

Working it “Out”: A Relational Understanding of Disclosure  
Decisions in Same-Gender Couples

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## ABSTRACT

“Coming out” is a unique experience for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and other sexual minority individuals (LGB+), yet it remains ill-defined within scholarship and is individually focused. This study investigates how same-gender couples negotiate relationship visibility and what motivates them to come out to others. A queer theoretical framework was used to explore how partners *do outness*. To address the needs of the literature, constructivist grounded theory methods were employed in analyzing the data. These findings showed that the majority of couples believed they had a “mutual understanding” of the rules and boundaries in place for relational visibility. In addition, the ways in which different individuals felt compelled to come out or stay in was impacted by their connection to the historical context of the Gay Rights movement. Clinical implications to help clinicians between in assessment and conceptualization in their work with members of the population were determined.

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## GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

“Coming out” is a unique experience for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and other sexual minority individuals (LGB+), yet the motivations for why individuals may choose to come out are underexplored. In addition, what it means to come out varies. This study investigates how same-gender couples negotiate their relational visibility and what motivates them to come out to others. To represent the strong influence of history and the oppression faced by LGB+ individuals and communities, a queer theoretical framework was used to guide this study and attend to the influences of power and privilege. These findings showed that the majority of couples believed they had a “mutual understanding” of the rules and boundaries in place for relational visibility and shared motivations in coming out. Clinical implications to help mental health professionals better serve these individuals, couples, and families were determined.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

“Coming out” as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or any other sexual or gender minority (LGBT+) is a unique experience with no parallel for those who are heterosexual or cisgender (Bradford, Ryan, & Rothblum, 1994). However, what “coming out” means is ill-defined by scholarship, often with different scholars using, sometimes, vastly different definitions in their studies. For example, Troiden’s (1979) participants did not mention coming out to others in their definitions of what the term meant to them. Over half of the participants in this study understood coming out to mean admitting to themselves that they had same-gender attraction. Alternatively, Cass (1979) saw coming out to others as a coping strategy and a way of showing pride in one’s identity. Cass believed identity congruence was not a possible conclusion given the current Western attitude towards same-gender relationships. For this model, coming out was seen as an action combining the anger derived from the lack of societal acceptance with the individual’s growing pride in their identification. For this individual, coming out to others was derived from a newly fostered “activist” mentality that saw purposeful confrontation to be the only way of validating the belief that same-gender attraction was good (Cass, 1979).

After an individual “comes out” the first time, they enter a life-long process of stigma management and determining how “out” they want to be. Knoble and Linville (2012) saw outness as being an interpersonal skill of LGB individuals to aid in their functioning as sexual minorities in a heterosexist, homophobic society. Due to this becoming a lifelong process of stigma management, what happens when two individuals, with unique ways of navigating this lifelong process, enter a relationship with one another? Knoble and Linville (2012) believed that a deeper understanding of how outness affects same-gender relationships was necessary to

improve assessment and services couple and family therapists (CFTs) were able to provide these communities. Despite this belief, little research has been done on the role outness plays in same-gender relationships. Participants from Knoble and Linville’s (2012) reported outness functioning as common ground and a shared understanding between partners, however, with such vastly different meanings being evident in scholarly understanding of what coming out means, how can partners be sure they have a shared understanding? In this study, I explored a deeper understanding of the relational effects of outness among same-gender couples, to answer Knoble and Linville’s (2012) call to improve assessment and services to these communities by understanding the role outness plays in these relationships.

### **Overview of the Study**

#### **Rationale and Significance of Study**

For decades, sexual minority individuals and their communities have been treated in scholarship as a monolith (Morin, 1977). As Zrenchik and Craft (2016) noted, if LGB+ Americans go to professionals for help, they were likely to find that their clinicians are as disadvantaged as they are in terms of having access to adequate resources and evidence-based knowledge. Bepko and Johnson (2000) indicated, “[that] often external stresses are more the focus of therapy than are internal dynamics [for same-gender couples]. Once couples are helped to navigate the external difficulties [...] the relationship might proceed healthfully by itself” (p. 409). If we accept that this claim has merit, clinicians need to become aware of and learn how to properly assess and discuss these external stressors. This current exploration touched on two of the external stressors that Bepko and Johnson (2000) discussed as a focus of therapy: (a) homophobia and heterosexism and (b) issues around coming out to others.

Differing views on how to perform outness can affect couples in a myriad of ways, including conflict around important life decisions such as where to live and whether or not they can bring their partner to social events (Rothblum, 2009). Despite scholarly understanding of the conflict that can arise from differing views, little research has been done on how outness affects relationship satisfaction among same-gender couples. In fact, Knoble and Linville (2012) published the first known qualitative study on this topic. Before this, quantitative studies yielded inconclusive results (Knoble & Linville, 2012). Despite the uncertain findings when it comes to the effect of individual outness, research on this topic shed light on the impact a difference in levels of outness between partners can have on relationship satisfaction. For example, Jordan and Deluty (2000) analyzed completed questionnaires from 305 women who reported being in a committed relationship or seriously dating another woman. The majority of this sample was white (85.6%), living in an urban or suburban setting (85.9%), and well educated (96% having at least some college). This study assessed relationship satisfaction using Spainer’s (1976, 1989) Dyadic Adjustment Scale. The Dyadic Adjustment Scale is comprised of four subscales, one being Dyadic Satisfaction which measures the amount of tension in the relationship and the extent to which partners have considered terminating the relationship. A path analysis found that disclosure had an indirect effect on relationship satisfaction while discrepancy between partners’ level of self-disclosure had a statistically significant direct effect on relationship satisfaction (Jordan & Deluty, 2000). Disclosure of sexual orientation was found to affect relationship satisfaction indirectly through a statistically significant effect on social support, which was assessed using the short form of the Social Support Questionnaire (SSQR; Sarason, Sarason, Shearin, & Pierce, 1987).

Through this study, I explored how discrepancy between partners’ level of disclosure affected partner communication and decision-making by viewing outness in a similar fashion to Knoble and Linville (2012), as an interpersonal skill. Thus, I investigated what is and is not discussed by partners when it comes to disclosure decisions. It is important that CFTs work to understand interactional problems that arise between partners’ and work to make conscious unspoken rules. This process can help clinicians frame their case conceptualization within an understanding of LGB+ consciousness (Bepko & Johnson, 2000). Understanding how these clients negotiate disclosure decisions and whether or not these rules are consciously made can assist them in helping their clients reach second order change; working to change the rules rather than operating within an unchangeable framework (Gurman & Kniskern, 1991).

### **Purpose of Study**

Our subjective experience is both structured by political arrangements as well as affecting these structures (Butler, 1988). In this way, the coming out decisions of previous generations of LGB+ individuals’ has reshaped the structure in which we come out now. Due to the lack of consensus in operational definition or any singular way to infer what coming out means, scholars cannot assume we understand how or why an individual choose to perform outness and what they hope to gain from that decision. This lack of consensus becomes problematic due to findings from a study conducted by Knoble and Linville (2012) which found that couples saw outness as “an extension of a value system relating to their sexual minority identity [as individuals]” (Knoble & Linville, 2012, p. 337). Outness had an effect on participants’ relationship satisfaction, and understandably so if your partner’s disclosure decisions tell you about their core values.

However, literature to date has seldom problematized or sought an agreed upon definition of what scholars mean when discussing the meaning of coming out (Orne, 2011). As scholarship has progressed, previous assumptions, such as privileging verbal disclosure, have lingered into future models (Orne, 2011). In addition, coming out and outness has not been explored relationally. Identity formation literature has explored how coming out can be used as a strategy to work towards healthful identification as a sexual minority individual but to date the relational aspect of outness, outside of one’s individual identity, has yet to be thoroughly investigated (Knoble & Linville, 2012). This limitation of scholarship affects CFTs’ work and understanding the needs of same-gender couples. The purpose of this study was to explore the relational aspects of outness and how individual conceptualizations of outness affect the negotiation process that same-gender couples go through in determining how visible they want their relationship.

Specifically, I used a queer theory framework to examine the following research questions:

1. What are the reasons that influence why partners in same-gender couples come out?
2. How do same-gender couples negotiate and communicate relationship visibility in different contexts?
3. How are same-gender couples affected by different definitions of outness?

### **IMPORTANCE OF LANGUAGE**

Language, particularly identity categories, tends to be instruments of regulatory regimes (Butler, 1993a). From a Foucauldian perspective, affirmation of “homosexuality” itself can be seen as an extension of a homophobic discourse. However, this discourse can be both an instrument and effect of power as well as “a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy” (Foucault, 1976/1990, p. 101). Throughout this dissertation, I used labels and

identities out of necessity. My goal in defining these terms was not to restrict the category but instead use the paradigm of calling to be classified as a rallying point for resistance to classification. That is, to use the trouble and confusion of defining as a way to elaborate the permanent instability of these terms and identities.

*Cisgender*: an individual is considered cisgender if the sex they were coercively assigned at birth matches their current gender identity. An example of this would be an individual who was assigned male at birth and identifies himself currently as a man. Trans folk would be any individual who does not identify their current gender with the sex they were coercively assigned at birth (Futty, 2010).

*Coming out*: The original coming out models identified distinct stages one passed through before individuals could confidently identify themselves as LGB+ (Cass, 1979; Troiden, 1979). These stage models have been widely employed in cultural and therapeutic discourse (Ohnstad, 2009). Throughout my literature review, I will explore the lack of consistency across different scholars and their use of the term. One example of a difference in operational definitions is the link between “coming out” and “disclosure.” For many scholars, these terms have been treated synonymously but this is not the case for all possible definitions of “coming out.”

*Gender expression*: Gender expression is the way in which an individual expresses their gender (American Psychological Association, 2015). Again, we have a binary created with masculinity on one side and femininity on the other. We societally expect men to express masculine traits and women to express feminine ones. However, gender expression entail identifying as a man but expressing femininely, expressing androgynously (elements of both masculinity and femininity) regardless of gender identity, or seeing yourself as masculine or

feminine of center (Indicating a range of terms for gender identity and presentation for folks who present, understand themselves, relate to others in a more masculine way or feminine way, respectively).

*Heteronormativity:* An ideology that promotes rigid, conventional gender norms, heterosexuality, and “traditional family values” (Ingraham, 2005).

*Heterosexism:* Heterosexuality, or attraction to the “opposite” gender, being privileged within our society and seen as superior is heterosexism (Morrow, 2000).

*Homonormativity:* This concept, coined by Duggan (2002), is the assimilation of LGB+ identities into heteronormative ideals and ways of living.

*Homophobia:* Homophobia is an aversion to same-gender relations and LGB+ individuals (Morrow, 2000).

*LGB+:* LGB is an initialism for Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual individuals. All minority sexual identities not explicitly listed (e.g., pansexuality, polysexuality, etc.) are included in the initialism LGB+. LGBT+ will be used to represent all sexual *and* gender minority identities. The T, which stands for transgender, is a gender minority identity and thus is not included when I am specifically referring to sexual minorities.

*Gender minority identities:* Our societal conceptualization of gender is within a binary with male/men on one end and female/woman on the other. Minority gender identities would be transgender individuals/trans folk (being assigned one sex at birth and identifies as the “opposite” gender currently). Also included are folk who fall outside of the gender binary such as genderqueer (people who do not identify with the binary of man/woman), agender (identifying as no gender), and third gender (identifying as a third gender outside of the male/female binary) to name a few.

*Monosexuality*: an individual being only attracted to one gender is known as monosexuality. Examples of monosexuality include identifying as a lesbian, heterosexual, or gay, all of which involve an individual with an attraction to only one gender. A few examples of non-monosexual identities are bisexuality, pansexuality, and polysexuality.

*Outness*: The extent to which an individual’s sexual and/gender identity is known by others (Morris, Waldo, & Rothblum, 2001).

*Same-gender couples*: In my study, I was interested in exploring same-gender couples in a way that is inclusive of all gender and sexual identities. Even if both partners identify as women, it would be incorrect to assume both identify as lesbians and the same is true with two men in a relationship with each other both being gay. In addition, I am interested in gender identity rather than sex assigned at birth leading me to use the term “gender” rather than “sex.” Regardless of gender identity, gender expression is not a factor in whether or not couples are eligible for this current study.

*Sexual minority identities*: Our societal conceptualization of sexuality is within a false dichotomy privileging heterosexuality and marginalizing sexualities outside of heterosexuality such as bisexuality (attraction to two genders), pansexuality (attraction to all genders), and same-gender attraction (gay and lesbian identities). This false dichotomy leads to sexual minority individuals to engage in a lifelong process of stigma management to cope with the marginalization they experience due to their sexual identity (Meyer, 2003).

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

With this study, I sought to explore how partners *do outness* relationally as literature to date has primarily focused on individual conceptualizations of outness. In this chapter, I will introduce the queer theory concepts used to guide this study. Next, I will touch upon the current literature of identity formation models and the assumed functions of coming out within each model. Lastly, I will review the limited research available on same-gender relationships and the need for explorations of how outness affects these couples.

#### Queer Theoretical Framework

LGB+ individuals appear to have constructed a false dichotomy naturalizing outness and condemning staying in the closet (Knoble & Linville, 2012). Laypeople and scholars alike often conflate pride in one’s identity as synonymous with being open to others about this identity. This understanding lends itself to the condemnation of being closeted. Butler (1993a) argues that identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes and how, from a Foucauldian perspective, might even see pride in “homosexuality” itself as an extension of homophobic discourse. Butler wrestled with how identity categories and labels do not provide liberation when they are used to define what the label purports to describe but can provide comfort if it is permanently unclear what precisely is being defined. Identities only appear stable and concretely defined “through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (Butler, 1988, p. 519). Thus, if we begin to view outness as a spectrum with many meanings, perhaps scholarship can cease viewing “being out” as a stable destination all LGB+ individuals should be journeying to on their way to happiness.

As scholarship has progressed, previous assumptions, such as privileging verbal disclosure, have lingered into future models (Orne, 2011). This conceptualization of being out as

equivalent to being happy has its roots based in the cultural stance from viewing coming out as a political tool to help reshape the dialogue (hooks, 1989). However, scholars’ work on coming out as work towards health and happiness is often disconnected from the conceptualization that it is foundationally reliant upon (Orne, 2011). This, again, stems from the conceptual inflation permeating the concept of “coming out,” leading to its casual usage within scholarship. While hooks (1989) saw coming out as a way to reshape the dialogue, queer critics (Eng, 2010; Ruti, 2017) have accused the LGBTQIA+ movement of pandering to the desires of the most domesticated at the expense of those who cannot easily assimilate (Ruti, 2017). Love (2007) argues that increasing media visibility only to “well-heeled” queers shows that one may enter the mainstream “on the condition that one breaks ties with those who cannot make it” (Love, 2007, p. 10). Homonormativity threatens to remove the radical from queerness, taming and neutering the term to the point where it might not even be deemed as queer anymore. As Butler (1993b) argued, the shaming is the act that “queers” those who resist; those who opposed hegemony.

There is no natural line drawn between those who are homonormative and radically queer. Butler (1990) introduced the concept of the *matrix of intelligibility*, which individuals must conform to in order to be intelligible and exist within our culture. The matrix is comprised of *natural* categories into which people, as social objects, can be manipulated and categorized. Deviance from these “natural identities” makes one “unintelligible” and, often, punished (Warner, 2004, p. 323).

As seems evident from the progression of the LGBTQIA+ movement, the matrix of intelligibility regulates sexual minority individuals by confining them to the *natural* assumptions and qualifiers for them to fit into their category (Warner, 2004). Queer theory seeks to problematize the referent and call into question how these categories have come to dominate the

way people understand themselves and others. Queerness is not about living outside of these regulations, but mocking these barriers. All individuals are caught in performances they think are natural and normal due to their conformity to the regulations put forth by the power structure (Butler, 1993a). To queer is to rupture the borders that separate the proper from improper and constrain everyone’s performances.

### **Review of the Literature**

Constraints on outness performances and what outness represents is ill-defined as scholars have used many, often contradictory, definitions of coming out which, primarily, have come from developmental theories of sexual identity (Orne, 2011). For the purposes of this study, it is important to explore the shifting borders of the definition for coming out within several founding identity formation models. While societal opinions of sexual minority individuals have evolved over the past several decades, most queer folk were coming into their own identities within a context saturated by pervasive heterosexism (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). Models of identity formation were affected by the overarching societal narrative by scholars situating their understanding of identity development on the assumption of oppressive contextual influence (Gonsiorek & Rudolph, 1991). To account for this influence, I attempt to situate each model in its historical context, paying attention to where the Gay Rights movement was during that place and time (Faderman, 1984). Next, I critique what I believe can be seen as the shifts in definition and meaning of coming and being out from each period.

### **Identity Development Models and Historical Context**

#### **Initial Articulations: Stage Models**

Stage models propose that individuals move through unique stages of development in acquisition of a sexual minority identity. After several years of clinical work with sexual

minorities, Vivienne Cass (1979) proposed a six-stage model in which the individual was an active participant in forming their gay or lesbian identity. The first stage, *identity confusion*, is when the individual begins to be consciously aware that same-gender attraction has relevance to themselves and their behavior. During the second stage, *identity comparison*, the individual moves from a heterosexual self-image to gay or lesbian. The third stage, *identity tolerance*, is marked by moving further from heterosexual and closer to gay or lesbian. This stage is met with an increased need to connect with other gay and lesbian individuals. Next, *identity acceptance*, is where individuals beginning to accept rather than solely tolerate their new gay and lesbian self-image. Fifth, *identity pride*, is when individuals begin to notice the incongruence between their individual and the societal understanding of same-gender attraction. This stage often includes “coming out” to others as a way of coping. The sixth and last stage, *identity synthesis*, individuals are aware of the dichotomous, “us versus them” thinking of the previous stage and focus on only devaluing homophobic others rather than all heterosexual individuals. As Cass saw it, at any stage, an individual could choose to forgo the process, known as *identity foreclosure*. Given the Western attitude of the time, identity was not in a place to be cognitively and affectively congruent; the goal was more to reduce the incongruence of positive identification as gay or lesbian to a level that was tolerable and manageable. Cass (1979) did not see congruence as a valid option based on the second foundational assumption of her model: “[the] locus for stability of, and change in, behavior lies in the interaction process that occurs between individuals and their environments” (p. 219).

During the same year, Richard Troiden (1979) conducted interviews with gay males whom he found through snowball sampling. In total, he was able to interview 150 men, 50 from each of these three areas: New York City, Suffolk County (suburban to semirural area 50 miles

from New York), and Minneapolis, Minnesota. The age of participants ranged from 20 to 40 years old. The sample ranged from 36% having no college education to 30% having at least some graduate school experience. The middle third had college experience. Troiden sought to incorporate men who did not often go to gay bars, as most studies concentrate individuals who frequent these locations; roughly half the sample were “bar-goers” who Troiden defined as someone who went to a gay bar for sexual and/or social purposes more than once per month during the previous year.

From his sample, Troiden (1979) created a four-stage model of identity development. The first stage, *sensitization*, refers to one feeling different than peers during childhood and adolescence. This stage is followed by the *dissociation and signification stage* in which individuals’ suspect they may be identify as a sexual minority. The third stage is *the coming out stage* in which individuals self-identify as gay and begin to reorganize and redefine their life through this new lens. In the fourth and final stage, *commitment*, the individual seeks out same-sex relationships as a way to confirm their identity.

Troiden (1979) himself acknowledged, not only disconnection between social scientists and the gay male communities, but among gay men themselves on what exactly “coming out” meant (Troiden, 1979). He asked participants (n = 150) for their definitions and found that 51% saw coming out as the act of defining oneself to oneself as gay. None of the definitions provided by participants even spoke to disclosing identity to anyone other than oneself. Instead, most of the responses given revolve around paths to seeking out other gay men for intimate and sexual relations.

As Cass (1979) noted, an individual developing through these stages of development act in accordance with the way they perceive the surrounding world. Early stage models focused on

individuals resolving internal conflict of identifying as lesbian or gay (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). It is clear from the first couple of stages of these models that preferential treatment is given to heterosexual identities and questioning individuals go through a lengthy process in coming to terms with their same gender attraction (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). Coming out is a way to interrupt the dichotomous way of thinking within Western culture (Allen, 1995). This act of self-naming opens a transformative process that fosters political change (hooks, 1989).

### **PRIDE Movement**

In June of 1969, LGBT community members loudly came out during the Stonewall riots in New York City. Stonewall is largely considered the single most important event leading to the gay liberation movement and the modern fight for LGBT rights. Gay Pride marches began a year later and take place annually to this day as a symbol of what the Stonewall riots began: activism for and acceptance of identity being tethered to how many people in the world know about how you identify.

The formation of the PRIDE movement relied heavily on community members being motivated to self-disclosure to others to carve space in the discourse for non-heterosexual identities to be visible as a strategy toward normalization and intelligibility. The problematically linear narrative of these early stage models (Sophie, 1986) often places coming out as a strategy implemented to serve multiple functions. Coming out can be seen as both a way to resolve individually move from one stage to another [e.g., Troiden (1979) in using it to seek gay male sexual interactions] in addition to altering the external world [e.g. Cass (1979) making incongruence more tolerable by creating more heterosexual, supportive allies].

Reflecting back on Knoble and Linville's (2012) study finding that same-gender partners saw outness as a shared understanding between partners, it is important to see how history has

shaped the mindset of different cohorts. A critical analysis of where scholars have been and how it has moved is key to understanding the plethora of definitions and meanings each partner may have about outness while believing they are “sharing” the same meaning with their partner.

### **Developmental Models**

While stage models moved linearly from one stage to another, developmental models recognize the flexibility of sexual identity and allow movement forward and backward through developmental phases (Sophie, 1986). Beata Chapman and JoAnn Brannock’s (1987) model was designed using a sample of 197 women, 190 of which identifying themselves as lesbians. Their sample ranged from 19 to 61 years old with a mean age of 34. Forty-one percent were from California while the rest of the sample came from a combination of thirty-two states and four countries outside of the United States. A majority (90%) of the sample was white and two thirds (66%) of the sample had either completed an undergraduate or graduate degree. These scholars outlined five phases in lesbian identity development. The first phase, *same sex orientation*, is feeling connected to other girls/women, which can include one’s understanding the term “lesbian” or having no name to describe the connection. The second phase, *incongruence*, is the first realization that these feelings are different than heterosexual others’ feelings. This is followed by the third phase, *self-questioning/exploration*, which is characterized by questions that come to the forefront due to noticing these differences. The fourth stage, *self-identification*, is feeling/thinking of herself as a lesbian. The final stage, *choice of lifestyle*, is making life choices congruent with identified orientation (e.g., seeking out same-sex relationships).

Joan Sophie’s (1986) research included interviewing 15 women currently experiencing changes in sexual orientation and/or identity at a midwestern university during the 1981-1982 academic year. From these interviews, Sophie developed a similar model, with its four phases

being (a) awareness of same-sex feelings, (b) exploring/testing those feelings, (c) accepting one’s identity, and (d) integrating it into one’s life. Sophie’s work synthesized several stage models (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; McDonald, 1982; Plummer, 1975; Raphael, 1974; Spaulding, 1982) into the major phase distinctions of her own generalized model.

Susan McCarn and Ruth Fassinger (1996) reviewed existing models of lesbian and gay identity as well as literature pertaining to racial minority and women’s identity development. McCarn and Fassinger identified two trajectories of lesbian sexual identity development – an individual trajectory and development within a group context—in order to separate the internal from sociopolitical processes. This model is characterized by four phases. In phase one, *awareness*, one feels different from others (individual) and recognizes there are different ways of being (group). The second phase, *exploration*, is characterized by experience of attraction to other women (individual) and one’s assessment of positioning regarding the LGB community (group). The next phase, *deepening/commitment*, is characterized by self-knowledge about one’s identity (individual) and involvement in the LGB community (group). The last phase, *internalization/synthesis*, consists of making the lesbian identity part of one’s overall identity (individual) and identification of oneself as a minority across multiple contexts (group).

Edward Morales (1983) reviewed the literature on ethnic minority communities and their gay and lesbian family members to resolve conflicts of dual membership. Morales proposed a process for identity formation of visible racial and ethnic gay and lesbian individuals. This model is composed of five states. Morales chose to refer to them as states because individuals may find themselves in one or more states simultaneously. The first, *denial of conflicts*, involves minimizing the reality of discrimination as an ethnic minority individual while their sexual orientation may or may not be presently defined. The second state, *bisexual versus gay/lesbian*,

is noting the preference for some ethnic minority individuals to identify as bisexual rather than gay/lesbian despite having no behavioral difference from other gay/lesbian identified individuals. The third state, *conflicts in allegiances*, underscores the simultaneous awareness of being both a member of an ethnic minority as well as a sexual minority. This state may also be filled with anxiety about betraying either marginalized community. The fourth state, *establishing priorities in allegiance*, the primary identification with one’s ethnic minority community and the lack of integration between the communities become the central issue. The final state, *integrating the various communities*, revolves around integrating their lifestyles as the major concern. Each state of this model discusses a clinical focus for therapy depending on which state(s) they find themselves.

Chapman and Brannock’s (1987) study included one particular question within their interviews where all of the women were asked, “if your only options were no sex or sex with a man, which would you choose?” While the majority chose no sex or refused to answer the question, 26% chose having sex with a man. This question and the response tie into the conversation among several scholars during the time (Cass, 1984; Harry, 1984; Sophie, 1986) pointing out behavior as being inconsistent with self-identification. McCarn and Fassinger (1996) supported this idea of inconsistency by noting how individual identification deals with new issues in every new relationship and context, highlighting sexual identity as a process and not a destination.

### **AIDS Epidemic**

Unlike the PRIDE movement following Stonewall, the historical context for these development models in the 1980s and 1990s were dominated by fear associated with gay behaviors and sexual relationships. Gay-related immune deficiency (GRID5), “gay cancer,”

“community-acquired immune dysfunction,” “gay compromise syndrome”—these are some of the many names used to describe human immunodeficiency virus and acquired immune deficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS) during the 1980s and 1990s. The AIDS epidemic, as it is often referred, led to fear of having sex among gay men. With the medical community and the government refusing to put funding into research, gay men were often told that ceasing to have sexual relations was the only way they could protect themselves against contracting HIV/AIDS. This reality likely influenced the conversation among scholars noting inconsistencies around identification and what were thought to be associated behaviors of said identities.

During this time, queer identities shifted from the Stonewall we-are-just-like-you to the fearful, AIDS-induced we-are-unique-from-you. This epidemic affected how individuals identifying as potentially the same label constructed the meaning of their label differently. However, without the addition of queer behavior tied to a queer identity, the identity itself becomes profoundly more concealable. Goffman (1963) discussed the concept of “concealable stigmas,” or people with stigmas not clearly visible to others. For LGB+ persons, this relates to concepts such as “remaining closeted” (e.g., not coming out) or “passing” (e.g., trying to be perceived by others as heterosexual). Smart and Wegner (2000) discussed the cost of concealing one’s identity as cognitively burdening him or her with constant preoccupation in maintaining this secret through the *preoccupation model of secrecy* (Lane & Wegner, 1995). This model describes how secrecy is perpetuated through a cyclical pattern with secrecy causing thought suppression, thought suppression causing intrusive thought, and intrusive thoughts causing renewed efforts at thought suppression with the cycle continuing ad nauseam. However, people with concealable stigmas may be burdened differently than those with visible stigmas.

For those with a concealable stigma, a variety of situations that necessitate concealment such as formal settings (e.g., a job interview) or informal settings (e.g., the early stages of romantic relationships or family interactions) may set in motion cognitive processes of this model. This process is called “*deep cognitive activation*” where stigma-related thoughts are accessible but do not remain at a conscious level. Deep cognitive activation can result in behavioral and judgmental effects that are indirect. That is, they are not connected to the activated thoughts of concealment in a direct fashion. The unclear origins of these indirect effects are the very reason for their profound impact on an individual’s wellbeing (Smart & Wegner, 2000).

The intersection of the preoccupation with secrecy model and deep cognitive activation is an experience Smart and Wegner (2000) coined as the “private hell” (p. 229) an individual would sentence one’s self while trying to maintain secrecy of their concealable stigma. Despite a lack of gay sexual behavior, and potentially other forms of public gay intimate behaviors, gay individuals may still benefit from acknowledging their identities through coming out to others. In this way, some of the motivations for coming out can be confirmation that there is no one way to identity as queer and constructing your own identity path. However, rather than developmental models having particular placements for and discussing of disclosure to others within the model, these scholars emphasize more coming out to one’s self, mirroring Troiden’s (1979) discovered community definitions. “Coming out,” while representing different motivations, also represents multiple, literal meanings: coming out to one’s self and/or coming out to others.

### **Life Course Models**

The life course perspective focuses attention on both the maturational and historical circumstances that influence the process of sexual identity development for gay, lesbian, and

bisexual individuals (Floyd & Bakeman, 2006). From this perspective, theorists discuss historical context in terms of the prevailing social-political and cultural circumstances that affect the developmental trajectories for different cohorts of individuals.

D’Augelli (1994) saw “becoming” lesbian, gay, or bisexual as requiring two processes: (1) distancing one’s self from heterosexist essentialism and the mandated identity of mainstream culture and (2) creating a new identity oriented around LGB+ dimensions. In his life-span model, he saw three sets of factors influencing development: a) personal subjectivities and actions, b) interactive intimacies (e.g., parents, family, peers, and partners), and c) socio-historical connections (e.g., policy, law, and social customs). The goal was to locate an individual’s life within the interplay of these three sets of factors. The coming out process is seen even in the beginning, with D’Augelli noting that the “pervasiveness of heterosexist assumptions [making] the development of a continuing method for asserting non-heterosexuality a necessity” (p. 325). In addition, D’Augelli called sexual orientations “fundamentally social in character” (p. 325). This belief not only erases the validity of singlehood, asexuality, and aromanticism for LGB+ individuals but also makes disclosure a necessary step towards becoming an LGB+ person.

While not proposing a model, Frank Floyd and Roger Bakeman (2006) conducted a study to investigate how life course factors affect coming out. They did this by assessing the effects of individual maturity and historical contexts on timing and sequencing of seven commonly identified coming out experiences. These seven milestones are: (a) becoming aware of same-sex attraction; (b) consensual opposite-sex experience; (c) consensual same-sex experience; (d) self-identifying as lesbian, gay, or bisexual; (e) disclosing to a non-parent; (f) disclosing to mother; and (g) disclosing to father. During their study, almost all participants reported experiencing the milestones of awareness of same-sex attraction, consensual same-sex experiences, self-

identifying as LGB, and disclosing to a non-parent. Fewer reported having a consensual opposite-sex experience, disclosing to mother, and the least frequent, disclosing to father.

Floyd and Bakeman’s (2006) found that 51% of their participants saw their development as identity-centered rather than sex-centered. This aligns with the idea that behavior does not need to be consistent with identity in order to confirm one’s self-identification and, indeed, is representative of changes within the historical context. This path for development was seen for younger participants but, in contrast, adults who self-identify follow a sex-centered path more consistent to the stage model put forth by Troiden (1989). Another important contribution of their study was noting, unexpectedly, that social acceptance of same-gender attraction and relationships since the 1980s has not led to earlier identity questioning in children and adolescents. Instead, this change has promoted a greater openness for adolescents once they have adopted their identity label.

### **“Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” and Hate Crimes**

In 1993, military policy went from LGB+ persons being unable to serve at all to “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” (DADT) with LGB+ persons being unable to serve *openly*. Five years later, in 1998, Matthew Shepard was violently murdered in Laramie, Wyoming. This tragedy led the U.S. Congress to pass the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act, nearly a decade later, in 2009 (H.R. 2647). Another hate crime victim, James Byrd Jr., an African American, was named alongside Matthew in the Act. However, Brandon Teena, a transman who was murdered in 1993, went unnamed.

This one step forward, two steps back progression of LGBT visibility and civil rights causes a individuals to have varying, and at times competing, motivations fueling their coming out decisions. For trans individuals affected by Brandon Teena’s vicious murder, perhaps

disclosure decisions were motivated by hopes of increasing overall visibility for their community. For post-1993 LGB+ service members, perhaps coming out to one’s self was enough to affirm their identity without putting their career or other salient facets of their identity at risk (Department of Defense Directive 1304.26).

### **Relationship Formation**

As stated previously, all of these models of identity formation are affected by the overarching societal narrative of the time they were conceived (Gonsiorek & Rudolph, 1991). From 1979 to 2006, with all of the models explored, a lot has changed for the lives of LGB+ people. While little research has been conducted on how these changes have affected same-gender couples (Knoble & Linville, 2012), Diamond’s (2005) longitudinal study has shown how concepts within sexual orientation have been drastically changing. Diamond’s (2005) sample included 79 non-heterosexual women between the ages of 18 and 25. The sample was primarily White (85%) and three-fourths of the respondents came from homes where at least one parent completed college. This study sought to explore fluidity in identity rather than ignoring or problematizing potential instabilities in identification across time. Her findings saw the distinction between stable versus fluid patterns of identification were counter to many common assumptions about the nature of sexual orientation development. Prior research was focused exclusively on development before individuals first identified themselves as sexual minorities, assuming little subsequent development would take place after this milestone was achieved. Diamond discussed how historical context of self-identification was an important factor to consider as, contemporarily, individuals are more likely to be open and actively question fixed identity labels than they would have in the 70s, 80s, and early 90s.

A greater openness to questioning fixed identity labels further heightens the need for scholarship to not treat LGB+ as a monolith. More than that, this questioning could lead to individuals having different within-group experiences of each identity label. Morris and Rothblum (1999) examined nearly 2400 women’s responses to the “Lesbian Wellness Survey.” This survey touched on five aspects of lesbian sexuality and the coming out process. The five aspects were: (a) sexual orientation (numerical rating of sexual identity from exclusively lesbian/gay to exclusively heterosexual); (b) years out (length of time of self-identity as lesbian/gay/bisexual); (c) outness/disclosure (amount of disclosure of sexual orientation to others); (d) sexual experience (proportion of sexual relationships with women); and (e) lesbian activities (extent of participation in lesbian community events). The correlations between dimensions indicated that the lesbian experience is not a monolith. The results from this study indicated that researchers who are studying one aspect should not infer about other dimensions. Rothblum (2009) in her chapter on the state of same-sex relationships discussed how little research has been done on the interaction of these dimensions when two individuals enter a relationship. She calls this an area where research was “badly in need,” since interactions are likely to be complex and interesting.

Research has indicated that same-sex couples perceive more equity in their relationships than different-sex couples (Goldberg, 2013; Gotta et al., 2011). Part of this may be due to the ways in which gender conformity and/or reject of hegemonic gender norms influence perceptions of power in these relationships (Carrington, 1999; Ferree, 2010). Pollitt, Robinson, and Umberson (2018) conducted a study examining the relationship between gender conformity and perceptions of shared power. This study utilized dyadic data from a survey given to 460 mid-life married couples. Of these 460 dyads, 171 were same-sex female couples, 124 same-sex male

couples, and 165 different-sex couples. Participants’ age ranged between 35 to 65 years old and couples were legally married a minimum of three years, with an average relationship length of 15.14 years. The results showed that greater gender conformity was associated with stronger perceptions of shared power for male same-sex couples whereas gender conformity had no effect on the perceptions of shared power among female same-sex couples. For same-sex female couples, the result could indicate a queering of how gender and perceptions of shared power operate within these relationships (Pollitt, Robinson, & Umberson, 2018).

Perhaps, for women in same-gender relationships in particular, power differentials are understood through difference performances of outness rather than performances of gender. Knoble and Linville’s (2012) study further shows how badly in need we are for this research. Individuals in this study were found to view their partners’ disclosure decisions as extensions of their value system. But with outness being performed and understood through multiple dimensions, how many relationships could be suffering from relational complications due to the conflation of these dimensions and viewing outness as one homogenous thing with one universal definition (Morris & Rothblum, 1999)? This current study will qualitatively explore this under researched topic, examining the nuances within outness and how it functions in same-gender relationships.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODS

This study investigated how same-gender couples negotiate and perform relationship visibility. Due to the limited scholarly investigations of the topic, this study was qualitative in design to allow for a nuanced understanding of processes and the construction of meaning-making these partners go through (Roy, Zvonkovic, Goldberg, Sharp, & LaRossa, 2015). I employed a social constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014) to explore the following research questions:

1. What are the reasons that influence why partners in same-gender couples come out?
2. How do same-gender couples negotiate and communicate relationship visibility in different contexts?
3. How are same-gender couples affected by differential definitions of outness?

#### **Participants and Recruitment**

##### **Sample Inclusion**

In this study, I interviewed 15 same-gender couples. The inclusion criteria for this study were as follows: 1) partners in this current same-gender relationship, 2) individuals are at least 18 years old, and 3) individuals in relationship identifying as a sexual orientation other than heterosexual

Exclusion criteria were individuals not currently in a same-gender relationship, one or both partners identifying as heterosexual, one or both partners being under 18 years old, and/or one of both partners being unable to participate in an in person interview. Same-gender couples were chosen for this study as to not limit participants by how they sexually identify. Individuals

in same-gender relationships may both identify as the same sexual orientation or differ from each other. It is important to the study that each partner be a sexual minority and grapple individually with the process of coming out and disclosure decisions. For this reason, even though heterosexuals may engage in same-gender relationships, they will be excluded from the study.

### **Recruitment Process**

Qualitative studies utilize purposeful sampling to help select participants who may provide information-rich insight for in-depth study (Patton, 1990). There are different strategies of purposeful sampling that could be used; for this study, I employed *snowball sampling* (Patton, 1990). This strategy is particularly useful given the nature of this study, since limited disclosure may lead potential participants to being *hidden* from view (Browne, 2005). Snowball sampling begins by locating well-situated individuals who may help the researcher gain access to potential participants within the community. I began this process by providing key individuals within LGB+ communities with information about my study. These key individuals included leaders at the local LGBT center as well as affirmative mental health therapists in the area. From there, these individuals discussed my study with potential participants as well as informed me of other well-situated individuals. This process was done mostly through social media. I posted on my personal Facebook page that was then shared by others on their personal pages as well as local affirmative or LGBT friendly groups. Most of my couples ( $n = 9$ ) informed me that they learned about my study from a Las Vegas LGBT parenting group on Facebook.

Couples interested in the study called or emailed the researcher and were screened for eligibility (See Appendix B). After interest was indicated, I was able to call each couple and ask them my screening questions to assess eligibility. Upon confirmation of eligibility, couples still interested in participating scheduled their interview. All interviews took place in mutually agreed

upon, convenient locations. Seven of the fifteen couples were interviewed in my therapy office. The rest were conducted in the couples’ homes. I emailed consent forms to couples after scheduling to give them the opportunity to review at their leisure before the interview. Consent forms were then reviewed with the couple upon arrival before their signature was obtained. The consent form contained information about the study, the risks and benefits of participation, and information regarding confidentiality (See Appendix C). Participants were informed that their consent could be withdrawn at any time and any portion of the study they completed up until that point was financially compensated.

All interviews were audio recorded for later transcription. To maintain confidentiality, each couple was given a participant number and participants were asked to choose a pseudonym that was used to identify them. All research protocols and standards were made to comply with the “*Ethical Standards*” in the *Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct* (APA, 2002) and Virginia Tech’s Institutional Review Board.

### **Sample Description**

This sample included 15 same-gender couples. The partners’ ages ranged from 22 to 78 years old ( $M = 42.7$ ). The length of the relationship ranged from 1 to 33 years ( $M = 11.33$ ). The majority of the couples were married and/or domestic partners ( $n = 11$ ) with children ( $n = 9$ ). Twenty-four of the 30 individuals identified as White/Caucasian<sup>1</sup> with the remaining six identifying as Black ( $n = 2$ ), Puerto Rican ( $n = 1$ ), Filipino ( $n = 1$ ), Middle Eastern (Asian) ( $n = 1$ ), and White/Black ( $n = 1$ ). Half of this sample ( $n = 15$ ) reported religion, or lack thereof, being important to them. These religions include: Christian ( $n = 4$ ), Jewish ( $n = 3$ ), Unitarian

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<sup>1</sup> Five participants wrote White/Caucasian with another racial or ethnic identity. These identities are: Caucasian/Middle Eastern, Irish/Jewish (White), White/Irish-Italian, White Ashkenazi Jewish, and Caucasian with a little bit of Native American.

Universalist ( $n = 2$ ), Protestant Christian- UCC ( $n = 2$ ), MCC ( $n = 1$ ), Baptist ( $n = 1$ ), Islam ( $n = 1$ ), and Atheist ( $n = 1$ ). The participants that did not state religion was important to them identified as: no religion ( $n = 5$ ), spiritual ( $n = 3$ ), Christian ( $n = 2$ ), Jewish ( $n = 2$ ), Catholic ( $n = 1$ ), non-organized religion ( $n = 1$ ), and MCC ( $n = 1$ ). A summary of the partners’ characteristics, demographics, and assigned pseudonyms is located in Table 1.

### **Data Collection**

This study consisted of two forms of data collection: a demographic questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. After informed consent was granted, partners were asked to complete a demographic questionnaire (See Appendix D). The questionnaire was designed to gather information of contextual factors for each participant (e.g., age, race, sexual orientation).

### **Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews were done dyadically (Appendix E). While there are challenges of conducting interviews with couples, it is important in considering the purpose of this research and the questions I explored that dyadic interviews be done (Gale & Dolbin-MacNab, 2014). With the study being dyadic in nature, a joint interview was the best way to analyze partner interactions and could provide insight hard to obtain through individual interviews (Allan, 1980; Eisikovits & Koren, 2010; Thompson & Walker, 1982). One of the drawbacks of dyadic interviews is the inability to develop individual version of the relationship (Holmberg et al., 2004). In addition, while reducing the imbalances between individual versions of the relationship through partners being audience to one another, there is a decrease in the material for analysis (Shotter, 1995). When there was agreement between partners or one partner felt that their partner had answered the question fully, there was verbal or non-verbal agreement. This decreases the amount of data material, but provides me with the information needed (e.g.,

that there was agreement) to help with analysis. Ultimately, the benefits of conducting this study dyadically, to be able to gain a deeper understanding of how relational outness is performed outweighed the drawbacks. Careful attention was paid during the interviews to non-verbal cues that could lead to probes that may help elicit more information from partners to increase the amount of data and provide a more holistic view of decision-making processes in each relationship.

Each dyadic interview consisted of 12 questions with several probes. Questions included how partners met, what attracted them to one another, and scenarios partners to imagine how they would behave in different social scenarios and how decisions were made about the visibility of their relationship. Participants were also asked about whether they saw these decisions changing in the future and how their answers would have changed if they were in different-gender relationships. All individuals were given \$15 gift cards (\$30 per couple) as compensation for their participation in the study. Interviews were an average length of 47.33 minutes. A paid transcription service or I transcribed the interviews.

Field notes and memos were utilized in addition to the transcriptions of the interviews to analyze the data. Field notes included information about the participants with reflections on the interview as well as discussions couples had with the researcher about the study once the recording was turned off. Memo-writing was also employed throughout the data collection and analysis process. The use of memos was a tool to record the researcher’s thoughts during the analysis process as it relates to the data and emerging theory (Charmaz, 2014).

### **Rigor and Trustworthiness**

To enhance trustworthiness of the data, multiple methods of rigor were utilized. Field notes and memo writing were done throughout the data collection and analysis process. Charmaz

(2006) compared memo writing to having a conversation with oneself. Memo writing was utilized to note how my biases or assumptions might influence the data collection and analysis process. Field notes were recorded after each interview, which included my reflections and observations on the interview and the participants that may influence the analysis process.

Triangulation was used through different sources of data (interview and questionnaire) and analysts (the researcher and dissertation chair) to assure dependability and confirmability by cross-checking data and interpretations and ensure rigor (Denzin, 1978). In addition, an audit trail was kept to allow for transparency of decisions made by my dissertation chair and myself during the data collection and analysis process (Guba, 1981). Supervision by my dissertation chair was provided throughout the coding process to help confirm the collapsing and merging of codes during the axial and theoretical coding phases.

Feminist critiques of traditional science highlight the importance of reflexivity and positionality (Allen, 2000; Daly, 2007). Reflexivity brings the personal and professional experience of the researcher into the mix as a part of the research process. For myself, this means acknowledging my place within the communities I seek to learn from. I am queer and my disclosure decisions are motivated by a desire to create political change by disrupting the heteronormative and cisnormative discourses in society. This motivator causes no increased risk for me since I am, often, already read as queer, I rely on no one for financial support, and I live in a city that is very diverse and accepting of queer identities. However, identifying as asexual and aromantic, it is important that I remember that I have never had to attend to relationship visibility or negotiate disclosure decisions with a partner. In the interview process, I was likely to be seen as an insider (queer) as well as an outsider (academic) with power. It was vital that I acknowledged the relationship between the participants and I was affected by power and

insider/outsider status (Burke, 2005). Efforts were made to acknowledge positionality through transparency, reflexivity, and bracketing. Bracketing is a form of reflecting on your own thoughts and beliefs throughout the research and coding process (Fischer, 2009). Bracketing occurred during discussions with my dissertation chair through the coding process as well as through field notes and memo writing.

### **Data Analysis**

Charmaz introduced the epistemological standpoint of grounded theory I followed. Charmaz (2005) furthered Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) work by situating it into a constructivist lens. The constructivist approach does not view the researcher as a neutral observer and instead sees the research as constructed rather than discovered (Charmaz, 2014). This lens is particularly useful for social justice inquiry by rejecting claims of objectivity, emphasizing reflexivity, adopting sensitizing concepts such as power, privilege, equity, and oppression, and remaining alert to variation and difference (Charmaz, 2006). Charmaz (2005) noted how social justice researchers pay attention to the silent working of structure and power and the ways they influence the research process. Being theoretically situated in a queer theory framework, I understand that no subjectivity exists outside of the matrix of intelligibility (Warner, 2004). Our identities are performative as they are *effects* of regulatory regimes differentiating and hierarchizing identities *under constraint* (Butler, 1993). As the researcher, I do not cease being influenced by these power structures and thus cannot be a neutral observer. Charmaz’s (2014) constructivist lens allows me to be alert to the ways in which my placement within the power structure and my performances of identity that form the “I” which will be conducting this research will affect the process analysis and construction of emergent themes.

Constructivist grounded theory methods code data by moving through comparative levels of analysis (Charmaz, 2005). Coding through this process is kept simple, direct, and spontaneous (Charmaz, 2014). Coding was done dyadically with the couple as the unit of analysis. Initial coding is the process of pulling meaning from the data that will guide future data collection and coding. This process includes line-by-line, comparative, and in vivo coding. These codes are provisional, as the researcher remains open to other analytic possibilities. Coding is a comparative and iterative process that begins once the first interview is transcribed. Analysis, at all levels of coding, integrates all pieces of data (e.g., questionnaire, interviews, measures) and treats them analytically as any other source of information (Charmaz, 2006).

During the initial coding process, weekly meetings with the dissertation chair were utilized to discuss initial codes and confirm data. After initial coding of five interviews, the codes and subcodes were compared to each other to look for processes in the data. This process of constant comparison continued with more interviews to look for similarities and differences within the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). As interviews progressed, further probes were utilized based on the data analysis to confirm the data, look for outliers, and add to the richness of emerging themes. For example, after it appeared many couples noted how the current political landscape during Trump’s presidency affected their feelings of safety and decision-making processes around disclosure, I began probing for more information about how the political landscape affected their thoughts and behaviors around disclosure.

Focused coding procedures attend to the ways initial codes account for the data (Charmaz, 2014). This process brings you further into the comparative process and heightens the sense of direction the researcher is taking in analysis. Focused coding progresses the process to

the development of the conceptual theory (Charmaz, 2014). This process was discussed with the dissertation chair in order to question and discuss decisions that were made.

Axial coding procedures specify the dimensions of categories (Charmaz, 2014). Axial coding aims to link categories with subcategories and ask how they are related. Strauss and Corbin (1998) saw axial coding as a strategy for bringing the data back into a coherent whole. Lastly, theoretical coding methods guide the integration of the data into a theory by seeing the ways substantive codes relate to one another (Glaser, 1978). The final coding system organizing the codes and fitting them into categories can be found in Table 2. A list of which couples fell into each theme and subtheme can be found in Table 3.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

The findings for this study are presented in three sections. The first section, pathways to outness, addresses the first research question (1) what are the reasons that influence why partners in same-gender couples come out? Four domains of considerations emerged from the data. These domains are identified as (a) individual considerations, (b) partner considerations, (c) societal considerations, and (d) being outed. The data from this study indicated that individuals are making outness decisions based on a mixture of these three domains of considerations. This is congruent with the literature already written on the topic since scholars of identity formation models were affected by overarching societal narratives and assumptions of oppressive contextual influence (Gonsiorek & Rudolph, 1991). Through this study’s queer theoretical framework, these domains can be understood as ways couples grapple with their options through the matrix of intelligibility.

The second section will address the next research question (2) How do same-gender couples negotiate and communicate relationship visibility in different contexts? This section will be described along with the emergent subcategories of conversations had, and not had, by partners: (a) boundaries, (b) “mutual understand,” and (c) insecurity.

The final section will address the last research question (3) how are same-gender couples affected by differential definitions of outness? This section will address the difficulties partners experience when they are at two different levels of outness. In this section, three subcategories emerged (a) friction, (b) shame, and (c) respecting boundaries.

In these dyadic interviews, often times only one partner responded to questions where there was agreement between the couple. These agreements led to many answers being affirmed

by the partner through verbal (e.g., “yeah” or “I agree”) or non-verbal (e.g., nodding) agreements. For this reason many of the quotes highlighted in this chapter include only one partner being quoted. With my research questions focusing on the relational processes, the couple was my unit of analysis. Each couple was coded into each theme and subthemes, making the sample size an n of 15.

## PATHWAYS TO OUTNESS

### Personal Considerations

Themes within this domain pertain to decision-making processes activated by individual experiences and understandings of outness. Under this domain two main subcategories emerged (a) “if someone asks, I will say something” and (b) validation of identity.

**“If someone asks, I will say something.”** Two thirds of couples (n = 10) did not go out of their way to come out to others, but also did not attempt to hide their relationship if the question arose. Darlene and Mickey were one of the couples (n = 10) who fell under the next subcategory. Mickey’s comment following Darlene’s quote from above, about wanting to be known as “us,” is as follows:

Mickey: I didn’t care [about others knowing about the relationship]. You ask me the question, I’ll answer the question, but I didn’t care.

Martin and Tim (Couple 10) also discussed how Tim (the more out partner) makes his disclosure decisions:

Martin: Well, you don’t have to, they can figure it out.

Tim: But my life is, I am who I am. Either accept it or don’t and frankly I don’t care.

This sentiment was shared by other partners who were more out including Matt (Couple 15), “I’m out, so I don’t hide it, but I also don’t feel the need to flaunt it,” Wonder Woman (Couple 3), “I didn’t hide the relationship but I wasn’t like making sure everyone knew,” and Amanda

(Couple 5), “If someone asks, I will say something. But if they don’t ask then it’s like none of their business.”

**Validation of identity.** While not a particularly salient theme for the majority of couples ( $n = 3$ ), this personal consideration was still an important one. These individuals discussed how visibility decisions were made as a way to assure they were read as LGB+ by others. Femme Momma (Couple 1) explained this by stating:

Femme Momma: I feel like I’m always having to state our relationship just because I have the visibility of being very feminine and blending in with the straight crowd, so I just have to say stuff like my wife and stuff like that. For identity. [...]

Butch Mommy: Femme Momma always complains that we’ll go out and I’ll get the nod. As might be evident by their chosen pseudonyms Femme Momma does not present as many would “expect” a dyke, her preferred identity label, to look to be rendered intelligible through the matrix (Butler, 1990). For Femme Momma to be validated in her dyke identity, she felt compelled to make disclosures about her relationship status. This falls in stark contrast to Butch Mommy who is read as LGB+ and thus receives *the nod*, as described by her as nonverbal cues of recognition by fellow LGB+ community members.

Darlene (Couple 13), who came out later in life, found herself in a similar predicament to Femme Momma. She states:

Darlene: I told [my partner, Mickey] I wanted people to know us as us, not like, okay you’re Mickey and you’ve always been gay. And now this is Darlene. And she all of a sudden decided she’s gay, you know, kind of thing. So I wanted them to know us and know us as a family, as a couple, and that kind of thing.

Whereas Femme Momma’s statement was influenced by her intelligibility via her gender expression and presentation, Darlene’s experiences seem to fall into another assumption the matrix of intelligibility. Coming out later in life after being married to a man, Darlene feared others will call her identity into question. In the interview, Darlene discusses how she has always

known about her identity but growing up in a small town and conservative family, “being gay was just not something that you admitted to.” In her previous marriage, she had four children. When Darlene came out as gay, her older two daughters had a hard time with it, not understanding how she could have married their dad and had them now “all of a sudden [she’s] gay.”

### **Partner Considerations**

Themes from this domain indicate some of the reasons individuals are influenced to come out by being in a same-gender relationship. Four subcategories emerged (a) being out to show commitment to the relationship, (b) basing decisions on the comfort of the partner who is less out, and (c) being out to show respect to your partner.

**Being out to show commitment to the relationship.** A large number (n = 12) of couples saw disclosure decisions as ways to reflect how seriously they took their relationship and how strong their love is. Kalel (Couple 14) states:

Kalel: I don’t want to hide our relationship because it was so strong and that there was really, there was love there. It wasn’t just somebody that I was dating, you know, I knew it was something serious and I figured it’s okay. Everybody, other people, straight people should share their love on Facebook so we can too. And so I never restricted him. I don’t think I ever said anything to [my partner] about it, did I?

Sappho (Couple 11), who initially came out decades prior to her meeting her wife, also discussed how the strength of their love led to these disclosure decisions:

Sappho: I don’t think we talked about [who we would tell]. I think it just kind of happened organically. It’s when you’re with the right person and you want to like, shout it from the rooftops.

Butch Mommy and Femme Momma (Couple 1) spoke about how it was important people around them knew how serious their relationship was:

Butch Mommy: I would say it was more important back then because a lot of people didn't think that we would stay together, like we're very different than your traditional

heterosexual couple or gay couple, like our thought process is really different, I think. So a lot of people, like she was the crazy partier drinker type and I had a job and I was like super stable and financially set, so I think a lot of people didn't realize how that was going to work. A lot of our friends were like "Yeah whatever."

Femme Momma: Just a hook-up.

Butch Mommy: Yeah, so a lot of having other people know was to have them know the seriousness of it.

Alex (Couple 2), whose does not disclose her lesbian identity and restricts her gender expression in her professional life, discussed how being read as a couple effects her emotionally, contributing to her efforts to be visible:

Alex: It also doesn't, and we've discussed this before, it also feels better and more congruent, like if we go out to dinner and we get a server who kind of puts it together, and gives us the bill as a couple instead of [each of us getting a separate bill]. And then I'm like, this person really didn't get it. In that case, I really wish they would've put it together, because we are together. But you know, that's why I think I agree with you that it's important that the world know that we're together.

Not being particularly close to his father, Trent (Couple 9) made a point of telling him about Scott (both Black young adults ages 30 and 25, respectively) when he knew the relationship was serious:

Trent: When my grandfather died. I wanted to make it clear as to how important Scott was to me, to my father. We're not on good terms. We're on very neutral terms. It's not bad. It's not good. It's just irrelevant. And I told him. I said, "I'm in a relationship. This is Scott. And it will be great for you to meet him. And here's the reason why." [...] Just to be clear, you're meeting with Scott. I want you to meet him. I want you to know him. What you might think of it is irrelevant.

**Basing outness decisions on comfort of less out partner.** Couples (n = 10) reported making decisions that would make the partner who was less out about their sexuality more comfortable. For Kalel and Clark (Couple 14) who both came out later in life and are in an interracial marriage, each had moments of being uncomfortable with visibility and wanting to be less out than his partner:

Kalel: I think we, we both have a little bit of uncomfortableness with it. I'm just in a different ways and with different groups of people in our lives. Um, you know, his maybe his, his work mine is more my conservative family, distant family. So we understand each other and I think it's kind of just an unspoken understanding about how it is. And I don't think it's anything to get mad about.

Clark: I think we know how we feel about certain things and we try not to make it a big deal.

Mark (Couple 7), who moved across the country to be with his now husband, experienced discomfort from his partner being in the closet to his family:

Mark: There were, you know, all these weddings in the family that happened and you know, as he's standing in a couple shots with the whole family and I'm standing off to the side like the friend of the family, like the, like the college friend that showed up.

Corrin (Couple 12), 22-years-old who began identifying as gay in high school, also needed to consider the fact that her girlfriend at the time, now wife, was in her first same-gender relationship:

Corrin: The beginning of our relationship was based around what she was comfortable with because it was all new.

Before getting together, Corrin's partner Roxy (22-years-old) did not identify as a lesbian and was not even questioning her sexuality, stating in the interview, “I didn't even know [about my sexuality]. [The relationship] was all just kind of fun at first. I guess that's how it started off.”

The situation was different for Violet and Alex (Couple 2), 47- and 48-years-old, respectively, who both met at a lesbian social event. Alex works as an elementary school teacher and had firm boundaries she wanted to keep between her personal and professional life. Violet discussed the affect these boundaries had on her:

Violet: She was doing a festival, because she's a music teacher. It made her very nervous for them to know that she was gay and...that means with me. I didn't feel that there was shame with being with me. But it was like, if they knew that she would pretty much out herself. So that's her privacy. But it was frustrating. So I totally get it [...] I got a little hurt. I mean, it's one of those things where it's nobody's fault. And I get it. But it's still hard.

Violet’s emotions around the subject were shared by the other partners in similar situations with their relationship, as *respecting boundaries* is another theme that will be discussed later in this chapter.

**Being out shows respect to partner.** Nearly half of the couples interviewed (n = 6) saw outness decisions as being ways to show respect to their partner. Sappho (Couple 11), 41-years-old, spoke of how her past relationship influenced how important it was for her to find a future partner who would be on the same page as her about disclosure:

Sappho: I um, with my ex, we were together for eight years and she, in that eight years, never told most of her friends or family circle and I mean we even had a child together through artificial insemination and she always introduced me as her friend. And this is my friend and her son as opposed to this is my partner and our son, right. And I knew if I were ever to be in a relationship again that I could not live like that because I feel very divided because my family and my friends knew, but I always have to be the friend when I was around her friends and family and, and granted it's, you know, 20 years ago I was a different time than it is now 15 years ago, but I just never felt valued. And so it was important.

Another couple, James and Howard (Couple 8), 44- and 46-years-old, respectively, discussed how they would not make a big move in their relationship without first taking this step:

Howard: I said, if we’re going to make this work. Because I ended up moving to Australia for a year. Remember I said if I was gonna move there, your parents were going to know who I was.

James: Well I told my mom before that.

Howard: But there was a conversation about that, about making sure that your family knew who I was, I wasn’t going to move there to be with you if your parents didn’t know that.

Matt (Couple 15), 36-years-old, felt it was important to bring up his relationship when others flirted with him:

Matt: Just a general situation that comes up is in social situations because we have gone out or whatnot. And if anybody acts like they're flirting or like they're interested in, that's always an important time to bring [our relationship] up.

Nearly all the couples (n = 5) who saw outness as a way to show respect also considered it to be an indication of their commitment to the relationship. Martin (Couple 10), a 46-years-old Muslim man from the Middle East who is very closeted, was the one exception:

Martin: I think if the situation was different. I would, I would totally marry him if I'm, if I was out, I find it disrespectful to him, which he doesn't understand [...] I'm married to someone who has to leave because my parents are here to me is very disrespectful. It's disrespectful to begin with. But then if you're married and that person has to leave, I find that over the top.

### **Societal Considerations**

Participants were influenced by society in a number of decisions about how visible they wished to be. Within this theme, three subcategories emerged (a) “people need to be exposed,” (b) safety, and (c) professionalism.

**“People need to be exposed.”** Nearly all couples (n = 12) discussed exposing the public to LGB+ couples and families as a major consideration in their disclosure decisions. The majority of my participants, 25 out of 30 individuals, were over 30 years old; 19 are older than 40 years old. Many of these participants discussed being connected to the history of LGB+ rights and their personal actions were connected to the historical context. Femme Momma (Couple 1), 43-years-old, stated:

Femme Momma: We're okay taking abuse if next generation doesn't have to.

James and Howard (Couple 8) similarly shared how this connection to history influenced how visible they wanted to be in their identities and relationship:

James: It's a weird time that I grew up in I have a history of the past and the oppression and the eighties and nineties and everything that happened there and AIDS and stuff. And so I feel connected to the past and connected to the future because I've lived in this time where so much has so rapidly happened [...]

Howard: I think [this perspective] stops you from letting things hold you back, you know, you've been through so much and both of us, I mean being closeted and worried about

what people are gonna think and just being comfortable and confident now that we are who we are. I don't think we allow anything to stop us from being who we are.

Ashley and Sappho (Couple 11), 56- and 41-years-old, respectively, also resonated with the influence history has had in their life experiences as a sexual minority and the affects of history on LGB+ community members from different generations:

Ashley: Things are very different now. And so I think a lot of people now, younger people coming out, they don't realize what it was really like. [...]

Sappho: [...] I think it is kind of a generational thing as far as we're older than you see these teens and 20-year-old LGBT couples that are holding hands walking down the street and I just want to like high five them and at the same time, you know, say, you know, because of us you're able to do that. And because of Stonewall [...] it's the same thing when I'm standing in line at the grocery store and 16 year old little baby dykes, maybe with your short haircut, you know, it's cute and they're holding hands and everything and I think, you know, they're the future. They're the future that is going to do it, “hey mama, that's the one I love” as opposed to “hey mom, I'm gay,” you know, and it's that. It's the pathway. It's like our generation and the generation before us is the one that has made it possible for them to be that way. And the generation before us, my heart breaks for them because they'll never be able to experience that. They'll never know what it would be like to kiss someone in public and hold hands.

When discussing the history of the movement and need for continued exposure, several couples (n = 5) discussed the need for representation, for themselves and future LGB+ individuals alike.

Mark and Larry (Couple 7), 52- and 53-years-old, respectively, talked about the lack of role models available for them when they were growing up:

Mark: We grew up in the seventies and eighties where being gay was just unheard of

Larry: There were no role models. I didn't even know what I was. I didn't know what was going on with me back then.

Along with representation, it was important for couples to create change for future generations.

Larry (Couple 7) discussed his way of making waves and getting people to notice the need for change:

Larry: I get it with the doctors appointments and the dentist appointments because I'm the one who takes them. The forms have a place for the mom, a place for the dad and I'm

very creative with those. What they expect me to do, I think, or most people do is cross out mom and write dad there but I don't do that. I cross all the mom section out and I squeeze both of our information, all tiny into the dad section. And then I write a note that says you need to update your form. [...]

Mark: We came back and the next time [the dentist office] changed it because he did that. [...] Just a little bit of waiting room activism.

**Safety.** All but one of the couples interviewed (n = 14) discussed safety concerns impacted their actions and behaviors. Within this theme, two subcategories emerged (a) public displays of affection (PDA) and (b) homophobia.

**Public displays of affection (PDA).** Almost all couples (n = 12) discussed hesitation or discomfort with PDA. Clark and Kalel (Couple 14), 34-year-old Filipino man and 36-years-old white man, respectively described how they behaved differently depending on where they were:

Clark: I don't think it's because we're afraid. I think it's just something that we're not really. [to partner] Right? I don't know. But gay pride week we're more.

Kalel: Yeah. Like at a gay event we will, but just walking down the street together we won't hold hands or hug, touch each other. We don't do PDA.

Over half (n = 7) of the couples who fell into this subcategory said some variation of, and sometimes the exact phrase “I'm not a PDA person.” Comments included “we don't do PDA” (Wonder Woman, Couple 3), “I'm not that kind of person” (Martin, Couple 10), and “there's a time and a place for everything” (Mickey, Couple 13). Alex (Couple 2) touched on the topic of PDA and had this to share:

Alex: If I was straight, I may not want your hand on my ass, but I wouldn't feel danger if you did it. [...] I feel like heterosexual couples, you could basically fuck on the back of your truck and nobody would give a shit.

Jennifer (Couple 5), 28-years-old, spoke about how comfortable she felt her partner was being visible in public:

Jennifer: My personal feelings are that it's taken these three and a half years we've been together for, for Amanda to feel more comfortable with any form of PDA. So in my,

from my view, it feels like often if we're out in public, Amanda does not want to be visible. Like, oh, this is a gay couple.

Amanda, also 28-years-old, had a traumatic experience with being out in her last relationship which influences her disclosure decisions in her current relationship.

Roxy (Couple 12), a 22-years-old white young mother, had similar thoughts about the hypocritical double standard of PDA between different-gender versus same-gender partners and how it affected what she and her partner did in public:

Roxy: I think one of the big things is that people always say, well I don't care but I don't want to see it and it just kinda makes me laugh because you can see straight couples making out on the side of the road groping each other and they don't say anything but God forbid we give each other a kiss on the cheek or something. So I don't know. It just. Yeah, we try to keep it conservative for that reason. So that people can't say, well you guys are just making out with each other over there in the corner. Like I just try to keep it clean.

In chapter five, I will address more of why I think so many participants discussed not “being PDA people” with me during the interview.

***Homophobia.*** Over half (n = 8) of the couples discussed difficulties contending with the homophobic attitude of others. Mickey and Darlene (Couple 13), 67- and 52-years-old, respectively, had a neighbor who treated them very poorly because of their relationship:

Mickey: We had a really, bad neighbor [...] he's the type of person that you would worry about him shooting you because you're gay.

Darlene: He made our life a living hell. [...]

Mickey: It was all because we were gay every bit of it and our neighbors [...] they just, you know, the one lady just says that [...] well, you know, it's because you girls are gay.

Amanda (Couple 5) had to think about her family's attitudes when she was a lesbian teenager:

Amanda: I came out relatively young. I was raised in a very religious home. In order to live in the house, I had to go to church every week. That was my rent. I thought I was going to get kicked out of the house when I came out. And I had my bags packed and it was not talked about after I came out. It was just like this culture of secret keeping throughout my life.

Violet (Couple 2), a 47-years-old woman, discussed frustration with needing to contend with possible dangerous repercussions for public displays of affection:

Violet: I wish we didn't have to worry about this kind of danger. I wish that my girlfriend didn't feel danger when my hand goes down to her ass, or I want to kiss her a quick peck on the mouth in public walking down the street. I hate that.

Hermione (Couple 6), 53-years-old, had the same fear of abuse and being in danger just for being gay:

Hermione: I believe that people still do beat up gay people and still you never know when, you never know how and you just kind of get these hairs on the back of your neck stand up. And it's like, I don't want to put you in danger and I don't want to be in danger, let's back off.

**Professionalism.** While couples discussed they pride and desire for societal change, the majority (n = 12) spoke about the current environment with which they needed to contend.

Within this subcategory, two themes emerged (a) discrimination and (b) taking into consideration the comfort of others.

**Discrimination.** Couples (n = 11) spoke about how the fear of discrimination affected the choices each couples' made. Granger (Couple 6), 44-years-old married to a woman 10 years older with two children, discussed decisions about where to live:

Granger: I don't know that we wouldn't felt unsafe [moving back to hometown], but as business owners, would we be successful?

For Scott (Couple 9), a 25-year-old Black man, looking into PhD programs made him think about the way he wanted to present himself professionally:

Scott: I think, walking into the world of academia we have to walk that tightrope of how multi-cultural can I actually be in academia and still be accepted at the same time. So I've always been honest about the fact that I was in a relationship. Sometimes it wasn't...I wouldn't explicitly say male or use male pronouns when I talked about my relationship. Until I'd sort of feel someone out.

Stella and Wonder Woman (Couple 3), 43- and 48-years-old, respectively, discussed how they would identify themselves to customers when they started their side business:

Stella: We actually did have a conversation like maybe we're not gonna flaunt it, but we're not gonna hide it either.

Wonder Woman: We were going to lie, we were going to say, oh, we're sisters doing this or something.

Jennifer (Couple 5) discussed how she decided not to tell the doctor she was currently worked under in her medical program:

Jennifer: [The doctor] has this intake form for patients that come in and he, one of the lines is like a heterosexual homosexual, bisexual and a woman had circled homosexual, scribbled it out and circled heterosexual. And I just laughed. I'm like, "look, she changed her mind." I was just joking. Right? But he took it as serious and he's like, he went into this whole tirade about like, "I don't understand how these people say that, like being gay isn't a choice because I've had so many women that come in and like they're lesbians for years and all of a sudden they're married to men and want to have kids now. So how are you telling me this isn't a choice to be gay or not be gay?" And I'm like, alright, so I guess like that's, that's an example of like, not like why would I ever tell this man then, oh, I'm gay, what are you going to think of me like?

Amanda: Especially because you're still, you need something from him for your education.

For some participants, gender expression played a part in their fear of discrimination professionally. Alex (Couple 2), an elementary school music teacher, consciously made decisions about her appearance and what information her clothes could be revealing:

Alex: When I go to work, I wear things that I don't wear just to go out. I'm not as comfortable [...] I just try to play down my natural butch tendencies. Because some of the things I like to wear are men's clothes or men's things. Sometimes kids can see that. I didn't know that, until a little boy called me out on it years ago, that I was wearing boy's pants. I never wore pants like that again.

***Comfort of others.*** Nearly half of couples (n = 6) considered the comfort of others when making decisions about how they would present themselves. Roxy (Couple 12) had these thoughts to share:

Roxy: You take more into account if your friends have kids and what they're comfortable around and what. Because you don't want to offend anybody no matter like how proud you are. You still don't want to upset somebody.

Rather than focusing on whether or not it made others upset, Mickey (Couple 13), a 67-year-old whose family of origin who were less than accepting of her lesbian identity and did not discuss it with family friends, thought about how vocal she would be around people who she thought would rather not discuss the topic:

Mickey: I think it's more of a, what do you call it, gaydar or whatever, that people who know you, they know, they, you know, whether they want to talk about it or not is their choice.

Granger and Hermione (Couple 6) also considered this, as Mickey had, when making decisions about how they would act around each other's family.

Granger: [My parents] both knew before we came home and we both slept in the same bed and everything, but I think when we were...even now still, well even that's gotten better, but when we first would go to [home state] in the first few years, there was no affection or even hugs good morning or anything. We did all that downstairs where they didn't see it. [...] I think we're passed tolerate now. I'm not sure we're too accepting but we're somewhere in the middle of the spectrum.

Hermione: They expect. If Granger's gonna be there, then Hermione and the kids are going to be there too. And I think kids made a difference with that too. There's no more of the "Hermione's just a phase"

Mark (Couple 7), a Jewish man heavily involved in his reform synagogue with some Conservative and Orthodox Jewish members, echoed these thoughts as well:

Mark: I tend to come out when I think it's going to make the other person uncomfortable, if I'm with older people and I get the idea that saying, oh, I don't have a wife, I have a husband is going to make them feel awkward and uncomfortable. I'll just skip it and just move on to something else in the conversation.

All the couples that fell into this subcategory did not discuss ways of behaving to challenge the discomfort of others; they all acted treated it as a boundary that should be acknowledged and respected.

## Being Outed

While not a theme for the majority of couples ( $n = 3$ ), the experience of being outed in some way played a large role in these couples disclosure decisions. For Roxy and Corrin (Couple 12), who began dating in high school both at age 16, they were keeping their relationship away from Roxy’s parents, who are conservative. After a technological mishap sharing Roxy and Corrin’s iMessage conversations with Roxy’s mother, Roxy has this to say about how her actions changed:

Roxy: [My best friend] I didn’t tell until the night my parents knew because when my parents found out, I said fuck it. And I posted a kissing picture of us on Instagram because we had never been, openly said yes, we’re together or anything.

Ashley and Sappho (Couple 11) were together for many, many years when they became much more visible and in the public eye:

Ashley: When the gay marriage issue came here, um, and we were able to get married and we went down [to the court house] expecting lots of people to be there in line and celebrating [...] we got interviewed suddenly we were like the face of gay marriage in [the state]

Sappho: [...] At that point there really wasn’t a question of being out because then we’re like walking down the streets and people would recognize us. So it’s kind of funny. We had both retired from teaching and then [...] I decided that I wanted to go back to teaching because I missed it. And then with students they would recognize it. They would recognize, I know you from somewhere, where do I know you from? Then they would google it. And then it became important because being a teacher and knowing that LGBT kids were sitting in my classroom, even if they struggled, maybe not knowing or maybe sometimes I knew before they knew [...] So when it would come up, I was their voice.

Also a teacher, Kalel (Couple 14) was the only partner outed at work:

Kalel: When I moved to Vegas I moved here as a teacher as well. Um, lucky for me, the woman who I am, my friend who was working in the district, she knew I was gay already and she actually was been at the school for several years and had lots of friends there and so I didn’t have to come out to anybody, which was really easy because we worked together and she basically told everybody that I was her gay friend and so that was a relief for me that I didn’t have to compete with the going out process at work as a teacher. So I think then realizing that nobody cared.

From his experiences of being outed leading to a more comfortable and relaxed work environment, Clark coming out at his school became a major discussion during the interview.

Kalel: I told him don't be scared of who you are. I mean it's not heartbreaking. Like I just wish he could be open with his coworkers wherever he goes as much as I am because I know how comfortable I am with my work and don't have to whisper about um, you know, my husband anymore at work and it's just, there's more people at my work, that know than don't know. So if there's somebody new comes in, I don't have to worry about it either. It's not, it's not a secret anymore.

Kalel's professional acceptance was something he wanted Clark to experience. Towards the end of the interview, Kalel mentioned how this is not often a point of discussion because “[they're] both working through it [themselves].”

## COMMUNICATION

### Insecurity

Couples (n = 9) discussed how conversations have, or could, take place if a partner's behaviors made them feel insecure in the relationship. For Jennifer (Couple 5) when Amanda would push her away when she pursued ways of publicly displaying her affection, it made her feel like a conversation needed to be had:

Jennifer: In the beginning [we had explicit conversations] because it bothered me. And uh, if you had to explain to me that it's something that didn't make you feel comfortable, you know, and then it wasn't asked again.

Mark (Couple 7) was also concerned by his partner's closeted behaviors:

Mark: There was one point where it got really heated and I was upset and it had been many years, several years and he still wasn't out when I was trying to express to him. It feels terrible to be hidden away. Like you're not claiming me, you're not claiming me.

Wonder Woman (Couple 3) felt similarly about the behaviors of her partner:

Wonder Woman: So she told me [that is isn't super affectionate] and then I thought I'll crack through that. And then probably our very first disagreement was always me wondering like, do you really love me? You never hug me.

For Granger (Couple 6), she thought there should be an end to this type of response from her partner:

Hermione: We talked a lot about it, because I always had to say, “I’m not mad at you. I’m not upset with you. There’s something about this time and place that I don’t feel comfortable with this.”

Granger: Yeah, I remember at times being annoyed. I don’t think it was the first three months you would say, or maybe in the first year, but after a year, I think I was like, “Okay now...we should be over this by now,” And then when you pull away then, I thought something was wrong.

James (Couple 8) brought up conversations about the choice of words his partner uses to describe their relationship, feeling like it showed his discomfort:

James: Howard sometimes doesn't call me his husband in public or when we were talking to other people and I always make a point to always say he's my husband.

Howard: I've always said partner. It's always been the term I've always used.

James: And I say to you, remember we had this conversation, you need to start calling your husband. You need to start making it comfortable for you.

### **“Mutual Understanding”**

On the other hand, over half ( $n = 8$ ) of the couples reported not having explicit conversations because they were both on the same page. Jarren and Matt (Couple 15), 27- and 36-years-old, respectively, who both consider themselves “fully out,” spoke about this when asked in the interview about any conversations they had about ways they, as a couple, would approach visibility:

Jarren: No, I don’t think [there has ever been a conversation]

Matt: No [...] I feel like we’ve just kind of naturally ended up on the same page with that kind of thing, which might be why, why we clicked so well together early on.

Hermione and Granger (Couple 6), who wish to be less out and more out, respectively, seemed to be going back and forth on what their conversations entailed, believing they must have talked about how visible they would be:

Hermione: I think at that point in time she pretty well knew that if we were going to continue dating and if we were gonna continue to be together, that she was gonna have to move a whole lot slower than-

Granger: I think we did talk about it though.

Hermione: We talk about a lot of things-

Granger: Maybe not how you would introduce me, but that it wasn't gonna be ... I knew it wasn't gonna be a romantic thing or like, "this is my partner or girlfriend or whatever."

Hermione: That was not gonna happen. It is still ... We've been together for 12 year and I'm very selective about how I call her my wife, my friend, my partner-

Granger: Really? So now I'm your friend to somebody?

Darlene and Mickey (Couple 13) also couldn't remember if they had discussions when Mickey was reserved about holding hands in public:

Darlene: I don't remember.

Mickey: I don't think we really ever talked about it. I think she accepted my feelings and I accepted hers. Just agreed to disagree on [hand holding].

For Clark and Kalel (Couple 14) new revelations came out about their feelings regarding social media visibility during the interview:

Clark: I think because we're not afraid to post what were, you know, like when we travel, when we went out we're not afraid to post it online and then they would just see.

Kalel: I think he helped me come out and be more comfortable with it on social media. Um, using the social media because he would tag me and say I love you on it. And at first that was uncomfortable for me.

Clark: You didn't tell me that.

Also discussing social media, Howard (Couple 8) pointed out how he and his partner both know what boundaries to follow:

Howard: I think we both know that boundary. There's neither one of us want to put, neither one of us can stand when people put their lives on Facebook and say things and do things that you know, that their lives aren't that great. And then they were trying to inspire other people all the time. And James's not on it as much as, as I am. Not that I'm on it a lot, but he's on it less. So I think there's just like a mutual understanding.

Tim (Couple 10), a 32-year-old very out gay man whose domestic partner is a very closeted 46-year-old Muslim man from the Middle East, also spoke about knowing the limits of what to share on social media:

Tim: I'm not like going to air, you know, my private life and stuff. What I mean I just, I guess we've never really talked about it, but I mean I know the limits.

### **Boundaries**

Nearly half (n = 7) of the couples spoke about explicit conversations they have had regarding the boundaries of how out they wanted to be as a couple. Martin (Couple 10) had a direct conversation with Tim about his lifestyle and religion:

Martin: I am not out and I had gone through multiple relationships. I'm significantly older than Tim. At one point I had decided, you know, I'm not going to put myself and the other person through it when I'm not out. I didn't want to get into a relationship, but when I met him and initially it was for sex, you know, he had a decent job, was related to an educational field. I have a master's and stuff and you know, it's nice to have that kind of connection. And then, um, I come with what I call a lot of baggage, which is, you know, I am very close to my religion. I don't drink, I don't eat pork so I needed someone to accept all of that. And he readily accepted all of that.

Wonder Woman (Couple 3) discussed how her partner, Stella, explicitly told her about what to expect in terms of affection:

Wonder Woman: I would say literally the first week we were dating, she made a comment or she made a statement about, you know, by the way, I'm not a super affectionate person [...] I'm not going to make the move to go kiss you or do this because I'm just not a super affectionate person.

When Violet (Couple 2) attended one of Alex’s work events, they had explicit boundaries on how they would interact:

Alex: I told her to meet me by the [statue], not come over to where I was with the students, and heteronormative couples who are straight, have their spouses come and meet up at the end. Although, there are still some that still say, “No. My spouse doesn’t like ...there kind of shy and reserved.” Because, some people use that excuse. I’m like, I’m going to use that one next time.

The boundaries were similar for Hermione (Couple 6):

Hermione: [I told her] you know, “okay you can come to the [work] picnic, but don’t be surprised if I’m not anywhere near you.”

### “IT’S HARD TO LIVE IN SOMEONE ELSE’S CLOSET”

This section title emerged from an in vivo code. The quote seemed to represent the themes that emerged as subcategories; the difficulties that come along with differential outness between partners. This section has three emergent subcategories (a) friction, (b) respecting boundaries, and (c) shame.

#### **Friction**

This subcategory was also named for an in vivo code. Larry and Mark (Couple 7) were discussing how their differential outness affected their relationship:

Mark: I was out right away. Larry took awhile to come out. So I think in the beginning it was more of a sense from you like, “I’m out and you’re not out.” And so that caused some problems. [...]

Larry: I don’t know if it was problems. Friction.

Further along in the interview process, the couple delved a bit deeper into how outness affected their decisions:

Mark: Coming out is so strange because when you’re on the closet inside of it, it’s such a drama. So difficult. And it’s funny.

Larry: My mom’s coming over, quickly, um, clean this up and move this out of the way. Open the guest bedroom door.

Mark: Yeah. And then on the other side of it, after you do it, you just, you think, what was all that drama about?

Friction arising from differential outness was something discussed by numerous couples (n = 9).

Bo and Shadow (Couple 4), 58- and 78-years-old, respectively, both had different things personally at stake, affecting how visible they each wanted to be:

Bo: I wasn't in the same town. I didn't work in the same town I had grown up in or anything like that. So I had a little different, maybe a little different cultural view than Shadow did. [...] I always felt a little more comfortable than she did.

Shadow: But that was the whole thing was all of my friends were there, all my mother's friends, you know, so it wasn't like...

For James and Howard (Couple 8) friction can arise from different ways they express themselves in public:

James: You don't like it when I'm being Queen Dancing in the shopping center or—

Howard: He's, no, he's always been a performer and he was a dancer so every once in awhile just kind of break out in a dance move and that's always been his personality that just him and I had been embarrassed. [...]

James: We tried to work out together. I have to jump around and dance around. And you don't use any very [...] you don't want to be overly like la de da [at the gym].

Howard: [...] Only because I just want to work out. I didn't want to mess around.

Granger (Couple 6), who is more out than her partner, experienced frustration in getting used to the boundaries her partner was comfortable with:

Granger: I think in the first year or so we had to go through some of that [learning each others boundaries]. Like she would, “No, I don't want to do that,” and I'd be like, “Oh, come on already.”

Jennifer and Amanda (Couple 5) discussed future decisions might change if their relationship progresses:

Amanda: I think, I mean, times are changing and every day is a new day. So, uh, I don't know where we're going to be for Jen's residency and depending on if that place is open

or less open, if we're going someplace rural, it might be a little more strict. If we're going to a more urban place where there's a lot of visibility, then we might be more open.

Jennifer: See to me, The ante goes up to when we get married and have kids. I can't imagine that a could or with ease do the same things I do now. If I have a ring on my finger, if I have a kid to pick up, it's much harder to pretend that you don't exist.

Amanda: Well they'll just assume I'm your husband.

### **Respecting Boundaries**

While there is “friction” that comes from differential outness, partners (n = 7) respect the boundaries of the individual who is the least out. Violet (Couple 2) discussed her recognition that her outness decisions needed to be conceptualized differently once she entered this relationship:

Violet: I'm super out about myself anyway. But because we're together, there's certain things that might not if she doesn't want that, too. This affects more than just me.

Corrin (Couple 12) recognized that dating a girl was all new to her partner and kept her comfort in mind:

Corrin: I would say at the beginning though, since it was all new to you, that the first couple of times, like we went out in public that we didn't hold hands and we didn't kiss because you weren't comfortable.

Mark and Larry (Couple 7) had a discussion about how they each felt in regards to their disclosure decisions:

Mark: It feels terrible to be hidden away. Like you're not claiming me, you're not claiming me. And I think the, the line that you said to me was, I don't understand how it's going to make you happier if my family hates me.

Larry: Because that's what I thought they would do.

Mark: [...] that was a real wake up line for me that this is really a serious thing to have and if I'm, you know, for my own comfort and pride in the relationship wanting to be claimed, you know, I can't ask him to have his dad disown him. Then I kind of really backed off after that point.

Wonder Woman (Couple 3) had to contend with many rules about what interactions with Stella’s mother would look like:

Wonder Woman: I was giving [Stella] a ride or something and you had, it became a joke later. 50 rules. Don’t try to hold my hand. Don’t call me babe. Make sure that you don’t refer to us as a couple. Make sure like there was this little list of things that I could and couldn’t do. [...] I was trying to figure out was she ashamed slash embarrassed of me or of her own sexuality, like being gay or I was just trying to figure that piece.

The two then joked how, after meeting Stella’s mom, Wonder Woman understood why the need for all the rules. But, before that point, Wonder Woman still followed and respected all of the rules put in place by Stella.

As a whole, these couples seem to accept living in their partner’s closet, if need be, rather than forcing them to come out faster or in a way that would be uncomfortable. For these couples, negotiating the *ins and outs* (no pun intended) of visibility just comes with the territory of dating another sexual minority individual.

### **Shame**

One third (n = 5) of couples experienced shame around their visibility decisions. Martin (Couple 10) spoke about how, while things have worked out in his relationship, he believes this is not how things should be:

Martin: I think [decisions have] worked, but I will tell you that if you’re getting in a relationship, this is not the path to take. I think people should be honest. It’s not worth being in a relationship if you have to hide the relationship. It’s very difficult.

After ending the recording, Larry (Couple 7) told the interviewer how he didn’t know whether he was going to bring up his closeted past because he was so ashamed of it. For Trent (Couple 9), a 30-year-old Black bisexual man, the feelings were not shame but rather embarrassment:

Trent: And I felt judged because me and Scott, do you have a bit of an unorthodox relationship? Compared to what the social standard should be? And I don’t fit the social standard of what a gay or bisexual male should be. So, for me, I was very embarrassed. So for a while I, when I met new gay people or when I went out, I wasn’t so quick to

bring up Scott. But I wasn't ashamed of it either.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### DISCUSSION

The examination of how same-gender couples negotiate their relational outness and attend to each other’s individual level of outness has been underexplored (Knoble & Linville, 2012; van Eeden-Moorefield, Few-Demo, Benson, Bible, & Lummer, 2017). In this current study, I found that partners make relational disclosure decisions based on different individual, partner, and societal considerations. The majority of couples respected the boundaries of the less out partner and made relational decisions based on their comfort. Despite this being the case, many of the partners who were less out felt shame about their decisions and privileged outness. Most of these negotiations about disclosure rules were made without discussion between partners due to their belief that they had a “mutual understanding.” Conversations only occurred when behaviors were made that caused insecurity in one partner or with violation of specific boundaries that one partner made. These boundaries were typically about work and done early in the relationship. In this section, the findings of this study are discussed through a queer theoretical lens to better understand how these same-gender couples perform outness. First, I will address the first research question: what are the reasons that influence why partners in same-gender couples come out? This question will be connected to the queer theory concept of the matrix of intelligibility. The matrix will also be used to discuss the last research question: how are same-gender couples affected by differential definitions of outness? The cognitive dissonance experienced by many participants and the push-pull nature of their ideas about what visibility *should* look like versus their desire to avoid the repercussions of being unintelligible. Next, research question two—how do same-gender couples negotiate and communicate relationship visibility in different contexts?—will be addressed. This section will delve more into

how historical context influences the ways in which couples negotiate and communicate. In addition, I will address on clinical implications to help mental health professionals best work and meet the needs of these communities. Lastly, limitations of this study and future directions will be explored.

### **Matrix of Intelligibility**

The themes from the data that attended to the first research question were *pathways to outness*. This section contained four domains of considerations: (a) individual considerations, (b) partner considerations, (c) societal considerations, and (d) being outed. The first three of these domains entail what considerations each individual or couple used to inform their decision-making processes on how and when, if at all, to be visible. These performances of outness were shaped by their impressions of what options were safe and available to them, as understood through the matrix of intelligibility. Warner (2004) stated “the meaning of any behavior is found in the way the behavior fits into the matrix of intelligibility, those around whose practices and gaze maintain the matrix, and the power served by these practices” (p. 323). The matrix is not one, concrete thing. The matrix is constructed via community and societal constructions such as marketing campaigns and juridical systems as well as individual and family of origin regular, everyday activities such as how meals are eaten and who does what chore. These constructs facilitate the making of certain “types” of people (Althusser, 1971). Perhaps, rather than making behavioral choices that render them unintelligible, they see a matrix where there is no path for their intelligibility. Stated another way, the only natural category is heterosexuality and, in the environment they were socialized, non-heterosexual identities have no option of being intelligible.

Performances of sexual identity are tied to the boundaries put in place by the matrix that would render each natural category as intelligible. Based on responses to questions during the interview, some participants saw LGB+ identities as a viable, intelligible category within the matrix. For the participants who experienced difficulty being seen as LGB+ because of their gender expression or relationship status, they understood their placement as being unintelligible as LGB+ and took actions to be seen as a part of that category. To fit within the boundaries of what LGB+ persons are and, thus, exist as *being LGB+* is a performance of what the matrix *expects* of LGB+ persons (Warner, 2004). Deviance from these “natural categories” could often result in punishment, such as being put in jail, an insane asylum, or being reviled in public (Butler, 1990).

It appears that LGB+ performances from the couples interviewed, in many ways, still reflect the assumption from Cass (1979); that societal attitudes affect what positive identification looks like. Individuals at risk of being unintelligible are not the only ones whose performances are affected by societal attitudes. Participants who fell into the subcategory “If someone asks, I will say something” see their sexual identity as something that can be talked about, but should not be “flaunted” or freely discussed. This pathway for outness still upholds the false dichotomy privileging heterosexuality over LGB+ identities through homonormativity (Butler, 1993b). Falling in line with constraints on how one can and *should* discuss their non-heterosexuality, queer critics have accused the LGBTQIA+ movement of pandering to the desire of the most domesticated at the expense of those who cannot easily assimilate (Ruti, 2017).

Weeks (1985) stated that there was a *political necessity* within an increasingly conservative gay and lesbian movement to rely on gay or lesbian identities as both self-evident and natural; the idea of a gay minority moving from the margins into the mainstream. Who,

exactly, is included in this movement to the mainstream is the point of tension. From PRIDE events to same-sex marriage campaign ads, decisions to appear appropriate and just like their heterosexual counterparts to push those who are homonormative forward in the movement while leaving the radically queer behind. Butler (1993b) saw performativity as divided and hierarchized under constraint within the matrix of intelligibility. Repetition of performance leads to subjectivity (and intelligibility) which “work, animate, and constrain the subject, and which are also the resources from which resistance, subversion, displacement are to be forged” (p. 22). To queer these performances of sexuality, one must resist, subvert, and displace the norms in place, which lead to unintelligible subjectivity. However, whether or not one even can choose to resist and potentially be rendered unintelligible is not up to each individual. Ruti (2017) makes the racial underpinnings of this process overt by noting Western homonormativity functions as homonationalism by “‘good’ gay or lesbian subjects purchase [their] social assimilation at the expense of racialized ‘terrorist populations’ [...] which are targeted for extinction” (p. 30). White LGB+ persons can purchase their way to intelligibility by their willingness to engage in homonormative processes, an option not granted to racialized queers nor other groups who cannot easily assimilate such as poor, gendervariant, and immigrant queers (Ruti, 2017). In addition, we are told, a process easier to achieve in Western culture than it is for non-Westerners who are more homophobic and prejudiced, discourse that conceals legacies of colonialism and economic exploitation.

The desire to be intelligible, or a desire to avoid the repercussions of unintelligibility, is evident in the push-pull responses of participants granted the power of choice in whether to conform or resist. For example, the same number of couples ( $n = 12$ ) was coded into the subtheme of “people need to be exposed,” discussing the need for greater representation and

continued movement forward in the Gay Rights movement as were coded into the subtheme of PDA where they discussed discomfort and hesitation with, essentially, *becoming* that exposure and representation. While these couples may think and feel one way, when it comes down to it, the fear of unintelligibility is so strong it seems to overpower their thoughts of resisting, subverting, and displacing. That is to say, LGB+ persons acting in homonormative ways does not necessarily reflect their ideals or attitudes about sexual minorities. Chevrette (2013) argued that a scarcity of research pertaining to sexuality in interpersonal and family communication creates an aporia where heteronormative frameworks are used to guide our understandings of non-heterosexual relationships. If we accept this hypothesis as true, the lack of a uniform definition of coming out and outness as well as the lack of understanding of these terms in the context of interpersonal relations within the literature appears to be affecting the lived realities of these participants and the valid paths they see for themselves.

This current study contributes to the literature by emphasizing how the concept of outness does affect LGB+ couples and families as they make choices to avoid the negative repercussions of unintelligibility. van Eeden-Moorefield, Few-Demo, Benson, Bible, and Lummer (2017) conducted a content analysis of LGBT research in top family journals from 2000-2015. Their conclusions showed that the sample of literature included only a few studies that included outness as a variable. Given the findings of this research, greater exploration of this variable should be done in the future to further deepen our understanding of the role outness plays in the lived experiences of these individuals, couples, and families. The conclusions of this content analysis also showed that the sample of literature analyzed was largely atheoretical. Conducting research on minority communities without a theoretical grounding can lead to

heteronormative frameworks and biases affecting our research and limits the validity of our understanding and analysis of experience (Lavee & Dollahite, 1991).

### **“Mutual Understanding” of Visibility Decisions**

Research question two asks how same-gender couples negotiate and communicate relationship visibility in different contexts. The data showed that, in large part, direct conversations about visibility do not happen. Instead, couples often assumed they had a mutual understanding of the rules ( $n = 8$ ) and only had conversations if something happened that made one partner feel insecure ( $n = 9$ ). These findings confirm Knoble and Linville’s (2012) findings that same-gender partners saw outness as a common understanding between partners and as a shared value system. However, as discussed in chapter two, there are many different motivations for coming and being out, and these motivations vary depending on historical context and connection to the Gay Rights movement. These differing motivations and connection to history affected how participants performed outness. In this section, I will connect history to the data to highlight how being embedded in, and having personal experience with, major historical moments of the Gay Rights movement affect the ways in which these couples navigate visibility. These connections will be highlighted through diverse parenting and relationship decisions made by different generations of participants.

### **Parenting Decisions**

In capturing a sample with an average age of 42.7 years old, many participants interviewed lived through the AIDS epidemic. Eight out of thirty participants were alive for Stonewall. Living through this history may affect how these LGB+ individuals view themselves, their actions, and their responsibility to the movement, as they developed their identity amid an oppressive landscape (Gonsiorek & Rudolph, 1991). The youngest participants in this sample,

Roxy and Corrin (Couple 12), both 22 years old discussed wanting their young son to know he is no different than his peers with different-gender parents. Compared to the oldest couple with children, Darlene and Mickey (Couple 13) who are 52 and 67 years old, respectively, who discussed how much has changed since they grew up. They homeschooled their son for a year out of concern that he would be bullied for having same-gender parents. This fear was shared by other parents in their 40s and 50s as well. However, the way they responded to this fear depended on how they conceptualized their identity. As discussed in chapter two, Cass (1979) and Troiden (1979) both had very different ideas about what coming out looks like and the meaning behind it. Being stage models, each scholar saw coming out as helping move individuals from one stage to another. For Cass, coming out was a way to cope with the incongruence between their individual identity and the societal opinion of same-gender attraction. Through this lens, coming out aided in the individual fostering pride in their identity. For Troiden (1979), coming out was only about an individual pursuing a same-gender partner. His participants did not conceptualize coming out as disclosing their identity to others and merely as a way to act on their same-gender attraction sexually and/or romantically.

In contrast to Darlene and Mickey’s early schooling decisions, Butch Mommy and Femme Momma (Couple 1) aim to have as many dialogues as possible with the public and their children. This couple makes a point to use politically charged language in an attempt to reclaim what might be used to bully them, such as the word homosexual. This difference in behavior follows Cass’s (1979) motivations and using coming out as a way to interrupt the dichotomous way of thinking within Western culture (Allen, 1995). On the other hand, Darlene and Mickey’s behaviors follow Troiden’s (1979) motivations, where “coming out” and self-identifying as gay begins the process of reorganizing and redefining their lives through this new lens. For Darlene

and Mickey, historical knowledge of and personal experience with discrimination lead to their unique couple decision to do what is best for their son. Butch Mommy and Femme Momma instead made societally informed decisions that expose others to LGB+ families and identities and seek to change the landscape in which their children will grow up. These parents and others in the study have all been affected by living through so many pivotal moments of the gay rights movement, both negative (e.g., AIDS epidemic) and positive (e.g., Stonewall and the Supreme Court ruling over marriage equality). How these pivotal moments and their experiences affect how these parents are *doing family* is complex. As Oswald, Kuvalanka, Blume, and Berkowitz (2009) stated, identifying as lesbian, gay, or even queer, does not mean they enact queer genders, sexual practices, or family configurations.

### **Dating and Relationship Formation**

A queer study of sexuality questions the naturalized, heterosexual center when examining the margins (Oswald et al., 2009). In this examination, one way of questioning the center emerged from the data by way of understanding how safety affects partner negotiations. The lesbian stereotype about partners moving in together quickly, or “uhauling,” is so well known that it has been written about in scholarly articles (Gordon, 2006). Gordon (2006) interviewed 23 women in a lesbian community in Bloomington, Indiana in 1998 on appearance, sex, and dating norms. Her finding showed that nearly all of the women felt they knew nothing about sex and dating rules for their lesbian community. Most women felt as though there *were* rules everyone else knew and they were “unlike other lesbians” due to their lack of knowledge.

I did not ask about dating or sexual rules and scripts, however, one couple brought up how the lesbian stereotype of “uhauling” rose out of societal homophobia and an environment unsafe for women to be able to date one another. Sappho (Couple 11) brought up after the

recording ended how sexual minority women would move in together because there was no safe way to date. Sappho mentioned this while discussing how she thinks she would not have been with her previous partner for 17 years if they had gone on a few dates before moving in together. While this stereotype focuses on lesbian interactions, these constructs affect sexual minority men as well, as evidenced by Martin (Couple 10) stating in his interview that he made Tim move out when he realized how quickly the merge had occurred because “[they] can’t be lesbians.”

Foucault (1977) argued that discipline created “docile bodies,” which conform and act in accordance with discourses created by those in power. This conformity was ensured through surveillance of one another and ourselves. Perhaps the lack of explicit communication found within the data portrays how historical, as well as modern, punishment and oppression is upheld and enforced even in the homes of LGB+ folk, scrutinizing themselves. These conversations, not falling into heteronormative scripts for relationships, would require *queering processes* (Oswald, Blume, & Marks, 2005) to challenge the sexuality binaries. As stated previously with the matrix of intelligibility, challenging these binaries could render one unintelligible and expose these couples to risk. Rather, this practice of “uhauling” may have come into existence as a homonormative adaptation, to allow for LGB+ relationships to exist without calling into question the heteronormativity or the false dichotomy naturalizing heterosexuality and oppressing homosexuality (Butler, 1993b). To queer these relationships, couples would need to risk their safety. However, this likelihood of this risk paying off would be greater if we refused to continue being “docile.” One avenue of resistance is through better education and training of mental health professionals; learning ways to encourage and promote queering processes for our clients.

### **Clinical Implications**

Understanding the historical context of the gay rights movement and the risks involved with queering processes can help clinicians ask better assessment questions of these couples. Bepko and Johnson (2000) indicated that, for same-gender couples, external stressors are more the focus of therapy than internal dynamics. However, widening our scope of what external stressors could be affecting the couples we are working with to include historical factors could benefit these couples.

### **Second Order Change**

When CFTs assess for relational dynamics, looking to what rules have been inherited or learned from each partners' family of origin is common (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Cultural competency literature can also provide more information to aid in assessment for specific cultures and ethnicities (McGoldrick, Giordano, & Garcia-Preto, 2005). I believe CFTs can learn a lot about how to competently work with LGB+ populations from queer theory and understanding how history and power structures have influenced, and are continuing to influence, efforts couples and families make to ensure their safety.

Assessing to understand what rules these couples might have adopted from their observations of the historical landscape should not be minimized. As previously stated, a clinician's goal is to help clients reach second order change by working to change rules whereas first order change would be adjusting behaviors to still follow and comply with the rules of the current system (Gurman & Kniskern, 1991). These same-gender couples are potentially working off of rules created to help them operate safely in boundaries set forth by previous generations that are now outdated. Returning to Sappho's comment about needing to move in because there is no safe way to date, that is still a stereotype of lesbians and could be influencing our clients currently, even though there are now safe ways to date someone of the same gender.

Rock, Carlson, and McGeorge (2010) conducted a study to assess attitudes CFT students held about sexual orientation, self-reported clinically competency related to work with LGB clients, and what LGB affirmative training they had received in their training program. Their findings supported previous literature that argued CFT training programs do not adequately address LGB topics (Godfrey et al., 2006; Green, 1996; Long & Serovich, 2003). When assessing students perceived clinical competency, results indicated a moderate level of understanding how heterosexism and discrimination affects clinical practice.

Better training needs to be provided to CFT students if we hope for these clients to be able to receive effective care. If these clients come into our offices to discuss external stressors affecting their relationships, clinicians need to understand these external factors and the heterosexist social structures that uphold these oppressive structures. Along with better understanding these structures, clinicians should feel an ethical obligation as systemic thinkers to challenge themselves, their colleagues, and their clients to behave in ways that do not conform to the power structures in place that continue oppressing and marginalizing these communities. Green (1998) asked of family therapists, “will we continue to only huddle in our offices waiting for individual families to request treatment, or will we move beyond family therapy to include prevention, community, intervention, and family social policy within our scope of practice?” (p. 107). Resisting and calling into question the heteronormative framework for all individuals, not just LGB+ folk can help in minimizing the negative effects these external factors by no longer blindly privileging heterosexuality and heteronormativity at the expense of sexual minority communities and queer family structures.

### **Self-of-the-Therapist Work**

The findings from this study support how the false dichotomy, privileging outness, affected these same-gender couples, but it did not suggest that being more out would be inherently healthful for all LGB+ couples. Martin and Tim (Couple 10) were open about their lives together and how they, as a couple, navigated their relationship to one another and their children. Martin discussed the arrangement, making him the only legal parent to his two adopted children. While Martin and Tim live together and co-parent, Martin understands that parental decisions fall to him and he is the only one referred to as dad. Tim reported being happy with the current situation and not looking for anything to change; how he had grown fond of the children and is there for them, but does not wish to be called dad or be a legal parent to them.

If Martin and Tim were to seek therapy in the future, I worry that their family dynamic will be pathologized as well as their closeted behaviors. Almost none of the couples in my study would describe themselves and their relationship as being “fully out” and many expressed shame in regards to their closeted behaviors. Israel, Gorcheva, Burnes, and Walther (2008) conducted a study to ask about what unhelpful and helpful therapy experiences LGBT clients have had. In the findings, they address how most LGB clients were openly identified as LGB at the time of their helpful (66.7%) and unhelpful (54.5%) therapy experiences. Once again, the lack of operational definitions for what coming out means affects our scholarship, because there is no way to know what these authors mean when they say these clients “openly identified” as LGB (Orne, 2011). Did they label their sexual identity and discuss this label with their therapists? Were they out to select individuals? Would they consider themselves “fully out”? We have no way of knowing.

Putting these questions already brought to the forefront of these findings to the side, a commonly cited unhelpful therapy situation affecting 23.8% of participants was not focusing on what the client wanted to focus on (Israel et al., 2008). If this finding was commonly cited

among a majority of intelligible participants, what is likely to happen to unintelligible clients? As previously stated, deviance from *natural categories* and the *natural assumptions* made about these categories makes one unintelligible and at risk for punishment (Warner, 2004).

If clinicians lack an understanding of sexual identity development and all the possible meanings of and reasons for coming out through these models, they may be at risk of pushing clients towards disclosure due to the privileging of verbal disclosure (Orne, 2011). Introducing the matrix of intelligibility and other queer theory concepts to CFTs (in a way that is palatable and easy to understand) could assist supervisors, professors, and/or continuing education unit (CEU) instructors in familiarizing CFTs with self-of-the-therapist issues that may be coming up in their cases with these clients. Clinicians are not exempt from operating within the matrix of intelligibility and supporting heterosexist and homophobic power structures. Addressing ways in which clinicians might be pushing their clients towards intelligibility or punishing those who are unintelligible can potentially lessen the number of LGB+ clients feel that their therapists are focusing on goals they as clients are not asking to be worked on in therapy.

### **Limitations**

While the findings of this study are robust, there are limitations to this study. As thoroughly discussed, history influences members of these populations, thus it is important to note the timing of when this study took place. Trump’s Presidency has affected the sense of safety for many marginalized populations, not just LGBT individuals. Had this study been conducted at a different, more politically stable time, it is possible that the data would have looked different.

Along with this unique limitation, this study was limited in many ways common to qualitative inquiries such as the majority of the sample being white (n = 24) and only one

participant identifying as bisexual, making the findings potentially only relevant to monosexualities such as lesbian and gay. The goal of qualitative research is for transferability, not generalizability (Creswell, 2008). This study sought to understand the processes and experiences of same-gender couples within a specific geographical context. The findings from this sample have implications that can inform understandings of same-gender couples in suburban/urban contexts and can be considered an adequate sample size for grounded theory analysis of process (Roy et al., 2015).

Another limitation is in the chosen sample for the study. The foci of same-gender couples itself is heteronormative as it excludes other queer relationship structures such as polyamorous relationships and family of choice networks (Fish & Russell, 2018). Critical analysis of normalizing forces (e.g., identity formation literature, performativity, and the matrix of intelligibility) and how they affect our understanding of same-gender couples is important, but it should not be the only relationship dynamic we explore.

### **Future Directions**

#### **Unique Sample**

When preparing our questionnaires and interview questions, I expected newer relationships to make up the majority of participants. Instead, this study interviewed mature relationships, ranging from one to 33 years in length with an average length of over 11 years together. Eleven out of the 15 couples in the study were married and/or domestic partners and nine had children. This is much longer than the average length of previous studies being around 4 years (Caron & Ulin, 1997; Jordan & Deluty, 2000; Beals & Peplau 2001). Knoble and Linville (2012), the first qualitative study whose findings and future directions founded this current study's exploration had a maximum relationship length of 14 years compared to this

study with a maximum length of 33 years and one third of the couples in the sample ( $n = 5$ ) having a relationship length longer than the maximum from Knoble and Linville’s study. This sample is one not often found in the literature and adds to the richness of LGB+ family life. This sample highlights how the historical context interacts with identity formation, visibility decisions, and how these decisions are negotiated and communicated between partners in different contexts. Future research should be done to learn more about how this historical context affects other aspects of queer lives, outside of visibility decisions, as well as deepening our scholarly understanding of outness.

### **Outness**

As evident in this study, LGB+ scholarship needs a nuanced understanding of coming out and outness. This study highlights the spectrum of outness couples operate within when making relational visibility decisions. Scholars should begin considering coming out and outness as a relational process, not just an individual process started and finished before LGB+ persons entering into romantic partnerships. As researchers continue to explore LGB+ couples, the need to continue to understand how these couples experience outness is important to consider. Conducting studies on the role outness plays in individuals choice of romantic/sexual partners could prove insightful and expand the scope of scholarship. In addition, studying scholars on how they define coming out and the motivations for disclosure could aid in shedding light to the lack of a unifying definition and lead to a more nuanced understanding of the term. Future research could also examine how clinicians handle, if at all, the topic of coming out clinically and their comfort assessing and working with same-gender couples, particularly in terms of external factors that could arise from differing options regarding outness and visibility. Future research should also be done on the disconnection between queer thought and action and how the

fear of unintelligibility affects the decisions these *actually* make versus the ones they *think about* making. These studies should explore not only whether these individuals recognize this disconnect, but what ways, if any, they are affected by this cognitive dissonance.

### **Conclusion**

This study of how same-gender couples negotiate outness responds to a gap in the literature of the ways in which outness is understood and performed relationally. Findings from this study indicate a need for more research on how LGB+ individuals and couples are affected by homophobia, pervasive heterosexism, and fear of unintelligibility (Warner, 2004). Future research must be conducted on these topics if we want mental health practitioners to be informed and able to assist these couples effectively and affirmatively.

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**Table 1**

Table 1.

*Participant Identification Table*

Couple ID	Pseudonym	Age	Race	Relationship Length	Married/ Domestic Partners	Children	Sexual Identity	Religion	Job
<b>1</b>	Butch Mommy	42	Caucasian / Middle Eastern	17 years	Yes	2	Lesbian	Jewish	Family Service Specialist
	Femme Momma	43	White	17 years	Yes	2	Gay	Somewhat Jewish/Spiritual	Customer Data Manager
<b>2</b>	Alex	48	Puerto Rican	4 years	No	N/A	Lesbian	Spiritual	Elementary Music Teacher
	Violet	47	Irish/Jewish (White)	4 years	No	N/A	Lesbian	None	Lecturer-Academic/ Full-Time PhD Student
<b>3</b>	Wonder Woman	48	Caucasian	10 years, 8 months	Yes	N/A	Lesbian	None	CEO at Mental Health Agency
	Stella	43	Caucasian	10 years, 8 months	Yes	N/A	Lesbian	Non-organized	Director of Business Ops
<b>4</b>	Bo	58	Caucasian	32 years, 11 months	Yes	N/A	Lesbian	Unitarian Universalist	Retired
	Shadow	78	White	32 years, 11 months	Yes	N/A	Lesbian	Unitarian Universalist	Retired
<b>5</b>	Amanda	28	White/Irish-Italian	3.5 years	No	N/A	Lesbian	None	Therapist
	Jennifer	28	White	3.5 years	No	N/A	Lesbian	Jewish	Student
<b>6</b>	Hermione	53	White	12 years	Yes	2	Gay	MCC	Manager, Core-Mark
	Granger	44	White	12 years	Yes	2	Gay	MCC	Teacher
<b>7</b>	Larry	53	White Ashkenazi Jewish	21 years	Yes	2	Gay	Jewish	Stay at home dad
	Mark	52	Caucasian, a little Native American	21 years	Yes	2	Gay	Jewish	Marketing Communications Writer
<b>8</b>	Howard	46	Caucasian	16 years	Yes	2	Gay	Jewish	Therapist
	James	44	White	16 years	Yes	2	Gay	Anglican	Concierge
<b>9</b>	Scott	25	Black/African American	3 years	No	N/A	Gay	Baptist	Manager of Volunteer Services
	Trent	30	Black American	3 years	No	N/A	Gay	Spiritual	Real Estate & Apple Supervisor
<b>10</b>	Tim	32	White	9 years	Yes, domestic partners	2	Gay	Catholic	Healthcare

	Martin	46	Middle Eastern (Asian)	9 years	only Yes, domestic partners only	2	Gay	Islam	Project Management
<b>11</b>	Ashley Sappho	56 41	White White	10.5 years 10.5 years	Yes Yes	4 4	Lesbian Lesbian	Christian Christian	Retired Retired
<b>12</b>	Roxy	22	White	6 years	Yes	1	Gay	Christian	Stay at home mom
	Corrin	22	White	6 years	Yes	1	Gay	Christian	Tradeshaw Manager
<b>13</b>	Mickey Darlene	67 52	White Caucasian	17 years 17 years	Yes Yes	1 5	Lesbian Gay	UCC Christian	Retired Medical Assistant
<b>14</b>	Clark	34	Filipino	6 years	Yes	1	Gay	Christian	Project Facilitator
	Kalel	36	White	6 years	Yes	1	Gay	UCC Protestant Christian	Software Support
<b>15</b>	Matt	36	White	1 year	No	N/A	Gay	Atheist	Assistant Principal
	Jarren	27	White/ Black	1 year	No	N/A	Gay	None	Staffing Recruiter/Student

Table 2

Table 2.

*Major Themes and Subcategories Representative Quotes*

<b>PATHWAYS TO OUTNESS (Addressing RQ1: What are the reasons that influence why partners in same-gender couples come out?)</b>
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**Personal Considerations**

“If someone asks, I’ll say something” (*n* = 10)

Matt: *I’m out, so I don’t hid it, but I also don’t feel the need to flaunt it. (Couple 15)\**

Amanda: *If someone asks, I will say something. Uh, but if they don't ask then it's like none of their business. (Couple 5)*

Validate Identity (*n* = 3)

Femme Momma: *I feel like I’m always having to state our relationship just because I the visibility of being very feminine and blending in with the straight crowd, so I just have to say my wife and stuff like that. For identity. (Couple 1)*

Darlene: *I told her I wanted people to know us as us, not like, okay you’re Mickey and you’ve always been gay. And now this is Darlene. And she all of a sudden decided she’s gay, you know, kind of thing. So I wanted them to know us and know us as a family, as a couple and that kind of thing. (Couple 13)*

**Partner Considerations**

Being out shows commitment to the relationship (*n* = 12)

Sappho: *I don’t think we talked about [who we would tell]. I think it just kind of happened organically. It’s when you’re with the right person and you want to like, shout it from the rooftops. (Couple 11)*

Kalel: *I didn’t want to hide our relationship because it was so strong and that there was really, there was love there. It wasn’t just somebody that I was dating, you know, I knew it was something serious and um, you know I figured it’s okay. Everybody, other people, straight people should share their love on Facebook so we can too. And so I never restricted him. I don’t think I ever said anything to you about it, did I?(Couple 14)*

Basing outness decisions on comfort of less out partner (*n* = 10)

Violet: *She was doing a festival, because she’s a music teacher. It made her very nervous for them to know that she was gay and...that means with me. I didn’t feel that there was shame with being with me. But it was like, if they knew that she would pretty much out herself. So that’s her privacy. But it was frustrating. So I totally get it [...] I got a little hurt. I mean, it’s one of those things where it’s nobody’s fault. And I get it. But it’s still hard. (Couple 2)*

Being out shows respect to partner (n = 6)

Corrin: *The beginning of our relationship was based around what she was comfortable with because it was all new (Couple 12)*

Sappho: *I um, with my ex, we were together for eight years and she, in that eight years, never told most of her friends or family circle and I mean we even had a child together through artificial insemination and she always introduced me as her friend. And this is my friend and her son as opposed to this is my partner and our son, right. And I knew if I were ever to be in a relationship again that I could not live like that because I feel very divided because my family and my friends knew, but I always have to be the friend when I was around her friends and family and, and granted it's, you know, 20 years ago I was a different time than it is now 15 years ago, but I just never felt valued. And so it was important. (Couple 11)*

Martin: *I think if the situation was different. I would, I would totally marry him if I'm, if I was out, I find it disrespectful to him, which he doesn't understand [...] I'm married to someone who has to leave because my parents are here to me is very disrespectful. It's disrespectful to begin with. But then if you're married and that person has to leave, I find that over the top. (Couple 10)*

### **Social Considerations**

“People need to be exposed” (n = 12)

Mark: *And we grew up in the seventies and eighties where being gay was just unheard of*

Larry: *There was no role models. I didn't even know what I was. I didn't know what was going on with me back then. (Couple 7)*

Femme Momma: *We're okay taking abuse if next generation doesn't have to. (Couple 1)*

Safety (n = 14)

Public displays of affection (PDA) (n = 12)

Clark: *I don't think it's because we're afraid. I think it's just something that we're not really. [to partner] Right? I don't know. But gay pride week we're more.*

Kalel: *Yeah. Like at gay events we will, but just walking down the street together we won't hold hands or hug, touch each other. We don't do PDA. (Couple 14)*

Alex: *If I was straight, I may not want your hand on my ass, but I wouldn't feel danger if you did it. [...] I feel like heterosexual couples, you could basically fuck on the back of your truck and nobody would give a shit. (Couple 2)*

Homophobia (n = 8)

Mickey: *We had a really, bad neighbor [...] he's the type of person that you would worry about him shooting you because you're gay.*

Darlene: *He made our life a living hell. [...]*

Mickey: *It was all because we were gay every bit of it and out neighbors [...] they just, you know, the one lady just says that [...] well, you know, it's because you girls are gay. (Couple 13)*

Amanda: *I came out relatively young. I was raised in a very religious home. In order to live in the house, I had to go to church every week. That was my rent. I thought I was going to get kicked out of the house when I came out. And I had my bags packed and it was not talked about after I came out. It was just like this culture of secret keeping throughout my life. (Couple 5)*

Professionalism ( $n = 12$ )

Discrimination ( $n = 11$ )

Granger: *I don't know that we would've felt unsafe, but as business owners, would we be successful? (Couple 6)*

Scott: *I think, walking into the world of academia we have a to walk that tightrope of how multi-cultural can I actually be in academia and still be accepted at the same time. So I've always been honest about the fact that I was in a relationship. Sometimes it wasn't...I wouldn't explicitly say male or use male pronouns when I talked about my relationship. Until I'd sort of feel someone out. (Couple 9)*

Comfort of others ( $n = 6$ )

Mickey: *I think it's more of a, what do you call it, gaydar or whatever, that people who know you, they know, they, you know, whether they want to talk about it or not is their choice. (Couple 13)*

Roxy: *You take more into account if your friends have kids and what they're comfortable around and what. Because you don't want to offend anybody no matter like how proud you are. You still don't want to upset somebody. (Couple 12)*

**Being Outed** ( $n = 3$ )

Outed with one big event that triggered coming out further.

Roxy: *[My best friend] I didn't tell until the night my parents knew because when my parents found out, I said fuck it. And I posted a kissing picture of us on Instagram because we had never been, openly said yes, we're together or anything. (Couple 12)*

Ashley: *When the gay marriage issue came here, um, and we were able to get married and we went down [to the court house] expecting lots of people to be there in line and celebrating [...] we got interviewed suddenly we were like the face of gay marriage in [the state]*

Sappho: [...] *At that point there really wasn't a question of being out because then we're like walking down the streets and people would recognize us. So it's kind of funny. We had both retired from teaching and then [...] I decided that I wanted to go back to teaching because I missed it. And then with students they would recognize it. They would recognize, I know you from somewhere, where do I know you from? Then they would Google it. And then it became important because being a teacher and knowing that LGBT kids were sitting in my classroom, even if they struggled, maybe not knowing or maybe sometimes I knew before they knew [...] So when it would come up, I was their voice.*  
(Couple 11)

**COMMUNICATION (Addressing RQ2: How do same-gender couples negotiate and communicate relationship visibility in different contexts?)**

***Insecurity* (n = 9)**

Closeted behavior causes partner to feel insecure in the relationship

Jennifer: *In the beginning [we had explicit conversations] because it bothered me. And uh, if you had to explain to me that it's something that didn't make you feel comfortable, you know, and then it wasn't asked again.* (Couple 6)

Hermione: *We talked a lot about it, because I always had to say, "I'm not mad at you. I'm not upset with you. There's something about this time and place that I don't feel comfortable with this."*

Granger: *Yeah, I remember at times being annoyed. I don't think it was the first three months you would say, or maybe in the first year, but after a year, I think I was like, "Okay now...we should be over this by now," And then when you pull away then, I thought something was wrong.* (Couple 6)

***"Mutual understanding"***  
(n = 8)

Clark: *I think because we're not afraid to post what we're, you know, like when we travel, when we went out we're not afraid to post it online and then they would just see.*

Kalel: *I think he helped me come out and be more comfortable with it on social media because he would tag me and say I love you on it. And at first that was uncomfortable for me.* (Couple 14)

Jarren: *No, I don't think [there has ever been a conversation]*

Matt: *No [...] I feel like we've just kind of naturally ended up on the same page with that kind of thing, which might be why, why we clicked so well together early on.*

***Boundaries* (n = 7)**

Martin: *I am not out and I had gone through multiple*

*relationships. I'm significantly older than Tim. At one point I had decided, you know, I'm not going to put myself and the other person through it when I'm not out. I didn't want to get into a relationship, but when I met him and initially it was for sex, you know, he had a decent job, was related to an educational field. I have a master's and stuff and you know, it's nice to have that kind of connection. And then, um, I come with what I call a lot of baggage, which is, you know, I am very close to my religion. I don't drink, I don't eat pork so I needed someone to accept all of that. And he readily accepted all of that. (Couple 10)*

*Wonder Woman: I would say literally the first week we were dating, she made a comment or she made a statement about, you know, by the way, I'm not a super affectionate person [...] I'm not going to make the move to go kiss you or do this because I'm just not a super affectionate person. (Couple 3)*

**“IT’S HARD TO LIVE IN SOMEONE ELSE’S CLOSET” (Addressing RQ3: How are same-gender couples affected by differential definitions of outness?)**

***Friction*** (n = 9)

*Larry: I don't know if it was problems. Friction. [...]*

*Mark: Coming out is so strange because when you're on the closet inside of it, it's such a drama. So difficult. And it's funny.*

*Larry: My mom's coming over, quickly, um, clean this up and move this out of the way. Open the guest bedroom door.*

*Mark: Yeah. And then on the other side of it, after you do it, you just, you think, what was all that drama about?*

*Bo: I wasn't in the same town. I didn't work in the same town I had grown up in or anything like that. So I had a little different, maybe a little different cultural view than Charlene did. [...] I always felt a little more comfortable than she did.*

*Shadow: But that was the whole thing was all of my friends were there, all my mother's friends, you know.*

***Respecting Boundaries***  
(n = 7)

*Mark: It feels terrible to be hidden away. Like you're not claiming me, you're not claiming me. And I think the, the line that you said to me was, I don't understand how it's going to make you happier if my family hates me.*

*Larry: Because that's what I thought they would do.*

*Mark: [...] that was a real wake up line for me that this is really a serious thing to have and if I'm, you know, for my own comfort and pride in the relationship wanting to be claimed, you know, I can't ask him to have his dad disown him. Then I kind of really backed off after that point.*

*(Couple 7)*

*Violet: I'm super out about myself anyway. But because we're together, there's certain things that I might not if she doesn't want that, too. This affects more than just me.*

*(Couple 2)*

***Shame*** (n = 5)

*Martin: I think it has worked, but I will tell you that if you're getting in a relationship, this is not the path to take. I think people should be honest. It's not worth being in a relationship if you have to hide the relationship. It's very difficult. (Couple 10)*

*Larry: (Field notes from conversation after recording ended) I was ashamed of my past being closeted. I didn't know if I wanted to talk about it during the interview. (Couple 7)*

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\*In these dyadic interviews, often times only one partner responded to questions where there was agreement between the couple. These agreements led to many answers being affirmed by the partner through verbal (e.g., “yeah” or “I agree”) or non-verbal (e.g., nodding) agreements. For this reason many of the quotes include only one partner being quoted.

**Table 3**

Table 3.

*Typologies Coding Participants*

Major Themes/ Subcategories	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
<b>PATHWAYS TO OUTNESS</b>															
<b>Personal Considerations</b>															
“If someone asks, I’ll say something”		X	X	X	X	X				X	X	X	X		X
Validate Identity	X		X										X		
<b>Partner Considerations</b>															
Being out shows commitment to the relationship	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X		X		X	X	X
Basing outness decisions on comfort of less out partner		X	X		X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	
Being out shows respect to partner							X	X		X	X		X	X	X
<b>Societal Considerations</b>															
“People need to be exposed”	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X		X	X		X	X
Safety															
<i>Public displays of affection (PDA)</i>	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X		X	X	
<i>Homophobia</i>		X		X	X	X		X			X	X	X		
Professionalism															
<i>Discrimination</i>		X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X		X	
<i>Comfort of others</i>			X			X	X	X				X	X		
<b>Being outed</b>											X	X		X	
<b>COMMUNICATIONS</b>															
<b>Insecurity</b>			X		X	X	X	X	X		X	X		X	
<b>“Mutual understanding”</b>						X		X		X	X	X	X	X	X
<b>Boundaries</b>		X	X	X		X			X	X				X	
<b>“IT’S HARD TO LIVE IN SOMEONE ELSE’S CLOSET”</b>															
<b>Friction</b>		X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X				X	
<b>Respecting Boundaries</b>		X	X		X		X			X		X		X	
<b>Shame</b>		X					X		X	X				X	

## Appendix A

### Working it “Out”: A Relational Understanding of Disclosure Decisions in Same-Gender Couples

#### Recruitment Postings

*Script for emailing well-situated individuals in the community who may help the researcher gain access to potential participants*

Hello, my name is Sarah Steelman and I am a Ph.D. Candidate at Virginia Tech. I am conducting a research study on how same-gender partners discuss relationship visibility. Since you are an important member of the LGB+ community in the area, I was hoping you might be able to help me pass along this information to people who may be eligible to participate in this study. Participants need to be at least 18-years-old, identify as LGB+, be currently in a same-gender relationship, and able to participate in an in person interview in Las Vegas, NV. Each partner will be compensated with a \$15 gift card for participating in the interview. Interviews will be audio recorded and should last between 45-75 minutes. Results may be used for publication or presentation purposes. If you know anyone who may be eligible, please pass along the information about this study. If they are interested in participating, they may call me (702-204-6174) or email me (Steelman@vt.edu). Thank you so much for your help!

*Script for social media postings about the study*

Hello, my name is Sarah Steelman and I am a Ph.D. Candidate at Virginia Tech. I am conducting a research study on how same-gender partners discuss relationship visibility. Participants need to be at least 18-years-old, identify as LGB+, be currently in a same-gender relationship, and able to participate in an in person interview in Las Vegas, NV. Each partner will be compensated with a \$15 gift card for participating in the interview. Interviews will be audio recorded and should last between 45-75 minutes. Results may be used for publication or presentation purposes. If you are interested in participating, please contact me by phone (702-204-6174) or email (Steelman@vt.edu). If you aren't eligible to participate but may know someone who is, I would also appreciate you passing the information along. Thank you!

*Script for twitter posting*

I am studying how same-gender partners discuss relationship visibility. For more info & inclusion criteria, check out this link: (link to publicly accessible Facebook post)

## Appendix B

### Working it “Out”: A Relational Understanding of Disclosure Decisions in Same-Gender Couples

#### Eligibility Screening Script

##### *Telephone screening*

Hello, my name is Sarah Steelman and I am a Ph.D. Candidate at Virginia Tech. You have indicated that you are interested in participating in my research study on how same-gender partners discuss relationship visibility. I am conducting an interview, with both of you in the room at the same time to answer questions. The interview should last between 45-75 minutes. Before we can proceed, I need to first make sure you and your partner are eligible for this study. Screening data is voluntary and will be kept confidential. If you are eligible and decide to participate, this information will be added to your interview data. If you choose not to participate, this information will be destroyed. Do I have your verbal consent to collect information to these questions? (*If yes, proceed; if no, thank them for their time.*) Are you both available now to answer a few question?

If both available: Great, I’ll start by asking you these questions and then ask you to put your partner on the phone so I can ask for their interest and verbal consent

If only one is available: That’s okay. I can ask you these questions and then we can discuss a time I can call back to get your partner’s interest and ask for verbal consent. Do you wish to continue?

#### **The Questions**

Here are the questions I need to ask to see if you and your partner are eligible for this study.

How old are you? (*Proceed if older than 18 years old*)

If answer makes them ineligible: Unfortunately, you and your partner will not be eligible for my study, I appreciate your interest. If you know anyone else who might be interested and eligibility, please pass along my information for this research study for them to contact me.

How do you sexually identify? (*Proceed if answer is anything other than heterosexual*)

If answer makes them ineligible: Unfortunately, you and your partner will not be eligible for my study, I appreciate your interest. If you know anyone else who might be interested and eligibility, please pass along my information for this research study for them to contact me.

Are you currently in a relationship with someone of your same gender? (*Proceed if answer is yes*)

If answer makes them ineligible: Unfortunately, you and your partner will not be eligible for my study, I appreciate your interest. If you know anyone else who might be interested and eligibility, please pass along my information for this

research study for them to contact me.

Would you and your partner be able to participate in an in person interview in an agreed upon location in Las Vegas, Nevada? (*Proceed if answer is yes*)

If answer makes them ineligible: Unfortunately, you and your partner will not be eligible for my study, I appreciate your interest. If you know anyone else who might be interested and eligibility, please pass along my information for this research study for them to contact me.

**If eligible**

You and your partner are eligible to participate in this research study. Do either of you have any further questions before we continue? (*Answer any questions*) If you both are still interested in participating, we can schedule a time and location for the interview. Would you like to schedule an interview? (*If yes, schedule an interview at an agreed upon time and private location*)

Thank you both so much for being willing to participate in this research study. I will send you the consent forms to review via email prior to our interview date. What is your email address? (*Write down email address.*) If you have any questions, concerns, or need to reschedule please call or email me. I look forward to meeting you soon.

## Appendix C

### VIRGINIA POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE AND STATE UNIVERSITY Informed Consent for Participants In Research Projects Involving Human Subjects

**Title of Project:** Working it “Out”: A Relational Understanding of Disclosure Decisions in Same-Gender Couples

**Investigator(s):** Sarah M. Steelman, MS, Graduate Student Researcher  
[Steelman@vt.edu](mailto:Steelman@vt.edu) / 702-204-6174  
Dr. April Few-Demo, PhD, Associate Professor  
[alfew@vt.edu](mailto:alfew@vt.edu) / 540-231-2664

#### **Consent form for research participation.**

This is a consent form to participate in this research. This form contains important information about this study as well as what to expect if you decide to participate.

#### **Your participation is voluntary.**

Please read this information carefully. Please ask any questions at any time. If you decide to participate, please sign this form. You will receive a copy of this form.

#### **I. Purpose of this Research Project**

The purpose of this study is to explore the negotiation process same-gender couples to determine visibility of their relationship in order to help mental health clinicians better serve these clients. The results from this research will be used for a doctoral dissertation and future publications. The expected number of participants will be 10-15 couples.

#### **II. Procedures**

You are being invited to participate in a dyadic interview as well as complete a demographics questionnaire. The interview will take place at the agreed upon community location that best fits the participants’ needs. The demographic survey 10 minutes. The dyadic interview will take approximately 45-75 minutes. All interviews will be audio recorded. Following the interview process, researchers will transcribe the audio recording. All identifying information will be removed from the transcript. You may choose to stop the interview at any time with no penalty to you.

#### **III. Risks**

There are minimal risks associated with participating in this study.

Risk of breach of confidentiality. The only people with access to identifying information will be the interviewer, the principle investigators, and a trained research team helping with transcription. The protection of participant information will be taken seriously during all phases of the study and after the study. Confidential study information is not discussed outside of the research settings unless prompted by you, the participant.

Risk of disclosure of personal information. Participating in these interviews may cause you to reveal personal information. You do not need to answer every question if you do not feel comfortable doing so. If at any time you appear upset or distressed as a result of the interview questions, the researcher may ask you about it to be sure that you want to continue. A list of local resources will be provided to you. Any expenses accrued for seeking or receiving treatment will be the responsibility of the subject and not that of the research project, research team, or Virginia Tech.

#### **IV. Benefits**

For many participants, completing our study may promote reflection of relational communication and encourage open communication between partners.

No promise or guarantee of benefits has been made to encourage you to participate.

#### **V. Extent of Anonymity and Confidentiality**

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be given a participation number that corresponds to the information you share. One electronic document will exist that connects your information to your participation number. This file will be kept on a password-protected computer of the researcher and be encrypted with another separate password. The research team will be the only people who have access to the data.

At no time will the researchers release identifiable results of the study to anyone other than individuals working on the project without your written consent.

The Virginia Tech (VT) Institutional Review Board (IRB) may view the study’s data for auditing purposes. The IRB is responsible for the oversight of the protection of human subjects involved in research.

*Note: in some situations, it may be necessary for an investigator to break confidentiality. If a researcher has reason to suspect that a person poses a threat of harm to others or oneself, the*

*researcher is required by Nevada State law to notify the appropriate authorities. This researcher must report any threat of harm to the proper authorities.*

## **VI. Compensation**

Participants will be financially compensated for their time in this study. Each partner will be compensated for their time with a \$15 gift card. In total, couples will receive \$30 for their participation in this research.

## **VII. Freedom to Withdraw**

It is important for you to know that you are free to withdraw from this study at any time without penalty. You are free not to answer any questions that you choose or respond to what is being asked of you without penalty.

Should you withdraw or otherwise discontinue participation, you will be compensated for the portion of the project completed in accordance with the Compensation section of this document.

## **VIII. Questions or Concerns**

Should you have any questions about this study, you may contact the researcher whose contact information is included at the beginning of this document.

Should you have any questions or concerns about the study’s conduct or your rights as a research subject, or need to report a research-related injury or event, you may contact the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board at [irb@vt.edu](mailto:irb@vt.edu) or (540) 231-3732.

## **IX. Subject's Consent**

I have read the Consent Form and conditions of this project. I have had all my questions answered. I hereby acknowledge the above and give my voluntary consent:

\_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_  
Subject signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Subject printed name

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*(Note: each subject must be provided a copy of this form. In addition, the IRB office may stamp its approval on the consent document(s) you submit and return the stamped version to you for use in consenting subjects; therefore, ensure each consent document you submit is ready to be read and signed by subjects.)*

### Appendix D

#### Working it “Out”: A Relational Understanding of Disclosure Decisions in Same-Gender Couples

##### Demographic Questionnaire

Sarah M. Steelman, Steelman@vt.edu

1. How old did you turn on your last birthday? \_\_\_\_\_
2. Describe your racial/ethnic background. \_\_\_\_\_
3. How do you identify your sexual orientation? \_\_\_\_\_
4. How do you identify your gender identity? \_\_\_\_\_
5. How long have you been in this relationship? \_\_\_\_\_
6. Are you married? \_\_\_\_\_ If yes, for how long? \_\_\_\_\_
7. List names and ages of any children you may have:  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_
6. What is your current occupation? \_\_\_\_\_
7. Where are you from? \_\_\_\_\_
8. Do you consider your hometown to be urban (e.g., a city), rural (e.g., the country), or suburban (e.g., outside of a city)? \_\_\_\_\_
9. How long have you lived here? \_\_\_\_\_
10. Do you consider your current location to be urban (e.g., a city), rural (e.g., the country), or suburban (e.g., outside of a city)? \_\_\_\_\_
11. How important was religion in your family of origin?  
 \_\_\_\_\_
12. What religion? \_\_\_\_\_

13. How important is religion to you now?

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14. What religion? \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix E**

Participant ID: \_\_\_\_\_

Dyadic Interview Protocol for

## Working it “Out”: A Relational Understanding of Disclosure Decisions in Same-Gender Couples

## Welcome statement - Introductory protocol

Thank you for taking the time to talk with me today. You have been selected to participate in this research because you are currently in a same-gender relationship. Our research project focuses on how relationship visibility is negotiated and communicated between you and your partner. We are interested in your experience and thank you for sharing.

This dyadic interview should last about 45-75 minutes. As compensation for your time, effort, and travel to complete this interview, we are offering each of you \$15 for participation in the interview. I have sent you the consent forms before today but I’d like to go over them again with you now and answer any questions you may have. (Go over consent forms)

Thank you again for agreeing to participate. Do you have any questions for me before we begin?

Interviewer-Ask each question and probe for more information using the questions below the main question if needed.

Q1 How did you meet?

Probe: What attracted you to one another?

Q2 How important is it to you both that others know about your relationship?

Q3 When, if any, are times you have been out to others about your relationship?

Probe: Tell me a story about a time you were out.

Probe: Tell me a story about a time you weren’t out

Q4 On a typical day out together, what is okay to do in public? (e.g., holding hands, kissing, hugging, etc.)

Probe: What is okay to say in public? (e.g., terms of affection, referring to the other as your significant other?)

Probe: What is not okay to do in public?

Probe: Does this change depending on where in public you are?

Probe: What happens if someone does something “inappropriate” in public?

Probe: What is okay to discuss publicly on social media?

Q5 Who, if anyone, knows about your romantic relationship?

Probe: How far into your relationship did you start telling others?

Probe: How did you each feel about others knowing?

Probe: How did you both decide you would tell people?

Probe: What happens if you disagree about these decisions? For example, what if one of you wants to tell your friends but your partner doesn't want their friends to know.

Q6 Imagine you are going out together with your partner's friends, what do your interactions look like?

Probe: What kinds of things do you say to each other?

Probe: Do you discuss what is and isn't okay before going out with them?

Probe: Is any sort of physical affection okay?

Probe: Does this change depending on where in public you are?

Probe: Does this change if you are out with **your partner's family**?

Probe: Does this change if you are out with **your partner's coworkers**?

Probe: What, if anything, could someone do that would be considered “inappropriate”?

Probe: What happens if someone does something “inappropriate”?

Probe: What happens if you disagree?

Q7 Now imagine that you go out just the two of you and an hour into your evening you run into partner’s friends. Since you were not planning on seeing people you know you did not discuss together before hand how you would act. What do your interactions look like?

Probe: Do you change your behavior? If so, how?

Probe: What, if anything, could someone do that would be considered “inappropriate”?

Probe: Does this change depending on where in public you are?

Probe: Does this change if you run into **your partner’s family**?

Probe: Does this change if you run into **your partner’s coworkers**?

Probe: Tell me a story about a time, if there is one, when this has happened in the past with friends, family, and/or coworkers.

Probe: What happens if you disagree?

Q8 Could these decisions change in the future?

Probe: How will you know they need to be changed? Can you give me an example?

Probe: If they did need to be changed, who would initiate the conversation?

Probe: Who might be helpful in these relationship decisions?

Q9 How do you think your answers to any of the questions I asked would change if you were in a heterosexual relationship?

Q10 Is there anything you want to say about how decisions are made in your relationship as it pertains to being out?