

“WELL IF THERE’S ONE BENEFIT, YOU’RE NOT GOING TO GET PREGNANT”:
A QUALITATIVE INVESTIGATION OF THE SEX EDUCATION THAT GAY,
LESBIAN, AND BISEXUAL INDIVIDUALS RECEIVED

by

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Masters of Arts in Sociology

Middle Tennessee State University
May 2016

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This is dedicated to the youth who feel *invisible* in their sex education classes.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my family for all the love and support they provided throughout this whole process. I do not know where I would be without them. I would also like to thank the Sociology department faculty, my committee, and especially Dr. Webber who provided critical feedback and guidance for this project and my entire time in the program. Thank you to my participants who took the time to participate in this project. Finally to my graduate cohort, thank you for the constant support, encouragement, and push I needed, especially on the hard days. I am forever grateful for each and every one of you.

ABSTRACT

Despite growing attention to gay and lesbian concerns, today's current sex education curriculum in schools and families is still centered upon heterosexuality. Those studies that examine family sex communication and school-based sex education commonly reflect and take place within a heterosexual context as well. This largely ignores the perspective of lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 10 self-identified lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) young adults between the ages of 19-25, this study explores what these individuals learn when it comes to sex education in school and in the home. The findings show that LGB young adults experience sex education, whether at home, school, or through their own searching, that is heterosexually centered, revolves around sex as being dangerous, and is often lacking the most basic health and behavior information. Overall, there is a gap in the information participants want and need in contrast to what is available to them which mirrors their heterosexual peers.

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INTRODUCTION

Increased attention from the media and popular culture has raised awareness about equality for the gay and lesbian community. However, despite growing attention to gay and lesbian concerns, today's current sex education curriculum in schools and families is still centered upon heterosexuality (Elliott 2012). Parents and adolescents often feel uncomfortable discussing sexual topics (Green and Sollie 1989), and when conversations about sex occur research shows that often parents assume that their child is heterosexual (Martin 2009). Heteronormativity often dictates sex education in the home and at school; heteronormativity refers to heterosexuality being the norm and dominating other forms of sexuality. Sex education programs frequently are scrutinized by parents and/or school administration (Elliott 2012) for the subject matter they cover, and attempts to address homosexual issues often face even more challenges from parents, school boards, or politicians (Boushka 2006). However, excluding specific concerns faced by gay and lesbian individuals can leave them without much needed information regarding sexual decisions. Because of heteronormativity and heterosexism in school-based sex education and many parents' reluctance to address homosexuality, research is scarce on the sexual conversations that gay and lesbian adolescents have with their parents and the information they received in school sex education.

In addition, there are few qualitative studies on family sexual communication in general, especially those that focus on the adolescents who participate in family sex communication. Qualitative studies have mainly focused on interviewing parents about the sexual communication they have had with their adolescents (Elliott 2012; Schalet 2011; Walker 2001). Perhaps this is because of the sensitivity of the subject matter, but

also the additional research barriers that are encountered and protections added to working with and studying adolescents since they are considered a vulnerable group (Swauger 2009). Therefore, my research seeks to fill a gap. Using data from 10 in-depth qualitative interviews with self-identified lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals between the ages of 19-25, I examine what gay and lesbian young adults learned about sex from their parents when they were adolescents, what gay and lesbian young adults learned about sex from their school-based sex education when they were adolescents, and where they learned about sex when their school and parents were not providing them with information. I first review the literature on parental communication about sexual topics, the discussion of homosexuality within the context of the family, and sex education. Then I will discuss methods and analysis. Next, I focus on findings. Finally, I provide conclusions, limitations, and directions for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Parental communication about sexual topics

Adolescent sexual behavior has been studied from various perspectives. A variety of studies have looked at the parent-adolescent relationship, and previous research indicates that this relationship can be a protective factor against engaging in sexual activity. Commonly though, these studies have concentrated on parental monitoring (Miller 2002), parental involvement (Majumdar 2005), parental connectedness (Kapinus and Gorman 2004), as well as parental views on adolescent sexual behavior (Gillmore et al. 2002). There is less research on the actual communication between parents and their adolescents regarding sexual topics. The research that does exist is varied, and it is still unclear what exactly is being communicated during these conversations (Miller 2002).

For example Newcomer and Udry (1985) found that parents and adolescents often disagree on what exactly is being communicated when discussing sexual topics. Further they found that mothers were much more likely to report sexual communication and teaching their adolescent something about sex, than the adolescent themselves were likely to report (Newcomer and Udry 1985). Some studies have linked more sexual communication to less risk taking behaviors, while others have found that more communication was not related to fewer risk taking behaviors (Clawson and Reese-Weber 2003). However, each of these studies takes place within a heterosexual framework. Also, one critique the majority of these studies have in common is that they have been quantitative in design which commonly lacks an in-depth analysis of these types of conversations. Furthermore, there is less research on the actual communication between parents and their adolescents regarding sexual topics, especially regarding homosexuality because parents commonly leave this particular aspect out of their sexual discussions.

Research reports that parents believe their children should be educated on sexual topics (Solebello and Elliott 2011) but are often unsure about what to say to them (Elliott 2010). This often results in a lack of parent-child communication about sex (Epstein and Ward 2008) and multiple factors impact the conversations that do take place. Overall mothers communicate more than fathers about sexual topics in the context of the family (Collins, Angera, and Latty 2008; Walker 2001; Hutchinson and Cooney 1998), and daughters generally receive more sexual communication than sons (Epstein and Ward 2008). Lehr et al. (2005) found that fathers were more likely to talk to their sons about sexual topics if their father had communicated about sex with them and also if they

noticed their son's physical development. Rothenberg (1980) found that mothers were more likely to discuss sexual topics if the adolescent was older, and if she felt comfortable discussing those topics. Regnerus (2005) found that parents who were more religious were less likely to discuss sex and birth control with their adolescent. Also, Regnerus (2005) found that religious parents, who reported talking to their adolescents frequently about sex and birth control, may actually be talking about morality and sexual values. These traditional religious principles tend to define heterosexuality as the norm and what is morally acceptable. Any other type of sexuality or sexual activity is often considered unacceptable, deviant, and morally wrong. Since religion has been shown to be associated with sexual attitudes (Regnerus 2005), families with parents who adhere to these religious principles may especially lack communication that includes lesbian and gay sex specific issues.

Most research demonstrates that communication about sexual topics not only takes place from a heteronormative stance, but it also shows that these conversations take place in that same context. For example, Martin (2009) found that most mothers assume that their adolescent is heterosexual, and with this they project heterosexuality as the norm and therefore do not discuss any alternative sexualities. She goes on to claim that mothers use their actions and talk to project this identity onto their children. Her quantitative study examined how mothers "construct heterosexuality as the norm, regardless of a child's ultimate sexual identity" (Martin 2009: 192). In their qualitative study of fathers, Solebello and Elliott (2011) found that fathers actively try to promote heterosexuality for their adolescents, especially their sons. Interestingly, as one father blatantly commented in their study when speaking of his adolescent, "we want them to be

as heterosexual as possible” (Solebello and Elliott 2011: 301). Although parents assume and may prefer that their teenager be heterosexual, Elliott (2012) finds they claim they would be accepting of different sexuality preferences. Although parents may view their promotion of heteronormativity as being protective of their children (Elliott 2012) this framing constructs homosexuality as a deviant identity and may foster internalized homophobia in their adolescent.

The discussion of homosexuality within the context of the family

Talking about sex in general may still be considered taboo, and being gay continues to be stigmatized in our society therefore, putting the two together creates a complex situation for parents and their children (LaSala 2010). Some researchers have studied lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) issues within the family context (Goldberg and Allen 2013; Moore 2011; LaSala 2010), as well as parent reaction to their children coming out (Johnson and Best 2012; Fields 2001). However, there is a lack of research examining how LGBT adolescents are educated and discuss sexual issues and topics with their heterosexual parents and within their family environment. LaSala (2010) examined a variety of issues that families with LGBT youth face. He qualitatively interviewed 65 self-identified gay youth between the ages of 14-25 along with 76 of their parents. When considering the discussion of sexual topics LaSala (2010: 205) claims that “parents in this study tried to discuss HIV risk with their children, but their kids, clearly embarrassed by their parents’ wish to talk specifically about sex - especially sex that is considered taboo - resisted their efforts.”

Research studies with LGBT parents focus more commonly on family formation (Moore 2011) or the suitability of LGBT parents (Goldberg and Allen 2013). Mitchell

(1998) examined how lesbian mothers educate their children on sexual topics. This study explains that when educating their children on sexual topics lesbian mothers put emphasis on their children knowing anatomically correct terms for their bodies, providing age appropriate information, reminding children that any two people can love each other, and mutual respect in relationships and between them and their children (Mitchell 1998). However there is an absence of research that examines heterosexual parents discussing and educating their LGBT identified children on sexual topics and issues.

Studies that have focused on LGBT youth within the family context more commonly examine things like the coming out process, well-being, identity formation, and self-esteem (Goldberg and Allen 2013; Beaty 1999). These studies show that those individuals whose parents have displayed behaviors that are more supportive of homosexuality have higher self-esteem and may feel more comfortable to come out to them as gay or lesbian at younger ages (Beaty 1999). Being able to come out to supportive parents generates an environment that contributes to the well-being of gay and lesbian individuals (Goldberg and Allen 2013; Beaty 1999). Coming out to their parents at a younger age may also help to create a pathway for discussing sexual topics that include gay and lesbian specific issues, although a study has yet to focus on this aspect of the coming out process.

Sex education

Elliott (2012) refers to the “danger discourse” which often surrounds the conversation of teenage sexual activity. Teenage sexual activity is often discussed in terms of being dangerous and something that teens need protection from by focusing only on various consequences that can occur like pregnancy and sexually transmitted

infections (Elliott 2012; Schalet 2011). This discourse, commonly employed in sex education courses, often takes place and is discussed within a heterosexual framework. School-based sexual education is often controversial with arguments over what should or should not be taught in these programs. There is also the longstanding argument over whether the school environment is the appropriate place to be discussing sexual topics (Zimmerman 2015). Zimmerman (2015: 3) asserts that “state sponsored school would come to dominate nearly every aspect of children’s lives, but it rarely and then only gingerly touched on sex.” Further, Republicans and the religious right have dominated the opposing discourse of school-based sex education (Irvine 2002). This leaves issues such as abortion, contraception, masturbation and homosexuality largely invisible within sex education courses (Zimmerman 2015). This results in school-based sex education programs being inadequate because they do not address all the sexual health needs that all youth may face, especially those needs of gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals.

The exclusion of homosexuality results in a disadvantage regarding sexual decisions, and especially so for gay and lesbian youth. There are a variety of reasons that have been cited as to why homosexuality is not discussed in school based sexual education. In their research, Kennedy and Covell (2009) discuss how the majority of teachers hold negative attitudes toward homosexual individuals, oppose incorporating homosexual topics into the classroom, and feel uncomfortable discussing homosexuality, which makes addressing the topic challenging. Boushka (2006) argues that religious views and discrimination are the reasons for the lack of homosexual teachings. Irvine (2002) claims that the religious right and Republicans have dominated policies related to sex education and therefore refuse to allow any type of discussion related to

homosexuality. Sex education teachers may lack administrative support (Zimmerman 2015) and fail to cover topics considered to be controversial such as homosexuality. However, not covering topics related to a variety of sexual orientations allows heteronormative structures to be maintained and oppression, stigmatization, and marginalization to persist.

METHODS AND ANALYSIS

I conducted 10 in-depth interviews to examine what gay and lesbian adolescents learn from their parents and school regarding sex education. Warren and Karner (2010: 129) state “if you are interested in biography and accounts, use the interview method.” This lends support to the type of method selected for this study. Interviews were conducted between April 2015 and August 2015. Each interview was semi-structured and guided with 21 open ended questions. Before the interview began participants filled out a demographic sheet with their sex, age, race, sexual orientation, relationship status and highest level of education attained. See Appendix A for details. Each participant was also reminded of their rights and voluntary participation. I obtained verbal consent to help preserve confidentiality. I began the interview by asking a general question of the sex education they received while growing up; more specific questions related to topics covered, context of conversation, beneficial conversations, sexual orientation, and differing conversations once sexual orientation was revealed followed. My subsequent questions focused on sex education they received at school, followed by specific questions about what information was provided. Next I asked about where participants received their sex education information if none was provided at home or school. A list of all interview questions can be found in Appendix B. Interviews were conducted in a place

that the interviewee felt comfortable commonly a private campus study room (n=8) or a local restaurant (n=2). Interviews lasted anywhere from 40 minutes to two hours in length, with most lasting approximately one hour. All interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed verbatim. Each participant was given a pseudonym to help protect their identity.

Recruitment

Recruitment began in the spring of 2015 and participants were recruited in a variety of ways. I began by making announcements regarding the research project in a number of undergraduate courses. These courses included three sociology classes, two communication classes, and one English class. This elicited four participants.

Recruitment fliers were also posted at numerous locations throughout campus including bus stops, building entrance doors, and announcement boards which brought forth two participants. The final four participants were referred to the study from previous interviewees.

Sample

Participants for this study range in age from 19 to 25, with a mean age of 22 and a median of 23. There were six women and four men. The majority of participants were white (n=8), while one was African-American and the other identified as multiracial. All of the men indicated that their sexual orientation was gay and all were currently in a relationship. Three women identified as lesbian, two as pansexual lesbians, and one bisexual. Pansexual orientation indicates an attraction to a person's personality; this may or may not be sexual and may or may not be an attraction to someone of the same sex. The two women who identified this way claimed that this was their main way of

classifying their sexual orientation, but because each was in a relationship with a woman they also considered themselves lesbians. Two of the women were engaged, two were in a relationship and two were single. All participants had some college education with the highest level attained being a Bachelor's degree. Appendix C provides a table of participant characteristics.

Analysis

My analytical strategy represents a grounded theory approach, consisting of two main coding stages (Charmaz 2006). During the first stage, I first listened to recorded interviews and transcribed them. I then read and reread interview transcripts utilizing line-by-line coding to develop as many themes and categories as possible. The second coding stage consisted of more focused coding where I paid special attention to key themes that I had identified during the line-by-line coding process. Focused coding was divided into three specific subcategories. I focused explicitly on each category of parental teachings about sex, school sex education, and where individuals were learning about sex.

FINDINGS

Overall, three main themes emerged. The first relates to sexual conversations that take place in the home. Participants indicate that the topic of sex makes their parents uncomfortable in general which is exhibited in their lack of sexual conversations. Parents also assume that sex education will be covered in school, therefore they fail to engage in discussions about sex. Those parents that do attempt to engage in sexual conversations typically do so from a heterosexual standpoint, even though they acknowledge their prior assumption that their child was not straight. Once adolescents have come out to their

parents heteronormativity and heterosexual ideals continue to dictate conversations in various ways. The second main theme focuses on school provided sex education. Overwhelmingly participants point out that the sex education they received while in school was exclusionary and useless to LGB individuals. Participants indicate that sex education provided in school is not only inadequate for them, but also for their straight peers. The environment created and the information provided leaves these LGB individuals feeling invisible, unimportant, and uninformed. The lack of information conveyed regarding LGB sex education leads to the third main finding, which is obtaining sex education information on their own. Various media outlets provide the majority of information the participants received both related to sexual health and sexual behaviors. Largely, the sex education received at home, school, or through one's own searching revolves around the "danger discourse" (Elliott 2012), which indicates that teenage sexual activity is dangerous and something teens need protection from regardless of sexual orientation. This type of discourse leaves a gap in the information participants want and need versus what is provided to them. The "danger discourse" and the gap in information related to sex education are both commonalities that LGB individuals have with their straight counterparts.

Learning about sex at home (or not)- "sex definitely makes my parents uncomfortable"

As other studies indicate, there is a lack of communication from parents regarding sexual topics (Zimmerman 2010; Epstein and Ward 2008; Irvine 2002). The majority of interviewees discuss how there was little to no formal conversations about sexual topics as they were growing up. Reasons given demonstrate that discussing sex, regardless of

one's sexual orientation, is uncomfortable and taboo for both the adolescent and the parent. Jack says:

Sex definitely makes my parents uncomfortable. The fact that they don't talk about it you know? There's a certain silence about it I guess. And I definitely don't feel comfortable talking to them about my sexuality. And it would have been uncomfortable for me [to talk about it] because I know it would have been uncomfortable for them. I know that they probably didn't receive a good sexual education you know, so I guess I can't really expect them to teach anything and honestly I really didn't want them to. I mean I seriously felt like I had to take a lot of my own sex education into my own hands, because I wanted to be educated about sex you know. And I knew that I was sexually different. So yea, I think that I um knew I couldn't get it out of my parents so I didn't even try.

Kate discusses the taboo nature of sexual discussions as she was growing up:

I didn't get a sex education, sex was kind of a forbidden topic. We didn't talk about sex. I guess because I come from a more conservative, more Republican, more strict household where you know you dress nice for church on Sunday and you spend time with family and what not, and sex just is more of a topic that's not discussed.

Lack of direct conversations with parents about sex communicates to adolescents that their parents are uncomfortable discussing sex in general. They also seem to perceive their parents as lacking knowledge on sexual topics, leaving the adolescents to their own devices when it comes to sex education. Participants indicate that their parents also appear to believe that sex education will be taught in school, so they fail to talk about it at home. Allen states "My parents never really talked about that [sex]. I feel like they might have wanted to, but they didn't because they knew the schools would teach us." This can be problematic when schools are inadequate at teaching relevant same-sex sexual topics, which will be discussed below, or fail to offer such courses altogether. Kate claims:

They didn't offer um wellness class in high school. And um, we had no sex education. It was never talked about it was never brought up. I was actually kind of surprised. In the class that I've taken you know I was oh

that's real? People actually offer sex education classes? And maybe that's why my mom didn't talk to me about it, she assumed that I was going to take a class like that and then she wouldn't have to cover it. But, we never got one.

Those parents that attempt to provide their child with sexual information tended to do so using outside resources to help. Lisa claims:

I think I was eight when she [her mother] first kind of brought up you know like menstruation and things like that. She had this book and it had all these pictures and it was kind of a little graphic for me like with skeletons and you know how the anatomy of it all works. And I was kind of like you know, it was interesting but scary at the same time because I was so young.

Lisa's example shows that her mother was trying to teach her about her body, but that is not the same as discussing sex and sexuality. Studies indicate that parents may be more apt to discuss topics that are considered less controversial like puberty (Collins, Angera and Latty 2008) when compared to other topics such as homosexuality. Parents may consider puberty a natural and normal part of growing up, but view their adolescents as too young and immature to engage in sex and sexuality behaviors and conversations (Elliott 2010). The materials Lisa's mother used left her feeling scared and confused since she was so young at the time and they failed to cover topics specifically related to sex and sexuality. Overall, parents avoid teaching sexual education to their children or leave it to someone or something else. Whether it be the school system or scientific books, parents are relying on other outlets to teach their children about sex. This can be problematic as parents can be viewed as an important source of sexual communication (Epstein and Ward 2008).

Gendered activities as a sign of being gay- “you just did it differently”

Some studies have shown that parents assume their child is heterosexual (Martin 2009), while others indicate parents may have an idea their child is gay or lesbian (LaSala 2010). The majority of participants in this study indicated that their parents knew early on that their sexual orientation would be something other than heterosexual. Julie claims:

Like I think it’s such a big innate part of me and I think she’s [my mom] always known. Um, I wasn’t a really girly like feminine, um I was a tomboy, I wore, I went through a stage where I wore boy’s clothes, so those are typical tell-tale signs.

Once adolescents officially come out to their parents, parental comments indicate that they knew at an early age that their child’s sexuality would not be heterosexual because of certain behaviors they display.

My mom was like well I always assumed you were a lesbian. She never really came out and fully said why I guess. I think that you know because I would play with like GI Joes and things like that or Legos were my favorite, I liked hot wheels, um, I was definitely a tomboy, always wanted to play all the sports. All my friends were guys pretty much. I was really involved in music and so all the instruments that I ended up playing are kind of more masculine instruments. I think my mom and dad kind of knew like ok she likes boys stuff or whatever and so I think they kind of assumed that I would at least be different if not gay. – Lisa

This example echoes many participants’ experiences. Six participants discuss how they displayed nontraditional gender behaviors, which their parents interpreted as them being gay or lesbian. Although gendered behaviors do not ultimately predict or affect one’s sexual orientation, parents view these behaviors as signs of being non-heterosexual. Parents may be concerned that others link gender nonconformity and sexual orientation when viewing their children (Kane 2006), but parents themselves often hold the same assumption. Even though parents assume early on that their child may be lesbian or gay,

they fail to discuss sexual topics that are specific and relevant to their child's sexual orientation. This indicates the powerful nature of heteronormativity and how it continues to dominate the sex education discourse, because even though parents may perceive their child as being a lesbian or gay male they continue to discuss heterosexual sex or no sex at all, rendering non-heterosexual sex invisible.

Heteronormativity continues to dictate conversations and treatment of adolescents once they have officially told their parents of their sexual preference. There are a variety of explanations for this. One example is that parents are already uncomfortable discussing sexual topics, and gay sex exacerbates their uncomfortableness. For example, Roberta states:

Like if my parents are uncomfortable with something they don't really make an effort to talk about it. [And they didn't talk about it] at all once I was thrown out [of the closet]. Like they wouldn't talk to me about sex when they thought I was straight like so like now they just pretend that it does not exist at all.

Parents also make the assumption that if their child has enough knowledge to know that they are gay, then they assume their child knows all about sex. Jack says "I think that if anything they thought that oh well I must have it all figured out [about sex]. I think that they certainly credited me I guess with having enough knowledge to know that I'm gay so." Conflating one's sexual orientation with valid sex education can be problematic when the two are not inextricably linked. For example, we do not assume straight individuals have all pertinent sexual knowledge and information. Thus assuming gay and lesbian adolescents are fully informed about sex because they are not straight confuses one's sexual orientation with sexual information which results in parents opting out of

sexual conversations, leaving these individuals to fend for themselves when it comes to their sex education.

Parental discussions related to sex- “she kept saying men and women”

Some participants recall parents engaging in conversations related to sex. The nature of these conversations is complex, as they still reflect a heteronormative stance before and after the adolescent has come out to their parents. Here, Bethany recalls a conversation she had with her mother before coming out:

I do remember her making a big point about that men and women, she just kept on saying men and women shouldn't do any kissing or touching until they're married. So she was um, I always believed my mom kind of had an idea about me being a lesbian but she kept on saying boys and girls, men and women, um, shouldn't touch, you shouldn't do anything until you're married and she just kept using that.

As previous studies have indicated, parents assume their child will be heterosexual and push that sexuality onto their children regardless of their ultimate sexual orientation (Martin 2009); however adolescents assume their parents know their sexual orientation as something other than heterosexual long before they disclose their same-sex attractions. As Bethany indicates, there is awareness of the heterosexual content within these conversations which can leave individuals feeling invisible and hurt when they do not feel acknowledged in the sexual conversation.

Once participants have come out to their parents, sexual conversations change but they still reflect a heterosexual ideal. For example, parents may continue to discuss only heterosexual sex in an attempt to change their adolescent. Colin describes sexual conversations with his dad after coming out:

I guess [dad] hinted maybe I'm just delayed or something. Or, maybe that you know what I'm feeling is maybe not really there and I haven't noticed

girls or something. He would always talk about how I wasn't exposed to that so I don't know where you got that from, you know, that was how he was at first. So he wouldn't talk about sex like it would be mostly you know like he was hoping my talking about straight sex that would kind of get me I guess interested in it.

Colin felt his dad was trying to change his sexual orientation by only engaging in heterosexual talk once he came out. Other participants also recall their parents engaging in heterosexual talk once they came out. Although no other participants describe their parents as trying to change them, three of the women participants discussed how their parents made comments related to pregnancy and having children. For example, when asked if her mother ever had any conversations related to sex or relationships once she came out Kate says "No, she just told me I was fine, I couldn't get pregnant. She was like well if there's one benefit, you're not going to get pregnant." The other two women participants echo this idea about pregnancy in their responses to the same question.

What's interesting is when you bring up children, like my mom's kind of almost like how is that going to happen?-Lisa

He [my dad] was just like "so you like girls?" and I was like yea. He was like "does that mean that you won't have any babies?" and I was like no, that's not necessarily what that means.-Bethany

First, no male participants describe any comments from their parents related to having children which indicates a gendered assumption that women should be concerned about pregnancy, either with prevention or wanting to have children. Second, these comments are still made in a heterosexual framework as parents indicate that if their child is in a same-sex relationship their opportunity for children diminishes. These comments show that parents do not consider adoption and artificial insemination as means to creating a family. Lastly, these comments directly relate sex to procreation resulting in not only

invisibility of pleasure within a sexual relationship, but complete elimination of gay and lesbian sex.

A few participants describe their parents as discussing sexual topics with them. Participants indicate those parents that have discussed heterosexual sexual topics may find it challenging to transition into discussing gay and lesbian sexual topics once their child has come out to them. Kerry, whose father had discussed birth control and condoms with her reflects on how things changed when she started dating a woman:

Maybe he felt awkward, maybe he felt like oh boy you know how do I go about this. Because I didn't even know, this is kind of ignorant of me, I didn't even know how women had sex together. I was like um so, what do we do? You know, how does this happen? So, it was a learning process for me and I guess it was a learning process for my dad. Because now it, you know here he was preaching condoms, birth control, and now he's like well I mean what do I tell her you know? I don't have any advice to tell her. And the same for my mom, you know she she's like um, I don't really know what to do?

Lisa also points to the idea that her parents may not have known what to say to her once she came out:

I think they [my parents] also you know, probably didn't know much about, I'm sure they knew almost nothing about you know like sexually transmitted diseases as far as with the lesbian community. . .I don't know if they assumed we weren't sexually active either.

Overall adolescents perceive their parents to be uncomfortable with discussing sexual topics, leading them to allow other outlets to teach their children about sex. Unfortunately these substitutions are not always effective. Although parents may have the assumption that their child has a different sexual orientation than that of heterosexual they do not have conversations related to alternative sexual preferences and specific sex education related to those preferences. Once adolescents have officially come out, the power of

heteronormativity continues to persist as parents either ignore sexual topics all together, only discuss heterosexual sex, or assume their child “has it all figured out.” Those parents that attempt to continue sexual conversations once their child has revealed their sexual preference may lack the knowledge to do so effectively.

Learning about sex at school- “I felt so stupid for having to be there”

Overwhelmingly participants told stories of experiencing sex education classes at school that were abstinence-based, heterosexually focused, and strictly excluded discussions of LGBT individuals. A variety of other studies document and describe this same environment (Elliott 2014; McNeill 2013; Elia and Ellison 2010). These classes often engaged in the “danger discourse” (Elliott 2012) surrounding teenage sexual activity by focusing on pregnancy and STD prevention. Allen describes how the “danger discourse” played out in his class:

They constantly preached abstinence. And then the second thing all it was, was a slideshow of diseases. And so it had that vibe of they really, they were really trying to get you to not have sex at all. Instead of teaching you how to do it safely, it was just an intimidation tactic.

Overall the classes indicate a deficiency in providing information not only related to sexuality and LGBT concerns, but also in acknowledging the wide range of sexual experiences that straight teens may have, as there was no discussion related to mechanics and healthy or pleasurable sex. Also, participants indicate that these classes should have been provided sooner as some teens were “obviously sexually active” before the classes took place. Stressing abstinence when most adolescents engage in sexual intercourse before leaving high school (Epstein and Ward 2008), is ineffective for all those who participate in these types of classes.

Based on participant experience, sex education in schools is typically included in a high school health education course, taught by a coach, for approximately one to two weeks in length, however some participants recall classes being only a few days. Interviewees were required to attend these classes to fulfill the course requirement. Not one participant could recall discussing any same-sex sexual or relationship topics in these classes; two participants did take a health class during their freshman year of college that “mentioned” same-sex relationships; however, even in college this topic was not given adequate time and instruction. Here, Tucker discusses his formal sex education:

I think even early as middle school it might have been briefly touched on. But um for sure in high school they had a sex ed through like health and wellness and science class. And then this past semester in my [college] wellness class they did an intensive sex ed and STI and STDs education, so I just really got the full I think, full spectrum of the education at least through the heterosexual side of sex. Um, never really touched on any gay relations like how lesbians would go about having sex or 2 gay males. Most sex education at the school can and probably should cover, but they didn't really slide into gay relationships or sex.

The majority of participants describe how they believe that same-sex relationships and sexual topics should be covered in their sex education courses, however this is rarely the case. Most feel alienated and uncomfortable in these classes, leading them to withhold any questions they may have or check out altogether. Jack recalls his sex education class:

You know I didn't even feel like I had concerns because they simply just did not feel valid. Any concern that I could have thought of wouldn't have been regarded as valid. And I felt like they [the teacher] would have been unfit to answer it anyway. And I would be ridiculed for bringing anything up. And so I did not even consider what my concerns may be . . . it wasn't an option to have one. I think in a lot of ways honestly I tried checking out because I felt very uncomfortable being in there, because none of it applied to me. . . I remember leaving that class and feeling like that was not helpful at all. Like you know that was so stupid is how I felt. I felt so different from the other boys, I mean I had certainly acknowledged to

myself that at that point and to others that I had no desire to have sex with women.

Bethany echoes some of Jack's feelings about her sex education class:

Of course all throughout the thing, everything was male or female. They never once mentioned any other type of um, sexualities or stuff like that. So that made me uncomfortable for the first part. I felt like they should know that in high school that people are going to start knowing that, if they don't already know that they're gay or lesbian or bisexual and that they also would want to know about their sex on their end or how they should protect themselves during that and not having the exact same type of intercourse I guess or whatever . . . And that any questions that we had it made us feel like that we couldn't ask them or we couldn't talk about it or we were ourselves taboo cause we didn't even get a mention. . . And I didn't I just didn't know why, that if like a lot of people in my high school were lesbian or gay, so I felt like we are a part of the population in general why can't you guys kind of talk to us. Why do we have to be so secretive, you know? Um, what is, what's the big deal I guess . . . it's not like you know showing lesbians or showing homosexuals is going to turn every other student homosexual or lesbians. I felt like that if you guys kind of included us then we would realize oh that's for us, we should probably pay attention, instead of saying just heterosexual, I'm like ok we don't I don't really know that much about that so I'm just not going to pay attention. So I felt like it was a waste of resources for us to be there and for us to not have gotten talked to. I kind of felt, made us feel like we're not we're not even worth talking to, stuff like that. So it was demeaning to me a little bit.

The environment created and the heterosexual discourse that surrounds these classes leave LGBT individuals feeling bad, left out, and at a disadvantage. They feel as if they are invisible and straight sex is the only thing worthy of discussion. In addition, the power of heteronormativity in current U.S. society leads some participants to expect this type of exclusion. When asked about how he felt as a gay male in these classes, Tucker states:

It's natural at that point [being excluded]. Like you know that you're not going to get the inclusion. It just becomes second nature like you're not going to get the full experience. But I was never like hurt or felt overly secluded because it had been like a whole life, that separation like not being included. With just like everyday conversations um, it was based

from like a heterosexual experience and so you just kind of assimilate along with that and just run with it.

The heteronormative structure is so powerful that this type of treatment, being excluded, begins to feel normal. LGBT individuals may learn to adjust their expectations and behaviors to “assimilate” as Tucker stated, which allows heterosexist inequality to persist at various levels especially in sex education courses. This type of exclusion continues into college health courses which is surprising because common discourse is that colleges are places where diversity of thought and progressive approaches exists. This repeated exclusion of LGBT individuals from sex education courses can leave them without much needed knowledge to protect themselves when engaging in sexual activity. Kerry demonstrates this point by saying:

So college was more informative but when it comes to same-sex couples, there's nothing out there. There's nothing that lets you know, it's just you know I guess you have to kind of connect the dots. Like if you're a male, you know this is what I learned, what did you learn, and hope for the best. And kind of like the same with females, you know this is what I learned, you know this is what you learned, let's put it together and hope for the best. So it should be its own class, it should be a separate topic, like a sub topic of sexual education. And then straight, gay, lesbian, you should have three categories or even Trans, if there are enough people that want to take that class that needed to know. But there aren't, there's nothing! There's nothing for anyone like that. So you just I guess you have to leave it to your own self to decide your sexual education and connect the dots.

Unfortunately, most LGBT individuals are left with “connecting the dots” and find it necessary to take initiative and learn about sex on their own.

Learning about sex on your own- “something with the title queer in it”

The majority of participants indicate that they did not learn anything useful or pertinent from their parents or school provided sex education classes regarding their specific sexuality and sexual health needs. Therefore, they sought their own sex

education pursuing information on their own. While some respondents retrieved information from what could be considered accurate and credible sources, others relied on sources that are not necessarily accurate, educational, or realistic. In their searches, the internet is the primary avenue for finding sexual information. They looked at information from lesbian or gay specific sites. Participants primarily sought out information on websites, chat rooms, and social media sites. Jack recalls the information he obtained from the internet and its importance to him:

I learned most of my information from the internet. Um, I remember Planned Parenthood website, that one was pretty good. I liked Planned Parenthood's website, I learned a lot on there. I feel like there were some queer, something with the title queer in it that was like a nice education website. I've had like some online like not like romantic relationships but online friendships um with some people who would talk about sex every now and then so they sort of um, taught me things I wouldn't have learned otherwise. Yea, but without the internet, I don't know what I would have done. I mean I probably would not be who I am if I hadn't learned what I learned when I learned it you know.

The internet can be a good source to obtain information and build connections with others in the LGBT community; however, the internet is not always the safest and most accurate source of information. As Kerry puts it, "Google is my friend, but google is not my friend; because anyone can post on google and so it's not always accurate information. It could be, it's not always factual, it's probably opinion." This indicates the importance of providing LGBT individuals with safe and medically accurate websites so that the information they receive is factual and applicable to their specific sexual health needs.

Another place that interviewees pointed out as a source for information was media that specifically depict gay characters. Tucker said he would watch LOGO, which is a

television channel aimed at LGBT viewers, and this provided him with positive depictions of a variety of gay and lesbian people along with sexual health information.

The LOGO channel um, that was definitely gay oriented. I think that's where I got some more specific details um, like information on AIDS and how to prevent and be aware and what the actual facts were and stuff like that. So that's probably where I got more inclusive and helpful information. - Tucker

Television was also used to guide behaviors that some engaged in. For example, Bethany recalls:

Experimenting and movies. Just like with girlfriends or watching movies, well not movies but TV shows. There was this TV show when I was little or when I was in high school called *South of Nowhere*. I don't think a lot of people have heard of it. But it was about our experience, it was like the first show of lesbians, so we watched that and it would have kissing scenes and like nothing really in-depth but we would kind of mimic what we saw on the TV show.

Kate indicates that she also learned about sex, through a different type of lesbian specific media:

Um, I guess terrible to admit, but porn. That's what a lot of kids did, so I mean other than that you just had to do a little exploring and you're like oh and then you learn about things that way. But that was my way of learning. I guess like browsing through types of videos, through different categories and such. Oh what is this, what is that, that kind of thing. The access to porn and being about to see oh ok so this is what it looks like, this is what it sounds like and that kind of stuff.

Gay and lesbian individuals may use these types of media as an indication of behaviors to engage in, but this could be problematic if television shows and pornography are not providing all the necessary information to be sexually safe and healthy. And media in general rarely provide fully accurate sexual information and depictions. Therefore, media sources in general may not be the best place for LGBT individuals to obtain sex education information. Providing accurate depictions of gay and lesbian individuals in

media is a good way to normalize these types of relationships and make them more mainstream, but relying on them for sex education information may not be the best strategy for educating LGBT youth on sexual topics.

Some participants described joining LGBT specific groups. These groups commonly would provide some type of sex education that was exclusively for LGBT individuals. Colin discusses being a part of this type of group:

My senior year I was part of um this group, it was all LGBT you know teens like myself and we had [a local HIV/AIDS organization] um come and talk to us. So I mean um you know they had demonstrations you know that kind of stuff. They showed us um items and talked about diseases I mean they went through everything. So that's where I got it all mostly was senior year. So as far as high school that's where I got it from.

This type of experience was rare, however it could be considered one of the most reliable and effective ways for LGBT individuals to obtain sexual health information.

Unfortunately, not everyone has the means and access to this type of program therefore incorporating these types of programs and the material they include into mainstream public school sex education classrooms could help to narrow the gap in sex education between straight and gay students.

Overall participants indicate a want and a need for information related to gay and lesbian sexuality and sexual topics. These examples show that they would like information that covers a wide range of topics from STD's and condoms to the mechanics of how two women or two men engage in sexual intercourse. These examples also point to a number of commonalities between straight adolescents and gay adolescents when considering sex education in general. The first is that the "danger discourse" surrounds gay and lesbian sex education as well. Those participants that sought out information on

their own mentioned how it was related to condoms and STD prevention. Next, there is a lack of discussion related to healthy sex. Whether gay or straight, there appears to be an omission in discussing topics such as masturbation (singular or mutual), how to have sex (oral, anal, or vaginal), or engaging in foreplay. Based on the examples, it appears that participants would like to receive this type of information because they sought it out on their own, in some not so healthy avenues, when it was not presented to them. Largely, these participants had to seek out information on their own because their family and school environments failed to provide them with adequate sex education knowledge. This results in them having more in common with their straight counterparts when considering the information that is wanted and needed in relation to sex compared to what is actually provided.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that parents and school-based sex education are largely ineffective in providing sexual information to LGB individuals. Therefore, these individuals must educate themselves on sexual topics. Participants perceive their parents as having a general discomfort with discussing sexual topics, leaving them to believe this is why parents fail to provide such information. There is also the assumption that adolescents will receive some form of sex education in school; however this is problematic when school-based sex education is limiting to all individuals especially those who are LGB. School provided sex education frequently fail at providing a wide range of information related to a variety of sexualities and sexual experiences that adolescents may have.

Those parents who do discuss sexual topics, tend to do so strictly within a heterosexual framework. Heteronormativity structures conversations before and after adolescents have come out to their parents. Before coming out, participants recall parents only discussing relationships involving men and women. After coming out, parents continue to use heterosexual ideals by focusing on trying to change their child into someone who is heterosexual or by focusing on sex only in the context of procreation. Because parents are also products of a heteronormative society, they may lack knowledge and find it challenging to discuss LGB specific topics once their child has come out to them. This leaves LGB individuals with a variety of information related to heterosexual sex education, but uninformed, frustrated, and upset that LGB specific sexual concerns are not addressed.

Participants indicate that they thought their parents were aware of their sexual orientation before officially coming out, and participant comments indicate that parents also knew their child would have a different sexual orientation than that of heterosexual. Even with this knowledge, parents do not discuss LGB sex specific topics. One reason for this is that parents appear to be uncomfortable with discussing sex in the first place; therefore discussing LGB sex which continues to be stigmatized and lacks adequate parental knowledge compounds the situation and makes sexual discussions all the more unlikely. Parents also link sexual orientation with sexual education. They presume that if their child knows they are LGB then they do not need sexual information and then fail to provide it. However, linking the two together shows an inconsistency in how sex education is viewed. For example, if we assume that with knowing ones sexual orientation (i.e. heterosexual) they have all the adequate sexual information then there

would be no need for any type of sex education. But this is clearly not the case; providing a wide range of information on varying topics, sexualities, and behaviors is important for all individuals.

Not only are parental conversations excluding LGB individuals, school-based sex education is as well. This exclusion has been documented by a variety of studies (Elliott 2014; McNeill 2013; Elia and Ellison 2010). Also, these courses typically engage in using the “danger discourse” (Elliott 2012) to discuss sexual topics. This leaves classes focusing on abstinence along with pregnancy and STD prevention, all within a heterosexual context. LGB individuals once again are provided with a variety of information related to heterosexual sex, but fail to gain knowledge related to specific questions and concerns they may have. This lack of knowledge regarding sexual issues can leave them at a disadvantage when making sexual decisions. Therefore, if LGB individuals want to be educated and knowledgeable about sex they must seek out that information on their own, which is what many participants chose to do.

Most participants did not recall gaining any useful sex education information from their parents or school provided sex education courses. Therefore, the knowledge they did have came from seeking out information on their own. The internet was a main source for gaining information, which has been documented as a supplemental sex education source for non-heterosexual students (Pingel et al. 2013). Some educational websites like Planned Parenthood were used to provide information, but participants also used social media and chat rooms. These examples indicate the need to provide LGB individuals with specific educational resources that they can access through the internet, because not all information disseminated on the internet is accurate and true. Participants

also gained sexual information through television shows and movies depicting LGB persons. This may be a good way for individuals to get a more mainstream, normalized viewing of LGB persons; however relying on the media to provide accurate sex education is problematic. In addition to experimenting with sexual behaviors, participants used media sources like pornography and television shows as a guide for behaviors to engage in. This again is problematic when the media does not accurately portray and provide sex education information.

My research has shown that there are a variety of similarities when considering sex education for LGB individuals and their straight peers. A general discomfort exists regarding parental sexual communication with their adolescent, which is compounded by an adolescent's non-heterosexual sexual orientation. Conversations that do occur continue to take place within a heterosexual framework, even if parents assume their child is not straight. My research shows that LGB adolescents do not learn anything particularly useful to them from their parents or school-based sex education, therefore they must educate themselves. Parental sexual conversations and school provided sex education commonly lack the wide range of sexual issues that LGB adolescents may encounter. My study reveals that there is a gap in the information that adolescents want and need with what they are provided. The "danger discourse" (Elliott 2012), has commonly been examined within a heterosexual context. However, I show that it also takes place when considering the sex education of LGB individuals. Those participants that sought out sex information on their own commonly referred to gaining knowledge on STD prevention. Largely, parental conversations and school-based sex education omit LGB concerns.

My findings here demonstrate a variety of implications for sex education in general and LGB individuals more explicitly. As Zimmerman (2015) notes, there continues to be the argument about the appropriateness of sex education in the school environment. My research indicates that providing sex education in schools is not only appropriate but necessary as many parents failed to not only provide sexual information but also assume the school would. My findings also suggest that sex education should be broadened to include a wide variety of information that includes sex but also covers topics related to sexuality. Since knowing one's sexual orientation does not necessarily equate to sexual knowledge for heterosexual students, it is important that this same assumption is not about of LGB students.

In addition to schools being more inclusive of LGB sexual topics, it is important for parents to do the same. Parents who do discuss sexual topics with their child should also incorporate information relating to a wide variety of sexualities. This can be beneficial regardless of an adolescent's ultimate sexual identity, because even if the adolescent is straight the information they receive can be disseminated to a friend, sibling, classmate, etc. who is not. This would also help to teach the adolescent respect and acceptance for all types of relationships. Parents should educate themselves on a variety of sexual topics so that they are able to provide their adolescent with accurate information. Overall, if we are to provide a well-rounded sex education for all individuals, then parents and schools must include topics related to LGB individuals.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Findings from this study should be interpreted within the context of its limitations. The sample size of 10 is small and most participants were white and

educated, which could be a different perspective from those who are non-white and have less education. This study was limited to those individuals who had come out to their parents and those who have not may have a different experience. Also, participants were asked to recall past events which can be challenging to the reliability of their reporting. Younger participants may be able to provide more recent and accurate accounts of their sex education. The findings presented here are limited to those individuals who volunteered and were willing to be interviewed, indicating some level of comfort and “outness” with these issues. Therefore, those individuals who may have chosen not to participate could have varied the findings. There is also the limitation of categorizing people. The scope of the study required individuals to place themselves in a sexuality category, this can exclude individuals who are questioning their sexuality or who choose not to label themselves.

Future research should focus on expanding the sample to include a larger and more diverse group of interviewees. This study could also be examined from the perspective of transgender individuals. Studies should focus on parents and examine why they provide sexual information within a strictly heterosexual context, even if they think or would be accepting of a child with a different sexual orientation. Other research should also focus on interviewing parents of gay and lesbian individuals to explore sexual information they have given. To help provide gay and lesbian individuals with more effective sex education, it would be beneficial to explore what topics and information they believe is important for parents and schools to offer. Finding ways to provide more inclusive sex education for all individuals is beneficial for everyone, especially those who are not heterosexual. Until sex education provides a wide range of information on wide

ranges of topics for all sexualities, inequality, marginalization, and especially heteronormativity will continue to persist.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A- DEMOGRAPHIC SHEET

Sex: _____

Age: _____

Race: _____

Sexual Orientation: _____

Relationship Status: _____

Education- highest level attained: _____

APPENDIX B- INTERVIEW GUIDE

Tell me generally about the sex education you received at home while you were growing up?

Can you recall how old you were during any of these conversation(s)?

Who discussed sex education at home with you?

What were some details and information given during these conversation(s)?

What was the context of these conversation(s)? Did something happen? Who brought up these discussion(s)? And why?

How did you feel during these conversation(s)?

How did your parents/guardians seem to feel?

Can you describe the conversations that were beneficial? What about others that you did not find so helpful/useful?

Were you aware of your sexual orientation during any of these conversations?
Were your parents/guardians aware of your sexual orientation?

Did they have other conversations regarding sex once they learned of your sexual orientation?

Were these conversations different? How?

Describe your relationship with your parents while you were growing up? What about your relationship now?

Are there other conversations regarding sex or sexuality that you had with your parents/guardians that you can tell me about?

Did you receive sex education from your school?

Can you recall what grade you were in and/or how old you were?

Can you provide some details about the information that was given during your school based sex education?

Did you find the information provided by school based sex education helpful/useful? Why or Why not?

If you were aware of your sexual orientation during high school, were you open about it? Why or why not?

What suggestions/recommendations do you have to make school based sex education more inclusive?

What suggestions/recommendations would you give to your parents regarding the sex education they provided to you?

Is there anything else you would like to add?

APPENDIX C- PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS

Participant	Age	Race	Sexual Orientation	Relationship Status	Education-Highest Level Attained
Jack	24	White	Gay	In A Relationship	High School Diploma
Colin	19	White	Gay	In A Relationship	High School Diploma
Kate	20	White	Lesbian	In A Relationship	High School Diploma
Tucker	19	White	Gay	In A Relationship	High School Diploma
Lisa	24	Multiracial	Pansexual Lesbian	Engaged	Bachelor's Degree
Allen	22	White	Gay	In A Relationship	Associates Degree
Bethany	23	African-American	Lesbian	Single	High School Diploma
Julie	25	White	Lesbian	Single	Pharm MD
Roberta	23	White	Pansexual Lesbian	Engaged	High School Diploma
Kerry	22	White	Bisexual	In A Relationship	High School Diploma

APPENDIX D- IRB APPROVAL



3/24/2015

Investigator(s): Michelle Estes and Gretchen Webber
Department: Department of Sociology
Investigator(s) Email: mle3k@mtmail.mtsu.edu

Protocol Title: "Tentative: "what's gay to do with it?": Current sex education practices within the family and school environments "

Protocol Number: 15-187

Dear Investigator(s),

The MTSU Institutional Review Board, or a representative of the IRB, has reviewed the research proposal identified above. The MTSU IRB or its representative has determined that the study poses minimal risk to participants and qualifies for an expedited review under 45 CFR 46.110 and 21 CFR 56.110, and you have satisfactorily addressed all of the points brought up during the review.

Approval is granted for one (1) year from the date of this letter for 20 (TWENTY) participants.

Please note that any unanticipated harms to participants or adverse events must be reported to the Office of Compliance at (615) 494-8918. Any change to the protocol must be submitted to the IRB before implementing this change.

You will need to submit an end-of-project form to the Office of Compliance upon completion of your research located on the IRB website. Complete research means that you have finished collecting and analyzing data. **Should you not finish your research within the one (1) year period, you must submit a Progress Report and request a continuation prior to the expiration date.** Please allow time for review and requested revisions. Failure to submit a Progress Report and request for continuation will automatically result in cancellation of your research study. Therefore, you will not be able to use any data and/or collect any data. Your study expires **3/25/2016**.

According to MTSU Policy, a researcher is defined as anyone who works with data or has contact with participants. Anyone meeting this definition needs to be listed on the protocol and needs to complete the required training. **If you add researchers to an approved project, please forward an updated list of researchers to the Office of Compliance before they begin to work on the project.**

All research materials must be retained by the PI or faculty advisor (if the PI is a student) for at least three (3) years after study completion and then destroyed in a manner that maintains confidentiality and anonymity.

Sincerely,

Institutional Review Board
Middle Tennessee State University