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Abstract

Communication between homosexuals and heterosexuals has been examined by communication scholars since the gay revolution of the 1970's. Communication scholars have sought to understand how homosexuals communicate with one another and heterosexuals. The current study examined the language used by homosexuals during the coming out process and the affect that language has on the family relationship after learning of a family member's homosexuality. Participants included (38) homosexual students and faculty who attended a midsize university in the southern Midwest, as well as they were sought through other means (word of mouth from students, Facebook) and they completed an online survey. Results indicate that homosexuals converge their language to a heterosexual language when coming out to their parents. Use of heterosexual language and disclosure of homosexuality increased satisfaction within the family relationship. Also, relational communication about coming out was positively correlated with the relationship satisfaction of the family. Social penetration theory, communication privacy management theory, communication accommodation theory, and uncertainty reduction theory were utilized as a theoretical framework. Findings of this study suggest further attention should be given to homosexual language and the usage of it in communication with others. In addition, this study adds to the research on homosexuals by looking at how language impacts satisfaction with the family relationship.

Keywords: homosexual language, heterosexual language, coming out, gay/lesbian (GL), family relationship

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

During the 1970's, people began to discuss homosexuality in conversations and the media included discussions of how right or wrong the gay/lesbian (GL) lifestyle was (Riley, 2010). The 1970's was a time in history when GLs were beginning to be seen as "normal" people, since before that time, sodomy and oral sex were illegal in much of the United States and GLs were often deemed mentally ill and could be institutionalized (Kaminsky & Lovett, 2005).

GLs today are expressing their lifestyle more openly even though they still face persecution, negativity, and homophobia. Now that some states have legalized same-sex marriage and civil partnerships, it is important that we understand the GL lifestyle better from a cultural perspective. This means that we need to understand how homosexuality is not just a lifestyle, but a subculture of the American culture that has its own speech language.

A subculture is defined as a group within another cultural society who shares in many of the same traditions and rules, but has differences in areas such as speech communities (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003). In a subculture, "a specialized vocabulary is developed by the members of the group, and this slang functions as a type of restricted language which is solely used for the purposes of communication and identification within the subculture" (Stanley, 1970, p. 47). While homosexuality shares many of the same traditions and values with the American culture such as being educated, obtaining a career, marriage, and having children, some heterosexuals feel that the idea of same-sex relationships defies the traditional values of marriage, children, and love between a man and woman and therefore feel that homosexuality should not have the same rights that heterosexuals have (Fejes & Petrich, 1993).

The coming out process is a time when heterosexuals learn more about the GL community. Sometimes disputes arise similar to when different cultures communicate, even though the homosexuals and heterosexuals belong to the same dominant culture. Due to the different ways that GLs must go about achieving the same goals such as marriage or long-term civil partnerships and/or children (adoption, invitro, and sperm donation, surrogate), heterosexuals may not understand these different routes because they are different from American acceptable norms.

This study looked at how the language (homosexual or heterosexual) used by GLs during the coming out process affects the family relationship. By understanding the language and language styles, as well as why GLs decide to come out to their families, this research adds to previous findings by connecting how language influences family relationships.

The majority of heterosexuals learn about homosexuals through the socialization they received about the GL lifestyle through media, friends, family, and social groups (Riley, 2010). Many people's perceptions about homosexuality are gained through the socialization they received from their parents; if heterosexuals belong to a religion that does not support homosexuality, they may have a negative idea about the homosexual lifestyle, when compared to someone who was raised by GL parents or a GL family member who was well received within the family (Kaminsky & Lovett, 2005).

Individuals gain first-hand experience about homosexuals when a homosexual "comes out" to a heterosexual person. "Coming out also termed 'disclosure' among adolescents, is a sexual identity recognition process culminating in a self-awareness of a gay, lesbian or bisexual orientation and/or sharing this information with others" (Riley, 2010, p. 4). GLs usually reveal

their sexual orientation to friends first and then family (Carnelley, Hepper, Hicks, & Turner, 2011).

The revelation of a same-sex orientation is an important one in a homosexual's life and this revelation can come with rejection, tolerance, or complete acceptance and support from the family; however, because it is different from the society norm of heterosexuality, heterosexuals may have difficulty fully understanding this type of lifestyle (Riley, 2010). One way to lessen this difficulty is to speak the language of the dominant culture. GLs have learned to code-switch between GL and heterosexual languages. Code-switching is the process of switching between languages when a person is able to speak fluently in multiple languages (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003).

Understanding the effect language has on the heterosexual and homosexual communication process is important during the coming out process. This study will gain an understanding of whether homosexuals change their language in order to make the coming out process easier on their families, yet also use terms from their own community to self-disclose and help their heterosexual family members understand their lifestyle.

This thesis will use four communication theories to help explain homosexual disclosure when coming out to their families and the effect that language used has on the family's acceptance: social penetration theory, communication privacy management theory, communication accommodation theory, and uncertainty reduction theory.

Social penetration theory (SPT) was developed by Altman and Taylor (1987) and is the "process of increasing disclosure and intimacy within the relationship..." (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008, p. 202). Social penetration theory examines how people can learn many things about one another (breadth) and/or detailed information about certain things (depth). The onion or sphere

has been the common symbol of what information and how much one person allows another person to know. The more information someone knows about another, the deeper into the onion the relationship goes. Learning information about one another is done through the process of self-disclosure. When we self-disclose to others we are allowing them to learn about our background, feelings, opinions, and personal information. Those who know numerous different items of information and personal information about another would typically be considered family or close friends (Griffin, 2009).

This theory will help to tell us if a GL discloses to family and what language they use to describe the GL lifestyle and the effect this disclosure has on the family. Because of the intimacy in many family relationships, both parents and children feel that they should be safe to disclose information to one another. By self-disclosing the homosexual lifestyle to family members and examining the language that is used, we will better understand if the relationship with the GL member and their family member changes. Disclosing allows for relationships to change for the good or bad and this study uses social penetration theory to better understand how the language used affects the level of disclosure and thus affects the relationship within the family.

Petronio (1991) developed communication privacy management theory (CPM) because she felt that disclosure was more complex than just revealing information. Petronio developed CPM to better understand that disclosure of private information can be positive or negative for those involved in the disclosure process. This study uses CPM to better understand how much of their sexual orientation GLs disclose to their family members. GLs decide if and when they choose to reveal that they are homosexual and by using CPM we understand why GLs choose to keep this information to themselves or what it would take for them to reveal their sexual orientation. Because sharing of information allows numerous people to be involved in secrets

that have been revealed (Petronio, 2002), this study will allow communication scholars to better understand what the effect of sharing information has on the family dynamic. In addition, it tells us how much information GLs reveal.

Communication accommodation theory (CAT); (Giles, 1979) refers to the ways in which people adjust and monitor their communication both verbally and nonverbally when communicating with others. When communicating with others we will change the way we communicate in order to fit in. This study looked at how homosexuals change their language from homosexual language to heterosexual language when communicating with their families and how this language affects their relationship with family members. By applying CAT we will be able to understand if GLs accommodate their language to those family members when revealing their sexual orientation to or if they choose to diverge and speak in the homosexual language.

Uncertainty reduction theory (URT) was developed by Berger and Calabrese (1975) to explain the interaction between strangers who seek to reduce as much uncertainty as possible about the subject or each other (Miller, 2005). This theory discusses that we do not like what is unknown to us. By applying this theory to the current study we can better understand how the disclosure of homosexuality and the language used helps reduce uncertainty in the heterosexual family. By reducing the uncertainty, the family may be more willing to accept a GL lifestyle, and thus, maintain a healthy relationship. However, this theory also explains how coming out could increase uncertainty because the heterosexual family member may know little about the GL lifestyle, so the language could be seen as reducing that uncertainty by giving the family members more information.

Societies view heterosexuality as the acceptable and normative lifestyle because it is what we have been socialized to accept. Homosexuals are viewed as a subculture and are sometimes seen as lower status citizens compared to heterosexuals (Fejes & Petrich, 1993). This work is important to the field of communication because it adds to research in intercultural communication by observing how members of a subculture communicate with those of the dominant culture and how this communication affects relationships. It is not only important to describe what language is used, but to determine how this language affects relationships between people in a subculture and those in a dominant culture.

Our nation has changed in the last 35 years with homosexuality being more openly accepted, yet our political system still only allows GLs certain rights: insurance benefits for legal marriages only, some states still state that same-sex marriage is illegal, and in some states child adoption rules are for only same-sex couples (Rothblum, Balsam, & Solomon, 2011). On the other hand, gay-rights have contributed to a shift in our legal system with new laws confirming equal rights in the union of marriage and parenting children. However, along with such changes families still struggle when they learn a child is homosexual.

This thesis helps us to understand the differences that are encountered when a person of a GL orientation reveals their lifestyle to their heterosexual family members through an examination of the language used when revealing a personal homosexual status. By understanding the power of language, we can better understand the homosexual subculture. This thesis shows researchers how language affects the coming out process, how much GLs disclose to their families, and how the language helps reduce uncertainty or create more uncertainty for the family members who are listening to the revelation.

CHAPTER 2

Review of Literature

Coming Out

When a gays/lesbians (GLs) individual decides to reveal their lifestyle to family and/or friends, the process is called coming out. The choice to come out as GL is not one that is easy or that will always be well received. The coming out process is one of recognizing romantic feelings toward the same sex, engaging in same-sex sexual encounters, self identifying as homosexual, and then disclosing that homosexual identity to others (Reynolds & Hanjorgiris, 2000).

Coming out is a process and there are steps that GLs go through to reveal their sexuality to their families. After identifying themselves as GL, many GLs must decide whether or not they wish to disclose their lifestyle to others and if so, who they will disclose to and how much of the lifestyle they will disclose. Many GLs will reveal to friends first and later family (Grov, Bimbi, Nanin, & Parsons, 2006) because people seek peer group acceptance, while a family can be more judgmental with the effects of non-acceptance more detrimental (Hockenberry, Wilson, Winkelstein, & Kline, 2003). When GLs make the decision to tell their family of origin (mother, father and/or siblings) that they are gay or lesbian, the mother is usually the first to know, followed by a sibling and usually last is the father (Kaiser, 2001). Little research says why GLs will disclose to certain family members first and not others, however LaSala (2000) determined that coming out to the family of origin can be very difficult on the relationship between the GL and the family of origin. Although the revelation can be difficult due to this lifestyle being outside the nuclear family (mother, father, children/heterosexual) expectation, many GLs wish to

reveal their lifestyles to their family members because the family unit has provided the most emotional support in the past (Berzon, 1992). "Disclosing sexual orientation to the family is one of the most difficult challenges that LG [lesbian gay] individuals face" (Hilton & Szymanski, 2011, p. 292).

Family of Origin

Parents

Telling a parent can be very difficult for a GL individual, but reactions of parents can be very important to the coming out process (Riley, 2010). Family opinions of having a GL child can vary. Most often GL children are raised by heterosexual parents who expect to have heterosexual children (Vangelisti, 2004). While homosexuality is a topic that has become more openly discussed in the media and press, the American public still has strong opinions about the GL community. In a 2001 survey, the Kaiser Foundation found that half of Americans believed that "homosexual behavior is morally wrong" and many times GLs feel that negativity towards their lifestyle when they come out to family members (Chan, 1989). Family members show many emotions such as shock, disbelief, guilt, and anger (Savin-Williams & Dube, 1998) when a GL family member reveals that they are homosexual. The negative reactions come from parents feeling as though they failed in some way (Ben-Ari, 1995), the fear of their child being alone or shunned, their child contracting the HIV infection (Saltzburg, 2004), or fear for them because they are moving away from family religious beliefs (Vangelisti, 2004).

In families of origin, about 50% of families react negatively to a child's disclosure that they are GL (Cramer & Roach, 1988); however mothers were more likely to respond positively than fathers (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993). Family members who reacted negatively to their GL family member's disclosure have a hard time adjusting to the idea of homosexuality (Floyd,

2001). However, fathers have the most difficulty, especially with a gay son. This is usually because fathers feel that they have lost the traditional masculine son (Riley, 2010).

When GLs reveal their homosexuality to their parents, many parents struggle internally with the idea that their child is involved in a lifestyle that they do not accept (Boxer, Cook, & Herdt, 1991) and yet they love and are devoted to their child. This revelation can cause a problem in the way that the family identifies itself. Family members usually have a shared collective identity and the disclosure of a family member being GL can challenge that identity (Soliz, Ribarsky, Harrigan, & Tye-Williams, 2010). This struggle increases the idea that while the child is still the same person, they do not know much about homosexuality (Mosher, 2001). Parents will now have to learn about new romantic relationships, different ways of perceiving future families for their children, the idea of potentially not having grandchildren, and a different way of life for their child. A parent that feels uncomfortable regarding their child's sexual orientation and everything that can come with this change can put a strain on the family relationship (Soliz, et.al, 2010).

After learning of a child's sexual orientation, parental reactions will then go through the stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (Peplau & Beals, 2001). Acceptance will take time to become evident, but when it does, there could be an improved parent/child relationship. Acceptance of a child's sexual orientation can be seen at different levels. Some parents wish to know more and want to be involved in their child's lives and choices as a GL, while other parents choose to acknowledge that their child is GL but do not wish to know any details regarding their child's sexual orientation.

In order to learn more about their child's sexual orientation, many parents seek support through groups such as Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbian and Gays (PFLAG) or

introducing themselves to the gay/lesbian community which allows them to deal with their anxieties, stresses, concerns, and issues of having a GL child (Heatherington & Lavner, 2008; Phillips & Ancis, 2008; Saltzburg, 2004; Savin-Williams, 2001). These groups can help parents gain an understanding of their child's lifestyle, as well as provide them with the support of knowing that they are not the only one experiencing this change in the family.

Siblings

Past research on the coming out process has predominantly focused on the reactions of children coming out to their parents as gay or lesbian (Hilton & Szymanski, 2011); however research regarding the disclosure of being GL to a sibling is just as important to understand. Savin-Williams (2001) found 38% of participants disclosed their orientation to a sibling before other family members. Hilton & Szymanski (2011) examined how the sibling relationship changed after the discovery that a sibling was GL. Siblings had a range of reactions to their sibling disclosing that they were GL: shock, happiness and acceptance, protectiveness and concern for GL sibling's future, anger/ disappointment in their parents on how they handled GL sibling's coming out, and changes in sibling relationship. Siblings felt as though they knew their sibling and when they discovered that the sibling was GL, it challenged the idea of how well they knew each other (MacDonald, 1983). Siblings felt shocked because it violated their expectations of the future with the GL sibling. Many siblings feel as though when they grow up they will get married, raise a family, have their children play together, and grow old together. Discovering that a sibling is GL can alter the idea of the future together.

Hilton & Szymanski (2011) showed that some siblings react with immediate happiness and acceptance for their GL sibling. Those who had been more aware of homosexuality had fewer negative reactions to their sibling when they came out (Nelson & Krieger, 1997) and were

able to accept the sexual orientation of the sibling. Those who had been introduced to homosexuality prior to having their sibling come out did not consider their sibling being GL a “big deal.” Others in the study were happy for their sibling because the sibling was able to be themselves and find another who leads to a committed relationship.

When GLs come out to their families, it is a decision that has not been made lightly. GLs may differ in the amount that they disclose to their family members during the coming out process (Savin-Williams, 2001) based on how comfortable they are telling their family during this initial disclosure. GL individuals who choose not to come out to their families because they fear being rejected (Mays, Chatters, Chochran, & Mackness, 1998) can cause GLs to avoid any type of interaction with their family members. This type of isolation for GLs from their families is a major cause of concern because GLs are then at a greater risk for social isolation, depression, and suicide (Kourany, 1987). Coming out to their families can be a terrifying experience for GLs, but families can provide great social support for those GLs who decide to disclose their sexual identity to their family members and then are later met with acceptance from their families.

When disclosing to the family a person’s sexual orientation, this involves thinking about the quantity and quality of what will be revealed. Two theories can be applied to the coming out process, social penetration theory and communication privacy management theory. Both of these theories will help research understand how much a GL tells their families, as well as to gain a better understanding of what they choose to disclose and why.

Social Penetration Theory

Social penetration theory (SPT) was developed by Altman and Taylor (1987) and is the “process of increasing disclosure and intimacy within a relationship...” (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008,

p. 202). SPT occurs in relationships when the amount of disclosure increases over time. In explaining SPT the most common metaphor has been the onion. This theory will be used in this study when examining the coming out process and the effect this has on the family.

According to the theory, we learn about one another by “penetrating” the onion or sphere (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008). When we learn about another person we can learn numerous things (breadth) and/or detailed information about a few things (depth). The onion model explains that when we learn about someone, the layers of the onion are being pulled back to and we are getting closer to the core of the onion. The primary way that people learn about one another is through self-disclosure. “Self-disclosure is the voluntary sharing of personal history, preferences, attitudes, feelings, values, secrets, etc. with another person; transparency” (Griffin, 2009, p. 114). Those who know numerous and deeply personal things about a person are considered to be someone that one would be very close with, usually a close friend or relative (Griffin, 2009). These people would have the knowledge located in the center of the onion, which houses our values, self-concept, and beliefs. Therefore, because these people are those who know intimate secrets about us, we expect them to be able to listen to revelations with a limited amount of rejection. Most people would consider family to be at the center of this core because they are the ones we speak with most often, and if we do not have a deeply intimate relationship with them, they are the ones we have known the longest. By self-disclosing, the homosexual is taking a risk, but according to the explanation of SPT the family relationship is one where the news should be more acceptable than an acquaintance relationship.

The idea of the onion is important to the family relationship because some parents are going to think that they know their child and have a deep relationship with them and vice versa. Thus, it should be safe to choose to tell family members more intimate details about our romantic

relationships. When homosexuals come out, they are revealing a side of their life that is unfamiliar to their heterosexual family members whose reaction maybe positive or negative.

Communication Privacy Management Theory

Petronio (1991) developed communication privacy management theory (CPM) because she believed interpersonal relationships are more complicated than just disclosing information. Petronio (2007) said that disclosing everything could sometimes lead to problems instead of enhancing the relationship, and that managing the privacy of what a person's says sometimes affects the relationship.

Private information that an individual has chosen to keep personal can become a collective and shared piece of information when the individual decides to share that information with others (Petronio, 1991).

“We expect to have complete control over the private information that is personal. When we move information from the personal level to the collective level through disclosure, however, we create a shared system that accounts for layers of jointly owned private information... within the collective boundaries that we co-own, we add to the shared information we have responsibility for or we give responsibility to others by enacting third-party disclosure” (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2006, p. 37).

When people decide to share their private information with others, the boundary becomes shared and people create privacy rules that must be negotiated with those that are sharing in the information. When those who have been chosen to share private information decide to tell others that are not within the boundary without secret holders consent, then boundary turbulence can

occur. Boundary turbulence is when the privacy rules that have been established are broken within a family (Petronio, 2002).

Petronio claimed that our personal rules determine what we keep private and what we decide to disclose to others based on five different criteria - culture, gender, motives, context, and a risk-benefit ratio (Petronio, Jones, & Morr, 2003). These criteria help those wishing to keep privacy boundaries to determine the rules that will be applied to the information. "Because of their perceived ownership rights, and because revealing private information is viewed as risky, people attempt to control who has access to private information" (Caughlin, Golish, Olson, Sargent, Cook, & Petronio, 2009, p. 118). These five criteria can be applied to the coming out process used by GLs and whether or not they choose to disclose their GL language to their families. According to CPM, GLs should choose to disclose their secret because of their relationship with the family members.

Family

Family studies is a very large and multi-dimensional field that intersects into other fields, as well as having multiple areas of study within itself such as: intimacy, courtship, marriage, family, and parenting (Stamp, 1999). Family is a very difficult concept to define because it can mean different things to each person (Vangelisti, 2004). Some will define family as their parents and siblings or spouse and children. Others will define it as certain family members (aunts, uncles) or as a close group of friends. For the purpose of this study, family is defined as any member who has a biological or legal connection to the GL person.

The family communication style is important to understand because as stated above, families are great support systems that are heavily relied on in good times and bad. We rely on

our families for support and guidance when we are experiencing something life changing such as realizing one is homosexual.

While the family is seen as a group who usually shares an identity or idea of who they are as a group, the revelation that a member is homosexual could change the family identity. This is could occur because some members of the family may not understand or accept the GL lifestyle. The GL revealing their lifestyle and the communication obstacles that could be faced within the family are similar to that of when two cultures have to communicate with one another. Therefore, this study will need to look at the communication between GLs and their family in ways of a cultural study as well. This is because the family will feel like a stranger to GL family member as well as the language barrier, learning of new traditions, and overall acceptance/tolerance. The family will feel like a stranger because they will have to learn about this lifestyle if they want to be able to accept it.

Gudykunst and Kim (2003) have determined that when people are confronted with cultural differences that are different than their own they refer to the other as a stranger. The concept of the stranger is important to this study because both the families and the GL could view each other as strangers during the initial coming out process. “Strangers represent the idea of nearness because they are physically close and the idea of remoteness because they have different values and ways of doing things” (Gudykunst & Kim, p. 23). In the coming out process, the concept of strangeness could occur because while the groups may have thought that they had similarities, the GL has developed other sets of values and beliefs that are outside the norm of their heterosexual family members.

Secrets and Relational Communication

The lifestyle of homosexuality is one of the biggest secrets that a GL keeps from others.

When GLs decide to share their secret with others, there can be both good and bad consequences. This uncertainty of the reaction can create apprehension in the GL (Soliz, et. al, 2010). To better understand why GLs choose to reveal or not reveal their lifestyle to their family members, it is important for this study to better understand how secrets can affect relationships. CPM will help us to understand how much is disclosed to the family members and why they chose to disclose that information.

People choose not to reveal secrets for a number of reasons (Afifi & Olson, 2005) usually because they wish to prevent receiving negative feedback from their family members (Cline & McKenzie, 2000). When determining who they wish to reveal a secret to, people will consider the different types of responses they could receive and will choose to reveal their secret to those who will give positive feedback (Derlega, Winstead, & Folk-Barron, 2000). This is because revealing a secret can be risky and most people will choose to disclose their information to those they think have the least amount of risk, are trustworthy, and are someone who will respond with minimal rejection to the person revealing the secret (Barrel & Jourard, 1976).

Revealing a secret to a family member is different than revealing to anyone else because in a family there are several levels at which family members can own private information. Information can be held by an individual, a dyad, a larger family subgroup, or by the entire family" (Caughlin, et. al, 2009, p. 118). Rules determine who is allowed access to this information and how much information the family is told. This means that when people choose to disclose to others they are bringing them into a shared privacy boundary (Petronio, 2004).

Making the choice to reveal that they are homosexual can be very stressful for gays and lesbians. Many times people choose not to reveal their secret so they can protect the relationship and themselves (Afifi, Olson, & Armstrong, 2005). This is because they will have disclosed to their families that they are participating in a lifestyle that may not be acceptable to the family, goes against some religious beliefs, and is different from the socially acceptable family unit (father, mother, and children). The GL lifestyle may also violate some of the expectations that we have for our family members such as marriage and children. GLs feel that there could be serious consequences when choosing to reveal their sexuality to others who do not believe or share in their lifestyle, especially family members. “The involuntary, intimate, and permanent nature of family relationships suggests that individuals may pay special attention to the consequences of revealing secrets to family members because the ramifications may be long-lasting” (Afifi & Steuber, 2008, p. 1).

Due to the negative reactions that family members may give the revealing GL, the GL may use indirect or direct types of strategies to disclose their sexuality to their family (Afifi & Steuber, 2008). An indirect approach is taken most often with the GL gauging their family member’s reactions and then determining how much of the secret they wish to disclose.

Most GLs are nervous about coming out to a family member and the reaction they will receive. Many GLs, especially adolescents fear that they will not be taken seriously about their sexual orientation and will receive a “that’s just a phase” response, could be completely cut off from their families (Hilton & Szymansky, 2011). Their families immediately could jump into stereotypes about the GL community such as promiscuity and HIV (Riley, 2010). Due to the negative reactions, GLs most often will choose to come out to one family member at a time,

instead all at once, and the first person that is typically disclosed to is the mother (Soliz, et. al, 2010).

Relational communication (Burgoon & Hale, 1984) is the “verbal and nonverbal themes present in people’s communication that define an interpersonal relationship” (Graham, 2009, p. 308). Relational communication examines the communication, usually in a conversation context that occurs between two people. This study examines the relational communication between the GL and chosen family member(s) and how it changes during the coming out process.

Afifi and Olson (2005) explained that people who choose not to disclose their secret(s) to their family members do so because they have received negative reactions to secrets before when disclosing other topics. The repetition of meeting negative reactions during times of disclosure can develop into a cycle within a family known as “the cycle of concealment” (Afifi & Olson, 2005).

“People may conceal a secret because they have been reprimanded for revealing information in the past. The fear of retribution that is built up due to past responses that have been negative, disconfirming, and/or verbally aggressive may propel individuals to continually suppress information from certain family members” (p. 2).

However, one can choose to communicate using language and ideas that confirm the positive relationship that has been developed among family members. This type of communication is conceptualized as relational communication and is described above. This leads us to the following hypothesis:

H1: There will be a positive relationship between GLs' relational communication about coming out and relationship satisfaction with the family.

Gay/Lesbian language

Culture

Numerous studies on language have compared cultures. Culture is defined as "historically created system of explicit and implicit designs for living, which tends to be shared by all or specially designated members of a group at a specific point in time" (Kluckhorn & Kelly, 1945, P. 98). When people observe different cultures the most common differences between them is the language used (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003). The difference in language can have profound effects on the communication that will take place.

GLs and heterosexuals function as different subcultures within American culture. Many heterosexuals have traditions and beliefs such as marriage between a man and a woman, conceiving children, and passing on those traditions from one generation to the next thus continuing their lineage. The GL culture goes about things differently. GLs are involved in romantic relationships such as partners (which can mean numerous different things), civil unions, and in some states marriage. Some GLs have children, but it is usually sought through ways of sperm donors and adoptions.

Although, both groups have the same values in the areas of procreation and partnerships and the language between the two may seem the same since they both speak English in America, but research has shown that GLs have a language of their own that the heterosexual culture often does not know (Doyle, 1982). Homosexual language is defined as language used by the gay community that heterosexuals may not be aware of (Hayes, 1981) while heterosexual language is

the language used by both heterosexuals and homosexuals when speaking in personal or public settings with one another or with the general population.

Many communication disputes and misunderstandings come from not being able to understand a culture that is different than the one that people are comfortable with. When a person is trying to learn about another subculture that is different from their own, understanding the speech style is important in order to learn about the other rules and norms within the group (Phillipsen, 1992).

Vocabulary

Jacobs (1996) has found that homosexuals have a “vocabulary” of their own that sets them apart from the mainstream (heterosexual) community of America. As mentioned earlier, several topics in the GL community have their own language. Due to this phenomenon of homosexual language, dictionaries and glossaries have been created to define some of the terms that GLs use (Cory, 1965; Farrell 1972; *Guild Dictionary of Homosexual Terms*, 1965; Strait, 1961; Westwood, 1960). These dictionaries have defined terms in the following areas: non-sexual relationship (sister) and sexual relationships (partner), labels for self-identification (gay, queer, lesbian), age (chicken, mother), specific settings (tearoom), particular phenomenon (rough trade), gay or non-gay behavior (screamer, bulldyke, clone, femme), integration into the community (closet queen), and roles in the community (fag hag).

Stanley (1970) referred to homosexual language as “homosexual slang” (p. 1) and spoke of how some of the terms were taken from other cultural groups such as the African-American community, some were known by the heterosexual community, and other terms were known solely to the GL community. Those terms that both the heterosexual community and the GL community know about such as queer, gay, and fairy are called the core vocabulary.

Terms that only the homosexual community knows are called fringe vocabulary. Fringe vocabulary is something widely known in metropolitan areas because of the higher numbers of homosexuals within the area, while this vocabulary may not be as well known in more rural areas. This is because usually smaller towns have fewer homosexuals who are known and therefore, the “openness” of the lifestyle, especially in language used is not as well known even to those who belong to the GL culture. Stanley (1970) discusses in her review of homosexual slang that over time as homosexuality becomes more accepted and discussed, terms that are currently fringe terms will become core terms that both groups know of and understand the meanings.

Speech styles

Moonwomon (1985) and Gaudio (1994) discovered that gays and lesbians have different speech styles than heterosexuals. Speech styles are those characteristics that give emphasis to the language we use and can convey different meanings. Speech styles can refer to the words used when we speak, speech rate, and the pitch (Hymes, 1974).

Phillipsen (1997) found that different subcultures could each have particular speech styles. While multiple speech styles can be found in a particular culture, each subculture can also have their own particular speech style. Stanley (1970) and Kulick (2000) have shown that GLs have a speech style of their own that differs from the speech style that heterosexuals use and each speech style has its own use of language and rules that apply to the usage of the words within the language (Phillipsen, 1996).

Moonwomon (1985) found that lesbians have a speech pattern that follows that of heterosexual males by avoiding higher pitches and speaking in a lower tone. Lesbians also tend to speak at a slower rate, similar to that of a heterosexual male. However, Gaudio (1994) wanted

to know if gay men could be identified through their speech style. Gaudio (1994) discovered that 100% of people used in the test could identify the gay men on the audio tapes. Through this study, gay men tended to use a wider range of pitches in their speech styles.

These two studies confirm the idea that heterosexuals have a stereotype of how GLs speak. When heterosexuals hear this speech style and identify the person as gay or lesbian, a negative connotation can be formed, without hearing the content of what they said (Gowen & Britt, 2006).

This study examines the language of GLs during the coming out process. Due to the negative connotations that families can feel toward other family members who reveal that they are gay/lesbian, this study examines whether GLs change their speech style to the speech style to that of the family during the coming out process or choose to be open with their own GL speech pattern during this time of revelation. This study determines whether speaking using a heterosexual style helps make the family feel connected to the GL.

Kulick (2000) found that in order for GL language to exist, then the person using the language (GLs) would have to identify themselves as gay or lesbian. The root of the homosexual language is in the identity of GLs; meaning that in order for the language to exist, the identity must exist as well. Using previous research findings that homosexuals have a language of their own, this research project will add to an understanding of how homosexuals use language to describe their lifestyles and how knowing about their lifestyle affects their relationships and future communication with family members.

This study will add to the current research on the coming out process and use of homosexual/heterosexual language. This research will seek to add to the previous research by looking at the words used in the coming out process and the effect language has on the family

relationship. By understanding the language and by learning more about what happens when people come out, this research will add to previous research on homosexual communication.

Examining the language from a perspective of two different speech communities communicating with one another will add to the research on homosexuals and their family members by better understanding how the language they use affects their relationship with one another.

The same misunderstandings in communication between heterosexuals and homosexuals occur between of two different speech communities. People of different speech communities can have the same language (English in this case), but can use words in different ways such as “to let down one’s hair” would normally mean to relax or to literally let down your hair. The GL definition of this word is “to admit without restraint that one is homosexual” (Ellis, 1965, p. 21). Research has shown that when groups adapt their language to the majority, they do so because they have recognized that they are the inferior group and therefore want to change their speech patterns by means of speech convergence (Giles, Bourhis, & Taylor, 1977), according to communication accommodation theory.

Communication Accommodation Theory

Communication accommodation theory (CAT) was developed by Giles (1979) and refers to the ways in which people adjust and monitor their communication both verbally and nonverbally when communicating with others. CAT explains that when communicating with others we will change the way we communicate in order to fit in, especially our nonverbal communication, including our speech rate, accent, and pauses in our speech (Griffin, 2009). Accommodating one’s speech to another is usually seen when people of two different cultural groups or speech communities try to communicate with one another. Accommodation is defined

as “the constant movement toward or away from others and changing your communicative behavior” (p.388).

Accommodation can be seen in communication processes between family members because families have an intergroup connection and tend to share a family identity. Because of this shared family identity when family members have to disclose information to their family members, they tend to switch their speech style to the shared speech style of the family.

When a person moves towards a particular speech style, the process is called convergence (Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006) and when they move away from a particular speech style it is called divergence. Convergence is when someone changes their communication to become more similar to another person (Griffin, 2009). When we converge, we adapt to the way another person is speaking: using specific words they use, accent, tone, pitch, and language. When people choose to show the obvious differences in communication style between the people they are communicating with and themselves, they will diverge (Griffin, 2009). This can be done by choosing to use a language or accent/dialect that is comfortable for you, but different for the person you are communicating with. Other ways that divergence can be achieved are through changing the tone and speech rate.

There are different reasons for why people will converge or diverge when communicating with others. When people choose to diverge, this is most often because they wish to stand out as an individual (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) or the minority group that the person belongs to. By diverging, the person is displaying the differences that distinctly show who they are. However, people choose to converge when speaking with others because they seek social acceptance (Giles, 1979) and wish to have others like them or seek their approval. By converging, the person shows that they are similar to the person they are communicating with. This convergence will

usually receive a positive response because the majority of people are more accepting of people who are similar to them.

Desire for approval → Convergence → Positive Response

This study examines how the convergence process is used in conversation between GLs and their heterosexual family members. And looks at the language GLs use with their families during the coming out process and if they change their communication in order to have a better reaction from their family.

CAT allows us to better understand what a GL says (Jacobs, 1996), i.e. if they use heterosexual language to explain themselves to their families through accommodation and convergence and if they chose to use GL terms to explain themselves, thus diverging. Research says that when individuals adjust their speech to that similar to the person listening, the speaker will be viewed more positively (Giles & Smith, 1979). By converging their speech code, the speaker will be able to be a part of the shared family identity (Banker & Gaetner, 1998). This theory leads us to the following hypothesis:

H2: In the coming out process, homosexuals will converge language to a heterosexual language to maintain positive relationships with their family members.

Uncertainty Reduction Theory

Uncertainty reduction theory (URT) was developed by Berger and Calabrese (1975) and explains that in the interaction initially between strangers, people desire to reduce uncertainty about each other (Miller, 2005). Strangers are referred to as “aliens, intruders, foreigners,

outsiders, newcomers, and immigrants, as well as any other person who is unknown and unfamiliar" (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003, p. 23). The idea of URT is that we set out to accomplish the goal of reducing our uncertainty with those whom we do not know. Not knowing information about someone makes people uncomfortable, therefore when we communicate with someone we set out to learn more about them.

Knowledge about family reduces uncertainty over the years. The family of the GL revealer is usually a stranger to the GL lifestyle. This theory can be applied to this study because while we know our family well (most of the time), there are some areas that families do not know anything about. Most often the family is not the first to know a homosexuals identity and when they do find out, it is usually a surprise to them (LaSala, 2000). Communicating with the GL family member allows the other family members to learn more about the GL lifestyle, thus reducing the uncertainty they may have had before the revelation. According to Berger and Calabrese (1975) our communication with those we know could be uncertain and that we communicate with them because we wish to learn more.

Berger and Calabrese (1975) put forth three ways that tell why we gain more information about others: passive, active, and interactive. Passive strategies are when we observe the person, while active is where we must do something such as research the person or speak to others about the person in order to gain the information (Foss & Littlejohn, 2008). In this study the interactive strategy was used during the coming out process. This is because during the coming out process, it would be expected that the GL's family members would ask questions and make inquiries about the lifestyle in order to learn more and reduce their uncertainty.

Uncertainty reduction theory discusses that we do not like what is unknown to us and to reduce uncertainty we need to learn more about the unknown through the process of disclosure.

By applying this theory to the current study we can better understand how the disclosure of homosexuality and the homosexual language used helps reduce uncertainty in the heterosexual family. By reducing the uncertainty, the family may be more willing to accept a homosexual lifestyle and deepen the family relationship.

Importance to the Field

This research is important to the field of communication because it helps explain better how people of different speech communities communicate with one another and co-exist in the same dominant culture, the heterosexual American society. There has been more acceptance of the homosexual community over the last ten years and while many Americans have welcomed a homosexual family member's lifestyle, many Americans still see the homosexual lifestyle as different from the society norm of heterosexuality and find homosexuality difficult to accept, even within their own families. Past research has looked at the coming out process of homosexuals to their family members (Soliz, et. al, 2010), but this study adds to that research by looking at the language used to describe the homosexual's life style to family members in the coming out process and how use of this language impacts the family relationship.

Language is important in both the heterosexual and homosexual communities. Heterosexuals define the seriousness of their relationships through the terms that are associated with it (boyfriend/girlfriend, fiancée, and husband/wife). Homosexuals have a language for these relationships, but the heterosexual community may not know these words, other than the term partner. In order to learn more about the homosexual community, we need to learn more about the language used in the homosexual community and understand what effect that language has on relationships with heterosexuals.

As we move forward, the GL community will continue to move into the mainstream of American society. This research is important to the field of communication because it links language with an important outcome, potential changes in how satisfied we are with changes in relationships. By better understanding the GL speech community, we may be able to better determine how language affects the coming out process and whether it can increase or decrease family satisfaction levels.

CHAPTER 3

Methods

Participants and Procedures

Approval from the Institutional Review Board was received. Instructors in communication and theatre courses agreed to let the researcher invite students to participate in the study. Students who chose to participate were given an information sheet that described the purpose of the study, their rights, and contact information for the primary and secondary investigators. Emails were also sent to the Gay/Straight Alliance (GSA), a student organization that supports gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender, asking for permission to leave information about the study for members to pick up at club meetings. Surveys were completed in an online forum to maintain student anonymity. Students were asked to complete the survey in reference to the moment they revealed their sexual orientation to their family member(s).

Participants were (61) undergraduate students and faculty members at a midsize university in the southern Midwest. A total of (61) participants began the survey, however (23) participants had to be removed because they did not complete any sections of the survey or did not identify themselves as GL.

Men (28) and women (10) participated in this study with a total of (38) participants completing the study. The average age of participants was 30.8 years old. The participants identified themselves as Caucasian (63%), Hispanic (26%), African Americans (3%), Asian (5%), and Native American (3%).

Measures

This survey measured a variety of areas including the language used, relational communication and family relationship satisfaction after the coming out process. The first several questions asked demographic questions including age, race, gender, and at what age the GLs came out to their family members. Section 1 of the survey began by asking what family members the participants came out to, if they came out to more than one family member at a time, when they came out (date and year), and if they were in a romantic relationship at the time that they came out to their families. The questions then proceeded into measuring the language used during the coming out process.

Language Used in Coming Out Process

The language used during the revelation process was measured through a series of open-ended questions. Question 9 asked “When describing a homosexual relationship to your family what words did you use? If you used words unfamiliar to them, how did you explain those words?” This question wanted to know the language that was used when coming out to the families. Questions 10 and 11 measured whether or not there were changes made to speech style when speaking to the family. These questions asked, “Did you change the way you spoke (words you used, rate of speaking, accent) in order to make your family feel more comfortable? How? Did this help the coming out process?” and “Was the language that you used to describe your romantic relationship or homosexual relationships in general to your family different than the language you use in the homosexual community? What language would you have used if you were speaking to another homosexual?” These questions required the participants to either answer yes or no to question and explain. By choosing yes or no, these questions allow for this study to measure if GLs change the way they speak when coming out to their families and in

what way- speech pattern and/or language. Question 12 asked “Did using a different language help with the coming out process?” and measured whether or not changing the language helped the family during the coming out process.

Participants were encouraged to be as detailed as possible about the language they used. The words that the participants used during the coming out process were divided into two categories- heterosexual or homosexual language. However, some words are used by both groups. *The Guild Dictionary of Homosexual Terms* (1965) defined the word gay as “denotes homosexuality, as used by homosexuals” (p. 18). The term “gay” is used by both heterosexuals and homosexuals to describe anyone that is gay.

After discovering what type of language participants used when coming out to their families, they were then divided into whether or not the particular type of language they used helped during the coming out process. Then the GL’s perceptions about the families’ reactions were measured after the GL came out to the family.

Communication within the Family during the Coming Out Process

Perceptions of the family’s reactions during the conversation about homosexuality were measured using the Relational Communication Scale (RCS) (Burgoon & Hale, 1987). Burgoon & Hale’s (1987) scale measured eight factors of relational communication that occurs in interpersonal communication- immediacy/affection, similarity/depth, receptivity/trust, composure, formality, dominance, equality, and task orientation. Graham (2009) explains that RCS is typically used to “measure dyadic relationships; however, the RCS is versatile and can be adapted for use in interpersonal, family, health care, and mass communication settings” (p. 308). This scale was modified to fit this study by changing “he/she” to “my family” and adding the phrase “about homosexuality” or “homosexuality” or “homosexual lifestyle.” Only certain

relational factors were used: immediacy/affinity (3), similarity/depth (1), receptivity/trust (3), composure (1), and dominance (1). These areas were chosen because they were viewed as best to measure the reaction during the coming out process. The areas of formality and task orientation were left out due to they did not seem relevant to a study on coming out and family due to both are not thought of by the participant or considered subconsciously when communicating.

Participants were asked to answer (9) items rated on a seven-point Likert scale (1=Strongly Disagree to 7= Strongly Agree). Sample items were, "My family member was intensely involved in our conversation about homosexuality" and "My family member was willing to listen to me describe my homosexual lifestyle." The reliability for this scale ranges from .42 to .88.

Cronbach alpha reliability scores for the modified test was .63.

Relationship with Family After Coming Out

The measure used to determine the relationship that the GL felt they had with the family after coming out was created for this study. Participants were asked to answer four items rated on a five-point Likert scale (1=not at all/very bad to 5= very good/very supportive). Items were, "Your relationship with your family/family member after you came out to them was: 'very bad to very good', 'not at all close to very close', 'not at all healthy to very healthy' and 'not supportive to very supportive'." Cronbach alpha reliability was .88.

CHAPTER 4

Results

Coming Out

This study confirmed some previous research and added new information in regards to the coming out process. The average age of the participants at the time of disclosure was 19.9 years old. As previously cited, people most often came out to the mother first, then siblings, with the father being the last to know. Participants (16) revealed that they came out to the mother first, (6) participants said that they came out to a sibling first, and (2) came out to the father first. Fourteen revealed that they disclosed their sexuality to more than one family member at a time. After learning of the GLs sexuality, (16) participants said that their families responded positively to the news, (11) participants said their families responded negatively, and (9) received a mixed response, with either their being a neutral response or that the parent responded positively then negatively or negatively and then positively.

The Family Relationship

Hypothesis 1 posited that there would be a positive relationship between the conversation about homosexuality and the family relationship. A Pearson Product Moment correlation was run to examine this hypothesis. Results showed the conversation about homosexuality was moderate, positively correlated with satisfaction in the family relationship ($r=0.695$, $t=5.79$, $p<0.01$). These results demonstrated that the majority of family were willing to listen to their GL family member describe the GL lifestyle (19.4 agree, 16.7% strongly agree), were honest in communicating about homosexuality (30.6% agree, 25% strongly agree), was involved in the conversation about homosexuality (24.3% agree, 21.6% strongly agree). When asked if the

family communicated coldness rather than warmth about homosexuality, participants said that they strongly disagreed (40.5%). GLs also strongly disagreed with the statement that their families created a sense of distance between them after disclosing their sexuality (45.9%).

Results also indicate that relational satisfaction among the family was high after disclosure of the GL's sexuality. After coming out to the family, GLs felt their relationship was very good (59.5%), very close (48.6%), very healthy (43.2%), and very supportive (52. 8%).

Language and Speech Styles Used in Coming Out Process

Hypothesis 2 argued that GLs would converge their homosexual language to a heterosexual language in order to maintain positive relationships with their family. When describing a homosexual relationship to the family, participants used the following words to describe homosexuality- gay, partner, I like guys, I like girls, boyfriend or girlfriend. Participant(11) said “ I like girls. We sleep in the same bed under the same sheet” when describing a homosexual relationship to the family. Participants (12, 14, 15, 21, 43, 44) simply said “I'm gay.” Participants (19, 27, 50) compared their relationships to heterosexual relationships and explained that homosexuality is very similar to heterosexuals, except for being attracted to the same sex.

Participants were then asked if they changed the way they spoke when coming out to their families and if this had any effect on the coming out process. The number of participants answers varied with (13) answering that yes they changed the way they spoke and (15) said no they did not. Participants who changed the way they spoke, changed the rate of speech, the language, and/or the volume. Participants said:

“I spoke very slowly and used implied words- instead of saying gay or homosexual over and over I said ‘well you know’ to try to take the pressure off” (Participant 28).

“I spoke with a calm collected and reassuring tone. I wanted to make sure that they knew I was not questioning myself. I spoke calmly to alleviate the need to raise voices. I spoke with a level of reassurance to stress the understanding that I had accepted myself and I understood the challenges ahead” (Participant 29).

“I spoke very quickly and quietly. A change in tone didn’t help the reaction, they were very upset” (Participant 31).

Several participants decided to change the way they spoke to calm their own nerves and in hopes of receiving a better reaction from family members. Of the (14) participants that consciously changed the way they spoke, half of them said that their families reacted positively or had some members respond positively with a few that were neutral to the situation. Four participants received negative reactions from their family and explained that the families felt heartbroken or considered homosexuality as a “their problem.”

Fifteen participants said they felt like they did not change the way they spoke when coming out. Some of the responses were:

“Spoke like usual, not much different” (Participant 22).

“No. I’m direct and blunt. I didn’t change just because I’m gay” (Participant 34).

“No, I talked to them the same way I always have” (Participant 26).

While both positive and negative reactions were met by the GLs disclosing to their families, (13) participants said that they felt using a particular language or changing their speech style did not help with the coming out process. However, one participant said changing the language did help because:

“I used terms that I wanted my family to refer to when speaking with me, simultaneously explaining what the terms meant, helped with the overall process of coming out and present the opportunity for my parents to gain a little insight into my ‘other world’ (Participant 29).

Participants were also asked if the language they chose to use was different than the language they would use in the homosexual community and were asked to describe the language they would use in the homosexual community. Participant’s answers varied. Some participants said that there was not a difference (12) and others explained that they do (13) speak differently when speaking to heterosexuals compared with homosexuals. Those who use different language when speaking to one group or the other responded:

“They were not when talking about the relationship itself. However, when it came to details about roles in the relationship, pertaining to sexual relations, my family didn’t care to hear the details and I didn’t tell them any. When speaking to another homosexual, I would just tell them” (Participant 7).

“I tried to use less vulgar language. If I was talking to another homosexual, I would have used words like ‘fuck’ instead of ‘sex’ and ‘turns me on’ instead of ‘arousal’” (Participant 28).

“When speaking to my parents and other homosexuals I attempt to use the same terminology. There are some terms my parents might not understand at first, but like anyone, especially a homosexual who is learning of their ‘other world’ it will just take a little time and explaining to understand” (Participant 29).

“Family: my boyfriend. Another homosexual: My boo, my boy!” (Participant 30).

“Yes it is different because there is a general understanding between two gay people; the lingo is different...” (Participant 33).

“I called my boyfriend, my husband or boyfriend but to my family he was my friend or partner” (Participant 37).

This study was able to identify that there is a homosexual language and a heterosexual language that GLs speak, depending on who they are speaking to, and while not all GLs acknowledge that they speak differently, others identified this difference in the two speech communities. Hypothesis 2 was supported because some participants did change their language to a heterosexual style of speaking. Using terms such as gay, I like boys/girls, or partner, heterosexuals are able to understand what this means, whereas words such as flit, freak, nola, nelly, and other terms are terms used to describe GLs by only the GL community (Ellis, 1965). Participants did admit that they tried to be straight forward and simple with their explanation. Participants also, explained that there was a difference between homosexual and heterosexual languages. Several participants used certain words when speaking to other homosexuals, but when speaking to their families they wanted to be as clearly understood as possible, therefore

they would change their language to a heterosexual language when speaking to the family about homosexuality. We can see that changing the language to a heterosexual style of speaking resulted in maintaining positive relationships with the family due to the content was understandable by all those involved in the conversation.

CHAPTER 5

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate whether homosexuals use a homosexual language or heterosexual language when they reveal their sexual orientation to their families and how this language style affects the relationship satisfaction of the family. First, the reaction to the revelation of homosexuality was investigated to better understand this process, which has been examined before in fields such as communication, psychology, and counseling. Second, homosexual and heterosexual language, was defined and examined to better understand which language is spoken when coming out to the family. Next, the relationship between the family members was measured to understand the satisfaction amongst the family members and the GLs after the coming out process. There were no significant differences between men or women in this study; however the findings here provide further understanding of the communication that takes place between heterosexuals and homosexuals and provides directions for future research.

Social penetration theory, communication accommodation theory, communication privacy management theory, and uncertainty reduction theory provided appropriate theoretical parameters for this research. First, GLs will first determine which family member(s) they wish to disclose their sexual orientation to, with the person they will receive the least amount of negative reaction being the first to know (social penetration theory), then they will choose to converge or diverge their speech style to their families when disclosing (communication accommodation theory), next they will decide how much to disclose to the family as well as what to keep to themselves (communication privacy management theory), and finally they amount of information they disclose as well as the language used will help to reduce uncertainty amongst

the family about homosexuality (uncertainty reduction theory). These theories provided an appropriate lens to the following findings.

The first hypothesis explored the communication about coming out and the relational satisfaction between the family members. These findings support past studies (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Floyd, 2001) that indicate that GLs come out to mothers first because they will respond the most positively and fathers were the last to know. Findings that families respond with different levels of acceptance or must go thorough stages in order to become accepted are in line with past studies (Peplau & Beals, 2001). Results showed that communication about coming out and relational satisfaction were positively correlated. The significance of these findings is important for several reasons. First, this study found that GLs reveal to their families because they want their families to know about their lifestyle and the explanation of the lifestyle is important in order for the families to clearly understand. Participants wanted to be as clear as possible in their explanation of the homosexual lifestyle and therefore explained simply, what being homosexual was- "I'm gay, I like women".

Secondly, the revelation of homosexuality provided relationship satisfaction, but with the disclosure being monitored by the GL in order to determine how much to disclose. Participants who revealed relationship satisfaction with their families, were clear in describing homosexuality, but did not go into details with their family members. By choosing a particular language, participants were able to let their families know who they are, but details that may make families uncomfortable (details on relationships or sexual information) were omitted from the conversation. Participants who explained simply that they were homosexual received mostly positive or neutral responses.

From this perspective social penetration theory helps explain the results. This theory postulates people disclose in order to learn more about one another and thus enhance the relationship (Littlefoss & John, 2008). The norm is that we have a close relationship with our families and the knowledge about one another puts the relationship in a high level of intimacy (Griffin, 2009). However, when GLs come out to their families, the GL is disclosing information to them that may be new information or unfamiliar to them. During the coming out process, heterosexual family members have to learn about a lifestyle that is different from theirs. During this disclosure, the GL is allowing the family members to learn more about them in an area of their life that is very personal, and the family member is having to absorb this information. This disclosure is the foundation of social penetration theory, because when people disclose, they wish to gain a deeper relationship and allow another to learn more about them (Altman & Taylor, 1987), however because the GL may not disclose everything about homosexuality to their family member(s), the family is not getting to the core of the sphere, which is not the goal. The goal is to be able to be as open as possible with the family about their lifestyle and receive complete acceptance. GLs are allowing their families to learn more about them (peeling the layers back) but deep penetration into the core is being determined based on each family member's particular reaction. Each GL is determining how their family may react to the news that they are homosexual. If GLs feel that the family will respond negatively, then less will be revealed and if the family could respond positively, more will be revealed to the family and thus the knowledge will allow the family to be in the core of the sphere.

These results can be understood through communication privacy management theory. Interpersonal relationships can be complicated when disclosing information (Petronio, 1991) and people will guard what they say and who they say it to. The results of this study support previous

research (Caughlin, Golish, Olson, Sargent, Cook, & Petronio, 2009; Petronio, 2000) that while GLs should want to reveal secrets to their families, sharing a risky secret enforces GLs to have boundaries of what is said to the family. This can be seen in the results of this study because participants stated that when they came out they just wanted to be as clear and simple as possible by simply saying “I’m gay” to the family, but they did not go into details about what being homosexual was. Participant (61) said “I avoided the term “boyfriend” when coming out to my parents and talking about sex at all. To my family my boyfriend was my “friend”... they [my family] responded very positively, but I did not want to go into details about being gay.”

By coming out we see that the GLs are wishing to disclose to their families about being homosexual, however the privacy boundaries are put forth in order to keep good relationships with the family. Choosing what to disclose and what not to disclose to the families, supports CPM’s basis that disclosing everything can sometimes lead to problems instead of enhancing the relationship (Petronio, 2007). The results support past findings of GLs are nervous to tell families of their sexuality and will guard what they say to them because a negative reaction is very detrimental to the GLs life and could result in being thrown out of the house or disowned (Hockenberry, Wilson, Winkelstein & Kline, 2003).

Hypothesis 2 explored homosexual and heterosexual language and posits that homosexuals will converge their language to a heterosexual language in order to maintain positive relationships with their family members. The results of this study support past research (Stanley, 1970; Kulick 2000) that homosexuals do have their own language that the heterosexual community may not be aware of and some terms go across both homosexual and heterosexual communities. With heterosexuality being the dominant group in American society and homosexuality being a subculture, the results support past research (Giles, Bourhis, & Taylor,

1977) of groups adapting their language to the majority and do this because they recognize that they are the inferior group. Hypothesis 2 was supported because (36) out of (38) participants adapted their language and speech style to a heterosexual language when coming out to their families, whether or not they realized that was what they had done.

Communication accommodation theory (CAT) helps to explain these results. Giles (1979) explained that (CAT) explains how we change the way we verbally communicate and nonverbally (speech rate, accent, or tone) in order to fit in or stand out from another group. The results of this study support CAT because when homosexuals come out to their families they converge their language to a heterosexual style of speaking by using specific words heterosexuals use (Griffin, 2009). Converging to the heterosexual style of speaking allows for the homosexual to show that they are similar to the family member(s) the GL is communicating with and assists with receiving a positive response because people are typically more accepting of those who are similar to them.

Participants explained that they chose to explain their sexuality in terms that their family would understand “gay, I like men, I like women” because it was blunt and easy to understand. Even some of the lesbian participants described themselves as “gay” because that was a term their families would understand. *The Guild Dictionary of Homosexual Terms* (1965) defines gay as “denotes homosexuality, as used by homosexuals” (p. 18). However, because gay has become a term that heterosexuals use to describe homosexuals, it has become part of the heterosexual language. Therefore, many of the participants used this term when they explained their sexuality to their families. As explained above, there are words that pertain just to the homosexual community when describing a homosexual.

Results are in line with CAT as well because participants explained that there is a different language when homosexuals speak to one another versus when speaking to a heterosexual. Because the heterosexual would not know this language, as well as the subject matter possibly being uncomfortable for the heterosexual family members, GLs would choose to converge their language in order for their families to understand better. Participant (32) explained that there was a different language between homosexuals because there is a mutual understanding, but that he explained he was gay because it would easier for his family to understand because that was a term they knew, as well as he dropped the pitch of his voice lower when speaking. This pitch drop can be understood as accommodating his speech style to another heterosexual male because of the negative reactions that are associated with homosexual speech styles (Moonwomon 1985) and for the need to seem similar to those that they are disclosing to. A change in the speech style was seen in several participants, some slowed down their speech rate in order for what the GL was saying to be understood and some dropped their pitch. These changes in the speech style could have been done to help support the change in the language being used in order to be better accepted. Other changes in speech style such as an increase in the speech rate were seen as a way to compensate for the nervousness that was felt during the coming out process.

Along with accommodating the language, uncertainty reduction theory (URT) assists in explaining the results. CAT explains that individuals change the way they speak in order to fit in with others and be comfortable, while URT is the idea that we feel the need to reduce the uncertainty when communicating with someone who is new or about a subject that is unfamiliar. URT helps to support the results of this study. Past research explains that some homosexual language is unfamiliar to the heterosexual community, where some of the language is known by

both communities and is referred to as the core language (Stanley, 1970). Past research explains that while the family is someone that usually knows a lot about one another, homosexuality can be an area that is not well known about or was not know about it a particular individual and therefore, when the GL does come out it is a surprise to the family (LaSala, 2000). Past research (Berger & Calabrese, 1975) also explained that when we seek to reduce uncertainty we can do so in 3 ways- passive, active, or interactive. Results for this study reveal that when GLs decide to come out to their families they must explain their lifestyle in a way that the family will understand and they do this through and interactive approach. In the conversation, the GL explains the homosexual lifestyle and helps to reduce uncertainty that family members may have in regards to stigmas, religious beliefs, concerns about societal rejection, or other uncertainties the family may have. The results in this studied have shown that communicating in a heterosexual language to the family helped to reduce uncertainty by explaining to them in a way that they would understand and thus open the door for further communication, if desired, to answer any further questions about homosexuality.

By reducing the uncertainty and converging the language, heterosexual family members were able to learn about the homosexual lifestyle. While some still did not agree with it and gave their family members a negative reaction, many participants expressed that their families reacted positively or were neutral and later had a positive attitude. This hypothesis is supported because changing the language did help achieve a positive relationship outcome in many of the participant's families.

These results show that GLs do change their language when coming out to their families, as well as relationship satisfaction can be obtained when coming out to the families. All of this explains that when coming out, GLs want to be accepted by their families and therefore will

change the way they speak in order to get across what they need to about their sexuality, while also not revealing everything to their families. These results and this study helped contribute more research to the coming out process, but also expanded on how subcultures communicated with one another. By understanding the language, this study helped and contributed more to an understanding of how homosexuals and heterosexuals communicate with one another on sensitive topics. I feel that this study helped in understanding what language is used when coming out as well as understanding how much homosexuals disclose to their families about their sexuality in order to maintain relationship satisfaction.

Limitations and Future Research

Given the findings discussed, some limitations to the current study should be considered. First, age of the participants was a limitation to this study. The average age of the participants was 30.8 years. This age group is on the younger side of the total GL subculture. This limitation is primarily due to the majority of participants were found at a university. Future research needs to examine a wider range of participants and determine if age (older the participant, older the parent) plays a factor in the response of family members when disclosing homosexuality to them.

All of these participants came out to a parent or sibling; however future research should examine the reaction to a GL revealing their sexuality to a spouse or child, the language used, and the response to the disclosure. Tasker, Barrett, and De Simone (2010) found that acceptance by children of a gay father was sought through gradual understanding and direct discussion. Further research in this area could gain a better understanding of coming out between a gay parent who is leaving a heterosexual relationship and the disclosure process to the children involved.

Future research needs to examine the families' perspective of the language that is used in the coming out process as well as its effect on the family relationship. This study only examined the language and effect on the relationship with the family of origin and from the GL's perspective. Future research needs to examine all areas of the family (family of origin, children, spouse, and extended family) from the families' perspective considering that the reaction they have may be quite different from how the GL perceives the family reaction.

Many of the dictionaries and articles in regards to homosexual language were older and were not very current (before 1990). Several of the terms that were deemed only homosexual language: gay, fairy, drag queen, and numerous others are words that are now known by both the heterosexual and homosexual communities and it is difficult to deem it as only homosexual language anymore. Future research could seek to identify what is still considered homosexual language and is commonly used by homosexuals, what is heterosexual language, and what words were once homosexual language and are now considered to be acceptable in both speech communities. As the languages begin to merge it would be interesting to understand what words are moving into both communities and what words are remaining in solely the GL community.

Since it has been determined that GLs have a language of their own, future research should also examine if there is a "coming out language". Future research should examine if the coming out language exists in the GL community and whether or not GLs choose to use this language when coming out. Also, research should examine if this language is only used in the coming out process or whether it is used in other situations where GLs must disclose information to their families, such as a romantic relationship.

Conclusion

The rationale for the current study was to explore the language used by homosexuals in the coming out process and the relationship satisfaction that is felt by the family afterwards. Results showed that relational communication was positively correlated with the relationship satisfaction of the family after the GL came out. Results from this study also found that GLs converge their language to a heterosexual language when coming out to their families in order to receive a better response. Due to the negative reactions that families can have towards homosexuality and the uncertainty that homosexuals feel about revealing their secret, it is not surprising that they would converge their language in order to fit in with the family and be better received.

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Survey on Coming Out

This survey seeks to expand our understanding of the language homosexuals use in coming out and the effect this language has on the family and the homosexual. Please answer the following questions as openly and honestly as possible. There are no right or wrong answers. No attempt will be made to identify you; all responses are anonymous. If you have questions about this survey, please contact me at eramon2@islander.tamucc.edu.

Are male or female? _____ Your age: _____

What is your ethnicity? White African American Hispanic Asian/Pacific Islander
 Native American Other

What was your age when you came out to your family? _____

Section 1

If you have not come out to your family please proceed to Section 4.

If you have come out to your family, please answer the following questions below from your point of view as to how the conversation went when you came out to your family (one or more people at a time). Think about what you said, how you responded and how you interacted with them during this conversation.

What family member(s) did you come out to :_____

Family members ages:

Ages 18-29 Ages 30-39 Ages 40-49 Ages 50-59 Ages 60-69
 Over 70 years of age

1. When (date and year) did you tell your family that you were homosexual?

2. Were you in a homosexual romantic relationship? If so, how long had you been in a homosexual relationship before you told your family?

3. When describing a homosexual relationship to your family, what words did you use? If you used words that were unfamiliar to them, how did you explain those words?
4. Did you change the way you spoke (words you used, rate of speaking, accent) in order to make your family feel more comfortable? How? Did this help the coming out process?
5. Was the language that you used to describe your romantic relationships or homosexual relationships in general to your family different than the language you use in the homosexual community? What language would you have used if you were speaking to another homosexual?
6. Did using a different language help your family feel comfortable in the coming out process? Explain.
7. How did your family respond (positively or negatively) to this revelation? What did they say and do?

8. Did you come out to one or more family members? If you spoke to them separately, what was the order you spoke to them (first mom, second dad, etc.)?

Section 2

Below are a series of statements about the conversation you had with your family when you came out. For each one, put the number from 1 to 7 in the space before the item, depending on the degree which you agree or disagree with the statement. Please complete all items.

When answering the statements, please respond in regards to the first family member you told about your homosexuality.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Disagree somewhat	Neutral or unsure	Agree somewhat	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

 My family member was intensely involved in our conversation about homosexuality.

 My family member communicated coldness rather than warmth about homosexuality.

 My family member created a sense of distance between us after I told them I was a homosexual.

 My family member seemed to desire further communication with me after I revealed my homosexuality.

 My family member was willing to listen to me describe my homosexual lifestyle.

 My family member was open to my ideas about the homosexual lifestyle.

 My family member was honest in communicating with me about homosexuality.

 My family member felt very tense talking to me about homosexuality.

 My family member attempted to persuade me that homosexuality was wrong.

 Revealing my homosexual lifestyle has taken a toll on my relationship with my family.

 Revealing my homosexual lifestyle has had no effect on my relationship with my family.

Section 3

Circle the number that best represents how you would describe your relationship with the family member after you came out to them.

1 Very Bad	2 Somewhat bad	3 Neutral	4 Somewhat good	5 Very Good
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1 Not at all close	2 Somewhat distance	3 Close	4 Somewhat close	5 Very close
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1 Not at all healthy	2 Somewhat unhealthy	3 Neutral	4 Somewhat healthy	5 Very healthy
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1 Not supportive	2 Somewhat not supportive	3 Neutral	4 Somewhat supportive	5 Very supportive
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This completes the survey for you. Thank you for your participation.

Section 4

Please answer the following statements if you have not told your family about your homosexual relationship. Please answer in regards to how you feel about keeping your secret from your family. For each one, put the number from 1 to 7 in the space before the item, depending on the degree which you agree or disagree with the statement. Please complete all items.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Disagree somewhat	Neutral or unsure	Agree somewhat	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

- ___ I would tell my family member if it was inevitable that my homosexual relationship would be revealed to my family member anyway.
- ___ If my family member started to wonder if I was homosexual, I would reveal my sexual orientation to them.
- ___ If my family member asked me about being homosexual, I would be honest with them.
- ___ If the secret of my homosexuality started to cause more difficulties than it currently does, I would tell my family member.
- ___ If I knew my family member would still accept me after hearing that I am homosexual and in a homosexual relationship, I would tell them the truth.
- ___ I have no fear in discussing my homosexual lifestyle with my family members.
- ___ I look forward to talks with my family about my romantic relationships.
- ___ When in casual conversations with my family members I don't feel I have to guard what I say about homosexuality.
- ___ I am afraid to come right out and tell my family exactly what I mean about the homosexual lifestyle.
- ___ Revealing my homosexual lifestyle would take a toll on my relationship with my family.

Thank you for your participation.