PARENTING STRESS AMONG SEXUAL MINORITY PARENTS: GENDER, RACE, CUSTODY STATUS, TIMING OF COMING OUT, AND LEVEL OF OUTNESS

by

Ann Caswell Martin

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Approved by:

_____
Dr. Phyllis Post

_____
Dr. Lyndon Abrams

_____
Dr. Henry Harris

_____
Dr. Claudia Flowers

_____
Dr. Suzanne Leland

ABSTRACT

ANN CASWELL MARTIN. Parenting stress among sexual minority parents: gender, race, custody status, timing of coming out, and level of outness. (Under the direction of DR. PHYLLIS POST)

The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between parenting stress among sexual minority parents and their gender, race, legal custody status, timing of coming out relative to becoming a parent, and level of outness. A total of 833 sexual minority parents were included in this internet survey research study. A snowball sample was recruited through LGBTQ-friendly organizations, social media, gay pride events, and personal networks. Participants completed an anonymous internet survey which included the Parental Stress Scale, the Outness Inventory, and a demographic questionnaire. A 3-step hierarchical regression was conducted to analyze the data. Sexual minority parents' gender accounted for 1% of the variance in their parenting stress. Legal custody status and timing of coming out did not add significant variance after controlling for gender and race. Level of outness added 1% of unique variance in parenting stress after controlling for gender, race, custody status, and timing of coming out. Continued study is warranted regarding the explanatory influence of gender and outness on parenting stress, as the relatively small effects found in this study may be amplified in a sample with more fathers represented and with greater variability in level of outness. It is imperative to further professional understanding of adaptive processes for sexual minority parents, such as outness, that can improve their parenting experiences in a heterosexually dominated culture.

DEDICATION

This accomplishment is dedicated to Dr. Jim Whitlow, without whom this work would never have been started, sustained, and completed.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Sexual minority individuals are increasingly choosing to parent children. The 2012 American Community Survey indicated that there were an estimated 640,000 same-sex couples in the United States. Eighteen percent of these self-identified households reported having children in the home (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Thus, approximately 115,000 same-sex couples were raising at least one child. These numbers do not include the potentially many sexual minority parents who are not in same-sex partnerships. The National Survey of Family Growth (Gates, Badgett, Macomber, & Chambers, 2007) reported that over one third of lesbians of childbearing age had given birth to a child or children, and almost one fifth of gay men had fathered or adopted a child. Sexual minority individuals also reported a significant desire to parent. Almost two thirds (57%) of gay men and over a third (37%) of lesbians without children desired children. Among bisexual men and women without children, these numbers increased to 70% (men) and 75% (women). Approximately one fourth to one half of gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals who already had children reported a desire for an additional child, 25%, 50%, and 47%, respectively (Gates et al., 2007). In a report on adoption and foster care by sexual minority parents in the United States, researchers estimated that two million gay, lesbian, and bisexual people had considered adopting children. Furthermore, 65,000 adopted children (over 4% of all children adopted in the United States) were living with lesbian or

gay adoptive parents in 2007 (Gates et al., 2007). These numbers present strong evidence that sexual minority individuals are both living and pursuing the parenting experience.

Parenting for sexual minorities is stressful in a culture that is biased towards heterosexual families (Ben-Ari & Livni, 2006; Biblarz & Savci, 2010; Wall, 2011). Issues such as same-sex marriage, second-parent adoption, and workplace discrimination against sexual minorities have been and continue to be sources of controversy, political discord, and legal battles across the nation (EqualityNC, 2014; Human Rights Campaign [HRC], 2016b). The image that has traditionally come to mind at the mention of the word "family" is that of a man, woman, and their respective children. This culturally based picture has developed through the lens of the heterosexual majority, which has historically dominated societal notions of marriage, parenting, and childrearing. For those families who operate outside the boundaries of societal norms there are often no culturally prescribed roadmaps for direction, guidance, and support. Families with one or more sexual minority parents face the tasks of partnering, parenting and childrearing without established norms to fall back on and, as a result of heterosexist bias, are often judged by those in the majority as interesting at best and pathological at worst (Lambert, 2005; Moore & Stambolis-Ruhstorfer, 2013; Patterson & Riskind, 2010).

Prejudice and discrimination towards sexual minority parents is evident in our nation's past and present. In 2013, the 17-year-old discriminatory federal Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) was repealed by the U.S. Supreme Court declaring that same-sex couples who were legally married could not be denied equal access to federal benefits of marriage, such as health insurance, survivor, retirement, and service member benefits (HRC, 2016a). Until June 2015, this civil rights victory only benefitted same-sex couples

residing in the 37 states that recognized legal marriage between same-sex partners. On June 26, 2015, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that state bans against same-sex marriage were unconstitutional and same-sex marriage was recognized as a legal right for sexual minorities in all fifty states (*Obergefell v. Hodges*, 2015). The recognition of legal marriage between same-sex couples is relevant to sexual minority parents' experience of parenting, because many of the benefits that accompany legal marriage are ways parents protect the well-being of their children (Patterson, 2009). Recent legislative efforts to protect the rights of adoption agency owners carry with them the potential for discrimination based on sexual orientation with regards to adoptive parent applications. In July 2014, a new bill that would allow adoption and foster care agencies to decline prospective parent applicants based on the religious beliefs of agency owners was introduced to Congress. This bill, which supporters titled the Child Welfare Provider Inclusion Act, could serve to make discrimination based solely on sexual orientation a legal reality for prospective sexual minority adoptive or foster parents (Stacy, 2014).

As sexual minority parents create families and raise children despite obstacles, some in this population may seek counseling to negotiate life challenges. One study reported that 82% of lesbian mothers had sought mental health counseling (Morris, Balsam, & Rothblum, 2002). When professional counselors enter into a counseling relationship, they are called to advocate for clients by addressing barriers that constrain positive growth and improvement (American Counseling Association, 2014). Parenting stress has been associated with less than optimal outcomes for parents and children (Crnic & Low, 2002; Deater-Deckard, 2004). Sexual minority parents further share a common challenge of parenting within an unpredictable climate, where their sense of

acceptance and recognition as parents may range from tolerance to rejection (Stacey, 2013). Sexual minority parents who repeatedly experience less than full acceptance in the role of parent may feel additional burden in having to defend their identity. Counselors can better serve sexual minority parent clients by understanding stress associated with parenting as a sexual minority.

Overview of Major Concepts

The focus of the proposed study is the examination of parenting stress experienced by sexual minority parents and the influence of several factors on this construct. The following section will introduce the primary concepts of parenting stress among sexual minority parents, parent gender, parent race, custody status, timing of coming out, and level of outness that will be explored through this study.

Parenting Stress

Parenting children can present meaningful rewards as well as difficult challenges. Parenting stress has been defined as the subjective sense of burden inherent in the task of childrearing, balanced by the degree of competence parents perceive in their identity as parents and their subjective experience of personal rewards related to this identity (Belsky, 1984). Stress associated with parenting has been examined from the perspective of its potential effects on child development and overall family functioning. Contextual factors on both the macro- and micro-levels have been explored in their relation to parenting stress. Some researchers have explored the relation between parenting stress and major life stressors and circumstances, such as poverty and child illness/disability (Chang & Fine, 2007; Woodman, 2014), while others have examined routine hassles encountered in the day to day work of childrearing, such as cleaning up messes and

securing child care (Crnic, Gaze, & Hoffman, 2005; Crnic & Greenberg, 1990; Crnic & Low, 1992). From the standpoint of advocacy for the betterment of children and parents, building professional knowledge and understanding of parenting stress can enhance the collective future of families.

Parenting Stress for Sexual Minority Parents

Parenting stress experienced by sexual minority parents has only garnered attention from researchers in the past 10-15 years. Prior to that, these parents were under scrutiny based on outcomes related to the adjustment and well-being of their children rather than on their parenting experiences (Patterson, 2000; Patterson, 2009). Sexual orientation has been a topic of controversy for decades, and advocates both for and against sexual minority rights have fueled research efforts to support their particular opinions and beliefs on the fitness of sexual minority individuals as parents. Current literature reflects more focus on the parenting experiences of sexual minority parents, including parenting stress. Researchers and practitioners in the field extend a call for interventions that empower and strengthen sexual minority parents; this push is also reflected in current literature (Goldberg, 2009; Moore & Brainer, 2013).

Previous studies on parenting stress for sexual minority parents have compared sexual minority parents with heterosexual parents examining differences in parenting stress by family type. A handful of these studies have also compared stress levels among lesbian mothers in partnerships (biological mothers vs. non-biological mothers) and among lesbian mothers and gay fathers (Golombok et al., 2014; Bos, van Balen, & van den Boom, 2004a; Bos, van Balen, van den Boom, 2004b). While quantitative studies have shown that levels of parenting stress reported by sexual minority parents were

comparable to those of heterosexual parents (Bos et al., 2004b; Farr, Forssell, & Patterson, 2010; Moore & Stambolis-Ruhstorfer, 2013), qualitative data clearly indicated that these parents experienced many challenges and stressors in the role of parent that are specific to parenting as a sexual minority in a heterosexist society (Ben-Ari & Livni, 2006; Breshears, 2011; Lassiter, Dew, Newton, Hays, & Yarbrough, 2006). Some parents have expressed difficulties negotiating the complexities of coming and living out as sexual minority parents (Ben-Ari & Livni, 2006; Breshears, 2011; Lynch & Murray, 2000) as well as struggles in establishing and even justifying their identities as parents (Goldberg & Smith, 2011; Bos, van Balen, & van den Boom, 2007; Tornello & Patterson, 2012).

Gender

Historically, the literature on parenting stress supports the notion that parenting stress experienced by mothers and fathers was more alike than different, particularly in low-risk parent populations (Crnic & Booth, 1991; Crnic & Low, 2002; Deater-Deckard, 1998; Deater-Deckard & Scarr, 1996). More recent studies have also failed to find a significant association between parental gender and parenting stress (Denby, Brinson, Cross, & Bowmer, 2014; Yoon, Newkirk, & Perry-Jenkins, 2015). Studies involving sexual minority parents have indicated no significant gender differences in parenting stress in comparing both lesbian and heterosexual mothers with heterosexual fathers using donor-insemination (Bos et al., 2004a; Tasker & Golombok, 1998). Similarly, no differences were found between lesbian and heterosexual adoptive mothers as compared to gay and heterosexual adoptive fathers (Goldberg & Smith, 2014; Golombok, Mellish, Jennings, Casey, Tasker, & Lamb, 2014). In addition, the above-mentioned studies relied

on samples of sexual minority parents raising children under the age of 10. The proposed study will expand knowledge about the association between parent gender and parenting stress for sexual minority parents with older children as well as younger children.

Some literature provides evidence that economic inequalities exist between men and women that can affect the parenting experience. Women typically earn less than men, and this disparity often increases with parenthood, as it is frequently mothers who carry the bulk of childrearing tasks and may reduce work hours to compensate with this (McLanahan & Perchesky, 2008). Yavorsky, Dush, and Shoppe-Sullivan (2015) found a discrepancy in unpaid work related to parenting tasks, with mothers reporting a greater increase than fathers across the transition to parenthood. Numbers of single mothers in the United States have risen steadily since the 1960s, and these mothers are disproportionately represented among sexual minority parents (Biblarz & Savci, 2010; McLanahan & Perchesky, 2008; U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). This study will further explore the relationship between gender and parenting stress.

Race

Existing literature on the connection between race and parenting stress is limited (Franco, Pottick, & Huang, 2010; Nomaguchi & House, 2013), and findings have been conflicting. Race was not found to be a significant predictor of parenting stress for parents of adolescents (Anderson, 2008) with different racial groups reporting similar levels of parenting stress. A small sample of White mothers and grandmother caregivers reported higher levels of parenting stress than African-Americans in one study (Musil, Youngblut, Ahn, & Curry, 2002), while multiple studies with large national samples of both mothers and fathers have shown that many racial minority groups reported higher

parenting stress levels than Whites (Franco et al., 2010; Nomaguchi & House, 2013; Raphael, Zhang, Liu, & Giardino, 2009). Some evidence suggests that structural disadvantages that are disproportionately associated with racial minority groups (e.g. younger parents, more children in family, single parents, and lower household income) can help explain racial-ethnic differences in parenting stress (Nomaguchi & House, 2013). Given the different findings in the research this study will contribute to this literature by exploring the relationship between sexual minority parents' race and parenting stress.

Custody Status

In parenting minor children, there is a need for adults to provide for children's basic needs and to make decisions in their best interest regarding a wide range of issues (e.g. education, health care, and social development). Child custody is a legal concept that delineates the relationship of children to the adults responsible in the eyes of the state for attending to children's needs. The legal relationship can impact parents' sense of security within a parental identity (Ben-Ari & Livni, 2006; Lassiter et al., 2006; Levy, 1992; Morris et al., 2002). The non-traditional structure of the majority of families headed by sexual minority parents, combined with the heterosexist bias inherent in the legal system (Patterson, 2009), can present challenges for these parents regarding decision-making, rights as parents, and child visitation privileges when partnerships end (Biblarz & Savci, 2010). To add to this body of knowledge, this study will examine the relationship between the legal custody status and parenting stress of sexual minority parents.

Timing of Coming Out Relative to Becoming a Parent

Coming out refers to the process of informing others about one's status as a sexual minority. It is one aspect in the development of an identity as a sexual minority individual and happens at different times and in different ways for different people (Coleman, 1982; Cass, 1979; Vaughan & Waehler, 2010). For some sexual minorities parenting children, the timing of this process occurred after they had already become parents through either a heterosexual relationship, adoption, or fostering of children. Other sexual minority parents had lived out for some period of time before pursuing parenthood. The timing of parents' embracing a sexual minority identity relative to the time they assumed an identity as a parent can influence their subjective experience of parenting (Moore & Stambolis-Ruhstorfer, 2013; Morris et al., 2002). This study will address the relationship between the timing of coming out and the parenting stress of sexual minority parents.

Level of Outness

Level of outness is determined by the degree to which sexual minority individuals are out to other people in their lives. A person who is out to only one or two people (e.g. a close friend and a parent) would have a lower level of outness than someone who is out to many or most people in their life (e.g. coworkers, neighbors, and strangers). Higher levels of outness have been associated with increased social support, more integrated sexual minority identity, and better interpersonal functioning and relationship quality (Clausell & Roisman, 2009; Knoble & Linville, 2012; Levy, 1992; Mohr & Fassinger, 2000). Little is known about the influence of degree of outness on parenting stress for sexual minority parents; however, the complexity of the coming out process for parents

as compared to non-parents is cited in the literature (Breshears, 2011; Puckett, Horne, Levitt, & Reeves, 2011). Parents who have resolved coming out issues to a greater degree may sense less burden in accomplishing parenting tasks in a homonegative society (Knoble & Linville, 2012). Parenting as a sexual minority individual creates a public visibility that transforms the coming out process into a continuous event as opposed to a one-time decision (Breshears, 2011). On a daily basis, sexual minority parents face in the moment decisions around whether to pass as a mainstream heterosexual parent, perhaps by simply remaining silent or choosing not to correct someone's assumption of heterosexual status, or to revisit yet again that process of openly affirming a sexual minority identity (Berkowitz & Marsiglio, 2008). Reasons for the latter could range from issues related to their own sexual identity development to a desire to model pride and reduce shame in the company of their children (Ben-Ari & Livni, 2006; Lassiter et al., 2006). Raising children requires regular interaction within a variety of social spheres, and there is always the inherent risk of stigmatization and homophobia associated with living out as a parent in a heterosexist culture (Bos et al., 2004a; Bos et al., 2004b; Goldberg & Smith, 2011). This study will explore the relationship between level of outness and parenting stress among sexual minority parents.

Purpose of the Study

Changes in the legal recognition of same-sex marriage and adoption laws regarding sexual minority parents are evident in the nation's current events. Over the past three years, 17 states legalized same-sex marriage (ProCon.org, 2014); similar efforts in other states led to a recent Supreme Court ruling in *Obergefell v. Hodges* that made same-sex marriage legal across the entire country (*Obergefell v. Hodges*, 2015). As the number

of sexual minority individuals parenting children increases (U. S. Census Bureau, 2012), it is important for professional counselors to support and empower these parents as they raise children.

One pathway in supporting sexual minority parents is to increase knowledge regarding influencial sources of stress related to their role as parents. The current study can add to the information available to professionals as they assist parents and prospective parents in coping and decision-making regarding parenthood. The purpose of this study is to explore the relationship between gender, race, legal custody status, timing of coming out, and level of outness and parenting stress among sexual minority parents.

Significance of the Study

This study will expand upon earlier work by further exploring factors contributing to parenting stress within the sexual minority parent population. This focus is directed by a methodological shift away from previous studies that have relied on the comparison of gay and lesbian families with "heteronormative" samples of heterosexual families, a term implying "the uncritical adoption of heterosexuality as an established norm or standard," (Perlesz & McNair, 2004, p. 130). Comparing gay and lesbian families to those of the dominant culture has failed to focus on discovering what is adaptive for minority family structures (Crosbie-Burnett & Helmbrecht, 1993, Lambert, 2005; Goldberg, 2009).

This study will attempt to also extend knowledge related to the construct of parenting stress by adding to the sparse literature on parenting stress among the growing population of sexual minority parents. In addition this inquiry may further build this body

of research by examining the relationship of sexual minority parents' gender, race, legal custody status, timing of coming out, and level of outness and their parenting stress.

Professional counselors may use information gained from this study to assist sexual minority parents in coping with and potentially reducing stress related to parenting. Gender, race, custody status, and timing and level of outness all have a social relevance that provides the context for the influence of these variables on parenting stress for this population. "What these families share is a need to cope with forms of prejudice, stigma, and discrimination that are rooted in aversion to the challenges to conventional gender and sexuality that their existence represents" (Stacey, 2013, p. vii). Promoting equity for sexual minority parents is a social justice issue that requires change at not only the individual parent level, but also at the institutional and societal levels to foster fairness and equality for these parents (Goldberg & Allen, 2013). Information gained from this study could provide support for efforts towards systemic change and a more inclusive, equitable environment for sexual minority families. Understanding the impact of factors, such as custody status and level of outness, on the parenting experience can empower sexual minority families and the social agents that represent them in advocating for change at multiple levels amongst the legal, educational, healthcare, and other systems which influence family life.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to explore the relationships between gender, race, custody status, timing of coming out, and level of outness and parenting stress among sexual minority parents. The specific research questions for this study are as follows:

1. How much variance can be accounted for in parenting stress by gender and race among sexual minority parents?
2. After controlling for gender and race, how much variance can be accounted for in parenting stress by legal custody status and timing of coming out relative to becoming a parent among sexual minority parents?
3. After controlling for gender, race, legal custody status, and timing of coming out relative to becoming a parent, how much variance can be accounted for in parenting stress by level of outness among sexual minority parents?

Research Design

A non-experimental correlational design using survey research methods was used. The study had one dependent or outcome variable, parenting stress, and five independent or predictor variables, parent race, parent gender, legal custody status, timing of coming out as a sexual minority, and level of outness. A three-step hierarchical multiple regression analysis assessed the variance in parenting stress that can be accounted for by each of the predictor variables. Gender and race were entered into the regression equation first, as these are descriptive variables that are not unique to sexual minority parents. Legal custody status and timing of coming out relative to becoming a parent were entered second, as these are variables that are unique to sexual minority parents. Level of outness was entered into the regression last because this is a factor that sexual minority individuals have control over and can change.

Assumptions

The following assumptions have been made in this study:

1. Study participants responded voluntarily and authentically.

2. Study participants accurately understood and responded to the survey questions.
3. The use of a variety of different sampling methods did not affect responses and increased the likelihood that the study sample is more representative of this difficult to access target population.

Delimitations

The researcher has noted the following delimitations as applicable to this study:

1. Data analyzed in this study reflected the self-report of participants.
2. Study participants were limited to individuals who had internet and email access and who were able to read and respond in English.
3. Participants received no incentive for completing the survey.

Limitations

The following limitations are true of the study:

1. Because the primary method of participant recruitment involved contacting individuals who have membership in organizations related to sexual minority issues, participants may have had higher levels of outness than is representative of the general population of sexual minority parents.
2. The community organizations cooperating with recruitment efforts are based primarily in urban areas. Data may be less generalizable to sexual minority parents who reside in more rural areas.
3. Due to the stigma associated with status as a sexual minority, particularly with regards to parenting, participants may have described their experience of parenting in socially desirable ways.

4. The sample was not random. Participants who live in different parts of the country, have children of various ages, and have varying years of experience as a parent took part in the study. It is possible that differences related to location, age and number of children, and years of parenting experience may have influenced the dependent variable of parenting stress in ways that were not captured in the proposed study.
5. The study was exploratory in nature and does not provide information on causal relationships among variables.

Threats to Validity

Threats to Internal Validity

Threats to internal validity are presented by factors other than the independent variables that may affect the dependent variable (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2006). Internal validity influences the accuracy with which the results of a study may be construed. Statistical analyses of the responses provided by participants are limited by the ability of the assessments used to capture a true measure of the intended construct. The instruments used in this study have been previously appraised regarding reliability and validity, and further details on these findings is presented in Chapter 3. Social desirability can be an additional threat to internal validity. Survey responses were collected anonymously and via the internet to reduce the likelihood of participants responding in ways they perceive may reflect favorably on themselves or the researcher. Another aspect to consider, however, is the potential added pressure participants in this study may have felt to portray their collective group as sexual minority parents in a positive light given the discrimination towards and rejection of sexual minority parenting that can be present in

U.S. society. The invitation and informed consent documents for participants in this study were carefully worded in an attempt to portray sexual minority parenting in a positive rather than negative manner.

Threats to External Validity

A goal of scientific research using statistical analyses is to use the findings from a limited sample to make inferences about the larger population. External validity encompasses the extent to which study results can be generalized to individuals outside the study (Gay et al., 2006). The convenience sampling methods utilized for this study limited external validity. The majority of participants in this study live in or near larger urban areas and were out enough regarding their status as a sexual minority to affiliate themselves with sexual minority centered organizations and events. Results from this study are only generalizable to sexual minority parents with similar characteristics and demographics, which are reported using descriptive statistics in the results section.

Operational Definitions

Parenting Stress

Parenting stress is the subjective report of parents' experience of sense of competence and sense of burden associated with the role of being a parent as measured on the Parental Stress Scale (PSS; Berry & Jones, 1995). The PSS was designed to measure normal, every day parenting stress in non-clinical populations and was intended to capture parents' experience of both the rewards and challenges inherent in the parental role. The PSS consists of 18 items with 5-point Likert scale responses ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree with higher scores indicating a greater level of perceived stress related to parenting. The total score was used.

Gender

Gender was defined as respondents' self-report of their gender on the demographic portion of the survey. The options were male, female, or other.

Race

Race was defined as respondents' self-report of race in the demographic portion of the survey using categories defined by the U.S. Census Bureau. The options were Caucasian/White, African American/Black, Hispanic/Latino, Native American, Asian American/Asian, Multiracial, or Other.

Legal Custody Status

Legal custody status was defined as the legal relationship of parent to child. On the demographic portion of the survey, respondents indicated the type(s) of legal custody relationships they have with the child(ren) they are parenting by indicating whether each of the following is true or not: sole legal custody, shared legal custody, or no legal custody. Thus, legal custody status was operationalized as three separate variables representing the three different types of legal custody arrangements.

Timing of Coming Out Relative to Becoming a Parent

The timing of coming out relative to becoming a parent was defined as self-report of whether they were or were not out as a sexual minority at the time they first shared a home with a child for whom they considered themselves to be a caregiver.

Level of Outness

For this study, level of outness was defined as the degree to which parents are out about their sexual orientation status in a variety of social roles. Level of outness was assessed using the Outness Inventory (OI; Mohr & Fassinger, 2000). The OI was

designed to measure both subtle (e.g. implied nonverbally) and overt disclosure of sexual orientation. Respondents are asked to rate the degree to which their sexual orientation is known by and discussed with others in 10 different social roles on a 7-point Likert scale. Total scores on the OI were used with higher scores indicating a greater level of outness.

Summary

In Chapter 1, a framework for the study of parenting stress among sexual minority parents was provided. All parents experience stress related to the role of parent; however, sexual minority parents may face potential rejection or less than full acceptance in this role due to their sexual orientation. Parenting stress can be influenced by multiple factors and has the potential to affect outcomes for parents as well as children. Sexual minority-led families face adversity due to the challenge their existence creates to traditionally accepted family norms. In this study, parenting stress experienced by sexual minority parents was examined with hopes of learning more about specific factors affecting stress levels in these families. Race and gender are relevant to the exploration of parenting stress in that imbalances in resources and opportunity exist relative to these characteristics. For sexual minority parents, security regarding legal rights and decision-making power is diminished due to inconsistent recognition and rights afforded by state and federal laws. When and to what degree sexual minority parents are out to others influences their parenting experiences within both the heterosexual and sexual minority cultures. Therefore, legal custody status and the timing and level of outness are important to consider related to parenting stress. The relationship between these predictor variables and parenting stress was assessed in a cross-sectional, correlational study. Sexual minority parents provided self-reported data through a survey. The purpose of this study

was to explore the relationship between gender, race, legal custody status, timing of coming out, and level of outness and sexual minority parents' parenting stress.

Organization of the Study

This dissertation is divided into five chapters. The pertinent background for and significance of the study and an introduction to the relevant variables and research questions was presented in Chapter 1. In Chapter 2 the professional literature related to each variable as well as the relationships between each of the independent variables (gender, race, custody status, timing of coming out relative to becoming a parent, and level of outness) and the dependent variable, parenting stress is examined. The methodology for the study which includes sections on the participants, procedures, instruments, research design, and data analysis is presented in Chapter 3. Results are presented in Chapter 4 and discussed in Chapter 5, along with contributions, limitations, and future research recommendations.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

A varied body of literature with contributions from the fields of social work, sociology, psychology, and counseling serves as the foundation for this study. The current chapter will present a synthesis of the scholarly writing and research related to parenting stress and factors associated with parenting for sexual minority parents. The framework for this analysis consists of the following segments: (a) conceptual and empirical considerations regarding parenting stress and the experience of parenting stress for sexual minority parents, (b) parental gender as related to parenting stress and the experience of such for sexual minority parents, (c) parental race as related to parenting stress and the experience of such for sexual minority parents, (d) legal custody status as it relates to parenting stress and sexual minority parents, (e) timing of coming out as a sexual minority relative to becoming a parent and its relation to parenting and parenting stress, (f) level of outness as related to parenting and parenting stress for sexual minority parents. The final section will provide a summary of the literature related to parenting stress for sexual minority parents based on relevance to this study.

Overview of Parenting Stress and Related Theory

Belsky (1984) was among the first to directly imply that stress associated with parenting can have a direct influence on parental functioning. He postulated that parenting outcomes are multiply determined and are driven by more than just individual differences among parents and children. Belsky believed that environmental factors were

also crucial in the process of parenting and influence parents along the parenting continuum from dysfunction to competence. In his process model of parenting, he presents the three major determinants of parental functioning as (a) psychological health and characteristics of parents, (b) characteristics of the child, and (c) contextual factors of both stress and support. Each of these determining agents may add a degree of either stress or support to the parenting process. Parent contributions to childrearing are defined as the interactive system of the parent's own developmental history, life experience, and individual personality traits. Child contributions include temperament and other individual characteristics that can contribute to the ease or difficulty of providing care for the child, as well as the degree to which child and parent characteristics match. Environmental contributions involve the influence of systems such as marital relationships, work experiences, and social and community networks and support (or lack thereof).

Belsky (1984) further proposed that of the three primary determinants of parenting, parental well being is the most influential, followed by contextual sources, with child characteristics being least significant. He surmised that to some degree, parent characteristics and factors play a role in the types and amounts of support accessed from the larger environment. This rationale was further developed by evidence in the literature pertaining to positive outcomes for high-risk children when combined with adequate parent and outside support factors. In fact, Belsky's model presents parenting as "a buffered system" (p. 91) in which support in one or more areas can serve as protective measures against stress in another area. Belsky's theory is significant to the current

project in the focus placed on contextual factors that can add stress to the parenting role and thus the experience of parenting.

A complement to Belsky's (1984) work is Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (1979). This model of development also focuses on the influence of the environment in which children are being raised. Parenting and child development take place within a system of interacting contexts. He theorized that cultural systems such as parents' workplaces and local governments, which children likely never experience directly, can and do have an influence in children's experience of growth and development, and thus, on the experience of childrearing. The environment is described as a set of embedded systems, each within the next, with the developing child and family at the center. The surrounding systems range from immediate contexts, or microsystems, such as family, school, and peers, to more remote contexts, or exosystems and macrosystems, such as government, legal systems, broader culture, and historical contexts. These systems and their interactions and interrelationships provide the framework for the natural ecology in which children and families develop. Bronfenbrenner's model (1979) acknowledges the influence of contextual sources of both stress and support on the experience of parenting.

In the exploration of parenting stress for sexual minority parents, the influence of the societal context in which these families are raising children is key. Prejudice and bias towards the heterosexual majority at both personal and systemic levels creates a context that is often not supportive to sexual minority families (Goldberg, 2010; Herek, Gills, & Cogan, 2009). Thus, the influence of this environmental context on the parenting experience of sexual minority individuals merits attention.

Definition of Parenting Stress

Parenting stress has been defined as the distress experienced by parents when faced with challenges in the role of parent that exceed the perceived resources (psychological, financial, and practical) available (Deater-Deckard, 2004). In this understanding, parenting stress becomes more than just a function of child behavior; it also encompasses the cumulative effect of day to day demands involved in raising children as well as potential environmental supports or resources (Crnic & Greenberg, 1990). Childrearing brings rewards and challenges, and the everyday experience of both is not uniform across all parents. This conceptualization of parenting stress is one that is measured subjectively; parents' subjective perceptions determine the extent to which challenges associated with parenting are experienced as stressful. For the purposes of this study, parenting stress will be defined as the balance of perceived rewards and difficulties associated with the role of parenting (Berry & Jones, 1995; Deater-Deckard, 2004).

Empirical Research Related to Parenting Stress

Stress among parents has been well documented (Cousino & Hazen, 2013; Crnic & Low, 2002; Deater-Deckard, 1998; Deater-Deckard, 2004; Theule, Weiner, Tannock, & Jenkins, 2013). Much of the research on parenting stress has focused on the effects of parents on children rather than on how raising children affects parental well-being (Berry & Jones, 1995). Strong support for an association between parenting stress and negative child outcomes has been demonstrated in the literature (Deater-Deckard, 2004). Theory suggests that parent characteristics, child characteristics, and contextual factors all inform the parenting experience. With regards to parents, there has been evidence that parental social cognitions and perceptions are an important component of parenting stress (Deater-

Deckard, Smith, Ivy, & Petrill, 2005; Milner, 2003; Shapiro, 2014). At the same time, parent behaviors, such as discipline practices and styles (Anthony et al., 2005), and parental negativity/positivity and expressed conflict (Crnic, Gaze, & Hoffman, 2005; Mackler et al., 2015) have not been supported as a mediator in the association of parenting stress and outcomes for children and parents. Regarding child characteristics, positive associations have been reported between higher parenting stress and children with behavior problems (Anderson, 2008; Bendell, Stone, Field, & Goldstein, 1989; Eyberg, Boggs, & Rodriguez, 1992; Mackler et al., 2015; Neece, Green, & Baker, 2012; Ostberg, Hakegull, & Hagelin, 2007) and chronic illness or disabilities (Baker et al., 2003; Cousino & Hazen, 2013; Darling, Senatore, & Strachan, 2012; Neece et al., 2012; Woodman, 2014).

The concept of parenting stress extends beyond what happens in the microcosm of the home. While factors unique to each family certainly play a role in the experience of parenting and family dynamics, researchers have also explored questions regarding the extent to which the outer world (societal context) can influence stress associated with parenting (Everson, Herzog, Figley, & Whitworth, 2014; Warfield, 2005; Zhang, Eamon, & Zhan, 2015). Environmental sources of stress affecting parenting have been examined in the literature in two main ways. First, those sources of stress that present difficulty above and beyond the experience of the typical middle class parent have been considered. Second, researchers have also examined more minor sources of stress that almost all parents experience such as managing hectic schedules, making arrangements for childcare, dealing with uncertainty regarding specific issues that occur with children, or lacking a sense of privacy or time for self-care. These daily hassles associated with

parenting may seem small, but can have a cumulative effect over time on the experience of parenting and perceived sense of parental burden (Crnic & Booth, 1991; Crnic & Greenberg, 1990; Darling et al., 2012; Stacy, 2012). Some of the research in the past 10 years on contextual stress and parenting has focused on families with special challenges that are specific to parent and child characteristics, such as parents with severe mental illness or children with special needs. Studies such as these have been excluded from this review, as the current study is designed to focus on a non-clinical parent population that faces potential environmental stressors. The following section examines literature on contextual sources of parenting stress in non-clinical families.

Researchers have explored the experience of parenting stress amidst extraordinary life circumstances that have the potential to affect family life. Associations between socioeconomic stressors and parenting stress have been found (Warfield, 2005); however, family income alone was not found to be a significant indicator of parenting stress for a small sample of low-income mothers (Raikes & Thompson, 2005). Some support has been shown for parenting stress as a mediating factor in the relationship between economic hardship and child problem behaviors (Mistry, Biesanz, Chien, Howes, & Benner, 2008; Rijlaarsdam et al., 2013). Extreme life circumstances such as living in community environments characterized by severe levels of poverty, violence, and drug use have been associated with higher perceived parenting stress for single mothers (Zhang et al., 2015). In the case of incarcerated parents, themes of parenting strain and emotional stress have been reported by caregivers of children with a parent in prison (Arditti, Lambert-Shute, & Joest, 2003). Furthermore, frequency and quality of contact with children have been found to influence parenting stress for incarcerated parents

(McClure et al., 2015; Tuerk & Loper, 2006). The influence of parental absence has also been shown in military wives with combat-deployed husbands where parenting stress was affected by length of deployment and soldier rank (Everson et al., 2014).

Research involving parenting stress related to the normative experience of daily parenting hassles has been varied. Daily hassles were found to be associated with lower life satisfaction for fathers of children with and without disabilities (Darling et al., 2012). In another study, minor parenting stresses predicted 33% of the variance in life satisfaction for parents of preschoolers in daycare (Stacy, 2012). Connections between daily hassles and parent depression have also been found. Previous parental experience of depression predicted parenting stress related to daily hassles in low-income mothers of preschoolers (Aranda, 2013). A similar finding showed that daily parenting stresses both predicted parent warmth and harsh discipline for parents of children with oppositional behavior and also mediated the relationship between parent depression and these two variables (Reyno, 2011). Additionally, social support has been found to influence minor parenting stresses in adolescent fathers of infants (Fagan, Bernd, & Whiteman, 2007) and mothers of 5-year-old children (Crnic & Greenberg, 1990). The identification of environmental supports as a potentially beneficial force in parenting supports existing theoretical positions and also strengthens the argument for further exploration of supportive contextual factors relevant to parents' individual experiences of childrearing.

Summary

Parenting stress theory and related empirical research have demonstrated that the consideration of contextual sources of stress affecting families is an important component in understanding parent experiences. The literature shows that major life stress events can

affect parenting and child outcomes, and also significant effects from more minor stresses that all parents share have been found. All parents are faced with negotiating the daily tasks and hassles of childrearing. Caring for children brings many rewards and also frustrations and challenges, even for parents in relatively normal circumstances. When the daily stresses of parenting are combined with other contextual factors that add levels of difficulty and challenge, such as lack of acceptance or recognition, and even rejection or discrimination that can threaten both parent and child wellbeing, as in the case of sexual minority parents, the parenting experience can be affected.

Theory Related to Parenting Stress for Sexual Minority Parents

Parenting and child development does not happen in a vacuum. It happens within a cultural context. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) model of parenting and child development provides a framework for how different contexts influence development and adjustment. In considering the experience of parenting and childrearing for sexual minority parents, his concept of the mesosystem, which represents the interactions among the smaller (family, school, and neighborhood) and larger contexts (legal, political, and societal) influencing families, is of particular interest. Sexual minority parents are parenting within a context that is biased towards the majority culture (heterosexual). Meyer's (1995) minority stress theory suggests that minority status of any kind brings with it chronic distress related to the inherent social conflict between minority and majority values. Herek et al. (2009) conceptualized the importance of sexual stigma in the experiences of sexual minority individuals specifically. Sexual stigma was defined as, "the negative regard, inferior status, and relative powerlessness that society collectively accords anyone associated with non-heterosexual behaviors, identity, relationships, or communities"

(p.33). The theories of Belsky (1984) and Bronfenbrenner (1979) described earlier in this section provide a reminder that contextual factors may affect the parenting experience of all parents and thus the experience of stress associated with the parenting role. For sexual minority parents, cultural forces such as discrimination and stigmatization towards sexual minority people, and parents in particular, are contextual factors that could affect the parenting experience within sexual minority families.

Empirical Research Related to Parenting Stress for Sexual Minority Parents

The number of studies examining parenting stress among sexual minority parents has grown in the past decade. The majority of these studies have assessed heterosexual parents as a comparison group and will be discussed below. Approximately half of these comparison studies have continued past patterns of comparing child adjustment in heterosexual families to that of sexual minority families, while others have moved away from focusing on child outcomes to explore more deeply the experience of parents themselves.

Focus on Child Outcomes

Children's socioemotional and psychological adjustment were the focus of five studies reviewed in the following section; however, parenting stress was assessed and compared across sexual orientation of parents. This set of studies is less relevant to the current study due to the focus on child outcomes; however, the reported results regarding parenting stress are worth noting in that findings in all five of these studies indicated no significant differences in parenting stress levels according to sexual orientation (Bos, van Balen, & van den Boom, 2007; Chan, Raboy, & Patterson, 1998; Farr, Forssell, & Patterson, 2010; Golombok et al., 2003; Golombok et al., 2014). Another shared finding

across these studies was that parenting stress was found to be significantly correlated with child adjustment for both heterosexual and sexual minority parents, which supports decades of similar reports among general parent populations (Deater-Deckard, 2004). More importantly, this group of studies comparing heterosexual and sexual minority parents reported significant predictive power regarding child well-being for family process variables, such as parenting stress, and not for family structure variables, such as parent sexual orientation. This result held true across studies for variables including couple relationship satisfaction (Bos et al., 2007; Chan et al., 1998; Farr et al., 2010), parent-child relationship (Golombok et al., 2003; Golombok et al., 2014), and inter-parental conflict (Chan et al., 1998). The use of objective teacher ratings of child adjustment in all but one of these studies (Bos et al., 2007) added strength to the results.

Focus on the Parent Experience

Another group of studies have compared heterosexual and sexual minority parents in their experience of parenting stress and other variables such as social support (Bos, van Balen, & van den Boom, 2004a; Goldberg & Smith, 2014; Lavner, Waterman, & Peplau, 2014; Shechner, Slone, Meir, & Kalish, 2010), couple relationship quality (Bos et al., 2004a; Goldberg & Smith, 2014; Tasker & Golombok, 1998), and parent psychological health (Goldberg & Smith, 2014; Lavner et al., 2014; Shechner et al., 2010). Lavner et al. (2014) were interested in adoptive parent adjustment across the first two years following adoption of children from foster care. Gay, lesbian, and heterosexual families all reported similar ratings of parenting stress, adoption satisfaction, and social support over time. No significant differences were found in parenting stress levels or in change in parenting stress postadoption based on sexual orientation. Goldberg and Smith (2014) explored

parenting stress, details of adoption, relationship quality, and perception of children's problems among another sample of gay, lesbian, and heterosexual adoptive parents. In their study parent preadoption depression levels and perceived problems in the adopted child were related to postplacement stress, however not sexual orientation.

Shechner et al. (2010) assessed differences in parenting and psychological distress and social support among lesbian and heterosexual mothers in Israel. Lesbians in two-mother households and heterosexual mothers in two-parent households reported similar findings on all variables. Single heterosexual mothers reported significantly higher parenting stress, more depressive symptoms, and lower social support than mothers in both types of two-parent families. Bos et al. (2004a) were also interested in the parenting experience and social support in lesbian families compared to heterosexual families. No differences in parental burden or social support were found between the two groups of parents.

Tasker and Golombok (1998) compared the role of lesbian co-mothers to heterosexual fathers in families using donor insemination. No differences were found in children's relationships with co-mothers and fathers as assessed by birth mothers or in co-mothers' and fathers' self-reported levels of parenting stress. Birth mothers reported that co-mothers were more involved in daily childrearing activities than were fathers.

Collectively, the studies above compared self-reported parenting stress among heterosexual parents and sexual minority parents, and found no significant differences in level of parenting stress by sexual orientation. These findings are strengthened by variety in sample populations, including lesbian, gay, and heterosexual parents by donor insemination (Bos et al., 2004a; Shechner et al., 2010; Tasker & Golombok, 1998) and

adoption (Goldberg & Smith, 2014; Lavner et al., 2014). Multiple geographic locations were also represented, including the United States (Goldberg & Smith, 2014; Lavner et al., 2014), the United Kingdom (Tasker & Golombok, 1998), the Netherlands (Bos et al., 2004a), and Israel (Shechner et al., 2010).

Having children and being a parent "outs" sexual minority parents in many ways that non-parents do not have to contend with. Therefore, having a sexual minority identity becomes a part of parenting for these individuals. Sexual identity is a part of parenting for all parents, but it is less salient for heterosexual parents as they are raising children as members of the majority culture, and therefore, the ways in which sexual identity and family formation are expressed through parenting is not of significance within the parenting role. For example, activities for children at school such as creating projects or drawings of the family or celebrating mother's day and father's day, simply do not carry with them the same challenges for heterosexual parents as for sexual minority parents. Only limited research has been done exploring the experience of parenting stress as it relates specifically to a minority identity.

Focus on Parent Experience Within a Sexual Minority Identity

Three research studies have examined parenting stress and related constructs within populations of sexual minority parents. In the first, Bos et al. (2004b) sampled lesbian couples who had become parents by donor insemination in the Netherlands and found that biological lesbian mothers and their partners reported similar levels of parental burden and parental competence, which the researchers defined as sense of burden felt as a result of parenting and sense of ability to handle parenting, respectively. Parental

burden and competence were both found to be significantly correlated to experience of rejection related to participants' status as lesbian mothers.

Tornello and Patterson (2012) recently conducted an internet survey of gay fathers who had become parents in the course of heterosexual relationships. Three groups of fathers served as the sample for their study: 110 fathers who were previously married to women but were now in relationships with men, 44 fathers previously married to women and now single, and 14 fathers who identified as gay yet had remained in their relationships with women. Participants' self-reported parenting stress, relationship satisfaction, outness, and gay identity were assessed. Results indicated that parenting stress levels did not differ significantly with regards to relationship status (single or married) or partner gender (male or female). Still-married fathers reported significantly less disclosure of sexual orientation to others, and more concern about hiding their gay identities; however, the relationships between outness, gay identity, and parenting stress were not examined.

In another inquiry, Tornello and colleagues examined predictors of parenting stress for 230 gay adoptive fathers in the United States (Tornello et al., 2011). The researchers explored details of the adoption process, gay identity, outness, and social support as potential contributing factors to perceived parenting stress. Parenting stress, gay identity, and outness were assessed via self-report using the Parenting Stress Index-Short Form, (Abidin, 1995), the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Identity Scale Revised (Kendra & Mohr, 2008), and the Outness Inventory (Mohr & Fassinger, 2000), respectively. Results indicated that fathers with children who were older at the time of adoption, with older children overall, and with lower social support experienced higher parenting stress. Gay

identity was also found to be a significant predictor of parenting stress. Fathers with a more positive gay identity reported lower parenting stress. In fact, gay identity was as influential as social support in predicting parenting stress. Together, children's age, age at time of adoption, social support, and gay identity accounted for 33% of the variance in parenting stress for gay fathers. This study was the first to explore the influence of gay identity on parenting stress. The current study will build upon this work by examining the relationship between outness and parenting stress for lesbian, bisexual, and transgender parents.

Summary

Several studies have explored parenting stress within the population of sexual minority parents. These studies have compared different sub groups within this population with each other and with heterosexual parents with regards to the degree of parenting stress experienced per self-report. Family process variables including level of parenting stress have been found to influence child adjustment more than family structure variables. Recent studies on parenting stress and sexual minority parents have demonstrated that there are no differences in degree of parenting stress experienced by sexual minority and heterosexual parents. Therefore, if parenting stress is considered harmful, due to its associations with negative child outcomes and negative effects on parental well being, then sexual minority parents and their children are not experiencing the potentially harmful effects of parenting stress any more than heterosexual parents and their children experience them. What these comparison studies do not tell us is anything regarding specific factors within the sexual minority parent population that may affect parenting stress. More information is needed in terms of understanding these parents as

sexual minority individuals who are parenting by examining other potential factors specifically associated with a sexual minority identity that may influence the experience of parenting stress. The current study attempts to fill this gap by exploring parenting stress among sexual minority parents as it relates to gender, race, legal custody status, timing of parents' coming out relative to becoming parents, and level of outness.

Parental Gender and Parenting Stress

In addressing the contribution of parent gender to the parenting experience, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model and Belsky's (1984) process model supply a framework for understanding how a combination of multiple factors can influence childrearing. Bronfenbrenner's model is based on spheres of influence. Parents are primary agents in the home environment, which is part of the innermost sphere of influence (microsystem) on child development. Parent gender interacts with other factors within the context of larger societal systems affecting the family such as economic and political systems and can influence the process of parenting. In Belsky's model, parent characteristics such as gender are one of three domains affecting the parenting experience (1984).

Some researchers have explored the role of parent gender related to parenting and the well-being of heterosexual parents. A group of earlier studies examining parenting stress levels found that the severity and amount of parenting stress did not differ greatly between mothers and fathers. For example, Crnic and Booth (1991) and Creasey and Reese (1996) both found no significant gender differences in reports of daily parenting hassles for intact families with preschool and school age children. These results were replicated in research with dual income families (Deater-Deckard & Scarr, 1996).

More recently, Shapiro (2014) was interested in parenting stress levels in blended families and found that among 310 parents in blended partnerships, biological mothers and fathers reported similar levels of parenting stress. Stepmothers, however, indicated significantly higher parenting stress than both stepfathers and biological parents. In another study with a sample of 716 caregivers raising children through kinship placements, caregiver strain did not differ between male and female caregivers (Denby, Brinson, & Cross, 2014). In addition, Yoon, Newkirk, and Perry-Jenkins' (2015) study revealed no significant differences between parenting stress levels of married, working mothers and fathers. In contrast, mothers have reported higher parenting stress levels than fathers in a study of 90 mothers of 3 month old infants (Scher & Sherabany, 2005) and 58 Iranian mothers of children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (Samadi & McConkey, 2014). It is notable that these two populations of mothers both shared particular vulnerabilities that may have contributed to the experience of parenting stress; new mothers are at increased risk of depressive symptoms post-partum (Pearlstein, Howard, Salisbury, & Zlotnik, 2009), and mothers of children with autism disorders face the challenges of adjusting to and providing for their children's special needs.

The existing research on parental gender and parenting stress among sexual minority parents has focused on two subpopulations within this group: adoptive parents and parents using donor insemination. Studies in both of these areas have examined heterosexual parents as a comparison group and have reported similar findings to studies of heterosexual parents reviewed above. Tasker and Golombok (1998) investigated parenting stress among lesbian co-mothers (i.e., women partnered with lesbian birth mothers by donor insemination), heterosexual fathers by donor insemination, and

heterosexual fathers by natural conception. No significant differences in parenting stress were found between co-mothers and both types of fathers. Bos et al. (2004a) also examined donor insemination families. Dutch lesbian mothers by donor insemination, their co-mother partners, and heterosexual mothers reported similar parenting stress levels as compared to heterosexual fathers. Research with lesbian, gay, and heterosexual adoptive parents has also revealed comparable parenting stress levels for mothers and fathers across all three of these groups (Goldberg & Smith, 2014; Golombok et al., 2014).

It is notable that the only studies that have shown gender differences related to parenting stress have been studies of heterosexual parents (Samadi & McConkey, 2014; Scher & Sherabany, 2005). Discrepancies in unpaid work related to parenting tasks, with mothers reporting a greater increase than fathers across the transition to parenthood have also been found in heterosexual families (Yavorsky, Dush, & Shoppe-Sullivan, 2015). Studies with same-sex parents have shown more equitable divisions of household and childrearing tasks than in heterosexual couples who may be more influenced by traditional gender roles (Bos et al., 2007; Goldberg, 2010; Tasker & Golombok, 1998). At the same time, single mothers are disproportionately represented among sexual minority parents (Biblarz & Savci, 2010). Women typically earn less than men, and it is often mothers rather than fathers who reduce work hours after becoming parents (McLanahan & Perchesky, 2008). It is possible, however, that differences in parenting stress related to gender have not been as salient in sexual minority parent populations since the majority of the work with sexual minority parents has relied on samples with average to above average income (Biblarz & Savci, 2010).

The studies described above are useful in that they provide a picture of fairly consistent findings of comparable stress levels across groups of both lesbian and heterosexual mothers in comparison to gay and heterosexual fathers. While the construct of parent gender was not an area of focus in these reports, their findings do provide a foundation for the consideration of the contribution of parent gender on parenting stress for sexual minority parents. Although the limited existing studies have not revealed significant gender differences in parenting stress, the extent to which sexual minority mothers and fathers experience the stress of parenting differently requires further exploration. The current study will examine the extent to which parent gender is associated with and influences parenting stress for sexual minority parents.

Parental Race and Parenting Stress

Two theoretical models provide a framework for the influence of race on parenting stress. The family stress model of economic hardship suggests that lower access to economic resources and material hardship, such as difficulty obtaining material family necessities, contributes to parenting stress (Gupta, 2007; McLoyd, 1998). An example of this would be low income and single income families who experience financial stressors that overwhelm parents' abilities to cope with the challenges of being a parent. Research has shown that factors related to economic hardship and structural disadvantages differ by race, with racial minorities experiencing proportionately higher levels of such factors (Nomaguchi & House, 2013). Belsky's family process model (1984) focuses on three domains that affect parenting stress: characteristics of the parent, characteristics of the child, and contextual stressors in the environment. The theory posits that the process of interaction among these domains can influence parenting stress.

Empirical research on race and parenting stress exists but is somewhat conflicting. Two studies with unusually high percentages of racial minority participants and relatively large national sample sizes reported no significant differences in parenting stress by race (Anderson, 2008; Sampson, Villareal, & Padilla, 2015). In a sample of 834 parents of adolescents living in high-risk communities, parent race was not a significant predictor of parenting stress. For this sample, 50% identified as racial minorities (Anderson, 2008). Likewise, a diverse sample of 2,412 mothers (42% black, 27% white, 26% Hispanic) showed no significant effects of race on the subjective report of maternal stress (Sampson et al., 2015). These results do not appear to support the family stress model of economic hardship.

In contrast to the studies mentioned above, there is also strong evidence that parenting stress is experienced differently according to race. Nomaguchi and House (2013) analyzed national data from over 11,000 mothers and found that U.S.-born Black mothers, foreign-born Hispanic mothers, and foreign-born Asian mothers reported higher levels of parenting stress than White mothers. American Indian mothers were the only racial group that reported lower parenting stress levels than White mothers. These differences were largely explained by factors related to structural disadvantages such as higher proportions of younger parents, lower family income, more single parents, and greater number of children among racial minority parents. For foreign-born mothers, limited English proficiency was an additional contributing factor (Nomaguchi & House, 2013).

Three additional studies have also found that White parents report lower parenting stress. Franco, Pottick, and Huang (2010) found that Black, Hispanic, and Other

(American Indian, Alaska Native, Asian, and Hawaiian) parents of children 3 years of age and younger reported higher parenting stress than White parents (n=2,865). In another study, results from a large sample (n=86,895) of mothers and fathers indicated that the percentage of racial minority parents reporting high levels of parenting stress was two to three times greater than the percentage of White parents reporting high levels of parenting stress (Raphael, Zhang, Liu, & Giardino, 2010). White parents in this study reported overall lower levels of parenting stress even when controlling for socioeconomic factors.

Nam, Wikoff, and Sherradan most recently examined racial disparities in parenting stress (2015) among a sample of 2,626 new mothers in the Midwest U.S. Parenting stress ranged in severity with Hispanic mothers reporting the highest levels, followed by Black mothers, and then American Indian mothers, with White mothers reporting the lowest levels. Differences between groups were all significant with the exception of White compared to American Indian mothers. The researchers concluded, based on further analyses, that social supports and maternal depression explained significant parts of these racial differences in parenting stress.

A search of the professional literature in psychology, sociology, and social work returned no results for empirical research on race and parenting stress among sexual minority parents. Racial minorities within this population are of particular interest in that statistics indicate that there are proportionately more sexual minority couples of color raising children than White sexual minority couples (Cianciotto, 2005; Dang & Frazer, 2007). Data from the 2000 U.S. Census indicates that same-sex households with two Black partners had lower annual income levels than those with one Black partner and

those with two White partners (Campbell & Kaufmann, 2006). Cianciotto (2005) reported similar findings regarding Hispanic same-sex couples. These economic differences by race, which theory suggests could influence parenting stress (Gupta, 2007) in same-sex households, suggest that more information is needed on the variables of race and parenting stress for sexual minority parents.

Collectively, the empirical findings on non-White sexual minority parents and on the connection between race and parenting stress suggest two things. First, environmental factors such as social support and economic resources are likely an important factor in explaining racial differences in the experience of parenting stress. This supports the rationale for examining race and its influence on parenting stress among sexual minority parents who are also racial minorities. Second, the evidence supporting higher levels of parenting stress experienced by racial minorities compared to Whites combined with economic data indicating a higher proportion of racial minority same-sex couples living at an economic disadvantage compared to White same-sex couples presents a reasonable argument that race may play a role in the experience of parenting stress among sexual minority parents. Additional information on this connection can help broaden understanding and inform future research efforts regarding race and parenting stress for this parent population. The current study will add to knowledge in this area.

Legal Custody Status and Parenting Stress

What's in a name? There is a symbolism of family identity that comes with legally recognized labels regarding the relationships between caregiving adults and children. The presence or absence of legal custody relationships and its associations with parental identity affect all sexual minority parents in a heterosexist world which questions

both the legal and social right of non-heterosexual parenthood. Sexual minority individuals who are parenting children they have not given birth to are at a particular disadvantage. Brown and Perlesz (2008) identified 45 terms used in the professional literature to characterize the relationship of non-biological sexual minority parents to their children. *Co-mother, social mother, other mother, second mother, stepfather, non-birth parent, co-parent, non-biological parent* are examples of the varied labels that attempt to describe these parents who frequently lack a legal relationship with children for whom they are caring. The U.S. Supreme Court's recent ruling providing marriage equality for sexual minority individuals (*Obergefell v. Hodge*, 2015) opens up new possibilities for the pursuit of legal parenthood for non-traditional parents; however, more information is needed on the impact of legal custody status on the parenting experience for sexual minority parents.

Theory Regarding Custody Status and Parenting for Sexual Minority Parents

Sexual minority parents are forming families and raising children outside the traditional notions prescribed by heterosexist ideology. Seidman (2004) wrote about heterosexual dominance as the advantages and superiority assigned to heterosexuality in cultural, social, and legal domains. He suggested that the notion of the closet has been supplanted by the recognition of non-heterosexual people as members of a sexual minority amidst the glorification of heterosexual dominance. Heterosexual ideology traditionally privileges biological parents. Seidman's ideas suggest that this institutional and interrelational preference creates a sense of marginalization for sexual minority parents who share legal custody with a (socially preferred) heterosexual parent or who lack a biological relationship with their child(ren).

Legal custody status refers to the legal relationship between an adult and a child. It encompasses legal rights and responsibilities; however, there are also issues of identity in the parental role intertwined with the legal implications. Galvin (2006) described families as discourse dependent, meaning that the identity of the family relies on the communication among members. He pointed out that, "though all families engage in discourse-driven identity building, less traditionally formed families are more discourse dependent, engaging in discursive processes to manage and maintain identity," (p. 3). Discussion *about* the family *among* the family (and others) is more important for less traditionally formed families seeking validation of their status as family units. Therefore, the labels, whether self-declared or dictated by legal and societal institutions, that are assigned to sexual minority people involved in raising children have implications regarding their conceptualizations of themselves as parents.

Empirical Research on Custody Status and Parenting for Sexual Minority Parents

Custody concerns. Existing research on custody status and sexual minority parents has been qualitative. Ryan and Berkowitz (2009) used in-depth interviews with 22 gay fathers and 18 lesbian birth mothers to explore the sexual minority parenting experience around mothering/fathering, pathways to parenthood, and decision-making regarding family formation. Themes of biological and heterosexual privilege within institutions (such as adoption agencies, courts, and fertility clinics) were revealed. Some parents described a desire for biological children driven by the internalization of inherent value placed upon this experience. Many respondents in partnerships discussed pursuing even the appearance of biological similarity between children and non-biologically related parents. For example some white biological mothers with partners of color

selected seminal donors of the same race as their partner in order to more strongly connect the partner and child. Respondents further indicated that fear of losing custody because of sexual orientation and/or lack of a legal relationship was an important reason in the choice to seek biological (i.e., donor insemination for women and surrogacy for men) rather than adoptive parenthood (Ryan & Berkowitz, 2009).

Similar fears regarding loss of custody due to the absence of a biological relationship with children were reported in research with 16 Israeli lesbian mothers conducted by Ben-Ari and Livni (2006). In fact, three out of the four non-biological mothers in their study expressed a desire to become biological parents themselves. In a study of ten gay and lesbian parents, Lassiter et al. (2006) found that for many respondents the fear of losing custody of their children served as an obstacle to decision-making regarding coming out. Morris et al. (2002) reported that 30 percent of lesbian and bisexual mothers in a national study (n = 2,431) indicated they had been threatened with loss of custody of their children. The majority of lesbian mother participants in a study by Levy (1992) identified worry about custody issues as a significant source of daily stress. It is interesting to note that 30 out of the 31 participants in Levy's study were co-parenting with a male from a previous heterosexual relationship.

Resolving dual identities. Empirical findings suggest that parenting as a sexual minority presents a conflict of identities (Barret & Robinson, 2000; Berkowitz & Marsiglio, 2007; Biblarz & Savci, 2010; Crosbie-Burnett & Helmbrecht, 1993; Donaldson, 2000; Hequembourg & Farrell, 1999; Perlesz & McNair, 2004; Rohrbaugh, 1989). The conflicting dualities of identity as both parents and sexual minorities are a challenge both for sexual minority individuals considering parenthood and for those

"coming out" of heterosexual relationships with children. The lack of consistent and uniform legal recognition of relationships between non-biological sexual minority parents and their children complicates this struggle within parental identity.

In a qualitative study of nine lesbian mothers, Hequembourg and Farrell (1999) found through open-ended interviews that respondents experienced incompatibility between their marginalized group identity as lesbians and their mainstream identity as mothers. Studies focusing on gay men have revealed that some gay fathers reported giving up their gay lifestyles in order to live a more "normal" life in mainstream society (Barret & Robinson, 2000; Mallon, 2004). Hequembourg and Farrell's (1999) sample of women, which consisted primarily of lesbians who became parents after coming out, reported that the legal status that comes with second-parent adoption (a process that is limited, expensive, and varies among states) assisted lesbian partners of biological and adoptive mothers in bridging the gap between their marginal lesbian identity and their mainstream identity as mother to their partners' children. Some mothers reported employing strategies that allow the non-biological mother to stress her mainstream identity as mother and deemphasize her lesbian identity in order to feel validated by society as an adequate parent (Hequembourg & Farrell, 1999).

Qualitative data from gay fathers and prospective gay fathers has indicated how negative stereotypes and heterosexist myths regarding sexual minorities as parents (such as "Gay men are pedophiles" or "Gay people want to raise gay children") can be internalized and ultimately integrated into self-concept (Berkowitz & Marsiglio, 2007). It is not uncommon for heterosexual parents to have moments when they question their own competency or ability in the parental role; however, such moments of insecurity for

sexual minority parents are further exacerbated by the many negative messages regarding a parental identity that these parents often encounter.

Challenges for co-parents. Sexual minority stepfamilies can be defined as parents with children from a heterosexual relationship who are co-parenting within a current sexual minority partnership (Lynch & Murray, 2000). Co-parents in these and other sexual minority partnerships (e.g., partner to a woman who is a biological mother through donor insemination or a previous heterosexual relationship or partner to a man who is a biological or adoptive father through surrogate birth or a previous heterosexual relationship) face additional challenges as parents and sexual minorities due to a lack of legal status as parent in many cases. The legal system's reluctance to acknowledge two same-sex parents presents an opposition to a co-parent's identity as a mother or father. Respondents in several studies (Donaldson, 2000; Perlesz & McNair, 2004; Rohrbaugh, 1989; Ryan & Berkowitz, 2009) have expressed frustration with questions of "who is the real mother/father?" The lack of consistent terminology that is universally understood in referring to co-parents is yet another indicator of the confusion between identity as sexual minority partner and identity as a non-biological parent to a child (Hequembourg & Farrell, 1999; Perlesz & McNair, 2004).

Crosbie-Burnett and Helmbrecht (1993) studied levels of family happiness in 48 gay male stepfamilies. Results showed that a positive relationship with the stepfather and his inclusion in family dynamics were most highly correlated with happiness in family life for biological fathers, stepfathers, and adolescent children. Later research revealed that lesbian stepmothers' identity as parents was threatened by the reluctance of stepmothers' extended families in embracing grandchildren that are not legally tied to the

stepmother (Hequembourg, 2004; Hequembourg & Farrell, 1999). Such results suggest that having a visible identity as a parent is important for sexual minority individuals who are parenting the children of their partners.

Research described earlier in this section has demonstrated the perceived power of a biological relationship between parent and child (Ben-Ari & Livni, 2006; Lassiter et al., 2006; Levy, 1992; Ryan & Berkowitz, 2009). This line of research suggests that biological and non-biological sexual minority parents may experience potential conflict between their sexual minority and parental identities differently. Further, such conflict would occur within the dynamic processes that characterize the development of both identity types. Negotiating the complicated interaction of these variables is challenging even in the context of a biological relationship between parent and child and is likely even more challenging when the parent-child relationship is less clearly defined legally and/or socially, as is often the case for sexual minority co-parents (Brown & Perlesz, 2008).

Theory Regarding Custody Status and Parenting Stress for Sexual Minority Parents

Parenting stress has been conceptualized as the balance of sense of competence and confidence in the role of parent with challenges created by this role (Berry & Jones, 1995). Sexual minority parents are raising children in a heterosexist society that has historically questioned the parenting viability and competence of this group as a whole based on sexual orientation (Herek, 2007; Mezey, 2015). Empirical findings suggest that custody concerns are a common theme for sexual minority parents and are related to parental identity. Therefore, it is reasonable to hypothesize that legal custody status could be related to parenting stress for this parent population.

Empirical Research on Custody Status and Parenting Stress for Sexual Minority Parents

As presented above, legal custody status has been shown to have unique implications in the experience of parenting for sexual minority parents. A search of the professional literature was conducted to identify studies looking at custody status and parenting stress for this parent population. No empirical studies were found examining these two variables. The proposed study may add to professional knowledge regarding these variables by investigating the relationship between legal custody status and parenting stress for sexual minority parents.

Timing of Coming Out Relative to Becoming a Parent and Parenting Stress

Theoretical Background on the Coming Out Process and Becoming a Parent

Eli Coleman (1982) proposed a developmental model for the coming out process for sexual minority individuals. His model included five stages that he intended as a fluid and flexible model representing the progression of embracing a sexual minority identity and revealing that to others. The *pre-coming out stage* involves a conscious or unconscious recognition of being different, particularly with regards to heterosexual norms such as heterosexual marriage and traditional child rearing. The *coming out stage* begins as individuals acknowledge same-sex feelings although these attractions may not be acted upon or labeled as such. Often some degree of external validation begins to be sought as part of this stage. The *exploration stage* is characterized by experimenting with both social and sexual same-sex relationships. Coleman pointed out that societal encouragement towards heterosexuality can delay the exploration inherent to this stage. The fourth stage is *first relationships*, in which individuals move towards a need for intimacy and seek more committed same-sex relationships. If first relationships begin

while issues from earlier stages are not fully resolved, difficulty can occur. The final stage is *integration*. During this stage individuals reconcile their outward and inward identities into an integrated self-concept. According to Coleman, not all individuals reach or resolve this stage.

Becoming a parent and childrearing has traditionally been conceptualized as an integral aspect of heterosexual identity. Sexual minority culture does not share this historical value placed on the raising of children (Dew & Myers, 2000). Theoretical depictions of the coming out process do not touch on the issues of parenting and family formation (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Troiden, 1989). Therefore, for sexual minority people who are also parents, the role and identity of parent is transposed somewhere within the development of a sexual minority identity. Sexual minority parents may have become parents within the context of a heterosexual relationship that occurred before same-sex feelings were acknowledged, or perhaps amidst an acknowledgement but lack of acceptance of same-sex attractions, or after or during the integration of a sexual minority identity. The timing of an individual's coming out relative to the time at which they became a parent could therefore play a role in the parenting experience.

Empirical Research on Timing of Coming Out and Parenting

In considering the population of sexual minorities who are also parents, two general groups become evident: those who became parents before coming out as a sexual minority, and those who became parents after coming out. Some research suggests that the experience of sexual minority parents who had children prior to coming out as a sexual minority differs in some ways from the experience of those who decided to become parents after coming out (Biblarz & Savci, 2010; Dunne, 1987; Lynch & Murray,

2000; Mallon, 2004; Moore & Stambolis-Ruhstorfer, 2013; Morris et al., 2002). Such differences have been characterized in studies focusing on gay fathers (Dunne, 1987; Mallon, 2004), lesbian mothers (Morris et al., 2002; Wall, 2011), and both gay and lesbian parents co-parenting with same-sex partners (Henehan et al., 2007; Lynch & Murray, 2000).

Lynch and Murray (2000) examined a group of gay and lesbian parents who had children before coming out. These researchers looked at gay and lesbian stepfamilies, which they defined as families comprised of one parent with children from a previous heterosexual relationship who is co-parenting within a current sexual minority partnership. Lynch and Murray postulated that these parents are faced with the challenge of building a blended family and negotiating the (frequently incomplete) coming out process at the same time. Researchers investigated issues related to coming out for 23 gay and lesbian custodial stepfamilies (6 male and 17 female families) through open-ended interviews. Results confirmed the hypothesis that existing theoretical models of coming out (e.g., Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Troiden, 1989) are limited in their applicability to the experience of gay and lesbian stepfamilies. The researchers concluded that decision-making processes related to outness in stepfamilies are (a) group, rather than individual processes, and (b) dictated primarily by the children's level of comfort. Outness was characterized as fluid and adjustable in accommodating the developmental or situational needs of children (Lynch & Murray, 2000).

Morris et al. (2002) were the first to quantitatively compare lesbian mothers who came out before having children with those who came out after having children. Lesbian non-mothers served as an additional comparison group. A volunteer sample of 2,431

lesbian and bisexual women completed the Lesbian Wellness Survey, an instrument designed by the researchers to investigate interrelationships between various factors of the lesbian experience, such as identity, community involvement, outness, parenting variables, hate crimes, and use of mental health services. Data was obtained from 10,000 questionnaires sent to gay, lesbian, and feminist groups, organizations, bookstores, and social networks (24% response rate).

Results indicated (Morris et al., 2002) that lesbians and bisexuals who had children before coming out (the "before" group) reported reaching various milestones in the coming out process at an average of 7-12 years later than lesbians and bisexuals who became parents after coming out (the "after" group). A smaller percentage of the "before" group (38%) reported a history of verbal and physical attacks related to sexual orientation than did the "after" group (55%), perhaps indicating that "before" parents are more comfortable passing as heterosexuals and therefore attract less discriminatory attention than "after" parents. More mothers in the "before" group than the "after" group reported utilizing counseling to help with the coming out process (42% vs. 24%). All groups reported a similar level of outness to friends and family however, members of the both the "before" and "after" groups reported being less out to the general sexual minority community than non-mothers, indicating that lesbian and bisexual parents may feel less acceptance from the sexual minority community than non-mothers. These findings are reinforced by the large, relatively diverse (75% white, 25% minority), and geographically representative (surveys obtained from all 50 states) sample obtained in the study.

Henehan et al. (2007) explored factors that distinguish gay men and lesbians who are parents from those who are not and also from heterosexual parents and nonparents.

Variables included demographics, social support, and timing of milestones in the coming out process as related to disclosure status regarding sexual orientation. Results showed that among sexual minority participants, parents reported greater outness than nonparents overall. In addition, parents reported being significantly older than nonparents when they first experienced same-sex attraction, when they first considered having a non-heterosexual identity, when they first accepted a non-heterosexual identity, when they first came out to another person, when they first had a same-sex sexual encounter, and when they first entered a same-sex romantic relationship. The researchers also specifically compared lesbians who had children before coming out ("before" group) with those who had children after coming out ("after" group). Findings replicated those reported by Morris et al. (2002) in that "before" group mothers indicated significantly older ages than "after" group mothers for each of the milestone variables above ($p < .01$ for all milestones).

The results found by Morris et al. (2002) and Henehan et al. (2007) imply that sexual minority parents may have different experiences and needs based on the timing of becoming parents relative to coming out. Parents who had children before coming out may benefit from more assistance in negotiating the coming out process and may need more help connecting with the sexual minority community, while parents who had children after coming out may need more support and empowerment in coping with discrimination and heterosexism. The findings from these studies suggest that parenting young children may delay the coming out process for sexual minority parents coming out of heterosexual relationships.

Mallon (2004) published a quantitative study of 20 gay fathers of non-biological children. He reported that these dads who became parents after coming out found themselves interacting with the heterosexual world to a much larger degree after having children. Fathers noted that parenting required constant "outing" as they encountered new and different settings in caring for their children. Eighty-five percent of respondents rated themselves at a 9 on a scale of 1 to 10 where 1 indicated being the most closeted and 10 being the most out. It is notable that all of the men in this study became parents a significant number of years after coming out and had a mean age of 45 years (Mallon, 2004).

Lesbian mothers in another study reported that becoming a parent after already being out allowed them to involve more people from their support networks in the decision-making process to become parents (Perlesz & McNair, 2004). Donaldson (2000) interviewed nine lesbians who had children after coming out (mean age = 50). Respondents commented on the benefits of having children after coming out in that conflicts and challenges related to parenting, such as coping with their children's adolescence, did not compete with the parents' own challenge of coming out as a lesbian. These results echo the conclusions of other studies (Lynch & Murray, 2000; Morris et al., 2002) suggesting that needs other than the resolution of coming out issues may take the forefront in work with sexual minority parents who lived out prior to having children.

Theoretical Background on Timing of Coming Out and Parenting Stress

Existing theoretical models (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Troiden, 1989) regarding the coming out process for sexual minority individuals depict a series of stages through which individuals progress as they resolve various issues related to living within

a sexual minority identity. These models were influenced by the developmental theory of Erik Erikson (1963), which portrayed human development in a similar stage design, and which posits that individuals are challenged to resolve varying crises inherent in each stage as they grow and develop. As in Erikson's theory, sexual identity development models outline different challenges that are the focus of each stage in the progression of sexual minority identity development. Resolving these challenges brings with it milestones in the process of coming out. For sexual minority parents, their position within the framework of the coming out process coincides with the transition to and tasks of parenting. Herek (2007) coined the term heterosexism to denote the intrinsic bias towards the majority culture of heterosexuality that manifests in social norms and expectations. Becoming a parent has been an important milestone within the heterosexual culture for centuries. The specific challenges based on disclosure status faced by sexual minority individuals who are forming families and raising children within a heterosexist context have the potential to affect the parenting experience overall.

Empirical Research on Timing of Coming Out and Parenting Stress

The professional literature base regarding sexual minority parents and coming out and sexual minority parents and parenting stress has grown in recent years. The relevant research regarding sexual minority parents and parenting stress was discussed earlier in this chapter, and the findings on sexual minority parents and outness will be presented in the next section. Differences have been found in the experiences of sexual minority parents who had children before coming out as compared to those who lived out as a sexual minority prior to becoming parents. However, no studies were found that have examined the relation between the timing of parents' coming out and parenting stress.

The current study will attempt to fill this gap by exploring the connection between time of coming out and parenting stress for sexual minority parents.

Outness and Parenting Stress

The process of coming out for sexual minority individuals involves two aspects. Individuals must first recognize same-sex feelings and resolve the meanings and implications of this acknowledgment within identity and self-concept. Second, coming out involves disclosing this identity to others. Both aspects represent the challenge to cultural norms of heterosexism that is inherent in the adoption of a sexual minority identity (Bohan, 1996).

Theoretical Background on the Coming Out Process

Coming out is conceptualized as a key component within the process of sexual identity development for sexual minority individuals. The writings of Cass (1979), Troiden (1989), and Coleman (1982) form the backbone of theory with regards to sexual minority identity development. Although these three theorists each have their own model of the specific stages that individuals experience in the development of a sexual minority identity, the models share a common theme of progression. Movement ranges from realizing a sense of being "different" in youth, through stages of confusion and exploration in adolescence and young adulthood, into stages of varying levels of identification with a sexual minority identity, and finally reaching an eventual integration of sexual minority identity into personhood as a whole. The process of coming out primarily occurs within the stages of development characterized by confusion, exploration, and early identification. These models are based on a primarily linear framework, suggesting that full emotional and social maturity comes with a healthy

identification as a sexual minority coupled with an active sense of belonging and interaction within the larger sexual minority community (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Troiden, 1989).

Empirical Findings Regarding Outness

Connections between outness and positive outcomes for LGBT people have been demonstrated in the literature, although the majority of studies are correlational. Greater outness has been associated with higher relationship satisfaction (Knoble & Linville, 2012; Tornello & Patterson, 2012) and lower relationship strain (Frost & Meyer, 2009) in same-sex partnerships, even after controlling for personality traits (Clausell & Roisman, 2009). Several studies have reported associations between greater outness and psychological well being (Halpin & Allen, 2004; Morris, Waldo, & Rothblum, 2001), including lower reports of depressive symptoms (Mohr & Fassinger, 2003) and greater positive affect (Clausell & Roisman, 2009; Halpin & Allen, 2004). In one study this connection was not supported (Balsam & Mohr, 2007). Additionally, increased connection to the larger sexual minority community and other social support systems has been reported (Balsam & Mohr, 2007; Bonet et al., 2007; Chow & Cheng, 2010; Morris et al., 2001; Tornello & Patterson, 2012). Support has also been found for the conceptualization of outness as a strategic process in the management of a sexual minority identity (Knoble & Linville, 2012; Orne, 2011). Outness has also been significantly related to internalized homophobia (Frost & Meyer, 2009).

Theoretical Background on Outness and Parenting

Meyer's (2003) minority stress model conceptualizes outness as a minority stressor that sexual minority individuals face in conjunction with an identity that is

outside of heterosexual norms. According to this theory, outness can be protective in that it can be manipulated to some extent based on the situational circumstances of the moment. Bohan (1996) suggests that disclosure of sexual orientation can be driven by multiple reasons. *Therapeutic disclosure* portrays coming out as a tactic for solidifying self-esteem and pursuing support in coping with stigmatization. *Problem-solving disclosure* helps address problems of circumstance such as questions regarding romantic partners or living arrangements. *Preventative disclosure* is coming out that serves to head off potential problems that may arise, such as negative comments or behavior when disclosure occurs later on in a social relationship (Bohan, 1996). These conceptualizations of coming out can be useful in the consideration of sexual minority parents as they wrestle with issues of both self-acceptance and disclosure to others in the many realms of social interaction that come with the parenting role.

Empirical Research Related to Outness and Parenting

The process of coming out has been conceptualized to encompass two dimensions within the development of a sexual minority identity (Bohan, 1996). First, individuals must come to terms within themselves with the acceptance of an identity as a sexual minority. Second, coming out also includes disclosing this identity to others, and in particular, non-gay others (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Meyer, 2003). The following section examines the professional literature regarding these two aspects of outness for sexual minority parents.

Self acceptance. The desire to become a parent brings with it many questions for both sexual minority and heterosexual individuals. Parenting for sexual minority people, however, can raise questions regarding identification with one's sexual orientation, an

aspect of the process from which heterosexuals are excused. Evidence that parents who had children before coming out may struggle longer in achieving self-acceptance and greater outness has already been presented (Morris et al., 2002). Parents who had children after coming out may find that their sense of self-acceptance within a gay identity can be threatened by the choice to parent. In an early study by Rohrbaugh (1989), one parent described that her "image of herself as a mature, self-accepting lesbian was disturbed and had to be reconstructed," (p.52). Levy later noted (1992) that issues of internalized homophobia may surface as the lesbian parent struggles with identity development. Her interviews with lesbian mothers revealed that respondents believed that being out as a lesbian and parenting at the same time required a shift in self-concept. These findings have been supported by more recent research as well (Glazer, 2014; Lassiter et al., 2006).

Embracing a sexual minority identity through coming out can involve a rejection or adaptation of traditional norms for gender socialization and family formation dictated by the heterosexual mainstream majority. Many examples of the varied ways in which sexual minorities challenge traditional notions of masculinity and femininity are readily apparent. Sexual minority parents themselves likely grew up in familial and societal contexts that were informed by heterosexist ideology. Consistent with this assumption, gay fathers and prospective fathers have reported stress related to the internalization of gender identity stereotypes (Berkowitz & Marsiglio, 2007). Respondents in one study described worries over being able to successfully provide "normal" gender socialization for their children or prospective children. These men also reported that giving up the notion of having children at all was involved in their initial development of a gay identity (Berkowitz & Marsiglio, 2007). The experience of giving up and even mourning the

possibility of being a parent has been echoed in other work with gay fathers (Mallon, 2004) and lesbian mothers (Glazer, 2014). The level to which sexual minority parents have attained self-acceptance regarding their own gender identity and sexual orientation within the process of coming out may affect their experience of parenting (Glazer, 2014).

Lassiter et al. (2006) conducted semi-structured interviews with ten gay and lesbian parents in an investigation of empowerment needs for these parents and found that parents who had children from previous heterosexual relationships reported the importance of overcoming internalized negative messages regarding themselves as non-heterosexual parents and individuals. Those parents in the study who were out prior to having children all commented on the significance of being secure in their sexual minority identities before they became parents (Lassiter et al., 2006). Parents have reported concealing their sexual orientation after becoming parents because of the discrimination commonly displayed by adoption agencies, social services, and healthcare systems (Glazer, 2014; McNair et al., 2008; Rohrbaugh, 1989; Ryan & Berkowitz, 2009). Such hiding may arouse painful emotions regarding outness as a sexual minority (Barret & Robinson, 2000). Due to the expense of adoption and donor insemination and potential heterosexist biases of clinics, lesbians sometimes choose to seek conception through sexual intercourse (Puckett et al., 2011; Ryan & Berkowitz, 2009). This choice may raise incongruences with lesbian identity, particularly if conception takes repeated attempts to occur (Glazer, 2014; Rohrbaugh, 1989).

There is some literature that implies that threats to the acceptance of self within a sexual minority identity are not always consciously perceived by sexual minority parents (Bos et al., 2004). Some findings have indicated that sexual minority parents may tend to

minimize their experience of heterosexism and other negative repercussions related to being out as a parent (Donaldson, 2000; Litovich & Langhout, 2004) in an attempt to protect their sexual minority identity. Levy (1992) found that the 31 lesbian mothers in her study did not see themselves as victims of heterosexism. They reported high levels of self-esteem and an average locus of control (between external and internal) on self-report instruments. Levy concluded that the negative effects of parenting as a sexual minority were mediated by coping resources that support lesbian identity and challenge societal norms. Similar conclusions were also reported for lesbian mothers by Litovich and Langhout (2004). A sample of 27 strongly lesbian-identified mothers reported that they became more open about their lesbianism after having children (Dundas & Kaufman, 2000), indicating that self-acceptance of sexual minority identity may have been strengthened after they began parenting.

Disclosure to others. According to Cass (1979), in addition to developing a sense of self-acceptance within a sexual minority identity, individuals must also begin the process of disclosing that identity to others in their lives. Gay and lesbian parents have reported greater levels of disclosure to others than their nonparent counterparts (Henehan, Rothblum, Solomon, & Balsam, 2007). Coming out is not an all or nothing occurrence (Barret & Robinson, 2000; Lynch & Murray, 2000). Issues related to outness for parents are connected to a range of people and systems including but not limited to: immediate and extended family, children's peers, children's friends' parents, complete strangers, schools, and healthcare providers (Lassiter et al., 2006; Mohr & Fassinger, 2000). Instead of asking parents whether or not they are out, a more appropriate question is "out to whom?"

Several studies have touched on the dynamics surrounding coming out to one's children. Gay fathers have emphasized the importance of open communication regarding questions about family structure and the methods through which children came into the family (Mallon, 2004). Lesbian mothers have stressed that openly discussing with their children their status as a lesbian family was helpful in coping with being out (Breshears, 2011; Levy, 1992). Being able to discuss sexual orientation openly with children may empower parents to prepare children for potential homophobic messages (Breshears, 2011; Dew & Myers, 2000). Another benefit reported by lesbian parents is the opportunity to teach children pride in being different (Breshears, 2011; Perlesz & McNair, 2004). Both lesbian and gay parents have also articulated the flip side of these benefits, expressing the difficult message being conveyed to children: there is nothing wrong with what we are, but at the same time many people think there is (Breshears, 2011; Lynch & Murray, 2000).

Coming out to children can be an especially difficult struggle for parents who have lived a heterosexual life prior to coming out. Gay fathers and lesbian mothers with children from previous heterosexual relationships have reported feeling fearful that their children would reject or lose respect for them after coming out (Dunne, 1987; Lynch & Murray, 2000). These fears were sometimes countered by the equal or greater fear of accidental disclosure (Dunne, 1987). "Before" parents have also expressed that coming out to their children resulted in requests from children that parents sleep in separate rooms, refrain from physical affection, and/or hide their sexual orientation from children's friends (Lynch & Murray, 2000). Murray and McClintock extended this notion, hypothesizing that children would experience *negative* effects from growing up

with a closeted parent. However, their study of 36 children who discovered a parent's sexual minority status at an average age of 19 revealed no difference in the trait anxiety or self-esteem of participants as compared to children of heterosexual parents (Murray & McClintock, 2005).

Sexual minority parents sometimes encounter added difficulties associated with outness in dealing with their families of origin (Lassiter et al., 2006; Lynch & Murray, 2000; Mallon, 2004). Those who are not out to their families may experience complications in co-parenting relationships if a partner's identity as a parent cannot be integrated into the larger family system (Rohrbaugh, 1989). Some parents who are out to their families may, at best, be frustrated by a superficial acceptance that is far from the affirmation that they desire, need, and deserve (Lynch & Murray, 2000), and at worst, experience a total lack of acceptance that many study respondents have noted as an ongoing source of disappointment and sadness in their lives (Gartrell et al., 2000; Perlesz & McNair, 2004). In contrast, respondents in one study reported a mix of reactions from their families of origin regarding their decision to become parents with the majority stating that they received positive support. Some reported that their relationships with their own parents were strengthened by having a child (Mallon, 2004).

Sexual minority parents face daily the challenge of balancing outness with involvement in the wide range of community contacts required in the parenting process. Four areas of relevance regarding outness in the community for parents are healthcare systems, their children's school(s) or daycares, religious communities, and the general public. Interviews with samples of lesbian, gay, and transgender parents revealed frequent negative experiences within the healthcare system, ranging from disapproving

attitudes from providers and staff when more out to feeling invisible as sexual minority parents when less out (Chapman et al., 2012; McNair et al., 2008). With regards to school environments, parents may be concerned about the consequences of coming out to classmates' parents (Byard et al., 2013); however, Goldberg and Smith (2014) found that perceived exclusion by other parents, rather than sexual minority parents' outness, was related to school involvement for same-sex adoptive parents of 5-year-olds.

Respondents in several studies (Bos et al., 2007; Gartrell et al., 2000; Lassiter et al., 2006; Mallon, 2004; Perlesz & McNair, 2004) have reported frustration from repeatedly having to explain their family structure to questioning (both harmless and judgmental) others in general public arenas. Religious involvement or spirituality and receiving respect regarding sexual orientation from social and community systems was described as a source of empowerment and strength, although for many, finding accepting environments was a struggle (Breshears, 2011; Lassiter et al., 2006). Level of outness affects parents' access to resources such as these.

Inherent in the process of negotiating desired level of outness for sexual minority parents is the issue of stigma management as it applies to both themselves and their children. Qualitative data from 13 lesbian mothers in same-sex partnerships in Nebraska revealed that the more parents are out, the more they, and potentially their children, are vulnerable to harmful heterosexist and homophobic reactions from the general public (Breshears, 2011). Breshears (2011) interviewed these lesbians on their communication with children regarding discussion of family status with outsiders. Respondents reported themes of having their family identity questioned or condemned in interactions with people outside the family. Lassiter et al. (2006) investigated issues of empowerment for

gay and lesbian parents and found themes of parents preparing children to handle prejudice, feeling challenged to stand up as role models for children, and confronting discrimination. Parents in this study described the emotional pain of dealing with homophobic stigmatization, but also expressed a sense of power gained from being forced to assert one's rights as a person and a parent (Lassiter et al., 2006).

In an in depth study of gay fathers parenting non-biological children (Mallon, 2004), respondents commented on the challenge of finding a balance between parents' personal right to privacy and their need to model pride and openness for their children. Many respondents spoke of the complexity surrounding the decision to be out to others as a parent, indicating that they face this choice repeatedly. Although these fathers knew they had the option of remaining closeted, they noted that coming out earlier often posed less problems later on (Mallon, 2004). Gartrell et al. (2000) conducted research with 84 lesbian families. Data from open-ended interviews revealed fear and uncertainty in coming out to new people due to the unpredictable nature of others' reactions, but also worse emotional consequences from portraying any sense of shame to children regarding family identity. Themes of parents preparing children to successfully manage stigma have been reinforced in multiple studies over time (Breshears, 2011; Gartrell et al., 2000; Lassiter et al., 2006; Mallon, 2004).

Additional study of how parents manage the consequences of being out for their children explored the extent to which lesbian families experience homophobia as a result of being out in a heterosexist society (Litovich & Langhout, 2004). In interviews with seven lesbian mothers and six of their children, families described a process of negotiating a balance between disclosure and discrimination. Even though participants

shared specific details of coping with multiple instances of homophobia from others, they tended to minimize overall their experience of heterosexism and other negative repercussions related to being out. This effect was also noted in other studies (Bos et al., 2004; Donaldson, 2000). Other findings, however, do provide support that outness brings with it exposure to heterosexism and stigmatization. In a study of U. S. children with lesbian parents, 37.5% of boys and 46% of girls indicated that they had experienced homophobia (Bos, Gartrell, van Balen, Peyser, & Sandfort, 2008). Among lesbian mothers in another U. S. study, 25% reported that their children had experienced negative consequences and rejection from others due to being parented within a lesbian family (Morris et al., 2002). In another study comprised of 20 lesbian families in Australia, mothers reported that parenthood brought with it a lack of safety surrounding sexual orientation that had not been experienced before having children in that they felt more exposed to potential stigmatization (McNair et al., 2008).

Empirical work related to outness and parenting supports the idea that negotiating outness for self and family brings with it challenges for sexual minority parents above and beyond those experienced by sexual minority nonparents coping with coming out. Being a parent creates a context in which coming out for self and family can be revisited, re-visioned, and re-experienced within the tasks of everyday life as a parent, and in which the balance between disclosure and discrimination affects not only self, but children as well. The current study will add to the literature in this area by exploring the relationship of outness and stress related to parenting for sexual minority parents.

Theoretical Background Related to Coming Out and Parenting Stress

It has been noted that gay and lesbian parents are out to a greater degree than their

non-parent counterparts (Henehan et al., 2007). Also, being a parent requires more interaction with the heterosexual world (Mallon, 2004; Tornello & Patterson, 2012) and thus to some degree forces increased outness (Ben-Ari & Livni, 2006). Theory suggests that the coming out process is a necessary step to establishing a healthy identity both within and outside of the sexual minority community (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Meyer, 2003). Empirical research indicates an association between greater outness and less psychological stressors for both parents and nonparents. The concept of parenting stress encompasses parents' perceived sense of burden and competence in the parent role (Berry & Jones, 1995). Meyer (2003) conceptualizes outness as a minority stressor that can be a protective factor and is often a function of situational circumstances. Meyer further describes community involvement as an adaptive force in coping with the stress of managing disclosure of minority status. Taken in conjunction, these theoretical notions suggest that, for sexual minority parents, the experience of parenting stress may be associated with degree of outness.

Empirical Background Related to Outness and Parenting Stress

Only two studies have examined outness as related to parenting stress (Tornello et al., 2011; Tornello & Patterson, 2012). One other study investigated related concepts with notable results. Goldberg and Smith (2011) assessed symptoms of anxiety and depression in gay and lesbian couples during the first year of adoptive parenthood. These researchers were also interested in perceived stigma connected to a gay or lesbian identity, which they measured as internalized homophobia, or the degree to which sexual minorities personalize derogatory beliefs about stigmatized sexual identities (Meyer, 1995). Results showed that internalized homophobia was a significant predictor of depressive, but not

anxiety, symptoms during the transition to adoptive parenthood (Goldberg & Smith, 2011). This finding suggests that parents who are more uneasy regarding a sexual minority identity may be at greater risk for stress-related concerns.

Tornello and colleagues have explored variables of outness and parenting stress specifically. In one study, gay men who had become fathers in the course of heterosexual relationships ("before" parents) were assessed on several variables including parenting stress and level of outness (Tornello & Patterson, 2012). The researchers were interested in group differences between three different subgroups of this sample population: fathers who had left their heterosexual partnerships and were currently in relationships with men, fathers who had left their heterosexual partnerships and were now single, and fathers who had remained in their heterosexual relationships. Results indicated that those fathers who were still in heterosexual relationships did report being significantly less out regarding their sexual orientation than fathers who had left those relationships; however, parenting stress levels among all the fathers did not differ significantly. The relationship between parenting stress and outness was not reported. Fathers who remained in relationships with women also reported greater need for concealment of their sexual orientation than those who were not in heterosexual relationships. It is possible that pressures to appear heterosexual, or at least not appear homosexual, are more prevalent for gay men who remain in heterosexual relationships (Tornello & Patterson, 2012).

Tornello, Farr, and Patterson (2011) examined predictors of parenting stress for 230 gay fathers of adopted children. Parenting stress, gay identity, outness, social support, and demographic information were assessed. A significant relationship was found between parenting stress and outness ($r = -.18$, $p < .05$), but outness did not

contribute significantly to the variance in parenting stress after controlling for other variables including age and number of children, whether or not children were adopted from foster care, and social support from friends and family. These findings suggested that gay adoptive fathers who tend to be more out tend to report lower parenting stress than fathers who disclose their sexual identity to a lesser extent.

Summary

Established theory acknowledges the significance of the coming out process in the lives of sexual minority individuals. Empirical study of sexual minority parent populations indicates that negotiating the degree to which parents and families are out regarding their sexual minority status is relevant to the process of parenting. There are only a limited amount of published studies reporting on outness for parents, and even less reporting on the relationship between outness and parenting stress. Thus, more information is needed on the association between level of outness and parenting stress for sexual minority parents. The current study attempts to add to the literature in this area.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between parenting stress among sexual minority parents and their gender, race, legal custody status, timing of coming out relative to becoming a parent, and level of outness. This chapter provides a description of participants, data collection procedures, instrumentation, research design, and data analysis plan that were used in this study.

Description of Participants

Participants in the study included a purposive sample of sexual minority parents from several areas of the country recruited via multiple methods described in the following section. Sexual minority individuals who are sharing a home with and contributing to the care of children under the age of 18 were invited to participate in the study. The researcher hoped to extend an invitation to participate to 800-900 parents. A minimum of 175 respondents was necessary to obtain sufficient power to detect effects.

Data Collection Procedures

Sampling Strategies

Because the study was designed to target sexual minority individuals, accessing a representative sample of this population of parents was challenging. As a result of this, random sampling techniques were impractical (Sadler, Lee, Lim, & Fullerton, 2010). Furthermore, sexual orientation is not a characteristic that can be gauged from external

appearances. The discrimination that sexual minority individuals can be potentially exposed to can create an incentive for sexual minority parents to remain hidden (Browne, 2005; Sadler et al., 2010). Therefore, snowball sampling techniques were used in this study to address these challenges.

Snowball sampling strategies are advantageous in situations where the focus is on difficult to reach subgroups with multiple eligibility requirements for participation (i.e., identifying as a sexual minority and being a parent). Disadvantages of snowball methods include the use of non-probability samples and the associated potential for bias in conclusions drawn; however, for this study, the potential gains associated with the use of snowball techniques provided a rationale for reliance upon this method (Browne, 2005; Sadler et al., 2010). Snowball sampling inherently engenders trust through its reliance on social and personal networks, established groups, and word of mouth, and can therefore be useful in accessing more closeted members of a population (Browne, 2005; Sadler et al., 2010). Sadler, Lee, Lim, and Fullerton (2010) recommended utilizing public venues such as health fairs and events aimed at specific groups as well as group email memberships as adaptations of snowball strategies that can be effective in increasing sample size when working with difficult to reach populations.

The current study employed several recruitment strategies to obtain the most representative sample of sexual minority parents possible within practical and financial limitations. The researcher recruited participants by working with cooperating organizations, utilizing social media, advertising in print and online publications, advertising in person at Gay Pride events, and by employing personal and professional contacts.

Cooperating Organizations. The researcher contacted several local and national groups associated with sexual minority families and shared a brief overview of the purpose and scope of the proposed study. Agreements were reached with these groups regarding participant recruitment via group email distribution lists. Examples of cooperating organizations are as follows. Rainbow Families DC is a non-profit organization based in Washington, DC that exists to provide advocacy and resources for sexual minority families. EqualityNC is a non-profit advocacy network in North Carolina that connects sexual minority individuals and allies across the state. Integrity is a national faith-based organization that exists to build community and activism among sexual minorities and straight allies. Eight community organizations focusing on LGBTQ issues distributed invitations to the study through group mailing lists.

Social Media. Through various personal and professional contacts, the researcher obtained the cooperation of several groups and individuals who agreed to post the invitation and link to the study on social media sites such as Facebook. Examples of these groups included an international Facebook group for lesbian and queer mothers and a Facebook group for sexual minority parents at a large, gay-friendly church in Atlanta, GA. Six Facebook groups posted an invitation to the study.

Print and Online Publications. QNotes is a monthly publication produced in North Carolina that covers entertainment, arts, LGBTQ information, and social justice issues within the LGBTQ community in the state. Issues are available online through a membership and in print in major urban areas across the state, such as Charlotte, Greensboro, and Raleigh, NC. An advertisement including an invitation and link to the

study materials was placed in this publication to run concurrently with the email and other group distribution of survey materials.

Recruitment via Gay Pride Events. The researcher attended Gay Pride events in various locations in the Southeastern United States in the fall of 2014 and in summer and fall of 2015 to recruit potential participants. Examples include: Atlanta Black Pride in September 2014, Atlanta Pride in October 2014 (both in Atlanta, GA), and Charlotte Pride in Charlotte, NC in August 2015. A recruitment protocol approved by the UNCC IRB allowed for the collection of email addresses to create a database of parents interested in receiving information about the study via email in the future. Study invitations were sent to 165 email addresses that were collected through this method.

Personal Network Recruitment. Finally, the researcher distributed the study materials via email to personal and professional contacts who are familiar with, part of, or active within the sexual minority community. These individuals were asked to forward the information to appropriate persons within their own social networks. Twenty-five personal email invitations were sent.

Survey Procedures

The researcher created a web-based survey for data collection using the Qualtrics website. Surveys were made available to potential respondents via email and online postings during the month of May 2016. Once approval for the study was gained from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte's Institutional Review Board, the researcher initiated the distribution of emails and online postings containing the study materials. A designated contact person connected with each cooperating group was responsible for distributing the invitation email to the membership of their group. Email contacts

obtained through Gay Pride recruitment, experts in the field, and word of mouth were sent emails using the researcher's university email account. All potential participants were asked to forward the invitation to other appropriate contacts within their personal networks. Participants were asked to submit only one response per household to avoid dependency in the data.

Upon receiving the invitation letter, all potential respondents were directed to the Informed Consent page through the Qualtrics website. Respondents were only able to proceed to the survey if they chose to click on a button indicating consent to participate in the study. No identifying information was requested from participants, as this was not necessary to accomplish the goals of this study and also as anonymity can increase the likelihood of response (Sadler et al., 2010). At the conclusion of the survey, respondents were thanked for their participation and reminded to forward the invitation email to any other appropriate contacts they may have. The survey remained on the website for four weeks. After the first two weeks, a follow up reminder email/post was sent through the same channels outlined above. Both responders and non-responders received the follow up since individual responses were not tracked. At the conclusion of the four-week period, the survey was closed by the researcher.

Instrumentation

The standardized instruments used for this study were the Parental Stress Scale (PSS) and the Outness Inventory. The developers of both instruments gave permission for the measures to be used in electronic form. The web-based survey for the study included a Demographic Survey along with the PSS and Outness Inventory. Following is a

description of each of these components and the accompanying introductory materials for the survey.

Introductory Letter (see Appendix A)

An introductory letter inviting participants to complete the survey was included in the body of the email. This letter explained the purpose of the study, the criteria for participation in the study, and requested the voluntary response of participants who fit the participation criteria. Respondents were assured that their participation was voluntary, anonymous, and confidential. The letter expressed thanks for respondents' anticipated assistance, and a link was provided to connect to the survey.

Informed Consent (see Appendix B)

Prior to beginning the survey, participants viewed an informed consent page. This document presented the purpose of the study, the criteria for participation, the potential risks and benefits associated with participation, and an estimation of time required to complete the survey in full. Efforts to protect the confidentiality of respondents were explained in detail to engender trust and increase the likelihood of participation (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2009). Respondents were made aware that they could exit the survey at any time without penalty. At the conclusion of the informed consent page, participants were directed to either indicate consent to participate by clicking on a button that connected them to the survey itself or to decline to participate by clicking on an exit button.

Demographic Questionnaire (see Appendix C)

A ten-item demographic questionnaire was created by the researcher for the study. The questionnaire was designed to collect information regarding age, sexual orientation,

area of residence including state and location (urban/suburban/rural), number of children in the home, marital status, and how they heard about the study. Respondents were asked to self-report gender, race, legal custody status regarding children in the home, and the timing of their coming out as a sexual minority relative to becoming a parent. Responses on these items were used for the independent variables in the main analyses.

The demographic questionnaire was field tested with a think-aloud technique (Dillman, 2000) to ensure that the question items were understandable and clear. One gay father and one lesbian mother known to the researcher participated in the think-aloud procedure. Each parent signed a release indicating their understanding of the procedure, their consent to participate, and permission for the researcher to manually record their feedback. A copy of the release is included in Appendix D. Responses provided by these parents were used to edit the demographic question items appropriately.

Outness Inventory (see Appendix E)

Level of outness was measured using Mohr and Fassinger's (2000) Outness Inventory, a 10-item instrument designed to assess self-reported outness. Respondents were asked to rate the degree to which their sexual orientation is known by and discussed with others in 10 different social roles. The roles range from parents to coworkers to strangers, and the rating scale ranges from 1 to 7 on a Likert scale, with 1 = *person definitely does not know about your sexual orientation status* and 7 = *person definitely knows about your sexual orientation status, and it is openly talked about*. A total outness score was derived from the average of each of three subscales: Out to Family (average of items 1-4: mother, father, siblings, extended family), Out to World (average of items 6-9: new straight friends, work peers, work supervisors, strangers), and Out to Religion

(average of items 10 and 11: members of religious community, leaders of religious community).

The Outness Inventory was validated by examining the correlations between scores on the Outness Inventory and scores on several other measures related to sexual minority identity development (Mohr & Fassinger, 2000). A sample of 590 lesbians and 414 gay men with a mean age of 36 provided responses on the measures in the study. The authors concluded that the Outness Inventory demonstrated adequate construct validity, as level of outness was correlated with scales assessing related constructs in the other instruments (Lesbian Identity Scale, Gay Identity Scale, Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure). Outness scores were appropriately and significantly correlated to Need for Acceptance ($r = -.40$), Need for Privacy ($r = -.40$), Internalized Homonegativity ($r = -.25$), and the final stage (Internalization-Synthesis) of sexual identity development ($r = .21$) in the expected directions. These conclusions on validity are limited slightly by a sample consisting only of lesbian women and gay men.

Parental Stress Scale (see Appendix F)

The Parental Stress Scale (PSS) was developed by Berry and Jones (1995) to offer an available and easy to administer measurement of stress associated with the role of parenting for non-clinical family populations. Everyday parenting tasks bring both challenges and rewards for parents, and this instrument was designed to capture that balance. The PSS is an 18-item measure using a 5-point Likert scale format. Respondents were presented with 18 statements regarding parenting and asked to indicate their level of agreement with each statement ranging from “strongly agree” (1) to “strongly disagree”

(5). Wording for the items was chosen so that statements indicating more stress were equally balanced with statements indicating less stress.

The PSS was field tested with several groups of parents recruited from school, childcare, and university programs for a total number of 1,276 participants (Berry & Jones, 1995). Two items were dropped from the initial 20 after administration to the first group (125 parents) due to low internal reliability. Reliability for the final 18-item instrument was reported as .83. Test-retest correlation with a 6-week interim period was .81. Validity was assessed by comparing PSS scores with scores on the Perceived Stress Scale (a measure of general stress) and the Parental Stress Index. Correlations were significant and reported as .50 and .75, respectively (Berry & Jones, 1995).

Research Design

This study was designed to explore the relationships between the dependent variable of parenting stress and five independent variables: gender, race, timing of coming out, and level of outness. The study used a non-experimental, correlational design. Data was accessed through a spreadsheet produced through the Qualtrics website and SPSS REGRESSION was used for data analysis.

Research Questions

The research question for this study was: How do parental gender, parental race, legal custody status, timing of coming out relative to becoming a parent and level of outness relate to parenting stress among sexual minority parents?

The specific research questions for this study were as follows:

1. How much variance can be accounted for in parenting stress by gender and race among sexual minority parents?

2. After controlling for gender and race, how much variance can be accounted for in parenting stress by legal custody status and timing of coming out relative to becoming a parent among sexual minority parents?
3. After controlling for gender, race, legal custody status, and timing of coming out relative to becoming a parent, how much variance can be accounted for in parenting stress by level of outness among sexual minority parents?

Data Analysis

Survey data was downloaded from the Qualtrics website into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software program. SPSS was used to provide descriptive data analyses and conduct the hierarchical multiple regression. Multiple regression analyses operate under several assumptions for results to give accurate representation of the data (Huck, 2012). Using SPSS, the data were screened for outliers, missing data, normality, homoscedasticity, multicollinearity, and model specification.

The researcher analyzed the data collected through the Demographic Questionnaire to describe the characteristics of the sample. Participant age, race, gender, sexual orientation, area of residence, number of children in home, and marital status are reported in Chapter 4. A description of how participants heard about the study is also presented.

Multiple regression analyses are an effective way to explain or predict relationships between multiple variables in a quantitative manner (Huck, 2012). For this study, a three-step hierarchical regression was used in an attempt to capture the variance in parenting stress accounted for by the independent variables, and also to examine the influence of certain variables above and beyond that of other variables. The researcher

performed the hierarchical regression using SPSS REGRESSION. Gender and race were entered into the regression equation first, as these are universal descriptive variables that are not unique to sexual minority parents. For the purposes of the analysis, gender was coded 0 for female and 1 for male. Race was coded 0 for White/Caucasian and 1 for non-White. Second, legal custody status and timing of coming out relative to becoming a parent were entered as these are variable that are specific to sexual minority parents and are not easily manipulated. Timing of coming out relative to becoming a parent was dummy coded with 0 for parents who did not consider themselves to be out when they first began parenting and 1 for parents who were out when first parenting. All custody status variables were dummy coded with 0 for "no" and 1 for "yes." Level of outness was entered into the regression last because this is a factor that sexual minority individuals have control over and can change. The variance accounted for by each group of variables in addition to the overall variance accounted for by all of the independent variables is reported in Chapter 4.

Summary

In this chapter, the research methodology and plan were presented for the study. Participants were described. Procedures for data collection and instrumentation used were presented. Research design, research questions, and data analyses were outlined. In summary, this study attempted to explain differences in parenting stress by both universal (gender and race) and specific (custody status, timing and level of outness) factors for sexual minority parents.

CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

The purpose of this research was to explore parenting stress among sexual minority parents. This study examined the relationship of parenting stress to gender, race, legal custody status, timing of coming out, and level of outness for sexual minority individuals raising children. This chapter presents the findings. First, a description of participants and preliminary analyses is provided, followed by information on instrument reliabilities. Next, the results of the major analyses are presented. The chapter closes with a summary.

Participants

Snowball sampling methods were used for this study, so it is unknown how many LGBTQ parents were exposed to the invitation to participate in the study. Seventy-five percent of participants were recruited through social media. Of the remaining participants, 14% learned of the study from a friend or acquaintance, 9% responded through an email received from an organization with which they were affiliated, and only 2% learned of the study through gay pride event recruitment.

A total of 1,151 survey responses were downloaded from Qualtrics at the conclusion of the data collection period. Of those responses, 170 were not completed. These participants exited the survey prior to completion. These cases were removed from the dataset, leaving 981. Among the remaining cases, 58 participants indicated they were

not LGBTQ parents, and 20 declined to participate in the study. These cases were removed from the dataset, leaving 903 responses (78% of the original total).

In Table 1 frequencies and percentages for respondents' demographic information are presented. Respondents reported their sexual minority status. Data indicated that the sample was comprised of 62% lesbians, 12% gay men, 17% bisexuals, and 1% transgender parents. Eight percent self-identified as "Other" regarding sexual minority identity. The sample included 86% females and 11% males. Three percent of respondents identified themselves as "Other" regarding gender. Regarding race, respondents self-identified as Caucasian (88%), African American (2%), Hispanic (4%), Native American (0.6%), Asian American (0.6%), Multiracial (3%), and Other (1.4%).

Table 1
Demographic Information, Totals, and Percentages

Variable	Number	Percentages
Sexual Minority Status		
Gay	108	12%
Lesbian	555	62%
Bisexual	152	17%
Transgender	12	1%
Other	71	8%
Gender		
Male	100	11%
Female	773	86%
Other	29	3%
Race		
White/Caucasian	793	88%
African American	21	2%
Hispanic	38	4%
Native American	5	.6%
Asian American	5	.6%
Multiracial	27	3%
Other	13	1.4%

Area of Residence		
Urban	355	39%
Suburban	446	49%
Rural	101	11%
Geographical Region		
Outside U.S.	91	10%
Northeastern U.S.	183	20%
Midwestern U.S.	105	12%
Southern U.S.	296	33%
Western U.S.	181	20%
Marital Status		
Single	83	9%
Married/Partnered	817	90%
Timing of Coming Out		
Out When First Parenting	783	87%
Not Out When First Parenting	115	12%
Custody Status		
Sole Custody	115	13%
Shared Custody	721	81%
No Legal Custody	129	14%
Annual Household Income		
150K or more	251	27%
100-149K	259	28%
60-99K	240	28%
30-59K	113	12%
29K or less	38	4%

Respondents resided in primarily urban (39%) and suburban (49%) areas, with only 11% indicating residence in rural areas. The geographical scope of respondents was large, with 10% of the sample residing outside the United States. Most of the international respondents were from Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom; however, there were also one or two respondents from the following countries: France, Germany, Israel, Lebanon, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Scotland, South Africa,

and Spain. Within the United States, 46 states were represented, with California, Texas, North Carolina, New York, Maryland, and Massachusetts having the highest proportions of responses by state. By region of the country, the southeastern U.S. had the greatest number of responses.

The sample included predominantly married or partnered parents (90%) with one (46%), two (36%), or three (10%) children. Three percent of parents indicated having 4 or more children. The majority of parents in the sample considered themselves to be out as a sexual minority at the time they first became parents (87%), while 12% of parents were not out when first having children. Only 13% of parents indicated having sole legal custody of a child. Most parents indicated having shared custody of a child (81%), and 14% of parents indicated they were parenting a child of whom they had no legal custody. Household income responses showed the majority of the sample was split fairly evenly among middle class, upper-middle class, and upper class parents (27%, 28%, and 28%, respectively). Lower middle class parents and lower class parents comprised 12% and 4% respectively.

Data Screening

Data for each variable were screened for missing values, outliers, normality, homoscedasticity of residuals, and collinearity. Missing values within each variable made up less than 3% of responses, with the exception of legal custody status. The construct of legal custody status was measured with three separate questions regarding the legal relationship of participants to the children they were parenting. The three questions captured the three possible custody relationships between parents and children: a parent who is the only legal parent of a child, a parent who shares legal custody of a child with

another caregiver, and a parent who has no legal custody of a child. Respondents indicated “yes” or “no” for each type of custody status. Only 1.4% of responses regarding sole legal custody (CustOnly) were missing, and only 2.4% of responses regarding shared legal custody (CustShare) were missing. However, 7.8% of responses regarding no legal custody (CustNone) were missing. Missing values for the CustNone variable were determined to be systematically missing.

Only two respondents omitted all three of the custody status questions entirely. This suggests that missing values within this set of three questions probably do not represent an intentional decision to skip or not provide a response regarding legal custody status. It is more likely that missing values are related to the question design rather than other variables in the dataset such as race or gender. Therefore, an imputation model based on these other variables may not yield sufficiently valid imputed scores. Further, because there was a sufficiently large valid N for significant statistical power, imputed scores for missing custody status values were not calculated.

Approximately 23 respondents answered only one of the three custody questions. In these cases, one custody status question was answered as “yes” and the questions for the other two statuses were left blank. The decision was made to substitute responses of “no” for the blank responses in these 23 cases, with the consideration that it is reasonable to assume that respondents who answered one question with “yes” and left two blank likely meant “no” for the other two. These substitutions brought the percentage of missing data down from 7.8% to 5% for the CustNone variable, which was deemed tenable for this study.

Missing values within the Parental Stress Scale and Outness Inventory instruments comprised 1.6% and 0.2% respectively. Significant bias in results due to missing data was not expected given the large sample size and the low percentage of missing data overall. Regarding sample size, a power analysis was conducted during the study design stage indicating a minimum of 175 respondents was necessary to obtain sufficient power to detect effects. The responses obtained exceed that number significantly. Therefore, listwise deletion was used in cases containing missing values. A total of 833 cases were retained for the major analyses.

SPSS EXPLORE was used to screen for outliers and normality for the two scale variables, parenting stress and outness. All scores were within the appropriate ranges for each instrument. For parenting stress, the distribution of scores was adequately normal (skewness = .42 and kurtosis = .42). For outness, the distribution was skewed towards higher outness as predicted when the study was designed (skewness = -1.79, kurtosis = 3.36). Outliers were examined and deemed acceptable as departures from the norm in the largely homogenous sample obtained for this study. Results were compared both including and excluding outliers, revealing no differences. Therefore, outliers were retained for the major analyses.

Scatterplots of residuals were examined to determine that the assumption of homoscedasticity was adequately met. Bivariate correlations (Pearson) and variance inflation factor (VIF) values were considered to assess for potential multicollinearity or singularity among variables. No variables were highly correlated (i.e. $r \geq \pm.8$), and VIF values were within acceptable limits (all less than 3.0). The highest VIF values and correlations were found among the custody status variables, which is to be expected

given that the three custody status variables (CustOnly, CustShare, and CustNone) were designed to measure different levels of the same construct and would therefore likely reflect some overlap. The correlation matrix is presented in Table 2.

Table 2
Correlation Coefficients for Outcome and Predictor Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Parenting Stress	-						
2. Gender (Male)	-.11**	-					
3. Race (Non-White)	.02	-.05*	-				
4. Sole Custody	-.01	0	-.01	-			
5. Shared Custody	-.02	.04	.01	-.64**	-		
6. No Legal Custody	.05	-.09**	.08**	.03	-.45**	-	
7. Out When First Parenting	-.03	-.06*	-.02	-.06*	.06*	-.04	-
8. Outness	-.11**	.05	-.08**	-.09**	.06*	-.01	.41**

Note. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

Significant correlations were found among the outcome variable, parenting stress, and two of the predictor variables, gender and outness. Results indicated that a low correlation existed between parenting stress and gender and outness ($r = -.11$, $p < .01$ for both). This suggests that both males and parents with greater outness reported lower parenting stress. No other significant correlations were found between parenting stress scores and the remaining predictor variables.

Among the predictor variables, outness was significantly correlated with all but two other variables, gender and CustNone. Most noteworthy among these relationships

was the finding that for this sample, parents who considered themselves out as a sexual minority when they first became parents were more out on the whole than parents who considered themselves closeted when first having children ($r = .41$, $p < .01$). Outness was also significantly correlated with race, and with having sole or shared custody; however these associations were weak (see Table 2). Non-white parents in this study reported slightly lower outness than Caucasian parents. Parents who reported having sole legal custody were slightly less out than those who did not report having sole custody, and parents with shared custody of children were slightly more out than those who were not sharing custody with another parent.

Significant relationships were found between gender and three other predictor variables: race, timing of coming out, and having no legal custody of children (CustNone). Although the associations were weak, more fathers than mothers in this study tended to be Caucasian ($r = -.05$, $p < .05$). More mothers than fathers reported having no legal custody of a child they were raising ($r = -.09$, $p < .01$), which suggests that more social mothers than social fathers were represented in the sample. Fathers were slightly less likely to be out as gay or trans men when first parenting ($r = -.05$, $p < .05$). It is possible that these associations may have been magnified had there been more male respondents participating in the study.

Instrument Reliabilities

The Parental Stress Scale was used to measure parenting stress. Total scores were used for the analysis. The possible range for scores was 18 to 90, with higher values indicating greater parenting stress. The mean was 37.30, with a standard deviation of 8.31. Cronbach's α for the Parental Stress Scale items was .85, which shows an

adequately high estimate of reliability for this instrument.

The Outness Inventory (Mohr & Fassinger, 2000) was used to assess outness. Total scores were used for this study. The possible range for scores was 1 to 7, with higher scores indicating greater outness. Mean outness was 5.87, with a standard deviation of 1.2. In this sample, the Cronbach's reliability estimate for the Outness Inventory was .90, which reflects an acceptable estimate of reliability for this instrument. Descriptive statistics for scores on both instruments are reported in Table 3.

Table 3
Descriptive Statistics for Parenting Stress and Outness Variables

Variable	Parenting Stress	Outness
Mean	37.30	5.87
Median	37.00	6.25
Std. Deviation	8.31	1.20
Variance	69.04	1.44
Skewness	.42	-1.79
Range	52	6
Minimum	18	1
Maximum	70	7

Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis

The goal of this study was to explore the relationship of parenting stress and gender, race, legal custody status, timing of coming out, and outness among sexual minority parents. A hierarchical multiple regression was conducted to explore the

variance in parenting stress scores accounted for by each of the predictor variables. Predictor variables were entered into the regression equation in a predetermined order based on theory and the nature of the variables. SPSS REGRESSION was used for the regression analyses.

The first research question was: How much variance can be accounted for in parenting stress by gender and race among sexual minority parents? Race and gender were entered into the model in Step 1, because these are universal characteristics that affect all parents. The regression results are presented in Table 4. Results indicated that the variance accounted for (R^2) equaled .012 (adjusted R^2= .009), which was significantly different from zero ($F_{(2, 830)} = 4.98$, $p < .01$). This finding shows that only a little over 1% of the variance in parenting stress scores was accounted for by race and gender.

The second research question addressed was: After controlling for gender and race, how much variance can be accounted for in parenting stress by legal custody status and timing of coming out relative to becoming a parent among sexual minority parents? To address this question, timing of coming out and the three custody status variables (CustOnly, CustShare, and CustNone) were entered into the model in Step 2, as these are variables that are unique to sexual minority parents. The variance in parenting stress accounted for by race, gender, custody status, and timing of coming out (R^2) was .014 (adjusted R^2= .007). The change in variance accounted for (ΔR^2 = .003) as a result of adding custody status and timing of coming out into the equation was not a statistically significant increase ($\Delta F_{(4,826)} = .528$, $p = .72$). This indicates that custody status and timing of coming out did not add a significant amount of variance in parenting stress scores after controlling for gender and race for this sample. Only a little over 1% of the

variance in parenting stress was explained by gender, race, custody status, and timing of coming out.

The final research question explored was: After controlling for gender, race, legal custody status, and timing of coming out relative to becoming a parent, how much variance can be accounted for in parenting stress by level of outness among sexual minority parents? Outness was added into the model in the final step as it is a factor that sexual minority parents have control over and can change. The variance accounted for by all five predictor variables (R^2) was .026 (adjusted R^2= .018). The change in variance accounted for (ΔR^2 = .012) indicated a statistically significant increase in variance accounted for over the Step 2 model ($\Delta F_{(1, 825)} = 9.88$, $p < .01$). Therefore, outness contributed slightly over 1% to the prediction of parenting stress above and beyond that accounted for by gender, race, timing of coming out, and custody status. The final model as a whole accounted for a little over 2% of the variance in parenting stress.

Table 4
Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analyses Predicting Parenting Stress From Gender, Race, Custody Status, Timing of Coming Out, and Level of Outness

Measures	R^2	Adj. R^2	ΔR^2	β
Step 1	.012*	.009		
Gender				-.11*
Race				.01
Step 2	.014	.007	.003	
Timing				-.03
Sole Custody				-.01
Shared Custody				-.003
No Custody				.03
Step 3	.026*	.018	.012*	
Outness				-.12*

Note. Betas reported are those from the step at which the variable was entered.
$N = 833$.
*$p < .01$.

Summary

This chapter presented the findings of the statistical analyses of the data obtained for this study. The goal of this exploratory study was to examine the relationship between parenting stress among sexual minority parents and their gender, race, legal custody status, timing of coming out, and level of outness. A detailed description of the sample was presented, demonstrating that the participants in this study were predominantly Caucasian lesbian mothers who became parents after coming out and who share legal custody with another parent or caregiver. Respondents on the whole tended to report high levels of outness (M = 5.87 out of a possible 7.0).

The two primary variables for this study, parenting stress and outness, were found to be significantly correlated. Parents who reported higher levels of outness tended to report lower levels of parenting stress, although this correlation is low (r = -.11, p < .01). The instruments used to measure these variables yielded adequate estimates of reliability in this study.

The research questions explored how much variance in parenting stress was accounted for by gender, race, legal custody status, timing of coming out, and level of outness. SPSS REGRESSION was used to examine the relationship among the variables, which were entered into the regression model in a predetermined order to explore the unique variance added by certain variables. Data screening indicated that statistical assumptions for regression were met. The results of the hierarchical multiple regression analyses were presented. Sexual minority parents' gender accounted for only 1% of the variance in their parenting stress. Legal custody status and timing of coming out did not

add significant variance after controlling for gender and race. Level of outness added about 1% of unique variance in parenting stress after controlling for gender, race, custody status, and timing of coming out. The complete model showed that all predictor variables accounted for only a little over 2% of the variance in parenting stress.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

The overarching goal of this study was to explore the relationship between parenting stress among sexual minority parents and their gender, race, legal custody status, timing of coming out, and level of outness. A primary area of interest was to determine if outness contributes to variance in parenting stress after controlling for the remaining predictor variables. The findings of the study are presented and discussed within the context of existing literature and theory. The chapter begins with an overview, followed by discussion of the results, contributions and limitations of the study, and the implications of findings. Recommendations for future research and concluding remarks close the chapter.

Overview

The number of sexual minority individuals raising children has increased in the last decade (Gates et al., 2007; U.S. Census Bureau, 2012), and an increase in empirical research with this parent population is needed. Institutions affiliated with families and children's well being such as the legal system, social services, and adoption agencies are facing new challenges in policy and practice as sexual minority parents become more prevalent and visible (HRC, 2016a). Sexual minority parents are raising children in a cultural context that is biased towards heterosexual norms and values and face opposition regarding equal rights as people and parents (Mezey, 2014; Stacy, 2014). Recognition and acceptance in the role of parenting and accessibility to supportive services in this role

is not a given for all. The helping professions are presented with an imperative in the work towards offering equal respect and opportunity for sexual minority families. Increasing knowledge and understanding regarding this parent population is an important step in this process. In consideration of this goal, and in the relative lack of scholarly research on stress related to parenting among sexual minority parents, the aim of this study was to explore the relationship of sexual minority parents' parenting stress and their gender, race, legal custody status, timing of coming out, and outness.

Sexual minority parents contributing to the care of children under 18 completed an internet survey on parenting experiences distributed via social media, LGBTQ organizations, and personal email addresses. The survey consisted of a demographic questionnaire, the Parental Stress Scale, and the Outness Inventory. The results and conclusions follow.

Participants

A total of 833 sexual minority parents comprised the sample obtained for this study. The sample consisted of predominantly Caucasian, partnered lesbian mothers who became parents after coming out and who were sharing custody of one to three children with another parent or caregiver. Racial minority parents, fathers, and parents who had children before coming out were also represented but to a much lesser degree (22%, 11%, and 13%, respectively). Only 13% of parents had sole custody of a child or children, and 15% had no legal custody of a child or children in their care.

Previous research with sexual minority parent populations has been characterized by largely female, Caucasian, and socioeconomically stable samples (Mezey, 2014). The current study reflected similar limitations, despite specific efforts to recruit fathers and

parents of color. The large number of females participating in this study may be due to the cooperation of the Queer Mamas* Facebook group, which is a very active, supportive group with more than 13,000 members. The low percentage of social mothers and fathers (i.e., partnered and raising a child with a biological or adoptive parent) is not surprising given the recruitment method and inclusion criteria. Parents were asked to provide only one survey response per household to avoid dependency in the data. It is likely that in many cases for partnered parents, social parents deferred to the biological or legal adoptive parent.

Discussion and Conclusions

Regarding the study's hierarchical regression analyses, the findings showed that the relationship of parent gender to parenting stress for sexual minority parents was statistically significant, but small in size. In the step one regression model, gender accounted for slightly over 1% of the variance in parenting stress, such that fathers reported less parenting stress than mothers. This effect found (r^2 = .01) was small enough that this result could be argued to be consistent with previous studies with sexual minority adoptive and donor insemination parents that did not find a relationship between gender and parenting stress (Bos et al., 2004a; Goldberg & Smith, 2014; Golombok et al., 2014). Some have argued that sexual minority couples may be less influenced by traditional gender roles and therefore experience more equity in the experience of parenting (Bos et al., 2007; Goldberg, 2010; Tasker & Golombok, 1998). However, this study's findings do have sufficient power to be reliable, and the question remains as to whether a more balanced sample of fathers and mothers might yield more accurate information about the impact of gender on parenting stress. This study supports the

possibility that being a female parent may to a small degree be related to the experience of greater parenting stress as compared to male parents. Continued study is clearly needed.

Step one further showed that race was not a significant predictor of parenting stress, which strengthens the findings of Anderson (2008) where, in a similar-sized sample, race was also not found to provide significant explanation of parenting stress. The findings are in contrast to those of Nomaguchi and House (2013) who did report associations between race and parenting stress. However in their study, the connection was partially explained by structural disadvantages such as lower income, single parenting, and higher numbers of children. The current study sample consisted of primarily average to high income, partnered parents with three or less children. Perhaps this difference helps explain the conflicting findings. Overall, previous findings have been conflicting regarding the relationship of race to parenting stress. In this study race did not provide adequate statistical explanation for differences in parenting stress between White and non-White sexual minority parents.

Step two of the regression model added timing of coming out and legal custody status (represented by three levels of legal custody: having sole custody, shared custody, and/or no legal custody of children) to the equation. The relationship between parenting stress and these variables after controlling for gender and race was not significantly different from zero. Although there is a solid literature base that establishes a case for differences in the parenting experience (i.e., different experiences related to outness, social support, and discrimination) among parents who had children before versus after coming out, as presented in Chapter 2, these findings suggest that such differences were

not related to parents' experience of parenting stress as assessed in this study. Regarding legal custody status, the findings of the current study showed no significant contribution by any of the custody status levels to parents' report of parenting stress. There has been no previous research on legal custody status and parenting stress to establish reliable methods for assessing this variable and its potential influence on stress. It is notable that missing data was much more prevalent among the custody status variables compared to all the other data collected in the study. This could suggest that respondents found the design and/or wording of the custody status survey items to be confusing, or that the items as presented simply did not effectively allow for respondents to accurately indicate legal custody status. The regression results indicate that timing of coming out and legal custody status, as measured in this study, are not related to parenting stress among sexual minority parents.

A central question in this study was the relationship between parents' level of outness and parenting stress after controlling for gender, race, legal custody status, and timing of coming out. Step three of the regression model indicated that outness contributed a significant, but not substantial, amount of 1% to the variance in parenting stress after controlling for the other predictor variables. This is notable as an extension of previous research that did not find outness to be a significant predictor of parenting stress after controlling for a different constellation of variables among adoptive sexual minority parents (Tornello, Farr, & Patterson, 2011). In the full model, all of the predictor variables accounted for 2% of the variance in parenting stress. Although the practical significance of this finding is limited, it does provide insight into one factor unique to

sexual minority parents, that can be controlled, that may influence the parenting experience, even if to a slight degree.

The regression results clearly indicated that there are more powerful factors affecting parenting stress that were not captured in this study. The goal of this study was not to identify key components affecting parenting stress, but rather to increase knowledge regarding the potential impact of factors related to a sexual minority identity on the experience of parenting. Factors applicable to all parents such as child behavior, special needs of children with disabilities, and parental mental health, which have been found to contribute to parenting stress for both heterosexual and sexual minority parents (Mackler et al., 2015; Neece, Green, & Baker, 2012; Woodman, 2014), were not explored in this study. A possible conclusion from this research could be that factors related to a sexual minority identity, which clearly would not affect parenting stress for heterosexual parents, do not affect parenting stress for sexual minority parents either. Thus, the findings of this study lend support to the notion that in many ways, the parenting experiences of sexual minority parents are more similar than different than those of heterosexual parents. This is also consistent with previous research that has not found differences in parenting stress levels related to sexual orientation (Goldberg & Smith, 2014; Lavner, Waterman, & Peplau, 2014; Shechner, Slone, Meir, & Kalish, 2010).

The current study was exploratory, and the results may best be considered as information that can direct continued study. The effects found, although small in size, were trustworthy, and it may be prudent to further explore the relationship between outness and parenting stress rather than conclude that there is no relation at all. Examining these factors in a sample with a more normal distribution of outness seems

essential to strengthening conclusions regarding these variables. Further, theory suggests that the construct of outness consists of both internal processes (self-acceptance of a sexual minority identity) and external behaviors (disclosing that identity to others). Tornello and Patterson (2011) found that gay identity, a variable that is closely related to the self-acceptance component of outness, accounted for a moderate amount of variance in parenting stress. The findings of the current study, taken in conjunction with those of Tornello and Patterson (2011), could suggest that subjective parenting stress is more related to the aspects of outness characterized by the internal experience of embracing a sexual minority identity rather than the external processes inherent in disclosure to others. It is also possible that a subjective measure of parenting stress, like the Parental Stress Scale used in this study, may more accurately reflect stress related to the internal rather than external processes involved in living and parenting out as a sexual minority.

Contributions of the Study

A strength of this study was in the sample obtained. The sample of 833 sexual minority parents is significantly larger than almost all existing research with this population of parents. The size and geographical scope of the sample (46 U.S. states represented and a 10% international sample) of parents responding adds power to the effects noted and strengthens the trustworthiness of results found. Further, a precedent has been established demonstrating the potential success from snowball sampling techniques, and in particular social media outlets, in accessing a difficult to access and potentially hidden population. Although the sample obtained was biased towards parents with higher outness, parents reporting lower outness also participated, lending support to

the notion that snowball sampling can engender trust and thus potential access to more closeted members of a population (Browne, 2005; Sadler et al., 2010).

This study expanded the literature by providing preliminary evidence that greater outness may contribute to lower parenting stress. In many ways, sexual minority parents do not have control over the cultural context in which they are raising children. However, the degree to which they choose to be out in the process of parenting is a factor that is within their control. Although the influence may be slight, the findings of this study suggest that increasing outness may be a positive factor in buffering stress associated with parenting as a sexual minority. This small path to empowerment may lead to meaningful interventions in work with this population of parents.

This was the first study to examine the influence of legal custody status and timing of coming out in the experience of parenting stress for sexual minority parents. Custody related stressors among sexual minority parents have been documented qualitatively in the literature, and the current study is a starting point in the quantitative investigation of this construct. The custody status question items in this study were designed so that parents with multiple children with whom they had different custody relationships could indicate such. This created an overlap among the three levels of custody status for some respondents and may have confounded this variable's potential contribution to variance in parenting stress. Alternative methods of assessment and analysis of legal custody status, such as between groups analyses rather than measures of association should be explored. This study's consideration of timing of coming out in relation to parenting stress also furthers empirical knowledge regarding parents who had children before coming out versus parents who had children after coming out. Additional

inquiry into the differences between these groups should be directed in areas other than the experience of parenting stress.

This study also builds upon a relatively small base of previous studies investigating the relationship of gender and race to parenting stress for this parent population. Only two other studies have been reported examining the variables of parenting stress and outness. One study focused only on gay fathers (Tornello & Patterson, 2012) and the other examined these variables only among adoptive parents (Tornello, Farr, & Patterson, 2011). The current study adds to the beginning knowledge regarding these factors and their relationship with parenting stress among the sexual minority parent population by adding information regarding these understudied variables from a greater variety of sexual minority parents using a variety of pathways to parenthood. These advantages, however, must be balanced with the small effect size of results obtained.

Lastly, this study adds to the initiative of moving away from comparing sexual minority parents to heterosexual parents and focusing on exploring what is adaptive for minority family structures. Heterosexual parents were not assessed as a comparison group, and factors unique to sexual minority parents were explored. This study represents an exploratory attempt to quantify themes that have been reported from qualitative data that give a voice to this diverse population of parents. This study changes the questions from seeking categorical conclusions regarding who is more or less stressed to exploring *how* and why stress is experienced within the context of a cultural minority. It sheds light on the importance of learning more about parents with dual minority status such as sexual minority parents of color and transgender parents. Counseling professionals can gain and

then extend to clients understanding and perspective regarding the parenting experience of sexual minority parents raising children in a heterosexist culture.

Limitations of the Study

Although the sample for this study was sufficiently large, the convenience sampling methods employed limit the generalizability of results. It is impossible to discern how study participants might have differed from parents who chose not to participate. Also, the results can most accurately be generalized to White, lesbian mothers who came out before having children as these demographics were overrepresented in the sample. In addition, the homogeneity of the sample increases the potential for bias in conclusions drawn from the results of the analyses. More variability in participant characteristics, particularly regarding the variables of interest, would have strengthened outcomes. Replication of the study with a more adequate representation of parents of color, fathers, and parents who had children before coming out could help substantiate or refute the results. Recruitment at gay pride events proved effective in making connections with a variety of potential participants in that many men and racial minority parents provided their email addresses for future invitation into the study. However, only a small percentage of parents recruited this way actually completed the survey later on. Greater demographic variability in respondents may have been achieved if actual data collection had been possible during these events.

The legal custody status variables also warrant discussion. In the absence of prior research with this variable, the question items used to assess custody status were developed by the researcher. Legal custody status is a complex construct that is difficult to assess, particularly in a parent population characterized by nontraditional family

structures. In this study, the intent was to assess the *legal* relationship between parent and child(ren), which encompasses decision-making power and other parental rights. However, the term custody is also commonly associated simply with whom a child lives with, regardless of legal status. The number of missing values for the custody items and the high percentage of respondents indicating shared custody could reflect problems with these items. Therefore data obtained may not be an accurate measure of this construct, and conclusions regarding these variables are potentially compromised. Assignment of legal custody in this country largely follows traditional norms developed around heterosexual and biological parentage and can vary state to state, potentially complicating sexual minority parents' accurate understanding of the full extent of custody privileges, particularly for non-biological parents. Sexual minority parents are often operating outside of traditional parenting and legal frameworks, which adds difficulty to assessing this construct.

The reliance in this study on self-report of participants is a limitation in that respondents could portray themselves in a socially desirable manner. Given the social and cultural context within which sexual minority parents are parenting, respondents could feel more than average pressure to represent their group in a positive light regarding parenting stress, and may unconsciously minimize their report of such. Also the subjective nature of self-report assessments opens the possibility for respondents to perceive instrument items differently than was expected by the authors and/or researcher.

Additional limitations are related to research design issues. The use of three regression analyses increases the chance of Type I error. Given the small size of effects detected in this study, combined with the inflated power obtained from the large sample

size, this concern is worth noting. Further, it is important to be mindful of the exploratory nature of the research questions and analyses, understanding that no information regarding causal relationships among variables can be derived from results found.

Implications of the Findings

This study was exploratory in nature, and the findings, although weak in practical significance, may lend some useful direction in the consideration of theory regarding both parenting stress and outness. Belsky's (1984) theory of parenting suggested that contextual factors could be sources of either stress or support in their influence on the parenting experience. Outness can bring with it associated risks such as rejection (Byard et al., 2013; Lynch & Murray, 2000) and stigmatization (Breshears, 2011; Chapman et al., 2012; Litovich and Langhout, 2004), but also benefits such as social support (Morris et al., 2002) and encouragement (Mallon, 2004). The relationship of outness to parenting stress in this study suggests that the benefits of outness outweigh the risks with regards to parents' experience of parenting stress. This would appear to be consistent with Belsky's notion of a buffered system, where supports can balance out stress. This conceptualization of outness can also be considered in support of Meyer's minority stress model (2003), where outness is a factor that can be manipulated as a coping mechanism and thus can serve as a protective factor.

In this study, outness was found to contribute slightly, though statistically significantly, to variance in parenting stress. From a parsimonious standpoint, this could imply that exploring outness in therapy might not be a priority with sexual minority parent clients. These findings indicate there are clearly other factors to consider for stressed parents. However, as outlined in Chapter 2, outness is a complex construct

related to partner relationships (Knoble & Linville, 2012; Tornello & Patterson, 2012), psychological well-being (Halpin & Allen, 2004), and social support (Chow & Cheng, 2010; Tornello & Patterson, 2012), and that can be visited as often as daily for sexual minority parents as they interface with society on behalf of their children. A more liberal implication of this study's findings for counselors could suggest that exploring dimensions of outness, particularly in relation to parenting, may be a fruitful endeavor in therapeutic interventions with sexual minority parents. For parents, self-acceptance (a dimension of outness) has been connected with parental identity (Glazer, 2014; Lassiter, 2006), and the results of this study suggest a possibility that therapeutic gains in the acceptance of a sexual minority identity may help produce gains in parental identity and thus buffer parenting stress. Further, sexual minority parent clients may benefit from assistance in connecting with accepting environments such as play groups, religious outlets, and other support networks. This type of support may be particularly appropriate for mothers and for parents who had children before coming out, as timing of coming out was significantly correlated with outness in this study (parents who had children after coming out reported higher outness).

The magnitude of response to the invitation to participate in this study is of significance to counseling professionals and researchers. The large response to this study indicates this population of parents wants to be visible and recognized in their identity as parents. The design of the study allowed for complete anonymity in response, but provided an opportunity for parents to add their experience to the collective picture of sexual minority parents as a group. Many respondents in their narrative comments at the end of the survey (anonymous) and also in social media comments (shared through

private, closed Facebook groups) expressed gratitude that this study was being conducted. In doctoral and masters programs, counselors in training are exposed to minority identity development models. Existing sexual minority identity development models (e.g., Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Troiden, 1989) do not account for the development of a parental identity as part of normal growth and development for sexual minority individuals. The response to this research lends credence to the imperative of incorporating sexual minority parenting experiences into counselor preparation as well as scholarly theory and inquiry.

Recommendations for Future Research

A significant limitation in this study was the lack of variability in the variables of interest. As noted previously, parenting stress scores were normally distributed, but the distribution of outness scores was positively skewed; also variability in gender, race, custody status, and timing was unbalanced. Further examination of these variables with a sample including more fathers, more racial minority parents, more partners of biological parents, more parents who had children before coming out, and more parents with lower overall outness is recommended. Because the current study sample was biased towards higher income and partnered parents, future research is also recommended with parents from lower income groups and single sexual minority parents, as factors such as socioeconomic status and single parenthood have been found to interact with gender and race in other studies.

The current study was an exploratory inquiry into the relationship of parenting stress and gender, race, legal custody status, timing of coming out, and outness among

sexual minority parents. The findings can be useful as a foundation from which the constructs examined in this study may be explored in new ways.

This study is the first to find significant gender differences in the experience of parenting stress among sexual minority parents. Previous studies examining gender and parenting stress have been conducted with parents of children aged 10 and under. The current study allowed for participants with teenage children as well (18 and under); however, children's age was not assessed. Past research with parents of younger children has found no gender differences in parenting stress, and the current study found a small difference in a sample including parents that might have had older children. Future research regarding the connection of children's age in the relationship between gender and parenting stress is recommended to explore whether having older children might help explain gender differences in parenting stress for sexual minority parents. In addition, further exploration of the relation between gender and parenting stress with lower income samples may prove fruitful. Inclusion criteria based on children's age and/or household income could more accurately target sexual minority parent subpopulations to address these areas. In this study a significant relationship was found between gender and parenting stress despite the relatively small percentage of male respondents (11%). Continued study is warranted regarding the explanatory influence of gender on parenting stress, as the relatively small effects found in this study may be amplified in a sample with more fathers represented.

Legal custody status and timing of coming out did not account for significant variance in parenting stress. Outness accounted for only a small amount of parenting stress variance. These are three factors that affect sexual minority parents in unique ways

and have been demonstrated qualitatively as considerations in the experience of parenting for these parents (Ben-Ari & Livni, 2006; Biblarz & Savci, 2010; Hequembourg & Farrell, 1999; Lassiter et al., 2006; Ryan & Berkowitz, 2009; Wall, 2011). The findings of this study suggest that perceived parenting stress as measured by the Parental Stress Scale is not related to custody status and timing and only slightly related to outness. However, the relationship of these variables to the parenting experience for sexual minority parents warrants further study.

It is possible that the Parental Stress Scale used in this study is more accurate in capturing parent and child factors related to parenting and less accurate in capturing contextual factors. The instrument was also developed and validated with heterosexual parent populations and may not accurately detect specific ways that sexual minority parents experience stress associated with parenting. Future research examining related stress variables such as parental justification (Bos et al., 2007), experience of rejection (Bos et al., 2004b), or perceived exclusion by other parents (Goldberg & Smith, 2014) in relation to custody status, timing of coming out, and outness may yield more accurate reflections of contextual stressors for sexual minority parents.

Concluding Remarks

Sexual minority parents' desire to parent has been established, and based on the response to this study, it appears they want to be heard and recognized. Counselors and helping professionals have a responsibility to support sexual minority clients in pursuing a parenting experience that is fulfilling. Lower levels of stress related to parenting are associated with better outcomes for both children and parents (Deater-Deckard, 2004), and the findings of this study are consistent with existing evidence reflecting a

connection between greater outness and positive outcomes for LGBTQ people (Halpin & Allen, 2004; Tornello & Patterson, 2012). It is imperative to further professional understanding of adaptive processes for sexual minority parents, such as outness, that can improve their parenting experiences in a heterosexually dominated culture. Counselor training can benefit from greater understanding of sexual minority family structures and mechanisms, and counselors in practice have the potential to create in the therapeutic relationship and support in the larger world beyond an environment where this family type is accepted, understood, and respected.

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APPENDIX A: INTRODUCTORY LETTER

Greetings! Are you an LGBTQ person parenting/co-parenting a child under 18 or do you know LGBTQ parents?

Would you be willing to help with an anonymous internet survey on LGBTQ parenting experiences? Your response can help counselors and the larger community better understand the experiences of LGBTQ people raising children.

My name is Caswell Martin, and I am a counselor and doctoral student in North Carolina. I am doing a research project through the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. My project is designed to increase knowledge about the parenting experiences of LGBTQ parents.

I would really appreciate it if you would take 10 minutes to complete my anonymous internet survey and/or share it with others. Responses to the survey will not be connected with individual email addresses in any way, ensuring privacy. Your participation is completely optional.

Thank you very much for your consideration! Your response will really help us out. You are welcome to contact us with any questions or concerns regarding this project.

If you don't want to participate, you can still help out by forwarding this email invitation to anyone else you know who might be interested.

Many, many thanks!!

Caswell Martin, MA
Researcher, NC Licensed Professional Counselor
caswell.martin@xxxxxxxxx.xxx

Dr. Phyllis Post
Responsible UNCC Faculty
ppost@uncc.edu

Please make a selection below:
[ ] I'd like to learn more about the survey and proceed.
[ ] I'd like to decline to participate at this time.
[ ] I am not an LGBTQ parent.

APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT

Dear LGBTQ Parent,

I am asking for your assistance in a research study. You are eligible to participate if you:

- Identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender
- Act as caregiver and share a home with one or more children under the age of 18.
- I am asking for only one response per household; however either biological or non-biological parents are invited to participate.

Purpose of the Study:
The purpose of this study is to learn more about factors that influence parenting stress for LGBTQ people raising children. The study will explore how the following factors are related to parenting stress: gender, race, custody status, timing about coming out, and level of outness.

Investigator:
The study is being conducted by Caswell Martin in the Department of Counseling at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The responsible faculty member is Dr. Phyllis Post, Department of Counseling, UNCC.

Risks and Benefits of Participation:

POTENTIAL RISKS: The risks of participating in this study are minimal. It is possible that uncomfortable emotions may arise as a result of considering issues of stress related to parenting and level of outness to others. You will be free to skip any questions that you choose and/or stop the survey at any time. The researcher will be available via email to assist in addressing any concerns that may arise.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS: You may experience a sense of personal satisfaction in the potential to add to the knowledge on your unique parent population. As member of a population that can be harshly judged or rejected, you may feel empowered by an opportunity to provide information that may help counselors help other parents like yourself and raise awareness of issues affecting LGBTQ parents.

Description of Participation:
You are being asked to complete an anonymous online survey that consists of about 35 questions. The survey asks for some demographic information, a rating of stress related to parenting, and a rating of outness to others regarding LGBTQ status. The survey takes only around 10 minutes to complete.

Confidentiality:
No names or identifying information of any kind will be collected. The survey is administered through the investigator's secure account in Qualtrics, a web-based program. Your email address and/or computer IP address will not be tracked. Responses

will only be accessible by the researcher and her research committee through password protected computer files. You can choose not to respond to any question and you can stop your participation at any time without penalty.

You are a volunteer. The decision to participate in this study is completely up to you. If you decide to be in the study, you may change your mind and stop at any time.

Fair Treatment and Respect:
UNC Charlotte wants to ensure that you are treated in a fair and respectful manner. If you have any questions about how you are treated as a participant, please contact the University's Research Compliance Office (704-687-1871). If you have any questions about the project, please contact Caswell Martin at 704-xxx-xxxx or amarti12@uncc.edu or Dr. Phyllis Post at 704-687-8961 or ppost@uncc.edu

Thank you so much for your time!

Sincerely,

Caswell Martin, MA
Doctoral Candidate
UNC Charlotte

Dr. Phyllis Post
Department of Counseling
UNC Charlotte

By making a selection below, you are indicating that you have read and understand this information.

[ ] I agree to participate.
[ ] I decline to participate.

APPENDIX C: DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

Demographic Questionnaire

1. Please select the category that best describes you for each of the following 4 items:

A. __ Male

__ Female

__ Other:_____

B. ___ Gay

___ Lesbian

___ Bisexual

___ Transgender

___ Other:_____

C. __Caucasian/White

__African American/Black

__Hispanic/Latino

__Native American

__Asian American/Asian

__Multiracial

___ Other:_____

D. __Single

__Partnered/Married

2. Please select the category that best describes the area where you reside:

__Urban

__Suburban

__Rural

3. Please select your state of residence: (drop-down list).

4. Please indicate the category that best represents your annual household income:

__ $150,000/year or more

__ $100,000-149,999/year

__ $60,000-99,999/year

__ $30,000-59,999/year

__ $29,999/year or less

5. When you first shared a home with a child for whom you were a caregiver/parent, did you consider yourself to be "out" as a sexual minority?

__Yes __No

6. Please indicate whether EACH of the following statements is true for you regarding legal custody status:

I contribute to the care of one or more children for whom I am the only legal custodial parent/caregiver. __Yes __No

I contribute to the care of one or more children for whom I share legal custody with another parent or caregiver.

__Yes __No

I contribute to the care of one or more children for whom I have no legal custody.

__Yes __No

7. Please indicate the number of children who share your home and receive care from you: __1 __2 __3 __4 __5 __6 __7 or more

8. Parental Stress Scale here (see Appendix F).

9. Outness Inventory here (see Appendix E).

10. Please indicate how you heard about this survey:

___ I provided my email address at a Pride festival.

___ I received an email from an organization.

___ I responded to an advertisement and/or social media post.

___ I received an email about the survey from a friend and/or acquaintance.

11. Is there anything related to parenting stress you would like to share? (response box provided)

12. Do you have any other comments you would like to share? (response box provided)

APPENDIX D: THINK-ALOUD RELEASE

Dear Think-Aloud Participant:

I would appreciate your participation in helping to develop a demographic questionnaire that will be used in my dissertation research. The goal of the questionnaire is to gather demographic information from survey respondents regarding gender, sexual orientation, race, marital status, area of residence, income, timing of coming out relative to becoming a parent, and legal custody status.

The purpose of the think aloud procedure is to receive your feedback about whether the question items are understandable and clear. You will be asked to read each item and response option aloud and respond verbally about the clarity, conciseness, redundancy, and grammar of the items. The process should take 10-15 minutes. I will remain silent during this process and will note your feedback.

Participating in the think-aloud is completely voluntary. I thank you sincerely for your time and effort.

Caswell Martin, MA, LPC
Doctoral Candidate
University of North Carolina at Charlotte

My signature below indicates that I understand the think-aloud procedure and have had a chance to ask questions about the procedure and the dissertation study. I am at least 18 years of age, and I agree to participate in the think-aloud process.

_____
Name (printed)

_____

Signature

_____
Date

APPENDIX E: OUTNESS INVENTORY

Please use the 1-7 rating scale below to indicate the degree to which you are out to the following people:

Mother
Father
Siblings
Extended family relatives
New straight friends
Work peers
Work supervisors
Strangers
Members of my religious community (e.g., church, temple)
Leaders of my religious community (e.g., church, temple)

1 = person definitely does not know about your sexual orientation status
2 = person might know about your sexual orientation status, but it is never talked about
3 = person probably knows about your sexual orientation status, but it is never talked about
4 = person probably knows about your sexual orientation status, but it is rarely talked about
5 = person definitely knows about your sexual orientation status, but it is rarely talked about
6 = person definitely knows about your sexual orientation status, and it is sometimes talked about
7 = person definitely knows about your sexual orientation status, and it is openly talked about

APPENDIX F: PARENTAL STRESS SCALE

Instructions indicate that each item be answered using a 5-point response format:
1 = strongly disagree
2 = disagree
3 = neutral
4 = agree
5 = strongly agree

*1. I am happy in my role as a parent.
*2. There is little or nothing I wouldn't do for my child(ren) if it was necessary.
3. Caring for my child(ren) sometimes takes more time and energy than I have to give.
4. I sometimes worry whether I am doing enough for my child(ren).
*5. I feel close to my child(ren).
*6. I enjoy spending time with my child(ren).
*7. My child(ren) is (are) an important source of affection for me.
*8. Having children gives me a more certain and optimistic view for the future.
9. The major source of stress in my life is my children.
10. Having children leaves little time and flexibility in my life.
11. Having children has been a financial burden.
12. It is difficult to balance different responsibilities because of my child(ren).
13. The behavior of my child(ren) is often embarrassing or stressful to me.
14. If I had it to do over again, I might decide not to have children.
15. I feel overwhelmed by the responsibility of being a parent.
16. Having children has meant having too few choices and too little control over my life.
*17. I am satisfied as a parent.
*18. I find my child(ren) enjoyable.

*items reverse in scoring