WGFS#2157358, Vol 0, ISS 0

Between Liberation and Shock: Italian Parents' Experiences of Their Children Coming Out

Lorenzo Montali, Anita Vignati and Angelo Benozzo

QUERY SHEET

This page lists questions we have about your paper. The numbers displayed at left are hyperlinked to the location of the query in your paper.

The title and author names are listed on this sheet as they will be published, both on your paper and on the Table of Contents. Please review and ensure the information is correct and advise us if any changes need to be made. In addition, please review your paper as a whole for typographical and essential corrections.

Your PDF proof has been enabled so that you can comment on the proof directly using Adobe Acrobat. For further information on marking corrections using Acrobat, please visit https://authorservices.taylorandfrancis.com/how-to-correct-proofs-with-adobe/

The CrossRef database (www.crossref.org/) has been used to validate the references.

AUTHOR QUERIES

Q1 Please provide missing volume number for the "Carbone et al., 2022" references list entry.

Q2 Please provide missing volume number for the "Montali et al., 2022" references list entry.

Q3 Please provide missing volume number for the "Tyler and Abetz, 2020" references list entry.

LGBTQ+ FAMILY: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL
https://doi.org/10.1080/27703371.2022.2157358

Between Liberation and Shock: Italian Parents' Experiences of Their Children Coming Out

Lorenzo Montali[a], Anita Vignati[a] and Angelo Benozzo[b]

[a]Department of Psychology, University of Milano-Bicocca, Milan, Italy; [b]Department of Human and Social Sciences, University of Valle d'Aosta, Aosta, Italy

ABSTRACT

Children's coming out has a significant impact at the family level, and parents' reactions can affect their children's well-being. Research investigating parents' perspectives is still limited outside the USA and primarily includes parents involved in LGB associations. Our study investigates coming out within families in Italy, a context characterized by heteronormativity and high stigma toward sexual minorities, with parents not involved in LGB associations. The aim was to explore the meanings parents attributed to their child's coming out and look at how it reshaped their relationships with their offspring in light of the theoretical model elaborated by Chrisler (2017) on studies conducted in the US context. Thirteen participants were interviewed (10 mothers, aged 43–63): ten with a gay son, two with a lesbian daughter and one with a bisexual daughter. The thematic analysis identified four themes that can be framed in Chrisler's theoretical model and then extended its field of application to a new socio-cultural context. The discussion highlights some features transversal to the themes that can be better understood if related to specific traits of the Italian family and relational culture, emphasizing the importance of educational and cultural interventions directed at parents who are not yet involved in associative networks.

KEYWORDS

Coming out;
LGB sexual orientation;
parents;
Italy;
thematic analysis

Introduction

Coming out as gay is a growing area of research with various interdisciplinary publications; it is a well-established field of scholarly investigation in numerous disciplines, such as psychology (Clarke & Peel, 2007; Hegna, 2007); philosophy (Sedgwick, 1990); linguistics (Chirrey, 2003; Motschenbacher, 2019); cultural studies (Gross, 2001; Ringer, 1994; Vasquez del Aguila, 2012); and sociology (Seidman et al., 1999). It has been investigated from many perspectives, including the narrative analysis of coming out stories (Plummer, 1995) and the historical reconstruction of the struggles of gays and lesbians fighting for recognition of their rights (Weeks, 1990).

Studies differ in terms of their focus on the audience for whom the coming out is performed: parents and friends (Adams, 2011; Borheck, 1993; Ravel & Rail, 2008), colleagues in the workplace (Benozzo et al., 2015; Charoensap-Kelly et al., 2020; Ward, 2007), or big audiences in popular television series (Benozzo, 2013; Chambers, 2003; Herman, 2003, 2005; Shugart, 2003). Of course, coming out has a political significance too, in terms of what it means to belong to a community, and these political implications are bound up with personal meanings (such as what it means to be gay, or to have a gay identity) (Herman, 2005). Indeed, the classic metaphor

CONTACT Lorenzo Montali lorenzo.montali@unimib.it Department of Psychology, University of Milano-Bicocca, Milan, Italy.

of 'coming out of the closet' has played an essential role both for individuals, for the LGBTQ+community and for the gay rights movement (Weeks, 1990).

Seeking to better understand the phenomenon and the research related to coming out, Sandler (2022) examined the literature on coming out and distinguished it in terms of (1) the various institutions in which individuals do their coming out; (2) the people to whom the coming out is addressed; and (3) the content, language, and meaning of coming out.

In the following pages, we contribute to the investigation with regard to the second and third area identified by Sandler, and our specific focus is on coming out to parents. We analyze the event of coming out to parents, and highlight how it produces reactions, and generates moments of intimacy and questioning, between parents and children. Such moments produce thoughts and reflections which refer both to the past and to the future.

Finally, we wish to highlight what we think is an important new feature of our study: we think it helps to fill a gap in the literature on coming out to parents, which is limited overall and particularly in contexts other than the US, and which has until now mainly focused on participants involved in LGB associations. Here in Italy, on the other hand, we had the opportunity to describe a context characterized by high stigmatization and a traditional culture with non-activist parents.

Coming out to parents

The literature on coming out tends to be investigated more from the point of view of the gay or lesbian person who is doing the coming out, while the reaction/position of those on the receiving end of the communication has received much less attention (Tyler & Abetz, 2020). However, as Chirrey (2003) says:

> Revelation and disclosure involve more than merely asserting belief. They present to the hearer the new gay or lesbian subject position of the speaker. In so doing, they have the potential force of altering reality for both the speaker and the listener. In that sense, coming out can be regarded as interactional. It not only involves the speaker in an act but may also have the force of causing the listener to change his or her perspective on the world in order to accommodate this new information. (pp. 29–30)

Moreover, a few pages later, Chirrey continues:

> When we talk of the individual creating a new reality in coming out, we must bear in mind that they need the co-operation of the hearers to achieve this. The meaning and effects of coming out are experiences from the unique perspectives of all participants. (p. 35).

What Chirrey emphasizes is a crucial aspect of this study: the idea that LGBTQ+offspring and their parents are influencing each other during those conversations about coming out communication. Following this line of thinking, we chose to define coming out as an event in the course of which LGB children disclose their sexual orientation to their parents.

This communicative event can be conceptualized as a rite of passage and a turning point (Tyler & Abetz, 2020). The study conducted by Tyler and Abetz consists of 11 parents and 11 LGBTQ individuals and looks at turning points as events or incidents that transformed the parent-child relationship. The thematic analysis carried out by the authors proposed three turning points in the relationship: coming out to the parents; the first relationship after coming out; and becoming the "parent of one or more LGBTQ child." Following this line of thinking, we come across the work of Jaspal (2019), who investigated the reactions to their sons' coming out of the parents of 12 British South Asian gay men. The study highlighted three themes in particular. The first is linked to the decrease in parental self-esteem; the second has to do with the denial of the child's coming out and what this denial implies, and the third concerns the fact that parents may feel they have to stop their sons from having relationships with significant others for fear of being victims of stigma. Jaspal's study is interesting because it highlights the complexity of the coming out formula when it is associated with ethnic or religious elements.

In this respect we agree with Bertone and Franchi (2008) and Conley (2011). The former claimed that, for an adequate understanding of the coming out, we need to consider the family of origin and the positions and reactions that an LGB person's parents have throughout the coming out process. The latter emphasizes the need for more in-depth studies on parents, since it is not just the individual who needs to undertake a process of building a new self, but also the parents who have to build a new parental identity, and create a new balance that has been lost, regardless of whether they react positively, negatively or with indifference to the coming out. For example, Conley (2011) investigates parents' worries following their child's coming out and notes three main concerns: about their child's mental and physical well-being; about what society thinks of them as parents of children belonging to a sexual minority (parental ego); and finally, about possibly losing the love of their loved ones, again because of their child's sexual orientation. In his study, Conley (2011) shows how these concerns are related to factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, income, parental education, child's gender, stigma awareness and gender role perception. Ryan et al. (2010) found a strong association between the level of parental acceptance and the psychological and physical well-being of LGBT people (mental health, substance abuse, risky sexual behavior). Mena and Vaccaro (2013) highlighted how family reactions can cause fear and have a negative effect on self-esteem. In their qualitative research with 24 GLBQ participants, they categorized the responses of parents to their children's coming out. The majority of the group received non-affirming responses from their parents, while others (fewer in number) received responses that were a mixture of negative -expressed through disbelief or silence- or supportive through acceptance of their child's sexual identity. Baptist and Allen (2008), conducted a case study to understand how coming out changes the role system within the family structure and how parents construct a new shared meaning regarding their child's sexuality, reconciling contradictions between accepting their child and maintaining heteronormative family values. Baptist and Allen's analyses show that parents come to redefine their identity on multiple levels: individual, family, social, and, more rarely, political. Tyler (2015), drawing on the perspective of symbolic interactionism, investigated the parent-offspring dyad, whether the offspring is lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer, focusing on the dynamics and changes in their relations from the point of view of both sides. The study proposes five sequential stages that correspond to the gradual construction of a shared narrative by members of the dyad in order to give meaning to the child's new sexual identity. These stages are: (1) out to self; (2) out to parent(s); (3) relational tension; (4) relational adjustment; and (5) evolving relational identity.

A crucial publication is Chrisler's (2017) meta-analysis, which looked at 19 different studies in order to construct a theoretical framework of parents' emotional and cognitive dynamics with LGB children. Considering the context and the cognitive and behavioral strategies which parents enact following their child's coming out, Chrisler's model focuses only on the parents' point of view and considers both positive and negative reactions. The theoretical framework is based on the various elements involved in the parents' process of understanding their child's coming out: context, suspicion, uncertainty, behavior reduction, confirmation of the child's identity, evaluation, parental response, coping, and re-assessment. This theoretical framework thus represents a precious resource for a better understanding of how parents process their child's new identity as they reconstruct their own parental identity.

Chrisler's (2017) important meta-analysis is limited to data collected in the United States. This highlights a gap in the literature because as the author's own model indicates, context plays a key role in shaping parents' reactions. Moreover, the studies mentioned above are limited by the fact that they only considered parents from support associations who had taken part in self-help groups, and not parents who did not have similar forms of support. Therefore, our study helps to fill a gap in the literature because there are no Italian studies conducted with parents not involved in activist associations. The aim of this study is to broaden our knowledge about the phenomenon of coming out in Italy as regards parents' experience with LGB (lesbian, gay, and bisexual) children. We focused on the meanings parents gave to the self-disclosure of sexual orientation of their children and the possible changes this can bring about. This is

Table 1. Participants' socio-demographic characteristics.

Gender	Women	10	Man	3			
Age	Range	43–63	Median	48			
Ethnic background	White	13					
Education	High school degree	9	Secondary school diploma	4			
Work status	Professional	3	Employee	6	Housewife	2	Unemployed	1
Relationship situation	Married	8	Divorced	2	Widow	2	Single	1
Children sexual orientation	Gay	10	Lesbian	2	Bisexual	1		

especially significant in Italy for two reasons. Firstly, because there are still very few studies which have looked into the coming out process from the point of view of the parents, and secondly, because a typical feature of the Italian context is the lingering presence of strong, regulatory heteronormative culture and discourses.

Method

Researcher's positioning

The research team consisted of two senior researchers with experience in sexual minorities, and a Master student with previous training in qualitative research methods. All identified as cisgender; two of them identified as heterosexual, one as gay.

Participants

Participants were recruited through an invitation published on social networks (Instagram and Facebook) in which we presented the research and its aims. Three criteria were used to select the participants: awareness of their child's sexual orientation, Italian citizenship (since the interview was conducted in Italian), and no involvement in parental self-help groups or membership of LGB associations, with the aim of investigating a less well-studied population.

We recruited 13 participants (10 mothers) aged between 43 and 63 years: ten with a gay son, two with a lesbian daughter and one with a bisexual daughter (Table 1). The number of fathers willing to collaborate in the research was far fewer than that of mothers, a common finding in similar qualitative research (Tyler, 2015; Gonzalez et al., 2013). It can be speculated that this has to do with a greater reluctance on the part of men to discuss personal issues. Respondents signed a privacy information form and guarantee of anonymity and consented to participation and data processing on the form of the Ethics Committee of the University of Milano-Bicocca that approved the research.

Our participants did not receive any compensation.

Data collection

We conducted a semi-structured qualitative interview to make it easier for participants to talk freely and to explore their experiences in more depth.

We chose to use interviews because they allow us to investigate meaning-making processes related to the participants' experience and to place them in the social context (Warren, 2002). It is, therefore, a particularly suitable method for studying processes of social change, such as those involving sexual minorities: "The personal narratives produced through qualitative interviewing thus reveal the way in which individuals are in active states of navigating social and cultural change" (Frost et al., 2020, p. 246).

Great attention was paid to the relationship between interviewer and interviewee: the emphasis was on putting the participant at ease and creating a relaxed, empathetic atmosphere, conveying understanding and trust so that the responses were as sincere and complete as possible. In order for participants to feel at ease, they were allowed to decide themselves how and where to meet. Most of the interviews took place in the participants' homes (N = 8), whereas the remainder (N = 5) took place via Skype. Moreover, at the beginning of every interview, it was stressed that it was important that the participant should feel free to express their point of view and experience, and this helped to create a relaxed atmosphere and put participants at ease, despite the extremely personal and delicate nature of the topic. The interviews were all conducted by a female researcher with a Master's degree in social psychology who had been trained to conduct qualitative interviews, and who had no previous relationship with any of the participants.

The interview grid was constructed on the basis of the relevant literature and the research objectives in order to explore four areas. (1) Parents' reactions to coming out (e.g., Think back to the moment when your son/daughter told you that he/she was L/G/B. Tell me about that moment in as much detail as you like.) (2) The perception of the relationship with the child (e.g., I'd like to ask you if and how your relationship has changed since he/she came out). (3) The impact of the coming out on the parental role (e.g., How would you describe the impact on you as a parent of your child coming out) 4. Future expectations (e.g., Tell me how you imagine your child's future).

The flexibility of the interview guidelines gave great freedom to the interviewer to explore all the relevant issues in depth. To this end, in addition to the primary questions, more in-depth secondary questions were asked. Given the sensitivity of the topic, certain non-directive interventions were particularly useful, such as encouragement, expressions of interest, summarizing the answer in order to seek confirmation, and pauses and requests for more detail. These strategies encouraged the interviewee to continue their story and go into things more deeply. At the end of the interview, socio-demographic information was collected: age, education, profession, and marital status. The interviews lasted for an average of one hour and were audio-recorded and fully transcribed.

Data analysis

We conducted a thematic analysis based on Braun and Clarke's model (2006) to make it easier to compare our results with the relevant literature that used a similar methodology (Chrisler, 2017; Aveline, 2006; Gonzalez et al., 2013; Baptist & Allen, 2008). Thematic analysis is a method that makes it possible to detect patterns of meaning in a dataset, in relation to the research questions posed.

Thematic analysis was chosen because it can provide rich and detailed accounts of data by examining a specific issue through the participants' perspectives (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Indeed, we used an inductive approach, so as to give importance to the respondents' points of view. Sandelowski and Barroso explain that different methods of analyzing qualitative data can be placed on a continuum depending on whether they adopt a more descriptive or more interpretive approach (2003). In our experience, thematic analysis fulfills both of these requirements as it provides us with a clear process to organize and describe the data, while still allowing for interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Furthermore, thematic analysis is a method that enables us to search for common meanings across a data set rather than identify unique and idiosyncratic meanings and experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2012), and this fits with our research objectives.

Thematic analysis is a gradual process consisting of several phases: in the first phase, which involved becoming familiar with the data, the researchers immersed themselves in the transcripts of the interviews, reading and re-reading them and noting down recurring ideas and patterns. This enhanced their knowledge of the data and helped them develop the interpretative skills necessary for the subsequent phases.

The second phase consisted of creating the initial codes, by systematically identifying the interesting features in the data. This phase was conducted iteratively using the NVivo software package (Colucci & Montali, 2008). The researchers each coded three of the most significant interviews and then compared the codes they had chosen with the others, in order to reach a consensus on the data coding process. Subsequently, two researchers coded all the remaining interviews, and when they had finished, they compared their codes in order to ensure there was good intercoder agreement, and then discussed conflicting cases to come to a shared decision. The third phase of the thematic analysis consisted of constructing the themes. Here, the codes were organized into themes and sub-themes, and the relationships between them was analyzed using visual maps. A series of research group meetings served to discuss this organization and reach a shared vision. In the fourth phase, the themes were reviewed and refined so as to guarantee internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity. As regards internal homogeneity, the extracts grouped within the same theme were re-read to check that they were consistent with each other. As for external heterogeneity, we checked that each theme described different meanings from those present in the other themes.

In the fifth phase, the themes were defined and given a name. The aim was to identify the essence of each theme, assess how they were interconnected, and how they could be organized to create a consistent narrative. In the sixth and final phase, each theme was assigned a name that represented its essence and how it contributed to the general narrative represented by the thematic model.

Results

The analysis identified a framework of interrelated thematic categories and subcategories (Table 2) that conceptualize the parent's experience of their LGB child's coming out as a gradual process which entails a reinterpretation of the child's life story before the coming out itself and leads to a reworking of the parental identity and a redefining of family relationships. Within this framework, four main themes were identified, each one corresponding to different moments in the parenting experience as they reconstructed it during the interviews:

1. Before the coming out: the continuum of suspicion
2. The coming out between liberation and shock
3. The complex elaboration of coming out
4. After the coming out: forms of acceptance and change

Before the coming out: the continuum of suspicion

This theme describes the experience of parents before their offspring come out, characterized by suspicion about their sexual orientation and by specific strategies for dealing with this suspicion.

Indeed, it is precisely the parents' narratives that contextualize this event as part of a story that began in their children's infancy.

Suspicion lies on a continuum: most of the interviewees said they had suspected their child was gay or lesbian without them saying anything; some remarked that they had noticed certain anomalies in their child's behavior but only realized later that they might be indicative of their sexual orientation, while others said that they had never suspected anything, in order to underline their surprise at the coming out.

Table 2. Thematic categories and subcategories.

Main theme	Sub-categories	Examples
The continuum of suspicion	Suspicion	*I felt it in my blood, that is, I've always known, I felt it as a mother, a parent who pays attention to their child does feel it.*
	Noticing anomalies	*I did notice some rather out-of-the-ordinary behavior, not that I did not like it, but I thought that he was different from the others.*
	No suspicion	*If she herself only came to realize it later, how was I supposed to have realized sooner?*
	Strategies for managing suspicion	*I stood at the window watching, but I was quite serene because I've always believed in him, so I had no fear, it was just a matter of time*
Coming out between liberation and shock	Liberation for child and parents	*As soon as he said it to me, his life began from then on, it seemed to me that from that day on he became more beautiful because it was like he'd been carrying a burden for such a long time*
	Parental shock	*Obviously it was a shock for me and my husband because we weren't expecting anything like that*
	Strategies for managing the relationship with children	*I don't want to say anything because I still have to understand, I wouldn't want to say something that might offend you, let's leave things as they are for now and later on you can tell me calmly what you feel, what I still don't know*
The complex elaboration of coming out	Awareness of limited knowledge and heteronormative expectations	*Since he came out to us, we've been on a journey too, because you have to discover a world you don't know. You know it exists, but you have never set foot in this world. I didn't know how to behave, how to relate to him.*
	Attribution of causes to the child's sexual orientation	*he didn't choose to be gay, he was born that way, it wasn't a choice, just like I didn't choose to be straight. (mother, 53)*
	Identification of typical traits of gay people	*They are not strange monsters, they're like me and you, it's just that they fall in love with whoever they want, but being homosexual, it's normal that he should be a bit effeminate. For example, he was taken on by Sephora as a make-up artist, so in your opinion, how can he be hetero?*
	Expectations about the child's future in a dangerous context	*The biggest worry I had for my son was the fear of others, I didn't think she could handle that on her own. I think she was afraid of this too because there's still an awful lot of discrimination, especially among peers*
	Coping strategies	*I needed to talk to my girlfriends because I really didn't know how to behave and maybe I also wanted some sympathy because I didn't feel very well equipped except for my common sense and my maternal feelings*
Forms of acceptance and change	No acceptance	*"Do you accept that your son has caught the flu?" You accept it, how can you refute a fact? You can't refute it, but if my son has the flu, I treat him.*
	Acceptance: resigned or full	*You say to yourself, "He won't have a normal life", "I won't be a grandmother", but actually these doubts exist for everyone, and so I started to get used to the idea, I said to myself "Who cares?" the important thing is that he is healthy, that he is happy, that he finds his way in life*
	Impact on parental identity: subtraction or enrichment	*It was a great lesson and it still is now. It helped me to understand diversity, and it also made me think a lot about people who judge others, about people who are afraid of certain things, about people who are so obtuse*
	The development of positive relationships	*We've always had a good relationship, but we've definitely become more complicit, seeing that I immediately accepted her homosexuality, she's realized that she can tell me anything without being afraid.*

Suspicion

Among those who had suspected something about their offspring's sexual orientation, some referred to a kind of parental intuition, which they associated with their ability to be competent parents also in their relationship with their child:

> I felt it in my blood, that is, I've always known, I felt it as a mother … a parent who pays attention to their child does feel it. (mother, 44).

Others referred to certain pieces of evidence that first made them suspicious, usually dating back to when their child was still small, as proof of their genuineness and incontrovertibility (Mason-Schrock, 1996):

> Since he was a little child, Filippo wanted princess dresses. His sister used to dress up as a princess at carnival time and he wanted to wear princess dresses, he wanted to play with Barbie dolls, and so at times, I would say to myself: "Well, I think this one here is gay". (mother, 54)

The instinctive nature of the suspicion, and the providing of evidence dating back to childhood both share a common logic of naturalization, on the basis of which the parents present their child sexual orientation as a stable state of affairs, unrelated to the child's free will: the parent's suspicion thereby loses any possible negative connotation, and instead is a demonstration of good parenting.

Noticing anomalies

Even among those participants who make no mention of having any explicit suspicion about their child's sexual orientation, some mention that they had noticed some "anomalies" in their child's behavior, but not realized what they might possibly have meant until after the coming out:

> I did notice some rather out-of-the-ordinary behaviour, not that I did not like it, but I thought that he was different from the others. And I asked myself things like "Who knows what he's like?" "Who knows why he's like that?" He had loads of female friends who were crazy about him, but we said to ourselves, "Why doesn't he bring his girlfriend home?" I thought, "Well, he's like a bear, he doesn't like being in company", I thought everything apart from that he was gay, not that, it couldn't be that, and instead, it was that. (mother, 53)

These so-called *anomalies* point to a series of expectations on the part of parents regarding how a person should behave, according to which their child's heterosexuality was something obvious and taken for granted. At the same time, this ex-post evaluation reveals a search for some consistency: now that the coming out has contradicted their expectations, the parent looks back into the past for traces of a *true self* that must have always been there.

Strategies for managing suspicion

Whether the parents elaborated an actual suspicion, or merely noticed some anomalies, they describe adopting strategies for dealing with the doubt which reflect the degree of tension they experienced and the way they saw the situation and their relationship with their child. Most respondents said they had not asked their child anything, despite their suspicions, and that they had waited for the child to choose when to talk and confide in them:

> I let him live his life as he thought best, so it was right that he should have his own experiences and live through his conflicts. Because a person has to reach awareness by himself and so I stood at the window watching, but I was quite serene because I've always believed in him, so I had no fear, it was just a matter of time. (father, 57)

The choice of this strategy reflects the priority these parents give to their child's wishes and the trust they have in their relationship with them.

Two other strategies involved a more active role on the part of the parents: the invitation to communicate and the explicit request for clarification. The former regards those parents who, despite reiterating the need to respect their children's own time and space, say that they offered them various opportunities to confide in them about their difficulties:

> I would go up to his room and say, "when you need to talk I'm here", and he always said, "yes, mum, I know". Maybe I am being presumptuous, but I think we both automatically knew, it is enough to look each other in the eye to understand certain things. When I asked that question, it was to do with his homosexuality, so he had understood, and I had understood. (mother, 46)

In the second case, what prevails is the parental desire to obtain confirmation, inasmuch as the parent perceives a threat to their relationship with their child and so the tension is unbearable:

> I banged my fist on the table at dinner, making him angry, and I said to him: "I'm sorry, but there is something wrong. You know you can tell us anything good or bad, who you like, who you don't like, any trouble you get into you have to tell us about, not people outside, because the only people in the world who can help you because they love you are us" so I said to him: "my treasure, what have you been up to?" In other words, there was a wall, and I didn't like that wall and I had to knock it down. (mother, 47)

No suspicion

At the other end of the continuum, there were parents who said they had never suspected anything about their child's sexual orientation who were concerned to justify their ignorance by referring to their children's own statements that they were in a heterosexual relationship or had had one in the past:

> She had had two boyfriends in the eighth grade. She realised she was homosexual when she was in ninth grade and she managed to tell me right away. But if she herself only came to realise it later, how was I supposed to have realised sooner? (mother, 43)

In this case, the sexual orientation is represented as a discovery made by the children too, like a stage in their development. Any lack of awareness on the part of the parent is thus not seen as a shortcoming or a sign of lack of interest in their child, but as due to them not knowing what was going on.

Coming out between liberation and shock

This theme gathers together parents' accounts of how their children told them about their sexual orientation, which mostly occurred directly, a finding in line with the literature (Barbagli & Colombo, 2007; Chrisler, 2017):

According to the narratives of our participants, coming out was a disruptive experience, whose significance was liberating for the child and for some of the parents, whereas for other parents, the overriding memory was the emotional shock they experienced in that situation.

Liberation for child and parents

As regards the children, the liberation consisted in resolving their internal emotional distress, which until that moment had manifested itself as a psycho-physical malaise. In fact, coming out enabled the child to regain possession in public of their true nature, which the parent had already guessed about and which "it was not worth keeping hidden" because it caused the child to suffer from feeling forced to hide something. Instead of breaking up the old order, the coming out is therefore presented by the parents as the reestablishment of an order, one now consistent with the parental hunch.

In fact, most of the parents emphasized that they had noticed various signs of distress in their children before they came out, which parents interpreted as being due to their children's increasing awareness of their sexual orientation and the difficulty of keeping it hidden:

> That year, my daughter had lost a lot of weight, she wasn't well, she also had a bit of anxiety. To call them panic attacks would be going too far, but certainly a bit of anxiety. I don't think there's anyone who realises they're homosexual and is happy about it. I think there's always a moment of panic. (mother, 43)

> The fact of hiding something so important from us didn't make him happy, he didn't feel free because when he was at home he always had to pretend to be something he wasn't. Trying to behave like someone you are not is difficult, especially at home. (father, 45)

In these narratives, the child seems either to share or to be aware of their parents' heteronormative expectations, and this justifies the concern and fear of showing their true self. The coming out experience thus constitutes a fundamental caesura between an old and a new identity, which enables the child to free himself from the suffering associated with concealment and to express him/herself in a truly authentic form:

> He has always said to me that the very moment he said it to me it was like he was saying to himself, "Marco, you're gay"; it was the beginning of a new life, do you understand? In the sense that until he accepted himself, he was denying it to himself too. As soon as he said it to me, his life began from then on, it seemed to me that from that day on he became more beautiful because it was like he'd been carrying a burden for such a long time. (mother, 44)

Also for some of our parents, the coming out was a liberating experience associated with positive emotions of joy and relief because their child was able to reveal that secret which the parent had had their suspicions about for so long.

> I hugged her and said, "it was time you told me, I've been waiting for ages, at least this way you get rid of all that weight you've been carrying around on your own". It was as if I had got rid of a burden too when he told me, I felt such great joy, it was lovely. (mother, 45)

Parental shock

In other cases, a feeling of shock prevails. Parents who had not suspected their child's sexual orientation explain this feeling as a reaction of surprise when faced with an unexpected event, while others link it to the difficulty of facing this new reality, due to heteronormative beliefs:

> It's news that shocks you, you're shocked. Because it's a bit like when they say to you: look, your child has an illness, do you understand? "Blimey, so things won't work out the way I thought they would" (mother, 48)

> Obviously it was a shock for me and my husband because we weren't expecting anything like that. It was the surprise that caused the shock, it wasn't a negative shock, but the thing was unexpected, it really was a million miles away from my expectations (mother, 63)

Strategies for managing the relationship with children

Despite the varying significance of the emotional impact, the parents' behavior, as they reconstructed it in the interviews, was always guided by the wish not to upset their child and took two main forms: either reassuring them, or doing nothing so as to avoid making a mistake.

More specifically, those parents who emphasized that their child was restless and irritable during the coming out explained that they reacted by reassuring them, regardless of their own emotions about the situation; those who felt unprepared for the situation and, more generally, for the reality of homosexuality, preferred to remain silent and wait for their son to take control of the situation:

> My reaction was to acknowledge his suffering. Seeing that he was shaking, crying and everything. I immediately reassured him, I said to him "treasure, you haven't done anything wrong, you haven't killed anyone, it's not a problem for us", then I hugged him, we all three hugged each other, we started to cry but it was a moment when we freed ourselves of something. (mother, 57)

> I said, "I don't want to say anything because I still have to understand, I wouldn't want to say something that might offend you, let's leave things as they are for now and later on you can tell me calmly what you feel, what I still don't know, you're the one who has to explain to me, I'm not the one who has to say something to you, because I don't know anything". (mother, 51)

In this theme, as in the previous one, we see a parental duty driven by concern for the child, which in this case leads to putting one's own emotional experience in the background and focusing on protecting those perceived as being in difficulty or at risk.

The complex elaboration of coming out

This theme brings together parents' discourse about the efforts they made over time to understand their child's new reality subsequent to coming out. The process is continuous, gradual and complex.

Awareness of limited knowledge and heteronormative expectations

On the one hand, it is hindered by their perception of having a limited knowledge of the LGB world, which is seen as creating tension in their relationship with their child, since they no longer know how to relate to him:

> Since he came out to us, we've been on a journey too, because you have to discover a world you don't know. You know it exists, but you have never set foot in this world. I didn't know how to behave, how to relate to him. We did get there in the end, but it was a bit difficult to begin with. (father, 51)

At the same time, for some parents, there was still some emotional difficulty involved in letting go those heteronormative expectations which had formed the basis of their identity as parents:

> The first ten days were a bit difficult, I never let it weigh on him in the sense that I tried not to let him see the burden I was carrying inside. However, those first few days were a bit traumatic for me. I went to work and cried at work. I was very tense because you start thinking about things you've never thought about before, like, I thought to myself, I'll never become a grandmother. (mother, 44)

The parents' elaboration of their child's coming out is, therefore, a non-linear path, along which a ball of yarn made up of uncertainties, fears and internal conflicts is gradually unrolled and which is focused on three aspects, corresponding to three sub-themes: attributing causes to their child's sexual orientation, identifying the identity traits of gay people and developing future expectations.

Attribution of causes to the child's sexual orientation

As regards the first sub-theme, the prevailing view among the parents is that "it's nature that made him that way". This fits in neatly with the suspicions they had, is consistent with the pre-coming out evidence, and helps to frame the child's well-being subsequent to their coming out:

> He didn't choose to be gay, he was born that way, it wasn't a choice, just like I didn't choose to be straight. (mother, 53)

By using this attribution, the parents avoid questioning themselves and the coming out is confirmed as the act thanks to which the child can finally be him/herself.

In a smaller number of cases, however, the origin of the child's sexual orientation is attributed to external events, with regard to which the parents may also have feelings of personal guilt. For example, there was a case of a mother who was convinced that her son is gay because of her inability to be an adequate caregiver:

> If I'd been a warm, caring mother, he would have had a different relationship with women, basically, I knew it was a fault of mine that he hadn't developed emotionally in an adequate way. And obviously that's something that causes me a lot of suffering. (mother, 57)

Another mother associated the lack of a father figure with her daughter's lesbian identity, claiming that the daughter was compensating for this absence by taking on characteristics and roles which her mother attributed to masculinity:

> For a while, I thought that not having a male figure as a point of reference because of the lack of her father it made her take on a bit of that element, that there might well be some confusion of roles, and that she felt that she had to accept that role and look after others. (mother, 45)

Regardless of the attribution that parents develop, childhood is identified as a crucial period in which the child's true nature begins to reveal itself, or in which the events that will condition their future development take place. This representation of childhood can result from the popularization of psychological theories and shows that the social construction of an object, in this case homosexuality, takes place within a complex system of representations.

Identification of typical traits of gay people

The sub-theme regarding identity characteristics brings together the stereotypical traits of gay people to which parents referred, seeing their gay sons, for example, as being interested in cosmetics and beauty products:

> They are not strange monsters, they're like me and you, it's just that they fall in love with whoever they want, but being homosexual, it's normal that he should be a bit effeminate. For example, he was taken on by Sephora as a make-up artist, so in your opinion, how can he be hetero? It's not that I want to discriminate, but in your opinion, a boy who likes to make people up, who likes make-up, who likes perfume and foundation cream, wouldn't you say he's gay? (mother, 44)

Expectations about the child's future in a dangerous context

As regards the sub-theme of future expectations, converging and diverging elements emerged among the participants. The converging elements had to do with the perception of a social context characterized by widespread homophobia and the prevalence of discriminatory practices in various spheres of social life. For parents, the stigma attached to gay/lesbian identity has a clear cultural origin and is linked, on the one hand, to the ongoing presence of gender stereotypes and on the other, to the significant role still played by the Catholic Church in Italy:

> There are so many people with a narrow, limited mentality because they aren't brought up properly, a boy can't wear pink, and parents talking among themselves say, "That child will be gay when he grows up because he plays with dolls", and these things have an effect on children, because children listen, and then automatically behave the same way. (mother, 47)

> Religion has made it so that homosexuality has to be hidden, they've inculcated us with the idea that homosexuality is wrong and so society has developed that way but homosexuality has always existed, they repressed it, but it's there, it's always been there (mother, 43)

Alongside this shared perception of the difficult social context, the difference that emerged in the interviews was that some parents gave more importance to their child's positive resources, which would allow him or her to respond effectively to the threats and challenges arising from the social context, while other parents expressed doubts and worries about their resilience:

> I see a bright future for him, his day-to-day reality is a continuous challenge, because since there are limitations on the part of society, it is obvious that they need to use the weapons they have, in his case, his intelligence. (father, 57)

> The biggest worry I had for my son was the fear of others, I didn't think she could handle that on her own. I think she was afraid of this too because there's still an awful lot of discrimination, especially among peers. (mother, 57)

Coping strategies

The analysis of this elaboration process of coming out also shows the specific coping strategies that parents used. The first strategy was connected to the idea of not knowing enough about the LGB world and consisted of trying to obtain information and knowledge by talking to their child, by reading books or watching films about the LGB world.

For example, the mother quoted below describes a training strategy that enabled her to see her son differently, with fresh eyes, and get closer to his emotional world, while the father describes how watching a film his son had recommended helped them move on from stereotypes about gayness and get a glimpse of a "world" they had previously known nothing about:

> I kept up-to-date on things, I did some reading up, and gradually I began to discover things, together with him, he was discovering himself and I was discovering my son. I'd say to him, "Whatever you're feeling, you tell me, because I need to understand, explain to me what it means, explain to me what you feel, what you see, because I need to learn together with you". (mother, 63)

> Until you actually know about something, you go on what you've heard other people say, then one evening he took us to this event where they were showing a film about this homosexual boy whose parents didn't accept him and so he let us into this world, his world, through that film show. (father, 51)

What parents would like is to become "experts" on the subject: on the one hand, this highlights the effort they feel they have to make in order to get closer to their child, but at the same time it indicates that a distance continues to exist which in order to be filled, needs a codified apparatus outside themselves. Books, newspaper articles and films therefore constitute useful cultural resources and talking points thanks to which these parents get to know paradigmatic stories about LGB sexual orientation, such as those of the protagonists of films and novels, which then become interpretative models for understanding their own reality. In this sense, the risk is a new kind of stereotyping, based on the adherence to models found in literature, film and the news, which offers a ready-made solution to the need of parents to give a well-defined form to the problem they are facing—how to understand what their child's homosexuality means—but does not safeguard their child's unique individuality and her/his personal development.

Another coping strategy was focused on satisfying the need for social and emotional support which these parents felt when dealing with the new situation brought about by their child's coming out: this consisted in talking to someone they trust in order to share their experience and receive advice and opinions:

> I needed to talk to my girlfriends because I really didn't know how to behave and maybe I also wanted some sympathy because I didn't feel very well equipped except for my common sense and my maternal feelings (mother, 46)

A third strategy is avoidance, a conscious, deliberate closing in on oneself with the purpose of managing one's stress as well as possible:

> Our worry was how to face him, how to talk to him, but in the end, I didn't ask anyone for advice, probably because I didn't think that the people around me were able to accept my son, whereas my husband didn't want to read anything, he had to do a lot of work on himself. (mother, 54)

After the coming out: forms of acceptance and change

This theme brings together the discourses about accepting the child's new identity and the resulting change in the parental role and relationship with the child. Acceptance can range over a spectrum that includes different positions: a negative attitude that remains thus, a form of resigned acceptance and also complete acceptance.

No acceptance

At one end of the spectrum are those accounts from parents whose negative emotional reaction to their offspring's coming out persists: the heteronormative expectations prevail, and the parent sees their child's new identity as a violation of these expectations, which justifies their feelings of loss. For example, one mother who thinks her son's gay sexual orientation is an illness categorically refuses to accept his new identity and is convinced that she can help him get better through therapy:

> I felt terrible the month after he came out. If I have to say, "You're fine the way you are", no, that's not what I think. It is like saying "Do you accept that your son has caught the flu?" You accept it, how can you refute a fact? You can't refute it, but if my son has the flu, I treat him. (mother, 57)

Another mother describes the efforts she and her husband made over a period of months to delegitimise their son's gay identity, and she attributes these efforts to being worried about a social context she perceived as discriminatory:

> There was a little bit of tension, especially in the first few months after he came out. I remember once there was a young girl, and I knew she liked him, and so I said to him, " You know that girl" and he said to me, "Mum, why do you keep saying these things?" and I said "Because it's not easy for you to live here, you know, you'll have to go a long way away, actually, go away now!" My husband kept insisting too, for a while he kept saying, "Try with a girl". (mother, 54)

Acceptance: resigned or full

The moral imperative to preserve their child's well-being and happiness was what lay behind the resigned acceptance expressed by some interviewees, even if this meant sacrificing their previous parental expectations and continuing emotional suffering:

> You say to yourself, "He won't have a normal life", "I won't be a grandmother", but actually these doubts exist for everyone, and so I started to get used to the idea, I said to myself "Who cares?" the important thing is that he is healthy, that he is happy, that he finds his way in life, that he does not take strange paths. I didn't immediately accept the fact that he wears make-up. Even today, it still has a strong impact on me, which in my opinion is inevitable. (mother, 44)

Most of the participants, however, said that they completely accepted their child's coming out. They describe having found a new balance through a process of normalization, thanks to which their son's sexual orientation is no longer a problem:

> Over time, I realised that it was not this big problem because I could see that Alessio was still my Alessio, the lovely person he was. Let's say that the moment he opened up to us and told us what he was, he started living life normally. I would have followed him a priori, irrespective of whether he was gay or not. Anyway, our path gradually became normal. (mother, 53)

Impact on parental identity: subtraction or enrichment

Varying positions emerged in our interviews also in regard to the changes which come about in parental identity: for some of our participants there was no change; others described a change that either took the form of a loss or a kind of enrichment.

In the former case, participants were not aware of any change in their identity as parents, since in their experience, the integration of their child's new identity did not require any particular effort. The new reality had been normalized from the beginning and thus caused no particular tensions:

> It had no impact on me as a parent, I didn't have to work on myself to say I accept or I don't accept, because for me it's a completely normal thing, so I didn't have to make any kind of change. (mother, 46)

Change taking the form of loss, on the other hand, was what characterized those parents who described their resigned acceptance. Their own working through of the process of coming out is described as a pathway in which changes occurred at the identity level, through dynamics of subtraction: the parent had to let go of their previous expectations for the sake of their child, process their feelings of loss and gradually abandon their beliefs and fears:

> For me it would be strange for a parent to immediately say, "Oh that's okay, no problem, everything's fine". It's not simple for a parent because the moment your child is born, and they tell you it's a boy, you have a label there, and you carry that label inside you unconsciously, and when that label is taken away, you say, "Oh dear, now everything's different" and the moment he tells you he's gay, you think, "I'm not going to be a grandmother anymore", you start saying "Things won't be like that".(mother, 44)

For about half of the parents, on the other hand, finding out about their child's LGB orientation led to a positive change in their parental identity. These parents describe their child's coming out as an opportunity for personal growth, thanks to this discovery of a new reality. These parents therefore describe themselves as having been enriched because the experience they went through helped them to understand different realities from their own and reflect on the existence of minorities that need to be protected:

> It was a great lesson to experience my daughter's homosexuality, and it still is now. It helped me to understand diversity, and it also made me think a lot about people who judge others, about people who are afraid of certain things, about people who are so obtuse. (mother, 48)

Even for the mother who would like her son to have reparative therapy, coming out was seen as bringing about a positive change in her own parental identity, inasmuch as finding out about her son's sexual orientation encouraged her to get treatment herself so to persuade her son to do the same:

> I went back into therapy for him, because I'd lost hope for myself, but my son's homosexuality pushed me to look after myself, because it brought home to me things that I was aware of but tried not to take into consideration. (mother, 57)

The development of positive relationships

Finally, in terms of their relationship with their child, most parents said that it had developed in a positive, constructive direction. They explain how their relationship with their child has become more intimate and complicit, how their child confides in them more, also about her/his relationships, precisely because they can finally show their true self:

> We've always had a good relationship, but we've definitely become more complicit, seeing that I immediately accepted her homosexuality, she's realised that she can tell me anything without being afraid. (mother, 43)

Those parents who reported not having experienced any change explained that the coming out did not in any way threaten the level of understanding they already had with their child. It was the very strength of the relationship that enabled the parent to be aware of their child's sexual orientation even before he or she came out:

> Nothing has changed because the relationship between mother and child cannot change. It would have changed if I hadn't wanted to accept something like that. He needed time to mull things over, I knew and respected that. The moment he liberated himself, I liberated myself too. (mother, 44).

In such cases, the complete acceptance on the part of the parent, and the fact that no effort was required for them to normalize their child's LGB identity meant that they see their relationship as being unconnected to their child's sexual orientation.

Discussion

This discussion is organized into three paragraphs. In the first, we show that, on a more general level, the themes we have identified correspond with Chrisler's (2017) theoretical model. This result fills a gap in the literature since that model was elaborated based on studies conducted only in a US context (except for one in Taiwan) and involving participants engaged in LGB associative networks. Thus, our research helps to extend the field of application of Chrisler's model to different cultural contexts and to parents who were not engaged in associationism.

In the second paragraph, the discussion explores the connection between our results and the Italian context, in order to understand how the parental experience of coming out is influenced by certain features typical of Italian family culture and the presence of discriminatory beliefs and practices toward LGB minorities that are still unfortunately widespread in our country. This discussion allows us to grasp those cultural specificities in the meaning-making process that

can offer a better understanding of the Italian context in which studies on the same topic are so scarce.

In the third paragraph, we aim to point out how our results can offer indications for an intervention aimed at fostering better acceptance of their child's sexual orientation, even for parents who are not involved in the network of LGB associations, such as those who participated in this study. In this way, we hope to help build strategies and tools that might reach a more marginal, isolated population than the one usually involved in studies on the topic.

A confirmation of Chrisler's model extending its field of application

The analysis identified four themes, each corresponding to different moments in the parent's experience.

Our first theme was "the continuum of suspicion", which brings together parents' discourses relating to the period before their child's revelation. This continuum is seen as a spectrum, which besides ranging from suspicion to non-suspicion, also includes references to anomalies in their child's behavior that the parents say they noticed, even though they were not considered to be indicators of their child's sexual orientation at the time. These findings are supported by Chrisler (2017), although his model presents the question of suspicion as a dichotomy, namely as presence or absence of suspicion. As envisaged in Chrisler's (2017) theoretical model, the suspicion stems from pre-coming out evidence that defies the parent's gender expectations, such as a lack of interest in mixing with people of the opposite sex or the presence of counter-stereotypical character traits.

Parents who claim to have suspected that their child was gay/lesbian or identified anomalies in their child's behavior before they came out, explain that they used strategies to resolve perceived tension and satisfy their desire to know things, which Chrisler calls "uncertainty reduction activities" (2017).

The second theme was "the coming out between liberation and shock", and brings together the parents' narratives about when their child told them there were gay/lesbian and corresponds to the "parental response" phase described by Chrisler (2017).

The third theme was "the complex elaboration of coming out", and it brings together parents' descriptions of how their perspective developed regarding their child's new identity. This elaboration takes place slowly, gradually and at times arduously, through the use of coping mechanisms that allow them to deal with the difficulties. This process corresponds to Chrisler's (2017) appraisal phase, in which parents assess whether the new information conflicts with their beliefs and values (primary appraisal) and at the same time, decide whether they can cope with this newness (secondary appraisal). Our results show that this elaboration process revolves around three main issues: the attribution of causes to the child's sexual orientation, the identification of gay identity traits and the development of future expectations. With regard to coping, the positive behavioral coping strategies (Chrisler, 2017) that were implemented were aimed at finding solutions to parents' needs for information and emotional support. Participants engaged in proactive behavior in order to increase their knowledge of the LGB world, consulting various information sources and discussing their doubts or difficulties with people they considered trustworthy. Stress management in some cases was also facilitated by a cognitive and behavioral avoidance strategy (Chrisler, 2017), which consisted of avoiding talking about the issue of coming out: this strategy was implemented when the prevailing perception was that adequate social and informational resources were not available.

The fourth theme, which was "forms of acceptance and change", brings together parents' medium-term reactions, describing how they positioned themselves regarding their child's new identity. Acceptance ranged along a continuum that includes a permanent state of shock when heteronormative expectations dominate and the initial negative emotional experience in the parent consequently persists; resigned acceptance, when these expectations are replaced by the moral imperative of the good parent who forgives the disappointment for their child's sake; and

finally full acceptance, which corresponds to the normalization of the child's identity. This continuum of acceptance has similarities with the final component of Chrisler's (2017) model, called "reappraisal", in which parents change their initial assessments of what it means to have an LGB child, creating new meanings, identities and relationships.

As indicated above, therefore, our themes can be framed within Chrisler's theoretical model. This enables us to take that model as an appropriate general frame for understanding parental reactions to coming out, even from a comparative perspective.

Putting narratives in context: parental experiences and socio-cultural dynamics in Italy

In this section, we describe some features of our results that cut across the four themes, and that can be better understood when seen in relationship with specific characteristics of the Italian context.

The first feature concerns positioning oneself as a good parent who has a great capacity to listen and care for the child and is guided by the moral duty to put the child's needs before one's parental concerns. We find it expressed in reference to parental intuition, thanks to which the participants explain that they had realized their child's sexual orientation, which had not yet been revealed (theme 1), in reference to the need to preserve their child's well-being even if this means giving up their own expectations (theme 2) and in the resigned acceptance of a part of the parents, who are driven by the desire to preserve their child's happiness at the expense of their suffering (theme 4). Italy is a family-based society, as demonstrated, for example, by the fact that children leave the family home much later than their peers in other Western countries (Baiocco et al., 2015). Family culture is characterized by a high emphasis on the values of emotional closeness and solidarity between family members (Putnick et al., 2012; Pivetti et al., 2012), so much so that the mothering style has been described in some studies as excessively warm (Bombi et al., 2011). Within this framework, a fundamental parental duty is to support one's children, as thrown into relief by some cross-cultural studies showing a greater tendency for Italian parents to adopt a protective style toward their children (Frigerio et al., 2021; Putnick et al., 2012). This need to protect is all the more pressing, the more the context outside the family is perceived as threatening.

In fact, a second feature that cuts across the themes is the parents' perception of the social context. It is precisely their concern about the widespread homophobia in Italian society that according to some parents, lies at the basis of their difficulty in positively processing their child's coming out (theme 3) and accepting his/her new identity (theme 4). This parental concern is corroborated by several studies, which indicate the presence of a widespread level of stigma toward gay and lesbian people that negatively differentiates Italy in Europe (Ioverno et al., 2016). Gay and lesbian people experience segregation and discrimination in various contexts: school, sports environments, the workplace, the health system and at different levels: legal, social and institutional.

According to the participants, one of the factors that accounts for the closed nature of the Italian cultural context is the important role played by the Catholic church' (theme 3). This interpretation appears to be confirmed by several studies that have dealt with the issue (Lingiardi et al., 2016). The Catholic church has always played a very influential role in the Italian public debate, particularly on matters that concern moral dimensions, and is the standard-bearer of a traditional, conservative culture about gender roles and sexuality that supports both negative attitudes toward these sexual minorities and specific limitations on their rights, for example to marriage or adoption (Rosati et al., 2020; Montali et al., 2022). In recent years, some more open attitudes have begun to emerge within the church on these issues; in particular, the current pope has repeatedly stated that the church has to accept gay and lesbian people. However, these positive changes, which are also a result of the actions of associations of LGBQ + Catholics, are still of limited scope overall.

The cis-heterosexism and cis-heteronormativity of Italian culture (Baiocco & Pistella, 2019; Rosati et al., 2020) are reflected in the third feature that cuts across our themes, namely parents'

heteronormative expectations. Parents refer to these expectations to explain the origin of their suspicion about their child's identity (theme 1); they cite them to justify the shock following their child's declaration about their sexual orientation (theme 2). These expectations constitute an obstacle in elaborating the child's new identity, which explains the lack of parental acceptance (theme 4). The essentialisation of GLB sexual orientation (theme 1) also falls under this issue.

This essentialisation appears to have a positive value in that, for example, it allows parents to distance themselves from the idea that their child's sexual orientation is a problem that can be remedied through psychological interventions (with only one exception among our participants). At the same time, however, this perspective is part of a binary vision of sexual orientations, which overshadows the fluidity that can characterize them. Therefore, coming out does not necessarily represent an act through which the binary and heteronormative structure that characterizes the hegemonic culture of gender relations is broken down.

The last feature that cuts across the four themes is the capacity to embrace change, which emerges in a significant part of the parental narratives. It can be found in the perception of coming out as a liberation that allows the child to reveal their identity (theme 2), in the desire to inform oneself to understand this new identity better and free oneself from one's heteronormative expectations (theme 3) and in the narratives of those parents who declare their full acceptance of their child's coming out and in turn feel that this process has also led them to change, discovering that they too have been enriched and are more capable of understanding the value of the difference (theme 4). Our data indicate that for some of our participants, their child coming out triggered a process of change in their beliefs that was reflected in their acceptance of this new identity and their relationship with the child. What these narratives and positioning reflect is a process of change that is also taking place in Italian society. Despite its continuing narrow-mindedness, in the Italian context too, the demands represented by the LGBT + community are more clearly visible than in the recent past. These demands have also led to some legislative changes: for example, the law on civil unions, which has extended some rights that were hitherto denied.

Practical implications: reaching an under-researched community

Our study aims to help fill a gap in the current literature on the topic, predominantly based on studies with participants engaged in associations of parents with LGB children. As crucial as these groups are in promoting a positive culture on the topic, the number of people involved in them is still limited. Therefore, it is worth extending the research to people not part of such groups because they may have specific experiences and needs.

In particular, one issue that emerged from our data is that of the individualization of coming out and sexual orientation, which remained a domestic issue confined within the family walls, and did not lead to activism on the part of the parent except for the search for more information on this topic. On the one hand, there is a clear awareness of the existence of a discriminatory cultural and social context; at the same time, this awareness is expressed exclusively in terms of concerns about the individual fate of the child and does not become an issue that can be dealt with through social mobilization aimed at extending rights.

The aim is, therefore, to work at the political and cultural level to emphasize the social dimension of these issues. Educational programmes should be developed at all levels of the school and university system focusing on the importance of extending the social rights of minorities and respecting self-affirmation of one's sexual and gender orientation. It is thus necessary to multiply the initiatives already in place in order to gradually reach broader and wider sections of society. As researchers working in academia, we are committed to fostering the spread of these initiatives and will continue to work in this direction.

The narratives we analyzed also showed a pressing need on the part of these parents to share and compare their experience with others because of the social isolation that many of them experience regarding the issue of their children's LGB identity. As other authors have recently

indicated (Carbone et al., 2022), there is a need to foster the establishment of local support groups based on peer-to-peer confrontation in which these parents can mirror themselves and find informational, emotional and social resources that enable them to overcome their difficulties and encourage positive processing of their experiences. These groups can focus on building networks of alliances as a possible deterrent to the fear and shame that can inhibit these parents.

Limitations and future developments

This research has some limitations, which may provide useful indications for future research developments. A first limitation is that we only recruited parents who did not seek help from support groups and are not active in the LGB association world. On the one hand, this gave us the opportunity to explore a specific perspective which has received less attention in the literature, but at the same time, it excluded from the study the experience of those parents who, subsequent to their child coming out, became aware of the need for collective action in defence of homosexual rights.

A second limitation concerns the sexual and gender orientations we considered. Most participants had cisgender gay children: there were few parents with lesbian daughters, and only one had a bisexual daughter.

Other studies have included parents of transsexual and queer children, thus reconstructing a broader reading of the issue. One further limitation has to do with the sensitivity of the topic: asking a parent to talk about such a personal family experience can produce socially desirable responses. In this sense, answers showing particular openness to homosexuality may be due to a fear of being judged negatively and the desire to present a positive self-image, whereas negative reactions and experiences may be more difficult to express. In our research, however, there were also narratives from parents who expressed their difficulties in accepting their child's coming out, and the variety of attitudes and positions expressed in the interviews seems to us a good indication of the quality of our data. A limitation of the data analysis is that it focused only on shared meanings and experiences while omitting the unique and distinctive ones. A final limitation concerns the limited number of parents interviewed, similar to that of other qualitative research on the same subject. This prevents us from generalizing the results, but in our perspective, this is compensated for by the richness and depth of the results themselves.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest

References

Adams, T. E. (2011). *Narrating the closet: An autoethnography of same-sex attraction*. Routledge.

Aveline, D. (2006). Did I have blinders on or what?" Retrospective sense making by parents of gay sons recalling their sons' earlier years. *Journal of Family Issues*, *27*(6), 777–802. https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X05285613

Baiocco, R., Fontanesi, L., Santamaria, F., Ioverno, S., Marasco, B., Baumgartner, E., Willoughby, B. L. B., & Laghi, F. (2015). Negative parental responses to coming out and family functioning in a sample of lesbian and gay young adults. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, *24*(5), 1490–1500. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-014-9954-z

Baiocco, R., & Pistella, J. (2019). "Be as You Are" clinical research center at the Sapienza University of Rome. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Mental Health*, *23*(4), 376–379. https://doi.org/10.1080/19359705.2019.1644572

Baptist, J. A., & Allen, K. R. (2008). A family's coming out process: Systemic change and multiple realities. *Contemporary Family Therapy*, *30*(2), 92–110. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10591-008-9057-3

Barbagli, M., & Colombo, A. (2007). *Omosessuali moderni: gay e lesbiche in Italia*. Il Mulino.

Benozzo, A. (2013). Coming out of the *credenza*: An Italian celebrity unveils his 'new' gay self. *Sexualities*, *16*(3-4), 336–360. https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460713479750

Benozzo, A., Pizzorno, M. C., Bell, H., & Koro-Ljungberg, M. (2015). Coming out, but into what? Problematising discursive variations of revealing the gay self in the workplace. *Gender, Work & Organization*, *22*(3), 292–306. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12081

Bertone, C., & Franchi, M. (2008). Family Matters. Supporting Families to Prevent Violence Against Gay and Lesbian Youth. European Conference. Florence, 20–21 June 2008. Conference proceedings

Bombi, A. S., Pastorelli, C., Bacchini, D., Di Giunta, L., Miranda, M. C., & Zelli, A. (2011). Attributions and attitudes of mothers and fathers in Italy. *Parenting, Science and Practice*, *11*(2-3), 129–141. https://doi.org/10.1080/15295192.2011.585557

Borheck, M. (1993). *Coming Out to Parents*. Pilgrim Press.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101. [Database] https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2012). Thematic analysis. In H. Cooper, P. M. Camic, D. L. Long, A. T. Panter, D. Rindskopf, & K. J. Sher (Eds.), *APA handbook of research methods in psychology, Vol. 2. Research designs: Quantitative, qualitative, neuropsychological, and biological* (pp. 57–71). American Psychological Association.

Carbone, A., Pistella, J., Gennaro, A., Petrocchi, C., & Baiocco, R. (2022). Parental Experiences of Coming Out: From "Un-doing Family Bonds" to "Family Generativity. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 1–23. https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2022.2048334

Chambers, S. A. (2003). Telepistemology of the Closet; or the Queer Politics of" Six Feet Under. *The Journal of American Culture*, *26*(1), 24–41. https://doi.org/10.1111/1542-734X.00071

Charoensap-Kelly, P., Mestayer, C. L., & Knight, G. B. (2020). To come out or not to come out: Minority religious identity self-disclosure in the United States workplace. *Management Communication Quarterly*, *34*(2), 213–250. https://doi.org/10.1177/0893318919890072

Chirrey, D. A. (2003). I hereby come out': What sort of speech act is coming out? *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, *7*(1), 24–37. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9481.00209

Chrisler, A. J. (2017). Understanding parent reactions to coming out as lesbian, gay, or bisexual: A theoretical framework. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, *9*(2), 165–181. https://doi.org/10.1111/jftr.12194

Clarke, V., & Peel, E. (Eds.). (2007). *Out in psychology: Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer perspectives.* John Wiley & Sons.

Colucci, F. P., & Montali, L. (2008). Comparative application of two methodological approaches to the analysis of discourses. *International Journal of Multiple Research Approaches*, *2*(1), 57–70. https://doi.org/10.5172/mra.455.2.1.57

Conley, C. L. (2011). Learning about a child's gay or lesbian sexual orientation: Parental concerns about societal rejection, loss of loved ones, and child well being. *Journal of Homosexuality*, *58*(8), 1022–1040. https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2011.598409

Frigerio, A., Montali, L., Anzani, A., & Prunas, A. (2021). We'll Accept Anything, as Long as She Is Okay": Italian Parents' Narratives of Their Transgender Children's Coming-out. *Journal of GLBT Family Studies*, *17*(5), 432–449. https://doi.org/10.1080/1550428X.2021.1932005

Frost, D. M., Hammack, P. L., Wilson, B. D., Russell, S. T., Lightfoot, M., & Meyer, I. H. (2020). The qualitative interview in psychology and the study of social change: Sexual identity development, minority stress, and health in the generations study. *Qualitative Psychology (Washington, D.C.)*, *7*(3), 245–266. https://doi.org/10.1037/qup0000148

Gonzalez, K. A., Rostosky, S. S., Odom, R. D., & Riggle, E. D. (2013). The positive aspects of being the parent of an LGBTQ child. *Family Process*, *52*(2), 325–337. https://doi.org/10.1111/famp.12009

Gross, L. (2001). *Up from invisibility: Lesbians, gay men, and the media in America*. Columbia University Press.

Hegna, K. (2007). Coming out, coming into what? Identification and risks in the 'coming out' story of a Norwegian late adolescent gay man. *Sexualities*, *10*(5), 582–602. https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460707083170

Herman, D. (2003). Bad Girls changed my life": Homonormativity in a women's prison drama. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, *20*(2), 141–159. https://doi.org/10.1080/07393180302779

Herman, D. (2005). I'm gay': Declarations, desire, and coming out on prime-time television. *Sexualities*, *8*(1), 7–29. https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460705049572

Ioverno, S., Nardelli, N., Baiocco, R., Orfano, I., & Lingiardi, V. (2016). Homophobia, Schooling, and the Italian Context. In *Sexual orientation, gender identity, and schooling* (pp. 354–374). Oxford University Press.

Jaspal, R. (2019). Why a Social Psychology of Gay Men? In *The social psychology of gay men* (pp. 3–15). Palgrave Pivot.

Lingiardi, V., Nardelli, N., Ioverno, S., Falanga, S., Di Chiacchio, C., Tanzilli, A., & Baiocco, R. (2016). Homonegativity in Italy: Cultural issues, personality characteristics, and demographic correlates with negative attitudes toward lesbians and gay men. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, *13*(2), 95–108. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13178-015-0197-6

Mason-Schrock, D. (1996). Transsexuals' narrative construction of the" true self. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, *59*(3), 176–192. https://doi.org/10.2307/2787018

Mena, J. A., & Vaccaro, A. (2013). Tell me you love me no matter what: Relationships and self-esteem among GLBQ young adults. *Journal of GLBT Family Studies*, *9*(1), 3–23. https://doi.org/10.1080/1550428X.2013.746052

Montali, L., Frigerio, A., Spina, F., & Zulato, E. (2022). The Discursive Construction of Polyamory: Legitimising an Alternative to Monogamy. *Sexuality & Culture*, 1–22.

Motschenbacher, H. (2019). Language and sexual normativity. In Rusty Barrett & Kira Hall, eds. *Oxford handbook of language and sexuality*. Oxford University Press.

Pivetti, M., Montali, L., & Simonetti, G. (2012). The discourse around usefulness, morality, risk and trust: a focus group study on prenatal genetic testing. *Prenatal Diagnosis*, *32*(12), 1205–1211. https://doi.org/10.1002/pd.3990

Plummer, K. (1995). *Telling sexual stories: Power, change and social worlds*. Routledge.

Putnick, D. L., Bornstein, M. H., Lansford, J. E., Chang, L., Deater-Deckard, K., Di Giunta, L., Gurdal, S., Dodge, K. A., Malone, P. S., Oburu, P., Pastorelli, C., Skinner, A. T., Sorbring, E., Tapanya, S., Uribe Tirado, L. M., Zelli, A., Alampay, L. P., Al-Hassan, S. M., Bacchini, D., & Bombi, A. S. (2012). Agreement in mother and father acceptance-rejection, warmth, and hostility/rejection/neglect of children across nine countries. *Cross-Cultural Research : official Journal of the Society for Cross-Cultural Research*, *46*(3), 191–223. https://doi.org/10.1177/1069397112440931

Ravel, B., & Rail, G. (2008). From straight to gaie? Quebec sportswomen's discursive constructions of sexuality and destabilisation of the linear coming out process. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, *32*(1), 4–23. https://doi.org/10.1177/0193723507312022

Ringer, R. J. (Ed.). (1994). *Queer words, queer images: Communication and the construction of homosexuality*. NYU Press.

Rosati, F., Pistella, J., Nappa, M. R., & Baiocco, R. (2020). The coming-out process in family, social, and religious contexts among young, middle, and older Italian LGBQ + adults. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *11*, 617217. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.617217

Ryan, C., Russell, S. T., Huebner, D., Diaz, R., & Sanchez, J. (2010). Family acceptance in adolescence and the health of LGBT young adults. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing : official Publication of the Association of Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Nurses, Inc*, *23*(4), 205–213. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1744-6171.2010.00246.x

Sandelowski, M., & Barroso, J. (2003). Classifying the findings in qualitative studies. *Qualitative Health Research*, *13*(7), 905–923. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732303253488

Sandler, E. T. (2022). An overview of coming out research: Introducing a three-lens typology. *Sociology Compass*, *16*(2), e12958. https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12958

Sedgwick, E. K. (1990). *Epistemology of the closet*. University of California Press.

Seidman, S., Meeks, C., & Traschen, F. (1999). Beyond the closet? The changing social meaning of homosexuality in the United States. *Sexualities*, *2*(1), 9–34. https://doi.org/10.1177/136346099002001002

Shugart, H. A. (2003). Reinventing privilege: The new (gay) man in contemporary popular media. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, *20*(1), 67–91. https://doi.org/10.1080/0739318032000067056

Tyler, T. R. (2015). Our story: The parent and LGBTQ child relational process. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services*, *27*(1), 17–45. https://doi.org/10.1080/10538720.2015.988313

Tyler, T. R., & Abetz, J. S. (2020). Relational turning points in the parent and LGBTQ child coming out process. *Journal of Family Studies*, 1–21. Q3

Vasquez del Aguila, E. (2012). ' God Forgives the Sin but Not the Scandal': Coming out in a transnational context–between sexual freedom and cultural isolation. *Sexualities*, *15*(2), 207–224. https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460711433751

Weeks, J. (1990). *Coming out*. Quartet Books.

Ward, J. (2007). *Sexualities, work and organisations*. Routledge.

Warren, C. A. (2002). Qualitative interviewing. In J.G. Gubrium & J.A. Holstein (Eds.), *Handbook of interview research: Context and method* (pp. 83–99). Sage.