**REP. OF TURKEY**

**TED UNIVERSITY**

**GRADUATE SCHOOL**

DEVELOPMENTAL FOCUSED CLINICAL CHILD AND ADOLESCENT
PSYCHOLOGY

**WHAT DO MOTHERS OF GAY YOUTH EXPERIENCE?
A QUALITATIVE STUDY**

DENİZ KORKMAZ

ANKARA, 2021

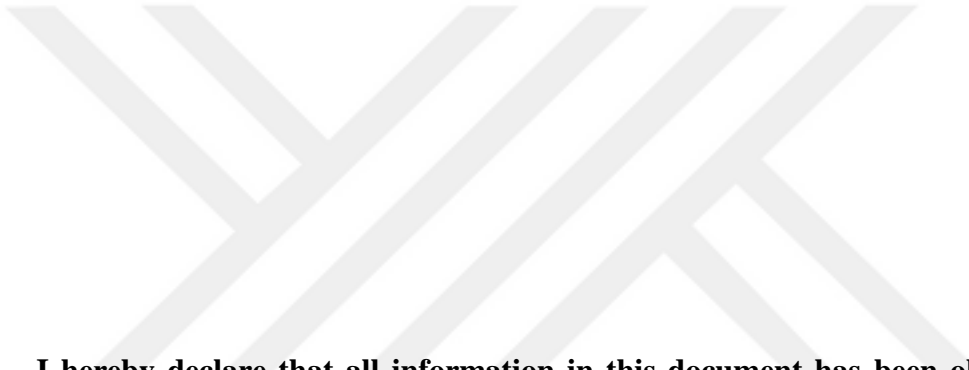WHAT DO MOTHERS OF GAY YOUTH EXPERIENCE? A QUALITATIVE
STUDY


A Thesis Submited To

The Graduate School

of

TED University


by


Deniz Korkmaz


In Partial Fulfillment of The Requirements

For

Master of Science

in

Developmental Focused Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology


ANKARA, 2021

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Name, Last name : Deniz Kormaz

Signature :

# ABSTRACT

WHAT DO MOTHERS OF GAY YOUTH EXPERIENCE? A QUALITATIVE
STUDY

Deniz Korkmaz

Master of Science, Developmental Focused Clinical Child and Adolescent
Psychology

Supervisor: Assoc. Prof. Dr. Ilgın GÖKLER DANIŞMAN

July, 2021

The main aim of the current study was examining parental experiences and the changes in the family system after young people who define themselves as gay explaining their sexual orientation to their parents in depth. A qualitative study was conducted to achieve this goal. The study sample consists of the mothers of six young people who define their sexual orientation as gay. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the mothers and the obtained data were analyzed with Grounded Theory. As a result of the analyses, the experiences of the mothers were gathered under three main themes. These are (1) pre-coming out experiences, (2) experiences during coming out, and (3) post-coming out experiences, respectively. These themes and the sub-themes they cover were compared with the findings in the literature and discussed from a system perspective.

Keywords: Coming Out, Family System, Adaptation Process, Grounded Theory

# ÖZET

## GEY GENÇLERİN ANNELERİ NELER DENEYİMLİYOR? NİTELİKSEL BİR ÇALIŞMA

Deniz Korkmaz

Master of Science, Gelişim Odaklı Klinik Çocuk ve Ergen Psikolojisi

Tez Yöneticisi: Doç. Dr. Ilgın GÖKLER DANIŞMAN

Temmuz, 2021

Bu tezin temel amacı; kendisini gey olarak tanımlayan gençlerin, cinsel yönelimlerini ebeveynlerine açıkladıktan sonra aile sisteminde yaşananları ve ebeveyn deneyimlerini derinlemesine incelemektir. Bu hedefe ulaşmak için nitel bir çalışama yürütülmüştür. Çalışma örneklemini cinsel yönelimini gey olarak tanımlayan 18-25 yaşları arasındaki altı gencin annesi oluşturmaktadır. Anneler ile yarı-yapılandırılmış görüşmeler gerçekleştirilmiş ve elde edilen veriler Gömülü Teori ile çözümlenmiştir. Analizler sonucunda annelerin deneyimleri üç üst tema altında toplanmıştır. Bunlar sırasıyla (1) açılma öncesi deneyimler, (2) açılma sırasındaki deneyimler ve (3) açılma sonrası deneyimlerdir. Söz konusu temalar literatürdeki bulgularla karşılaştırılmış ve sistem perspektifiyle tartışılmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Açılma, Aile Sistemi, Adaptasyon Süreci, Gömülü Teori

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# INTRODUCTION

The current study focuses on parental experiences and changes in the family system after young people's coming out. LGBTI+ individuals' disclosing their sexual orientation and/or gender identity to others is defined as "coming out". Coming out process is an important milestone for LGBTI+ in both constructing and internalizing their sexual identity. The reactions that the individuals receive after disclosure are predictive of their later adjustment. Therefore, the process of coming out does not only concern the individual but the environment as well. It is a fact that the process of coming out resonates in a familial and sociocultural context. Similar to the coming out process of LGBTI+ individuals, their families also go through the disclosure process to their own environment. Therefore, it would be unfair to consider the concept of coming out only at an individual level. During and after the disclosure process, cultural characteristics, family characteristics and values are as important as family members' individual characteristics. Therefore, in the current study sexual orientation will be addressed within the family context.

The context in which the current study was conducted can be understood from the reports of KAOS GL (An association fighting for the rights of LGBTI+s in Turkey). LGBTI+s in Turkey continue to be under increasing pressure due to their sexual orientation. They are not only subjected to pressure but they also have been exposed the violence of various types. As reported by KAOS GL (2019), hate speech, discriminatory language and prejudice in the media increased against LGBTI+ people between 2017 and 2019. In 2021, the situation is getting worse as a result of the government's segregation and rigid anti-LGBTI discourse. According to KAOS GL's (2017) hate crimes report, 117 respondents reported 267 human rights violations in 2017 alone. Fifty-eight of the 267 violations were attempted to murder, physical violence, gunshot wounds, rape or other sexual assaults. It was also reported that

LGBTI+ youth aged between 18-25 were exposed to hate crimes most. When KAOS GL's 2019 report was examined, 328 case reports were made by 150 people. The frequency order of reported cases are, respectively, hate speech, threats of violence, physical violence, sexual harassment and being followed. 46.43% of the people who reported actual attacks on the individual, including attempted murder, physical violence, gun injury, rape or sexual assault, identified their sexual orientation as gay. In the report, higher rates of hate crimes against gays were associated with both heterosexist ideology and easier distinction of gay identity. These findings indicate that being LGBTI+ or a family member of LGBTI+ is really challenging in Turkey. Also, coming out is not an easy process in an environment of violence and discrimination. Not only gay individuals but also their families are worried about revealing their children's sexual orientation to the others.

Same sex relations were considered as "psychopathological" in the past within the mental health literature. In recent years, LGBTI+ inclusive studies have been increasing in the psychology literature, as in other fields. Although same sex relations are not considered as deviance after the 70's, it still takes its place in the literature as a "difference" whose underlying reason should be investigated (TODAP, 2017). Today, psychology literature is influenced by the developments in other fields and it uses the concepts of "diversity" and "variety" instead of "difference". In fact, with the beginning of the sexual minority movement in the world and the increased visibility of sexual minorities, the field of psychology has started to transform. Despite this transformation, the visibility of LGBTI+s and their families in the academic field is still not sufficient. Moorefield, Few-Demo, Benson, Bible and Lummer (2017) reviewed top-ranked family journals between 2000 and 2015. Only 2.24% of published articles included or focused on the LGBTI+ population. It was also found that only 3.9% of the studies involving the LGBTI+ population were conducted with parents who had LGBTI+ children. Although the importance of parents in the pre- and post-disclosure period is highly critical, studies of parents of LGBTI+ are less than they should be in the literature. For instance, Bouris et.al. (2010) stated in their review that there was no study conducted with parents and consisted of parental perspective about children's sexual behavior, substance use, and violence/victimization. Even though

studies involving parents have been conducted after 2010, their number is still quite limited.

## 1.1. Sexual Orientation and Gender identity: Review of Concepts

It is noted that sexual orientation and gender identity are different concepts. Gender identity describes the people's evaluation of themselves as male-female or non-binary; whereas sexual orientation refers to which gender a person is emotionally and sexually attracted to (Johnson & Repta, 2012; Başar, 2013). In general, the concept of sexual orientation includes four types of attractions. These attractions are heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual and asexual. People's sexual orientation can be defined as heterosexual if they are attracted to someone of the opposite sex, homosexual if they are attracted to the same sex, bisexual if they are attracted to both sexes, and asexual if they are not attracted to any sex. On the other hand, gender identity is called trans or cis-gender, depending on whether the gender with which people define themselves and their biological sex are compatible. If it is not compatible, the person's gender identity is called trans.

In order to understand the difference between these two concepts, it is necessary to explain the concepts of sex and gender better. While sex is defined as a biologically determined concept; gender is a socially constructed concept. Although, sex, as it may change later (i.e. the concept of transsexual), is related to the genital organs, hormones and genetic constitution (Johnson & Repta, 2012); gender is related to roles, responsibilities and gender expressions.

**1.2 Sexual Identity Development and Disclosure in the Context of Family**

Sexual identitiy is constucted in familial context. Along with the innate characteristics, gender roles are learned and internalized firstly in the family. The impositions of the heterosexual world begin in the family and manifest as parental expectations. Parents generally expect their children to conform to heretosexual norms accepted by the society and to express themselves according to the "female" and "male" roles approved by everyone.

In addition to these, the disclosure of one of the family members can be considered as a family transition process because family dynamics have changed and the balance in the family has deteriorated. Although the disruption of family balance is closely related to living in a heterosexist world, within the scope of this study, disclosure will focus more on the family context. In this framework; the importance of family support during the coming out period, the experiences of parents and changing family dynamics will be mentioned.

**1.2.1 Importance of Family Support in Coming Out Process**

Family is the first place we mirrored and built our self. Also, family is one of the leading sources of social support. With adolescence, although peers start to play an important role as an important source of social support in young person's life, youth still want to be in touch and connected with their parents. Especially in face of stressful life events, the fact that families are a safe haven for young people support their children's coping mechanisms. In a similar vein, gay youths feel the need to be accepted as the way they are by their families and be connected with them, especially during the painful process of constructing their sexual identity and beyond. The position taken by the families after coming out is an important predictor in terms of young people's internalizing their own identity, maintaining their well-being, and

coping with the difficulties due to their sexual orientation. A review article that examined 31 studies about parental influences on their LGBTI+ children showed that parental reactions are related to children's sexual behavior, substance use, exposed violence and victimization, suicide and mental health (Bouris et.al, 2010). Also, they added that the studies reviewed were all based on yung adults' reporting. Therefore, it should not be forgotten that only children's perceptions can be deduced from these studies. Bergman, Malik, Page, Makynen, and Lindahl (2013) examined relations between lesbian, gay and bisexual youth's sexual identity and their parents' responses to their disclosure. They found that less parental rejection and more sexuality-specific social support were relevant to affirmed sexual identity of youth characterized by low level of internalized homonegativity, concerns about being accepted, difficulty coming out to others, identity uncertainty and concealment motivations. In addition, according to some researchers, family support is related to youths' self-esteem and it is found protective for depression, substance abuse and suicide (Ryan, Russell, Huebner, Diaz & Sanchez, 2010; Savin-Williams,1989). Similar to the results of this study, in Feinstein, Wadsworth, Davila, and Goldfried's (2014) research, family support as moderator, was associated with depressive symptoms and minority stress in lesbians and gays. As parental acceptance and family support increased, discrimination and rejection decreased and there was a negative association between parental acceptance and internalized homophobia. Another important finding is that family support has a buffer effect between victimization and mental health problems in gay, lesbian and bisexual youths. That is if there is adequate family support, the impact of victimization on the mental health of young people is decreasing (Hershberger & D'Augelli, 1995). Zeamba's (2001) research which examines lesbians' coming out process to parents showed that lesbians who had come out to either one or both parents reported lesser. feelings of loneliness than those who had not come out. Kabacaoğlu's (2015) study which examines the coming out process of gays and lesbians in Turkey showed that parents' accepting attitude made it easier for their children to tell about their sexual orientation to others. In short, the family environment and parental reactions predicts the well-being, psychological and physical health of gay, lesbian and bisexual youths. Also, when interpreting family studies, it should be kept in mind that young people

can experience both acceptance and rejection by different family members, parental reactions may change over time and parent-child relationship is interdependent rather than being a one-way relationship. Also, beyond the research done, taking into account that "all human demand is for love and recognition" the importance of young people being accepted as the way they are by their root families is obvious.

## 1.2.2. Parental Reactions toTheir Child's Disclosure and Parental Experiences After Disclosure

It would be more convenient to consider parental experiences and reactions separately. Because parents' inner experiences and their reactions to their children are not necessarily the same. In the literature, although there has been an increasing number of studies examining parental experiences recently, parental reactions and predicted factors have been the subject of more research compared to the former. In addition, studies investigating parental reactions often rely on their children's reports. Therefore, when examining the studies investigating parental reactions, whether the study was conducted with parents or their children is critical when interpreting the results.

In the literature, acceptance and rejection are considered as a spectrum rather than dichotomy. In the study where gay and bisexual young people described their fathers' reactions, fathers' reactions were gathered in six categories (Jadwin-Cakmak, Pingel, Harper & Bauermeister, 2015). These were immediate rejection, denial, individual acceptance-group rejection, support without full acceptance, ambivalent acceptance, and immediate acceptance. In addition, Ghosh (2020) described forms of rejection as blatant, hostile and subtle rejection. He added that blatant rejection may occur as withdrawal, as well as in a direct and aggressive form. On the other hand, acceptance included ambivalent acceptance, loving denial, resigned acceptance, and liberal acceptance.

In addition to the parents' reactions to their children, the emotions they experience internally are also investigated. Conley (2011) demonstrated that parents experienced concerns about their children emerged in three areas as follow: what society thinks about their children, being rejected by significant others and wellbeing of their children. It was also added that mothers experience concerns regarding the wellbeing of their children more frequently compared to fathers. Besides, having gay sons are more concerning for both mothers and fathers compared to having lesbian daughters. This finding is consistent with the KAOS GL's report in Turkey. Also, Cassar and Sultana (2021)' s study examining Maltese parents of experiences retrospectively, showed that while the mothers' primary concern was their son's safety, the fathers' were particularly about their son's appearance and being mocked by other people. In this vein, in the Goodrich (2009)'s research, the common emotion experienced by all participating parents was fear about the safety of their children. In addition to concern and fear, loss and grief are prevalent experiences of parents as well (Fields, 2001; Goodrich, 2009; Conley, 2011; Tyler, 2015; Newcomb, Feinstein, Matson, Macapagal & Mustanski, 2018). Relationships with their children, their children's future, the dreams they have about their children, and "heterosexual dreams" were experienced as lost by parents. After these perceived losses, the mourning experience starts. Studies focusing on the grief responses of parents pointed out these responses with the Kübler-Ross' (1969) stages of grief that consist of shock, denial, anger, bargaining, and acceptance (Chrisler, 2017). Besides, according to Ghosh's (2020), while guilt and shame were experienced more by the mothers, denial and rejection were experienced more by the fathers. Also, generally mothers were more accepting to their children compared to fathers (D'augelli, 2005; Livingston & Fourie, 2016; Tamagawa, 2018). Parallel to this, children generally prefer to disclose to their mothers first rather than their fathers (Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003; D'augelli, 2005; Livingston & Fourie, 2016; Ghosh, 2020; Cassar & Sultana, 2021). It was stated that parents' other feelings were being hurt, anger, frustration, sadness, disappointment, guilt and shame (Saltzburg, 2004; Goodrich, 2009; Ghosh, 2020; Tamagawa, 2018) Also parents' experiences were confusion about their own feelings and about who they're going to share the information that their son is gay (Goodrich, 2009; Ghosh, 2020; Cassar &

Sultana, 2021). It was stated that parents reported mixed and ambivalent feelings rather than unadulterated feelings. Some studies indicate that parents go through the same experience of coming out as their children (Goodrich, 2009; Ghsoh, 2020). While some parents do not share this information with anyone by keeping it as a secret, some prefer to share it with people who will support them. But sharing with whom their son is gay may create confusion in the family because the people that the child and the parent want to share this information with may not be the same. On the other hand, although the studies in this area are very few, there are studies in the literature that draw attention to the positive experiences of parents. As a result of Horn and Wong (2017)'s study, the experiences of fathers with gay sons emerged under seven themes: (1) fathers experienced variety of emotions such as worry, fear, relief; (2) fathers expressed love and affection to their children in their own way; (3) fathers experienced both positive change and constancy in father-son relationship; (4) fathers attached importance to deeper communication with their sons after son's disclosure; (5) fathers changed positively and experienced growth; (6) fathers had concerns about children unrelated to homosexuality; (7) fathers gave support different ways. In a study based on parents' self-reports and investigating the positive aspects of having LGBTI children, 5 themes emerged (Gonzalez, Rostosky, Odom, & Riggle, 2013). The first theme was personal growth which consisted of parents' open mindedness, gaining new perspectives, increased awareness of discrimination, and compassion. The second theme was parents having positive emotions such as pride and unconditional love. The third theme was parents' increased activist behaviors after children's disclosure. The fourth theme was new relationships provided by their children. The last theme was parents having deeper family relationships after disclosure.

To sum it all up, while parents have common reactions and experiences, there are also occasions where parents differ from each other. In general, the emphasis in the studies is that contextual factors are determinant in the reactions and experiences of the parents. Factors predicting parental reactions will be explained in the next section.

### 1.2.3. Factors Predicting Parental Reactions

Parental reactions to learning that their child is gay or lesbian depend on several factors. These factors are both contextual ones, and the ones related to the individual characteristics of parents. When interpreting the results of studies examining parental experiences, reactions and related factors, it should be taken into account that these studies are generally qualitative studies. Although there are quantitative studies as well, they are conducted with limited number of participants. Another point that should be considered when interpreting the results of the study is that parents who are fully rejected to their children do not participate in these studies. The study conducted by Huebner, Roche and Rith, (2019) which examines how parental responses change according to parent-child characteristics and elapse time, is one of the most comprehensive studies in this field. This research was conducted with 1195 parents of gay, lesbian and bisexual youths and demonstrated that ethnic minority parents described having more difficulties than white parents did. In addition, parents described less difficulties as the time passed after 2 years learning about their child's sexual orientation While there was no significant reduction in the difficulties they faced between 2 months and 2 years, the parents stated that the experience became easier to deal with after 2 years. The relationship between parental reactions and elapsed time since learning that their son is gay has been the subject of many studies. Regardless of their initial reaction, the parents became more accepting in time (Goodrich 2009; Gonzales, Rostosky, Odom & Riggle, 2013; Jadwin-Cakmak, Pingel, Harper & Bauermeister, 2015; Grafsky, 2014; McConnell, Birkett & Mustanski, 2016; Gattamorta, Salerno and Quidley-Rodriguez, 2019; Cassar & Sultana 2021). In their review on parental reactions, Ghosh (2020) stated that in studies conducted up to the 2000s, parents generally showed rejective reactions to their children's disclosure. Katz-Wise, Rosario and Tsappis (2016) in their review, noted that parents are nowadays more accepting of their children compared to the past, however this does not apply to parents' initial reactions. Parents' acceptance or rejection does not appear immediately, acceptance is a continuum. In general, it was stated that there was a

difference between the initial reactions and the current reactions, and that the parents became more accepting over time.

Other factor that predicts parents' reactions is that families' awareness about their children's sexual orientation. Ghosh (2020) and Chrisler (2017) stated that various results may occur related to awareness about sexual orientation of their children. While this awareness may prepare some parents psychologically and prevent parents from experiencing shock, it may push some parents to force their children to conform to traditional gender roles. Van Bergen, Wilson, Russell, Gordon and Rothblum (2020) conducted a research with lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, pansexual, or two-spirited individuals about their parents' reactions. They found that their parents' awareness about their sexual orientation before they came out ranged from suspicion to certainty. In addition, it was stated that in older cohort. Children's came of age prior to the 1990s) had less suspicion about their children's sexual orientation and experienced more shock.

Parents' religion is the other factor that is related to their reactions. Although it is not possible to generalize this from studies examining the relationship between religion and parental responses due to the fact that parents from different religions perceive their sons to be gay differently and the sample sizes were not representative, these studies can still give us ideas. Some research demonstrated that religious families tend to be less accepting of their LGBTI+ children (Goodrich,2009; Ryan, Russell, Huebner, Diaz & Sanchez, 2010; Jadwin-Cakmak, Pingel, Harper & Bauermeister, 2015; Gattamorta, Salerno, & Quidley-Rodriguez, 2019). On the other hand, Cassar and Sultana (2016) demonstrated that some religious parents negotiated about their beliefs and constructed their own moral rules after their children came out.

Furthermore, the adjustment process of culturally minority parents may be more difficult (Huebner, Roche & Rith, 2019). Gattamorta, Salerno, and Quidley-Rodriguez (2019) interpreted the results of their qualitative studies as Hispanic parents who have more traditional values compared to White parents reacted more negatively and showed more rejecting attitudes due to their cultural characteristics. In addition, Van Bergen, Wilson, Russell, Gordon and Rothblum (2020) started that race and ethnicity

are related to ambivalent parental reactions and they associated this result of the study with minority stress.

In addition, parents' attitudes towards their children depend on the importance parents attach to gender roles and parents' sex, and age. Conley (2011) stated that mothers worried significantly more than fathers about their children. Also, parents with a high femininity score, regardless of gender, were more worried about their children and parents with both low masculinity and low femininity reported less concern about their children. While children usually reveal their sexual orientation to their mothers first within the family, they rarely reveal their fathers first (Toomey & Richardson, 2009; Katz-Wise, Rosario, & Tsappis, 2016) and generally receive more negative reactions from their fathers (Savin-Williams,1998). In Jadwin-Cakmak, Pingel, Harper and Bauermeister's study, gay and bisexual young people reported that they expected more negative reactions from their fathers than their mothers and this expectation was not confirmed. Perceived negative responses from fathers differed based on some factors (Willoughby, Malik & Lindahl, 2006). Gay youths who have cohesion in their families perceived their fathers' responses less negative compared to youths who have unbalanced cohesion in their families. Also parenting styles of fathers were found to be related to young people's perception of their father's reaction. Fathers with authoritative parenting style were perceived less negatively than fathers with authoritarian parenting style in terms of their first reactions.

Overall, parental responses may vary according to the individual characteristics of the parent, but are also embedded in the context. Chrisler (2017) came up with an inclusive theoretical framework about understanding parental reactions and in this framework, context plays an important role in all layers. (See Figure 1). Therefore, parents' responses should be examined in with its context. Because context and current circumstances, as in many cases, largely predict the responses of the parents to their children.

**Figure 1**

*Theoretical framework of parental reactions*
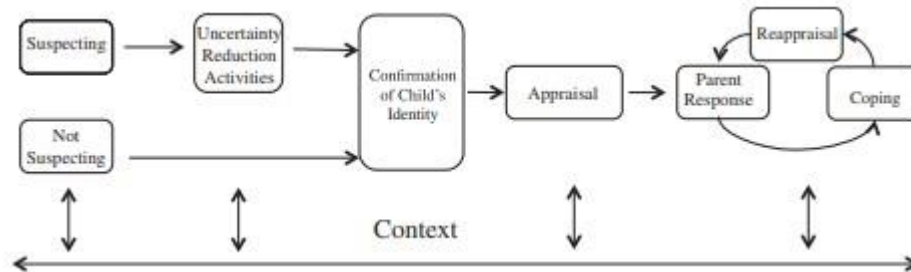


*Note.* This figure is retrieved from "Understanding parent reactions to coming out as lesbian, gay, or bisexual: A theoretical framework" by Chrisler, A. J., 2017, *Journal of Family Theory & Review, 9*(2), 165-181.

### 1.2.4. Family Dynamics After Coming Out

It takes time for families to internalize the sexual identity of their children, just like the youths' internalization of their own identity. Getting to know that their children's sexual orientation is nonheterosexual should be considered as a transition process of family. Because when sexual orientation is disclosed to the family, new information enters into the family system and consequently, the balance of the system is disturbed. When children reveal their identities, the homeostasis in the family changes, boundaries and family roles need to be adjusted; expectations, hopes and family goals change (Willoughby, Malik & Lindahl, 2006; Heatherington & Lavner, 2008). Also, the parents may need to redefine themselves and their children, and construct meaning about their losses. Parents' internalization of their children's sexual identities can also be interpreted as rebalancing the system.

Getting to know that their children are homosexual may require parents to mourn for some familial roles (Fields, 2001; Goodrich, 2009; Conley, 2011; Tyler, 2015; Newcomb, Feinstein, Matson, Macapagal & Mustanski, 2018). They may lose their

heteronormative expectations from their children and psychological family (e.g., becoming grandparents, having a wedding for their children, etc.). However, since these losses are not concrete, it may be difficult for the family to name this situation. The absence of a visible loss can create a confusion in parents' mind. The families need to rearrange their expectations, hopes, roles, and boundaries about their children once their children come out. This process might be stressful for LGBTI+ families due to many uncertainties they face. These uncertainties can be expressed in the forms of following questions: "Who are the members of our family?", "Who is inside or outside of our family?", "What should we expect from our child after that?", "Is our child sick, does he change?", "Our child is homosexual because of us, what did we do wrong?", "Do they harm our child?", "How will we explain to those around us?", etc. Since family members are an important source of support for dealing with the difficulties homosexual youths experience related to their sexual identities, it will be useful to understand the experiences of the families during the coming out process. Understanding the experiences of family as a system without psychopathologizing would support homosexual young people and their families.

## 1.3. The Scope and Aim of the Current Thesis

The current study adopts a systemic perspective to understand the experiences of the families. Therefore, it would be appropriate to briefly mention about family systems perspective at this point. Minuchin (1985) stated six principles about systems theory as follows: (a) all systems are a whole and the parts of this whole are interdependent, (b) the patterns in the system are not linear but circular, (c) systems want to maintain their stability and which means homeostasis, (d) system patterns may change over time, (e) systems are made up of subsystems and (f) boundaries are shaped by implicit rules and boundaries exist to separate subsystems in complex system.

Compared to the research focusing on the gay, lesbian and bisexual individuals, relatively there is a lack of studies incorporating the parental perspective and family

system in the literature. The studies focused mainly on how gays, lesbians, and bisexuals perceive their parents. In other words, the studies were carried out with lesbian and bisexual individuals rather than their family members.

Although many studies have been conducted on the coming out process, most of them do not include the parent perspective. Studies conducted with parents generally focused on the first parental reactions, but the ongoing process of adaptation was ignored. Furthermore, studies examining parental reactions often rely on reports from children, in other words, studies convey parental reactions as perceived by their children. Studies in which the sample is composed of parents of LGBTI+ are very rare. In addition, although the role of context in parental experiences is obvious, studies with LGBTI+ parents in Turkey are very few. When the literature was reviewed, only three unpublished dissertations conducted with parents were found. One of them is in the field of social work, the other one is in the field of sociology and the third is in the field of psychology. The study in the field of social work explained parental experiences within the family life cycle and mentioned what can be done in the field of social work (Yıldırım, 2018) The thesis, written in the field of sociology, examined the transformation of LGBTI+ parents and focused on the processes of interaction within the family (Ece, 2017). In the thesis written in the field of psychology, parental experiences were tried to be explained quantitatively with the family system theory (Kürkçüoğlu,2016).

The current study aims to understand parental experiences, their transformation taking place within the family system over time and the factors that facilitate the family adaptation process in depth. In addition, although there are one-way explanations about how parental reactions affect children's well-being in the literature, there are no studies emphasizing cycle of interaction and their interdependent relationships. This study also aims to understand how members of the family interact with each other around the coming out and its aftermath. The research questions are as follows: What happens in the family system when a gay youth shares his sexual orientation with his parents? What is it like for parents to get to know that their child is gay? How does the transition process take place within the family? How do intra-family dynamics change

after disclosure? How do parental responses transform over time? How has the relationship of parents with their environment been affected? What are the facilitating factors of the parents' integration?

Understanding parental experiences and factors that facilitate adaptation would provide useful resources for psychologists who work with families to support them in the adjustment process. This can indicate which issues to be focused on in interventions.

# CHAPTER 2

# METHOD

## 2.1. Methodological Background

The current study aims to understand deeply what parents of individuals who identify themselves as gay experience after their children disclose their sexual identity. This study also investigates adaptation mechanisms of families. The most important reason for the use of qualitative technique in research is the necessity of exploring unique experiences rather than focusing on how much they are, since there are few studies in this field. Although studies in other cultures help us, we need to understand in-depth what LGBTI families live in Turkish culture, as the coming out process is very sensitive to culture. Although there are common experiences in the acceptance process of families, the qualitative technique was preferred to understand different experiences and to understand the factors related to these experiences in depth. In summary, as Cresswell (2013) stated, qualitative research technique was used because the current study aims to understand complex concepts in context, based on people's experiences.

Grounded theory, one of the qualitative research techniques, was chosen because the family system needs to be understood by considering the effects of cultural, historical and economic factors besides the individual factors. Grounded theory synthesizes positivist and interpretative approaches. It also explains events as well as describing them (Kasapoglu,2015). The purpose of this study is to understand families' adaptation mechanisms and to explain what happens in the family system with an explatory perspective, that's why grounded theory is used. Also, current study wants to explain what families perceive as loss and how they find meaning for their losses was tried to be understood in detail through grounded theory.

## 2.2. Participants

The sample of the study consists of six participants who are mothers of individuals who identify themselves as gay. The adolescents and young adults whose mothers were participated in the study were between 18-25 and had already come out to their parents Since it was difficult to reach the sample group, the snowball sampling was used. The participants were accessed primarily from Ankara Gökkuşağı Aileleri Derneği (GALADER) which is a family group of LGBTI individuals in Ankara. In addition, mothers from Lezbiyen Gey Biseksüel Trans İnterseks Bireylerin Aileleri ve Yakınları Derneği (LİSTAG) and İzmir LGBTİ Aile Grubu were interviewed.

In Thomson's (2011) review, it is stated that determining the correct sample size in grounded theory is difficult and samples vary from study to study. Sample size may change according to the researcher's ability, nature of the topic, the scope of the research question and the sensitivity of the subject which is studied. In this review, the range was found to be 5 to 114; besides, 10 to 30 interviews were considered to be adequate for saturation. In the current study, 6 interviews were conducted with the mothers.

The inclusion criteria of the study were having a child between the ages of 18-25 who declare his sexual orientation as gay. Although the invitation to participate was made for both parents, only mothers volunteered to participate in the study. The possible reasons why fathers were not represented in the sample will be discussed in later chapters.

The age range of the participants was 44 to 59 and the mean age was 51.17 ($M$=51.17, $SD$=5.91). Participants were living in Ankara, İstanbul and İzmir. The age range of the participants' sons was between 19 and 25 and the mean age was 23.33 ($M$=23.33, $SD$=2.25). The participants learned about their children's sexual orientation an average of 5.7 years ago ($M$=5.7, $SD$= 1.94). (See Table 1 for detailed socio-demographic characteristics of the participants).

**Table 1**

*Socio-Demographic Characteristics of The Participants*

| Participants | Age | Province | Profession | Income | Marital Status | Education | Time Since Come Out (Years) | Number of Children |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 55 | Ankara | Cleaner | Under Medium | Divorced | Primary School | 4.5 | 6 |
| 2 | 44 | Ankara | Not working | Medium | Married | High school | 5 | 2 |
| 3 | 45 | Ankara | Nurse | Medium | Widowed | High school | 7 | 2 |
| 4 | 54 | İzmir | Retired-teacher | Medium | Divorced | University | 9 | 2 |
| 5 | 50 | İstanbul | Retired-electrical engineer | Upper Medium | Divorced | University | 4.5 | 1 |
| 6 | 50 | İzmir | Hairdresser | Medium | Married | University | 4 | 1 |

## 2.3 Measures

**Semi-Structured Interviews.** Based on a literature review, a question pool was created then the questions that are thought to serve the purpose of the study the most were selected from this pool by the research team to be included in the semi-structured interview. In addition, the questions that Boss and Yeats (2014) recommended using when working with families experience the ambiguous loss were added to the question form as well. Three clinical psychologists working in the LGBTI field were asked to provide feedback on the questions. After the changes done in line with the feedbacks, the interview questions took their final form. As a result, the semi-structured interview forms were included twenty-seven open-ended questions (See Appendix A). For the objectivity of the interview, special attention was paid to the fact that the questions were non-directive and neutral. For instance: "Could you tell us how was your child's coming out process?" ("Çocuğunuzun cinsel yönelimini size açıklama süreci nasıldı, biraz anlatır mısınız?"), "What is it like to have a gay child? What does it mean to you?" ("Gey/Eşcinsel bir çocuğa sahip olmak sizce nasıl bir şey? Sizin için ne anlam ifade ediyor?") etc

## 2.4. Procedure

Initially, the ethical permission was taken from TED University Human Subjects Ethics Committee. Before starting the interview, participants were informed about the study, confidentiality of the interview and that they can withdraw from the study at any time. Written and verbal consent (See Appendix B) was obtained from the participants for voluntarily participation and for audio recording during the interview. Additionally, the identity information of the participants was kept confidential in the study. Participants were given the option to join the study using fake names.

After the ethical permission was taken from TED University Human Subjects Ethics Committee, the participants were reached via personal connection and GALADER.

Firstly, general information about the study was given to parents and they were invited to face to face interviews. Although the research announcement was made to include both mothers and fathers, only mothers agreed to participate in the study. The data collection through face to face interviews were interrupted by the COVİD 19 pandemic and interviews had to be conducted online after June of 2020. Interviews were done with the mothers who voluntarily accepted to participate in the study online and face to face. Two of the interviews were made face-to-face and four of the interviews were made online. Participants signed informed consent face to face interviews started. In online interviews, consent was obtained verbally from the participants and audio recording was made. Interview times were between 93 and 128 minutes and the average time was 108.33 minutes ($M$=108.33, $SD$=15.37). A break was given when the participants needed it. Before the interviews, the participants were informed to participate in the interview in an environment where they could speak freely. Face-to-face interviews were held in GALADER's office, in an environment where the interviewer and the participant were alone.

The interviews started with the researcher's introducing herself and an explanation regarding the framework of the interview. Small talks were made to warm up the participants and then demographic information was collected. After that, semi-structured interview questions were asked. Due to nature of the the semi-structured interview technique, the questions were not asked to each participant in the same order. Participants were encouraged to open themselves and they were asked to talk about their experiences as detailed as possible. For data analysis, voice recordings were obtained in all interviews with the permission of the participants. All interviews were transcribed verbatim. For anonymity and confidentiality, the identities of the participants were changed while transcribing. Voice recordings and transcripts of the interviews were stored in an encrypted file on the researcher's computer as stated in the informed consent.

## 2.5 Data Analysis

The interviews were read carefully several times to master the content of the interviews after transcribing the audio recordings word by word by the first researcher. Then, the interviews were coded line by line using the MAXQDA which is a qualitative data analysis software by the first researcher. In line with the structure of the grounded theory, the participants' statements were not adhered to any theory while coding. In other words, encodings were made with an exploratory perspective. After the first researcher coded all the data, the second researcher checked the quotations in all the codes. Different points of consideration were discussed and necessary changes were made in the codes. Then the codes were grouped into meaningful categories. During the analysis, recurring concepts and word frequencies were examined. The concepts and categories were determined according to the common and different attributes of the participants. As a result of all these, superordinate themes emerged in which the categories took on a meaningful shape. The same process was repeated for all cases.

## 2.6. Reflexivity

"I am a 25-year-old female psychologist living in Turkey. I have been living in Ankara since I was born. I am currently continuing clinical psychology master education. I grew up in an egalitarian and relatively free home where my parents had an equal say. My family has always supported me to be a strong and independent woman. Especially my father has always encouraged me to stand on my own feet as a requirement of his worldview. Even though I didn't grow up in a family that internalized traditional gender roles, the idea of living home alone bothered my parents. "A woman living alone" probably didn't fit their representation. Although they did not directly express that they wanted me to finish school, get married and have children; their daughter, who was a "woman living alone", left them disappointed. In fact, the disappointment of the mothers I interviewed and the disappointments of my family were similar in some respects. Yes, I am a heterosexual woman, but I do not have the dreams that

traditional gender roles have assigned to me. I even reject traditional gender roles intentionally. At this point, I stand by everyone and every formation that struggles with traditional gender roles. Also, my thesis can be interpreted as a tool for people who do not conform to traditional gender roles to make their voices heard. In fact, my motivation for both writing this thesis and becoming a clinical psychologist is the effort to see the unseen and trying to be the voice of the unheard.

In an environment of increasing pressure, I experience being a minority in terms of wearing what I want, behaving as I want and being myself. I am an individual who has experienced the difficulties of being a woman in Turkey. I know and experience what it means to be marginalized, to be excluded, to be despised. As a woman who does not conform to traditional gender roles, although not because of my sexual orientation, I share similar experiences with both mothers and their children.

Besides, I had difficulties in some points while interviewing mothers. Although the idea of being the voice of minorities excited me, at the same time, the thought of "who are you? How do you find the right to speak for others?" did not leave me in the all processes of my thesis. It still scares me that my thesis is perceived as the comments of an "outside eye". This thesis is an attempt to understand another minority group by someone who defines herself as a minority in this country.

In the interviews, the struggle and transformation of mothers were the parts that impressed me the most. I was sometimes quite emotional and had a hard time staying neutral, especially when mothers expressed their transformation and their unconditional love for their children. The struggle of mothers so that their children are exist, live, and love just as they are gave me admiration and strength.

Mothers, who are struggling with the increasing oppression, especially due to the political situation in the country, I hope that one day they can build a different world for themselves, their sons and anyone else who has had the same experience. One of my volunteer duties is the effort to be the voice of families in the academic field."

# CHAPTER 3

# RESULTS

As a result of the analysis of the interviews with six mothers participated in the study, three superordinate themes emerged. These are (1) pre-coming out process, (2) coming out process and (3) post-coming out process (See table 2). Each superordinate theme will be explained with its sub-themes. In order to increase the transparency of the results, quotations from the expressions of the mothers were made under each sub-theme.

**Table 2**

*Superordinate and Subordinate Themes*

| |
|---|
| **Pre-Coming Out Process** |
| *Pre-coming out experiences* |
| Interrupted Relationship with father |
| Emotional Baggage |
| *Family system dynamics around homosexuality* |
| Never cross one's mind and retrospective recalls of the signs |
| Feeling deep inside that there is something she cannot name/"different" with their child |
| Remaining in limbo |
| **Coming Out Process** |
| Initial reactions |
| Meaning making efforts |
| Bargaining |
| Transfer of the emotional burden from child to mother and relief of the son |
| Ambivalence |

Father's expected/actual reactions

| **Post-Coming Out Process** |
| --- |
| Loss |
| Secrets, lies and isolation |
| Reorganization of the boundaries to facilitate adaptation |
| Redefinition of family beyond blood relationship |
| Growth and improvement as a result of chains of influence |
| Socially displaced immigrants |
| Factors facilitating adaptation |
| Ruptures with the society |
| Mothers' coming out experiences |

## 3.1. Pre-Coming Out Process

The first theme is "pre-coming out process". Understanding pre-coming out experiences has been helpful in understanding the post-coming out process and evaluating the story as a whole. The structure in this theme was gathered in two axes. One of these axes is the pre-coming out experiences. The other is the family system dynamics around the homosexuality as seen in the concept map (See Figure 2)

Two themes remarkably repetead in mothers' accounts with regard to the pre-coming out process. Accordingly, the first sub-theme was identified as "interrupted relationship with father". Although no direct question was asked regarding the child's relationship with the father, mothers mentioned their child's relationship with the fathers while describing their family relationships. One of the youths had never seen his father although his father was alive, two of them were not in contact with their fathers, one of them has lost his father; although only the remaining two were still in touch with their fathers, their relationships were poor. It should be noted that three of the interrupted father-child relationships was mainly due to parents' divorce. In addition, it was stated that one of the young people who met with his father had a conflicting relationship with him. Therefore, the emotional and/or physical absence of a father is observed for the families participating in this study. Mother 5:

**Figure 2**

*Concept Map of the Pre-coming Out Process*
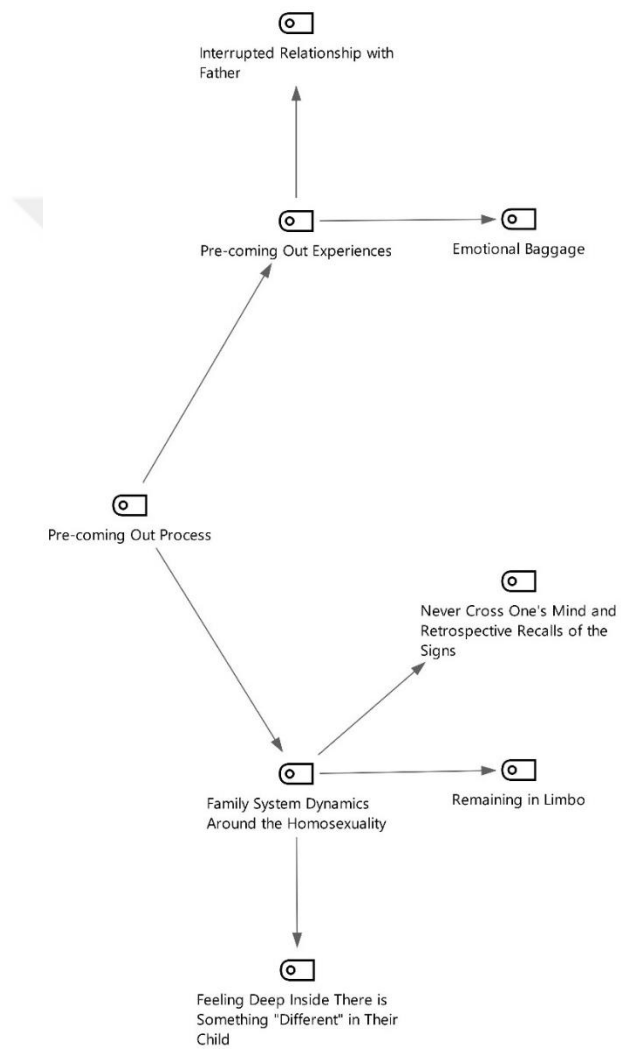
"Eski eşim hemen evlendi biz boşandıktan sonra. Sonra bir müddet Filipinler'de, bir müddet Avusturalya'da ve Özbekistan'da yaşadı. Oğlumla ilgilenmedi. Halbuki oğlumu taparcasına seviyordu fakat oğlum ilgisizliğinin farkına vardığı için babasını reddetti. Hiç görüşmüyor. Babası 5 ayda bir aklına gelirse aradı. Benim oğlum babasını reddetti görüşmüyor. Yani herhalde 10 yıl falan hiç görüşmediler. Yani şöyle söyleyeyim mezun oldu üniversiteden 2018'de. O zaman mezuniyet törenine ben çağırdım ama ben de modern bir insan değilim, konuşmuyorum. Sadece mezuniyet töreni olduğunu duymuş, herhalde mezun olmuştur gel dedim istiyorsan gel. Oğlum da bir şey demedi. Benim için sokaktaki adamdan farklı değil dedi."

*"My old husband got married right after we got divorced. Then he lived in Philippines, Australia, and Uzbekistan. He did not care about my son. Although my son adored his father, when he realized that his father was neglecting him, he rejected him. He does not talk to him at all. His father used to call once in 5 months if his son came to his mind. My son has rejected his father, he does not see his father. I think it has been 10 years or so, that they haven't seen each other. Let me put it this way, he graduated from the university in 2018. I called his father to the graduation, but I am not a modern person as well, I don't talk to him. He just heard his son's graduation ceremony, I told him to join if he wants to. My son didn't say anything as well. He said his father is no different than a man on the street for him."*

Mother 1:

"Babasını hiç görmedi. Bazen ben sorarım, babanı yolda görsen koşup sarılır mısın konuşur musun diye. Bana derdi ki yüzüne tükürürüm. Yani babasız büyüdüğü için onun hep bir tarafları eksik. Nasıl diyeyim yani maddi manevi her şeyinde, eğitimlerinde, tabi ki anlayışlı bir baba olsaydı ben de istemezdim ayrılmayı. İyi ki ayrılmışım diye sonradan sonraya dedim. Çocuğumun gey olmasında, işte benim özgürlüğümde, maddi manevi işte aklına ne geliyorsa. E şimdi oğlum da özgür. Belki dışarı çıkarmayacaktı onu, çok babalar var öyle. İyi ki ayrılmışım.

*"He never saw his father. Sometimes I ask him whether he would hug and talk to his father if he sees him on the way. He tells me that he would spit on his father's face. I mean, since he grew up without a father, he lacks some stuff. I mean, I would not want to get divorced as well if his father was an understanding man who could help us emotionally and financially. But I said I am glad we got divorced later on. My son being gay, my own freedom, financial or emotional stuff, whatever comes to*

*your mind. Now, my son is also free. Maybe his father wouldn't even let him go out. There are lots of fathers like that. I'm glad I broke up with him."*

"Emotional baggage" is the second other sub-theme. Mothers mentioned that they experienced difficult life events such as loss, divorce, and illness. Previous loss experiences also affected mothers' post disclosure reactions. Mother 1, who lost three children before, expressed her feelings as follows:

> "İçim kan ağlıyor ama saçını okşuyorum böyle. Çok kaybetme korkusu yaşadım o an. Dedim ilk önce üç çocuğumu kaybettim bir dördüncüyü de kaybetmek istemiyorum dedim. Kızımdan daha önce çocuklarım oldu, 2 tane. Onları, birinin hiç yüzünü görmedim zaten, öbürü 2 ay yaşadı. (…) Diğer çocuğumu kaybettiğimde de gey olan oğlum daha çok küçüktü, 10 aylıktı. Traktörün altında kaldı. Ondan sonra benim ilk tepkim sarılmak oldu. Ama içimden korktum, oğlumu kaybetmemek için sarıldım."

> *"I'm in deep sorrow but I'm fondling his hair. I was afraid of losing him a lot at that moment. I said first, I lost my three children and I said I don't want to lose a fourth. I had two children before my daughter. I didn't even get to see one of my children's face at all. The other had only lived for two months. My gay son was too young, like he was ten months old when I lost my other children. My child got crushed by a tractor. After that, my first reaction was hugging. But I was scared, I hugged not to lose my son."*

"Never cross one's mind and retrospective recalls of the signs" is the other sub-theme. The mothers were asked if they had any predictions of their son's sexual orientation before their son came out to them. Five of the mothers stated that they never thought that their son was gay, and the possibility of this did not even cross their minds. After mothers got t know that their child was gay, they came to the realization of not paying any attention to some clues. These clues were reported as follows: bringing LGBTI brochures to home, and not having heteronormative gender characteristics such as not being interested in football, not being naughty, not swearing, playing with Barbie, being emotional and naive. Mother 6:

"Tabi tabi onu hissediyorsun ama ona bir şey veremiyorsun, bir şey uyduramıyorsun yani. Ya da kabul etmek istemiyorsun o anda. Ama gerçekten düşünmedim. Yani cinselliğiyle ilgili hiçbir şey düşünmedim çocuğumun. Bu tamam erkek diyordum yani, tamam biraz feminen erkek de diyordum. Hani ağlıyor her şeye, erkek mesela topla oynar bizimki oynamıyor falan yani gibi. Böyle veriler var yani çocukta."

*"Of course, you feel it, but you can't really give anything to it, I mean you can't make anything up. Or you just don't want to admit it at that time. But I really did not consider. I mean I didn't think anything about my son's sexuality. Although he was a bit feminine, I would consider him as a male. I mean he used to cry a lot, like he wouldn't play with a ball like other males do. These types of signs were also there."*

"Feeling deep inside that there is something 'different' with their child" is the fourth sub-theme. Despite the mothers said they had never thought their son was gay, they also added sometimes they sensed it implicitly but did not really give any chance for that to be true. Mother 6 describes this situation as follows:

"Mesela ben hiç çocuğumun cinsel yönelimiyle ilgili ya da cinsel hayatıyla ilgili bir şey düşünmedim bugüne kadar, o açılma sürecine kadar. Hiçbir şey düşünmedim yani gerçekten böyle bir soru sormadım yani, benim çocuğum heteroseksüel mi yoksa eşcinsel mi böyle bir soru hiç sormadım ben kendime. Mesela uzmanlardan biri bana şunu sormuştu, neden karıştırdın o zaman. Mesela böyle bir soru sordu. Madem sen böyle bir şeyi hiç düşünmüyordun neden karıştırdın o zaman çocuğun özel eşyalarını işte bilgisayarını, mektupları okudun bilmem ne falan. Orada herhalde insan kondurmak istemiyor. Şu anda bile tam çözümleyemiyorum onu. Belki hissediyorsun hani çocuğunda bir sıra dışılık olduğunu."

*"For example, I have never thought about my child's sexual orientation or sexual life until today, until that period of coming out. I didn't think of anything. I have never asked myself whether my child is heterosexual or gay. For example, one of the experts asked me that if you never thought of such a thing, then why did you tamper the child's personal belongings, why did you read his letters. I guess people do not want to face the truth. Even now I can't quite figure it him out. Maybe you feel something unusual with your child."*

"Remaining in limbo" is the fifth sub-theme. The mother, who thinks whether her child is gay, called her dilemma as limbo. Although she senses that her son is gay, she does

not want to face this situation and states that she is in a kind of denial and escape. She called limbo that the state of not being able to name her son's situation.

"O dönemde aslında onun o değişikliğini, duygu durumunu, davranışlarından çok fazla kestiremesem de hep şey vardı kafamda acaba benim çocuğum eşcinsel mi diye o dönemde başladı. Sonra karşıma çıkan bir iki şeyle yüzleştim onunla ilgili. Her ne kadar ona sorsam da o bunu inkar etti, yok öyle bir şey diye. Sonra konu ikimiz için de kapandı. Aslında onun açısından kapanmış oldu ama benim içimdeki fırtına dinmedi. 1 yıldan sonra kendi yaşadığımız, doğup yetiştiğimiz ile döndük. Tabi o arada zaman ilerliyor, oğlum 3. Sınıf oldu, 4. Sınıf oldu. Ama ben bu duygularımı durduramıyorum. Araştırmak da istemiyorum, yüzleşmek istemiyorum. Bunu şey olarak tabir ettim, çok eğlenceli bir ortamdasınız, o arafta kalma durumuydu benimki, birden benim oğlum gey mi diye düşünüp o eğlencenin zehir oluşu… Ya da mesela çok uykunuz geliyor yatağa giriyordunuz ama o anda o düşüncenin aklına gelip sabaha kadar uyumama durumu… bunları çok yaşadım ben, o arafta olma durumunu."

"*Although I could not predict his feelings and thoughts from his behaviors at that time, I always had the question of whether my child is gay. Then I faced couple of things I came across about it. Although I asked him, he denied that he was gay. Then this subject was over for both of us. Actually, it was over only for him, but the storm inside me hasn't calmed. After a year, we returned to the city where we were born and raised. My son was growing up at that time, he was 4th grade, but I can't stop my feelings. I do not want to either investigate my suspicious thoughts or confront him. Mine was a state of limbo. Let me explain it this way, you are in a very fun place, suddenly you think that your son is gay and all the fun is ruined or, for example, you are too sleepy, you go to bed, but you cannot sleep when that thought comes to your mind. I've experienced these a lot.*"

## 3.2. Coming Out Process

Before moving onto the experiences of the mothers (See Figure 3), youth's ways of coming out to their families will be mentioned briefly. Mother 1, without any prior guess, got to know that her son is gay when he verbally came out to her. Mother 2 found out that her son is gay, after he verbally came out to her, but she also had a guess

about this. Mother 3 got to know it after reading his son's diary which was intentionally left on his bed by himself. Mother 4 was told that her son is gay by her own daughter. Her daughter, on the other hand, found that her brother is gay after tampering with his

**Figure 3**

*Concept Map of The Coming Out Process*
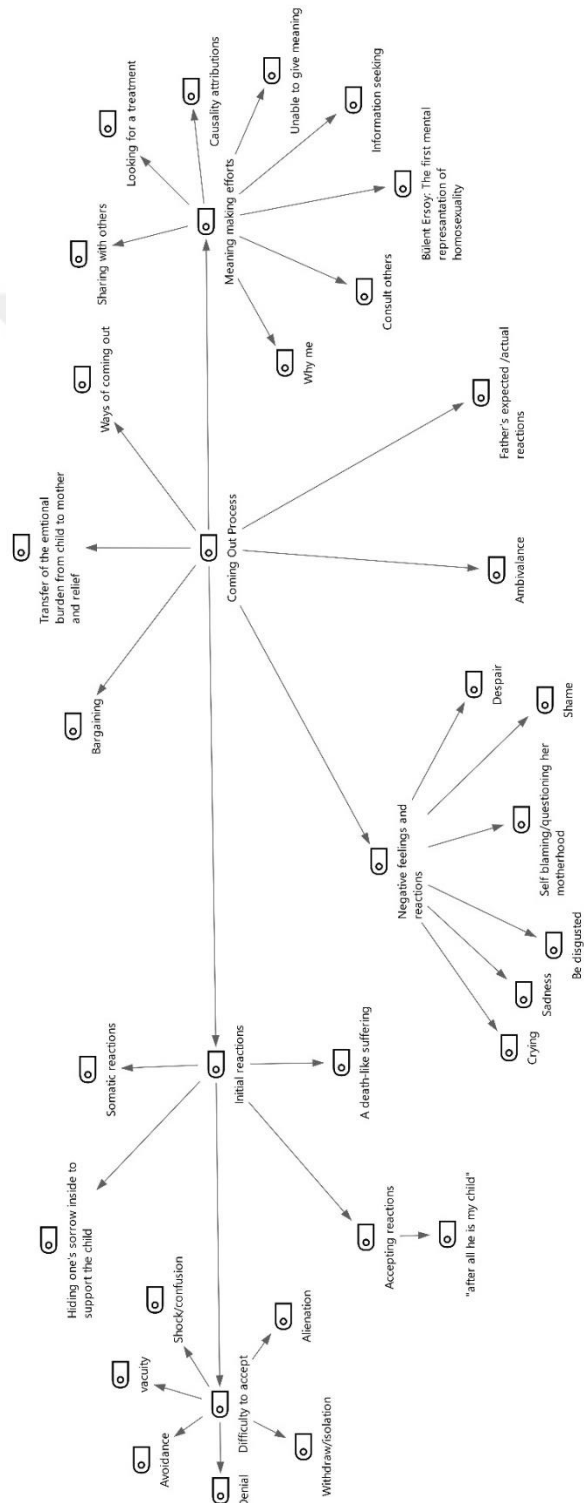
computer without any permission. Mother 5 got to know this when her son verbally disclosed to her at an unexpected moment. Mother 6 found a letter written to a man while tampering son's computer to find a reason for her son's lies. While questioning who was in the letter, her son confessed that he is gay.

"Initial reactions" was the first sub-theme. Mothers' initial reactions varied from acceptance to rejection. They stated that they experienced mixed emotions simultaneously. "After all he is my child" is one of these initial reactions. Five of the mothers stated that even though they had difficulties in accepting their son, they thought he is their child no matter what. Mother 5:

> "Hayır, sen benim oğlumsun, canımsın ciğerimsin, her şeyimsin, her şartta benim oğlumsun başımın üzerindesin dedim. Bunu söylerken kötü bir şey demedim, sen LGBT'sin ayrısın demedim. Sen neysen benim oğlumsun, önemli değil bana ne yaptığın dedim. Aması yok. Sen benim oğlumsun."

> *"You are my son, you are my everything. Whatever happens, you are my son. When I said this, I did not say that you are LGBTI and you are different. I did not say anything wrong. I said it doesn't matter what you do to me, whatever you are, you are my son. There is no excuse. You are my son."*

Some mothers had difficulty accepting it. The reactions they showed while they were dealing with those difficulties are denial, avoidance, alienation, shock/confusion, vacuity and withdraw/isolation. For instance, four of the mothers stated that they had no communication with a single person after they got to know that their son is gay. "Hiding one's sorrow inside to support the son" is another initial reaction. Five of the mothers stated that they tried not to show their feelings to avoid hurting their children. Mother 5:

> "Olsun oğlum dedim bu senin tercihin. Ama nasıl dediğimi de bilmiyorum. Yani içimden ölüyorum, kanıyor bir şeyler, birileri böyle kazıyor jiletle beni, öldürüyor ama sol lobum hemen devreye girdi, tabi oğlum normal dedim."

> *"I said: Okay son, this is your choice. But, I don't know how I said this either. I mean I'm dying, something is bleeding inside me. Someone is cutting me with a razor and killing me. But my left lobe stepped in immediately and, I said of course, this is normal."*

Moreover, mothers experienced negative feelings such as self-blame, sadness, shame, disgust and despair. Also 5 of the mothers said that they cried a lot when they learned it. Especially the self-blame has been experienced intensely by mothers. Mothers tended to attribute their sons' being gay to their own mistakes and unsuccessful marriages they made. They interpreted having a gay child as a punishment to them and received this punishment as a deserved price of their mistakes. Mother 5:

> "Utanma duygusu hissettim, ben ne beceriksizdim de bunu yaptım. Suçlama duygusu, çocuğu bakıcılara bıraktım yurt dışına gittim, hep işime dominant bir kadındım hep işime odaklandım, para kazanacağım diye çocuğu yalnız bıraktım. Babadan ayrıldım keşke ayrılmasaydım, Allah da benim belamı verseydi, hiç baba figürü yoktu."

> *"I felt ashamed, I thought how incompetent I am so that I caused that. The feeling of self-blame, I went abroad leaving my child to nurses/keepers. I was a career-oriented woman, I always focused on my job. I left him alone just to earn money. I got divorced, I wish I didn't. I wish god punished me. There was no father figure."*

Also she added:

> "Suçluluğum çok uzun sürdü, inkar etmedim. Tabi doğru olan bir şey var, inkarım şurada bitti hani dedim ya doktora psikoloğa %1 şansım yok mu diye, yok deyince bitti. Sebebini hep kendimde aradım. Yani benimki gibi bir insanın yapmayacağı bir şey yaptım. Benim eski eşimin ailesi hukukçu, ağır ceza hakimleri falan. Neler düşündüm biliyor musunuz, hiç bana yakışmıyor ama düşündüm, dedim ki herhalde onlar birini haksız yere ölüme götürdüler, haksız yere bir ceza verdiler, birinin hayatına mal oldu, onlar da beddua etti soyun sopun kurusun diye, böyle olduğu dediğim bile oldu. Yakıştıramıyorum kendime ama başkası olsa saklar, saklamıyorum, ben böyle sığ seviyesiz şeyler bile düşündüm. Hep kendimi suçladım, çok suçladım. Benim yüzümden, evde otursaydım, kırsaydım dizimi bu kadar paralar kazanacağıma çocuğumla olsaydım. Ama şimdi anladım ki onunla ilgili değilmiş. Suçluluğum çok fazlaydı."

> *"The feeling of guilt lasted too long, I did not deny it. Of course, this is also true that my denial was over at the point where the psychologist told me I dont have even a 1% chance when I asked if I had any. I always thought I was the one to blame. I mean I have done something that a person like me would not do. My ex husband's family is full of judges dealing with serious crimes. Do you know what I thought? This isn't really me but I thought that they falsely sentenced some people to death, they did not judge them fairly, they caused people's deaths so that their families cursed them in return. I am not happy with what I thought, but*

> *at least I am not hiding it, someone else would do that. I even thought such shallow, no-sense things. I always blamed myself, a lot. It was because of me. I wish I stayed at home, be with my child rather than making this much money. But now I realize this wasn't about that. The guilt was too much."*

One of the initial feelings of mothers is "a death like suffering". Especially 2 mothers emphasized the expression "like death" while describing how much they suffered. Also, somatic reactions occurred in two mothers after their son came out. One of them stated that she had temporary paralysis on her face. The other said she had severe headaches.

Second sub-theme is the "meaning making efforts". This sub-theme includes the efforts of mothers to make sense that their son is gay. Bülent Ersoy[1] appeared as the mothers' first mental representation of homosexuality. Three of the mothers stated that when they learned about it, Bülent Ersoy came to their minds first because they did not know the difference between sexual orientation and gender identity. Afterwards, 2 mothers stated that they questioned why this happened to them as a part of the meaning making process. Mother 5:

> "Ormana gidiyordum arabayı kitliyordum bağırıyordum, neden Allahım, ha pardon Allah'ım demeyeyim çünkü benim dini inancım yok, diyordum ki Allah'a inanmadım da ondan mı oldu. Ben vallahi billahi karıncayı ezmem. Yolumdaysa yolumu değiştiririm. Kimsenin hakkını yemem. Ben dindar değilim ama öyle ahlak kurallarım var. Niye bana oldu niye yani? Niye böyle bir şey yaptı? İşte Mesnevi'ye göre bu seni tekamül ettirecek bir ders, ya ne dersi, neyin dersi? Ben zaten tekamül olmamış mıyım? Yani ben zaten insanlara kötü davranmıyorum, neden ben?

> *"I was going to a forest, locking the car, and screaming. Why, my god? Oh, pardon me, I should not say it this way because I did not believe in religions. So, I thought this happened to me because I did not believe in God. I swear I would not even hurt an ant. If it is on my way, I would change my way. I was not unfair to anyone. I am not religious, but I have my own ethics. Then why this has happened to me? Why did he do*

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[1] Bülent Ersoy is a Turkish singer and actress. A trans woman, she is known as one of the most popular singers of Turkish music, nicknamed Diva by her fans. Ersoy began her career as a male singer. Already one of Turkey's most popular singers and actors, she gained international notoriety in April 1981 after having sex reassignment surgery in London.She kept the name "Bülent" even though it is a typically masculine name. **(Resource: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/B%C3%BClent_Ersoy)**

*something like that? According to Mesnevi, this is a lesson that will make you mature. What kind of a lesson is that? Am I not mature already? I mean I do not do anything bad to other people. Why me then?"*

Mother 2:

“Günlerce ağlama, günlerce artık kendini sorgulama, neden niye… niye ben?”

*“Crying for days, questioning yourself for days, why? Why me?"*

With this questioning, mothers started to make causality attributions about their son being gay. Mothers attributed their sons' being gay to puberty, hormones, growing up with women in the family, possibility of getting raped or being exposed to sexual abuse, also the possibility of bad events that he might have encountered during the Gezi Protests, having been subjected to violence by his brother, being smaller compared to his peers and not being able to attract girls, and raising him "like a girl". Mother 2:

“Cinsel yönelimle ilgili hiçbir bilgiye sahip olmadığın için sadece toplumun yanlış bildiği ve senin onlardan kulaktan duyma bildiğin şeyler var. İşte, çocuğun tecavüze uğrarsa eşcinsel olur. Ben acaba çocuğum böyle bir duruma maruz kalırken ben neredeydim… suçluluk duygusu…”

*“There are things that society knows wrong, and you inherit those things from them just because you don't know anything about sexual orientation. Like, if your child is raped, then he becomes a homosexual. Where was I when my child was exposed to something like that? The feeling of guilt…"*

Later, mothers stated that they started to seek information. While some mothers tried to get information from the internet, some of them consulted their friends. While some of the mothers needed to consult an expert for treatment, some of them needed an expert help to understand the situation. Eventually, five of the mothers received professional support. Mothers emphasized the importance of coming across an expert who is not homophobic. Mother 4:

“Ondan sonra internete girdik acaba eşcinsellik nedir diye. Kimi tedavi edilebilir diyor, tedavi edilemez diyenler de var, karmakarışık bir sürü

bilgi. Biz dedik ki bu işin içinden çıkamayacağız en iyi kapatalım bunu, yarın gidelim psikiyatriste o bize en doğrusunu söylesin."

*"Later on, we searched what homosexuality is on the Internet. Some people say it can be cured, some people say the opposite, lots of complicated information. So, we thought we better stop doing this because it was not helping, and we decided to go to a psychiatrist the next day so the psychiatrist would tell us the best."*

Mother 6:

"Doğru bir psikoloğa denk gelmenin çok büyük bir avantaj olduğunu düşünüyorum. Eğer ilk psikiyatr kadına gitmiş olsaydım ben 4 yılın sonunda hala çocuğum karşı cinsten hoşlanacak diye vakit kaybediyordum ve para harcıyordum. Psikoloğun da çok büyük etkisi var, şans diyelim biz buna."

*"I think finding the right psychologist is a great advantage. If I went to the first psychiatrist woman, in the end of four years, I would be still wasting my time and money so that my son would like someone from opposite sex. I mean the psychologist played a huge role in this, let's call it luck."*

"Trying to digest" is the part of the meaning making efforts. After learning that their children are gay, mothers' processing of information can be attributed to mothers' efforts to digest this information. Metaphorically, this information first caused indigestion in mothers. A great example to this is given by Mother 6:

"İşte çocuğu bir gün okul çıkışında aldım ikimiz birlikte bir kafeye gittik. Ona dedim ki seninle bir şeyler konuşmak istiyorum rahatsız olduğum bazı konular var dedim. Sonra kafede biz pizza söyledik. Mektubun baş rolü. B. kim dedim. Böyle durdu. Bu arada ben de pizzadan bir lokmayı ağzıma attım. Anne dedi ben artık senden saklayamayacağım dedi. Ben sana bir şey söylemek istiyorum, B. benim erkek arkadaşım dedi. Ben böyle dondum. Nasıl yani dedim. Anne ben geyim dedi. (…) Gece 11'de o akşamüstü 6'da ağzıma aldığım pizza var ya, o lokmayı kendi elimle çıkardım gece 11'de. Yutamadım ben onu. Böyle yanağımın kenarında duruyordu hala."

*"I picked up the child and we went to a café together. I told him that there are things that bothers me, and I wanted to talk to you about them. Then we ordered a pizza. I asked him who B., the leading role of the letter, is. He stopped for a second. Meanwhile, I took a bite from the pizza. He said: "Mom, I can no longer hide this from you. I want to tell*

*you something. B. is my boyfriend." I was shocked. I asked him how. He said that he is gay. (...) Remember the bite I took from that pizza at 6 o'clock in the evening, I took out that piece with my own hand at 11 o'clock at night. I couldn't swallow it. It was still in my mouth."*

In this process, the mothers who participated in the family associations found the other mothers in the same association who accepted their sons as the way they are extremely awkward. They reported that could not understand how other mothers were capable of doing so. In this digestion process, it is observed that while it was good for some mothers to be a little more withdrawn, there were also expressions implying that telling that her son is gay to someone that she did not particularly know made her feel better. Another mother craved to find someone who had the same experience as her and she wanted to learn how she/he coped with this situation.

"Bargaining" is the third sub-theme. Right after the disclosure, three of the mothers talked about their bargaining processes. They reported that they wished something else would happen to their children instead of them being gay. Mother 5 talked about her bargain with the specialist she consulted:

> "Psikoloğa dedim ki ya hani %10 şans bile yok mu değişse. M. Hanım yok dedi. %5? Yok. %1 olamaz mı dedim belki değişir. M. Hanım, 20 yaşındaki bir genç artık ben eşcinselim diyorsa eşcinseldir, bunun lamı cimi yok dedi."

> "I asked the psychologist if there is even a 10% chance for him to change. He said, no chance to change. I asked if 5%? I asked whether there is even a 1% chance that he would change. He replied: If a 20-year-old teenager says I am homosexual, he is gay, there is no coming back from that.

"Transfer of the emotional burden from child to mother and relief of the child" is the fourth sub-theme of the coming out process. Mothers perceive the fact that their son is gay as the burden of not being able to share it with anyone, and burden of dealing with this information alone. Mother 1:

> "Benim omuzlarıma attı ya, benim omuzlarıma attı yükü. Yükü benim omuzlarımın üzerinde kaldı. Açıldıktan sonra her şeyi üzerime attı. Tek başıma kaldım."

> *"He put all the burden on my shoulders. The burden was left on my shoulders. After he came out, he threw everything at me. I was left alone."*

The mothers talked about emotional relief in their children after they came out. As the stress of hiding that they are gay, and the lies they told to protect themselves disappeared, the sons seemed more relieved following their coming-out process. This reflected positively on the mothers' feelings as well. Mother 3:

> "Yani şimdi onda bir mutluluk oluştu, rahatlık oluştu. Yani en azından, biliyorsunuz bir şeyi saklamak zordur, insanı strese sokar. Oğlumu da en çok strese sokan benimle paylaşamamasıymış. Açılınca psikolojisi biraz daha düzeldi. Ben bunu gördüm. O gerginliği üstünden attı, annem benim yanımdaysa dünya üzerime gelse umurumda değil gibi bir düşünceye sahip oldu."

> *"I mean he got happier, became more relaxed. You know it is hard to hide something, it stresses people. The thing that stressed my son the most was the fact that he could not share this with me. After he came-out, his psychology got better. I saw that. He got rid of that nervous state and felt like if his mother was on his side, he would not care even if the whole world was against him."*

"Ambivalence" is the fifth sub-theme. Five of the mothers reported ambivalent feelings and thoughts that accompany their son's disclosure process and beyond. Loving her son very much while also loathing her son, wanting her son to always be with her but avoiding eye contact when they are together, knowing that this was not a choice of his son but also blaming him for being gay, accepting her son as he is whereas not being able to stop thinking about the possibility of him being heterosexual are the expressions of ambivalence mother experienced during this process and afterwards. Mother 6:

> "Bu çapraz duyguları ben elbette ki yaşıyorum yani. Herkes yaşıyordur. Biz kabullendik diyoruz, çocuğumun ne kadar renkli olduğunu gördüm, yeniden tanıdım onu çok seviyorum diyorum ama birisi, sen şimdi bana desen ki ilaç buldum vereyim mi, ver derim yani. O da biraz şey, belki sizin bireysel sorununuz yok çocuğunuzla ama hani toplumda o metrodaki gibi bakan adamlar var ya, belki onlar yüzünden böyle bir şey, topluma uyum sağlasın hani. %80'i 90'ı heteroysa o da hetero olsun. O ilacı alırım tabi."

*"Of course, I also have these ambivalent feelings, everyone has them. I say I accepted, I saw how colorful my son is, I got to know my son again and I loved him very much. But if someone said they found a medicine and ask me whether I want it, I'd say give that medicine to me. Maybe you don't have a problem with your child, but I want him to adapt to society because of those guys watching my son on the subway. If 80-90% of the society is heterosexual, my son should also be heterosexual. Of course, I would take that medicine."*

"Father's expected/actual reactions" is the last sub-theme of the coming out process. Although the fathers did not participate in the interview, the mothers were asked about the father's reactions and what would have happened if the father had known the situation. Mother 1 said that his father did not know and if he found out he would kill his son. Mother 2 said that the father did not know, and if he knew, he would accept it in time because he had an experienced wife and son. Mother 3 said that she had lost her husband, but if he had found out, he would have accepted his son because freedom was important to him. Mother 4 said the father knew that his son is gay but he pretended as he didn't not know. She added, his father did not want his son to know that he was aware of the situation and tried to hide it from him. Mother 5 said that his father learned it, but he said that he has gay friends and this is perfectly normal for him. Mother 6 stated that the father found out but he did not care as he did not see his child anyways.

### 3.3 Post-Coming Out Process

In this section, post-coming out mothers' experiences, adaptation processes, factors facilitating this process, changing dynamics, the reorganization process of boundaries and the reactions of the environment are discussed (See Figure 4).

"Sense of loss" is the first sub-theme of the post coming out process. There were specific concepts that mothers regarded as losses in this process. The most common losses are related to heteronormative expectations. All mothers said that they dreamed of their sons getting married before their son came out. One of the losses that all

**Figure 4**

*Concept Map of The Post-Coming Out Process*
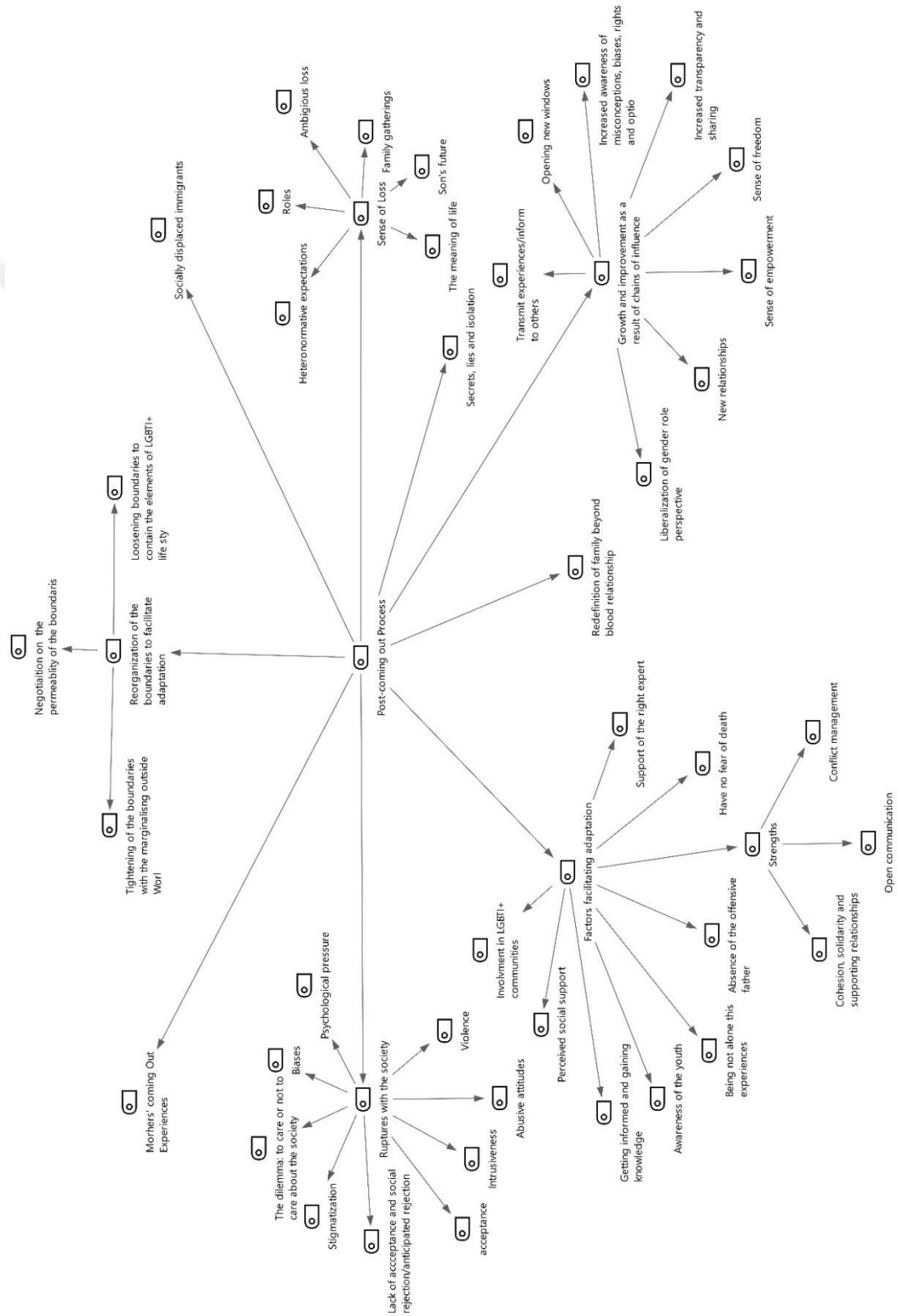
mothers express is the loss of the role of being a grandmother. One of the first thoughts that came to their minds is the thought of "I will not be a grandmother anymore". In addition, Mother 6 described a loss similar to an ambiguous loss as follows:

> "Tamam dedim bugüne kadar olan çocuğum buydu, bunu sıfırla dedim. Ben çocuğumu sıfırdan tanımak istiyorum. Yani bugüne kadar benden gizlemiş olduğu ya da açılmadan önceki hayatını bir kenara bırakacağım bu yeni çocuğu ben sıfırdan tanımaya çalışacağım ve her gün yeni bir özelliğini öğreniyorum. Çok değişik bir şey. Gerçekten sanki o çocuk benim çocuğum değilmiş gibi geliyor bazen. Çok çok enteresan."

> *"I told myself to erase what I know about my child up to this day. I want to get to know my children from scratch. I will put everything that he hides from me, or his life pre-come out aside, and try to know him from scratch. And I learn something new about him every day. This is strange. Sometimes I feel like this child is not mine. It is very interesting."*

Mother 4 said that she lost her "son's future". In other words, she said she thought that his school, business, and family life was over and also thought her son would always be alone. Mother 5 stated that her life lost its meaning after her son's disclosure and that she is waiting for her days to come to an end. Mother 1 said that she had lost her family togetherness. She thinks that her family will no longer come together because her son does not meet with other family members after he came out.

"Secrets, lies and isolation" is the second sub-theme. Secrets and lies emerged as a way of setting boundaries, a way of protecting oneself and their son. The mothers kept it as a secret that their son was gay, hiding it from both the rest of the family and their friends. By keeping it as a secret, they believe they actually protected their sons and themselves from negative reactions. Because they thought that if they disclose to others, they would get hurt. Therefore, as a result of social exclusion, mothers had to keep this situation as a secret. They had to lie to keep the secret and isolation comes with this secrecy and lies. The social network of the mothers has narrowed in the post-coming out period. All mothers distanced themselves especially from the extended family. They were forced to isolate themselves to prevent themselves from the

intrusive interrogations by the environment. They acted this way in order not to lie, not to be excluded, not to be questioned, not to be judged as a result of the secrecy.

Mother 3:

"Bir de şöyle bir şeyi var, nasıl söyleyeyim size, hani biz ailede kabul edebiliyoruz ama toplum bunu kabul etmiyor. Akrabalarımız var, mesela biz şu anda durumu herkesten saklıyoruz. Çünkü önyargılar var. Bir de dine bağlıyorlar mesela, işte dinde böyle bir şey yok deniyor. Ne bileyim insanlara psikolojik baskı yaparak, huzursuz ederek o insanları daha çok kötü yola itiyorlar. Bir şekilde saklamak zorunda kalıyoruz yani. Hani ben bir annemle bir kardeşimle bir abimle hani bu sıkıntılarımı kesinlikle paylaşamıyorum. Çünkü anlamayacaklarını çok iyi biliyorum. İşte bazen şeyi konuşuyoruz mesela benim ailemdekiler soruyor, neden B. sizinle yaşamıyor diye. Ben de diyorum ki işte onlar çalıştığı yere yakın arkadaşlarıyla ev tuttular. Siz zaten 3 kişiniz diyorlar, sığamadınız mı koca eve niye beraber yaşamıyorsunuz neden sizi bırakıp gidiyor diyorlar. Yani bana o kadar çok soru soruluyor ki ben en çok da yalan söylediğim için üzülüyorum. Çünkü yalan söylemeyi sevmiyorum. Artık beni bunaltıyorlar, bir yerde tıkıyorlar ve ben artık orada çizgimi çekiyorum. Size ne diyorum artık, neden beni bu kadar bunaltıyorsunuz diyorum. Ya hani onlar da kafalarında ne yaşıyorlarsa artık, bana psikolojik baskı yapılıyor. Bu durum da beni çok rahatsız ediyor. Ben bunu oğluma yansıtmamaya çalışıyorum. Ailemde çok yapılıyor bu mesela. Ailemle bile doğru düzgün görüşmüyorum. Herkesten kaçmaya başladım."

*"There is also this thing, let me put it this way, I mean we can accept it in the family but society does not. I mean we are hiding this situation, from our relatives, from everyone because there are prejudices. People also attribute this to religion, they say that there is no such thing in religion. I mean, they force people into doing bad things by simply exerting psychological pressure and making them uncomfortable. One way or another, we feel like we have to hide this. I mean I can never share what I am going through with my mother, or my brother because I know very well that they wouldn't understand this. For example, when we are talking, they ask why my son does not live with you. They also say my house is big enough for a family of size 3, but still we cannot fit in. Why did my son leave me? Since they are asking too many questions, I get sad mostly because I lie to them. Because I don't like lying. They overwhelm me and I finally draw my line there. I'm saying that this is none of their business, asking them why they are bothering me so much. They are putting psychological pressure on me and this is making me very uncomfortable. I try not to project it too much on my son. I don't even see my family much. I started running from everyone."*

"Reorganization of the boundaries to facilitate adaptation" is the third sub-theme. In order for mothers to adapt in the transition process, they had to rearrange both their own boundaries and family boundaries with the environment as the new information entering the system. With their sons being gay, the mothers readjusted themselves in terms of the position they will take both towards their sons and the environment. The mothers first negotiated on the permeability of the boundaries. Here, the mothers tried how to set the boundary and also, they wanted to see whether they could accept it or not. For example, Mother 5, previously told all her friends that her son was gay, but later she found this absurd and decided that this information did not concern her friends. In another example, Mother 2 mentioned, although she admitted that her son had a lover, it took a while for her to admit his sexuality. In other words, mothers have examined themselves and made trials in order to have flexible boundaries. They tried to rebalance the system, taking into account the needs of both their own and the environment. As a result of this negotiations, they have tightened and/or loosened their boundaries based on the situation and place. Here, the tightening of the boundaries was against the outside world-environment that marginalized them. In fact, secrecy, isolation, cutting off communication with homophobic people are parts of this tightening. Mother 4:

> "Evet sınırlarımızı koruduk ve sınırlarımız içerisinde sorunlarımızla baş edebildik. Çünkü belki açıklamamız gerekseydi olay daha da büyüyecekti. Aaa eşcinsel mi hadi doktorlara gidelim, oraya buraya gidelim, çocuğumun üzerinde baskılar çoğalacaktı, üzülecektim keşke söylemesem mi diyecektim. Yani yine kapalı yaşamamız bize avantaj sağladı. Biz üç kişi sorunlarımızla baş edebiliriz'e inandık yani."

> "We protected our boundaries and we were able to deal with our problems within our own boundaries. Because if we had to explain it, the event might have gotten bigger. They say that: Oh, is he gay? Let's go to the doctor then. If we had told others, the amount of pressure would have increased on my child. I would get upset, and regretted telling them. In other words, our isolated life gave us an advantage. So, we believed that as a family of three people, we can deal with our problems."

While mothers tightened their boundaries with the society, they were also loosening their boundaries to contain the elements of LGBTI+ life style at the same time.

Mothers said that while they used to dream of a bride next to their son, now this dream is replaced by a groom next to them. That is, although the dreams are the same, their subjects have changed. Over time, mothers met their sons' lovers and they said that they wanted their sons to find someone they loved very much. Mother 6 said that, over time she began to like her son's feminine appearance. Joining family groups, sharing their feelings there, and starting activism are the most important examples of loosening boundaries.

"Redefinition of the family beyond blood relationship" is the fourth sub-theme. The emphasis of all mothers was on the constructed family rather than the family to which they were bound by blood. As a result of the distance between them and their family they are connected by blood line, they constructed their own family after the disclosure and they seem quite satisfied with it. The constructed families, especially by the mothers who join the family group, largely consisted of people in the association. Their needs of belonging to a group and being accepted there are fulfilled by being part of the family association. In addition, they feel like they can be helpful in the family they have constructed, by transferring their experiences to others. In the interviews, it was seen that the mother who did not join the family association had more difficulty in defining her new psychological family. This mother has less social support than mothers in the family association. Since she did not tell anyone from her family and friends, this situation made her very lonely. Despite this, that mother also emphasized that blood bound do not matter when describing the family. The psychological family of all mothers has changed after the coming out. This change is about being accepted, being able to exist and not being judged. Mother 4, who said even the concept of family has changed for her, added that:

> "Şimdi bir köpekle bir kadın bile aile olabilir gibi geliyor. Evet yani aile kavramımız iyice değişti. Yani şimdi aile grubumuzda öyle uzun süreli, beraber yaşayan, Kanada'da evlenen, yurt dışında evlenen ailelerimiz var, tabii ki çok normal iki erkek iki kadın evlenmesi aile olması çok normal. Yani birbirlerini sevdikten sonra birlikte yaşamaktan mutlu olduktan sonra hiçbir sorun yok. Biz, yani heteroseksüellerin bence %90'ı mutsuz evlilikler. Boşandıktan sonra gözlemlediğim, o kadar çok yanlış evlilik , o kadar çok mutsuz evlilik var ki sırf birlikte olunmuş, aynı evde çocuklar var diye işte bana göre %90'ı zoraki evlilik. Yani herkesin fırsatı olsa, cesareti olsa boşanması gereken, kendilerini mutsuzluğa yönelten, hani gerçek anlamda ben

bununla ömrümün sonuna kadar her anımı mutlu yaşıyorum diyen insanlar o kadar azdır ki. E bunu da eşcinseller de yaşıyorsa ne mutlu. Bulmuşlarsa öyle birisini… Yani onlara aile denilir. Öbür türlü her gün kavga eden bir karı kocaya aile demem ben. Evinde her an mutsuz olan bir aileye aile demem. Birbirinden gizlenen saklanan sırları olan bir şeylerini paylaşamayan aileler aile değil."

*"Now I feel like even a dog and a woman can become a family. I mean, the concept of family has changed a lot. There are couples living together for a long time in the association, there are also couples got married in Canada and other foreign countries. People with same gender getting married and becoming a family is pretty normal of course. If they love each other, if they are happy because they live together then there is no problem. In fact, to me, 90% of the heterosexual marriages are unhappy. After I got divorced, I observed that people are staying married just because they have children living with them in the same house. I mean 90% of those are unhappy, forced marriages. I mean, if people have the opportunity or if they are brave enough to get divorced then they would take it. In my opinion, people who think they will live together happily until the end belong to a really small group of people. And if that is the case for homosexuals, how great this is. Then they are called a family. I would not label a couple fighting every single day a family. A family that is unhappy at every moment is also not called a family in my opinion. Neither the families that are hiding stuff from each other are."*

"Growth and improvement as a result of chains of influence" is the other sub-theme of after disclosure process. The improvement of the mothers in the post-disclosure process is an example of the concept of chain of influence in family systems theory, which explains how the change in one subsystem affects the other subsystem. After learning that their sons are gay, there has been positive transformations and growth in mothers. One of the positive transformations is the liberalization of gender role perspectives of all mothers. The mothers have questioned gender roles. As a result, the roles they have accepted so far have been shattered. They questioned not only the roles of their sons in the society, but also the roles society assigned to them. For instance, Mother 2 said that the identity of femininity is more prominent than the identity of motherhood now. Four out of six mothers especially emphasized that this experience opened new windows in their lives. The awareness they gained, investigation they made regarding the gender roles, relationships they formed in the association that set them free are the key factors in discovering new worlds. In fact, they reported that they are the ones who experienced changes, not their sons. They added that the idea of such

a transformation did not even cross their minds. In addition, they said that their awareness regarding not only LGBTI related topics but also different fields of life has increased and they realized the importance of embracing variety. Mother 2:

> "Yakınlaştırmaktan ziyade farkındalığımı arttırdı. Ben hep bizimle ilgili yazılan, bizim anlatımımızla yazılan kitaplarda bahsettim, evet benim bir dört duvarım vardı. Bir de camım vardı ama camımda perde vardı. Benim çocuğum ilk önce o perdeleri açtı, sonra o camı açtı, sonra benim o camdan bakıp nefes almamı sağladı. O yüzden benim için çok başka bir yerde. O yüzden artık şey diyorum çocuğum olmaktan ziyade yol arkadaşım diyorum. Beni çok fazla dönüştüren bir insan. Zaman zaman iyi ki geysin de diyorum. Bunun aile grubunda da esprisi oluyor. Gerçekten bu konuda şikayetçi değilim hiçbir şekilde. Rahatsız değilim son 5 yıldır."

> *"It increased my awareness rather than making me closer. I always told this in the books written by our narratives, or the books written about us. Yes, I was in a room with four walls. There was also a window, but it was covered with a curtain. My son opened the curtain first, then he opened that window, and let me look out that window and help me breathe. That is why he is so special to me. That is why I consider him as a friend I walk with more than as my son. He changes me a lot. From time to time, I tell him that I am glad he is gay. We joke about this in the family association as well. I am not complaining about that by any means, for real. I am not bothered by that for the last five years."*

Increased transparency and sharing in their relationships with their sons are the other reported positive changes they experienced. It is stated by the mothers that the children seemed to be more distant to their mothers and they were lying occasionally to hide the situation before coming-out. The mother-child relationship was also strengthened by both the come-out and the acceptance of the mothers. Keeping this secret together made them get closer to each other and this also helped increasing their communication. Another positive aspect that could be associated with the come-out is mothers' increased sense of empowerment. This phenomenon is also linked to the liberalization of the gender roles as a part of the chain transformation. Mother 2:

> "Mesela bir on yıl öncesinde ben eşime hayır diyemeyen bir kadındım. Çok acı ama evet öyleydim ama şimdi değilim. Şimdi hayır demeyi de biliyorum, sen orada dur demeyi de biliyorum. Kaygım ve korkum yok. Beni boşayacak, bana fiziksel şiddet uygulayacak böyle bir kaygım korkum yok."

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*"Ten years ago, I was a woman that cannot say no to my husband. It is really sad but I was like that, but I am not anymore. Now I know how to say no, or how to tell someone to stop right there. I am not worried or scared. I am not worried or scared that he will divorce me or he will abuse me physically."*

As an example to the growth, mothers reported the desire of transmitting their experiences and informing others experiencing a come-out process. Increasing the awareness of the society and being helpful to other parents are received as responsibilities by the mothers benefited from the family association. Another result of the transformation is becoming an activist after participating in the family association meetings with the intentions of sharing, understanding and internalization of the situation. Mother 4:

"İstanbul aileleri ile görüşmem bir kırılma noktam oldu. Öyle olunca ben de aile grubunda, 9 senedir gruptayım, aslında ben kabul sürecimi benim için bir sorun yok artık çocuğumla ilgili hiçbir sorunum yok, sırf gelen yeni annelere bir örnek olalım bir çeşit olalım diye kalabalık olalım diye bulunuyorum."

*"Meeting with the families in Istanbul was my turning point. I am in the family association for 9 years now. I am not actually attending the association for myself or my son anymore. I don't have any problem with my son. I am just here to help the new comers, to make the association crowded."*

Mother5:

"LİSTAG'da çok aktif çalışıyordum. Bütün PHD, master degree hepsine üniversitelere karşı ben sorumluydum, tezlerine yardım ediyordum. İngilizcem çok iyi olduğu için yurt dışında LİSTAG'ı temsil ediyordum, birlikte Tiran'a gitmiştik. Böyle yardım etmeye çalışıyorum. Yürüyüşlere katılıyorum elimde pankartla. Ya da yabancı gazetelere röportaj veriyorum İngilizce falan. O tip işlerde destek oluyorum onlara. İnsanlar bir olgunluk seviyesine gelip bunu anlamak zorundalar. Ama ben, dünyayı görmüş ben, bir sürü gelişmiş ülkede yaşamış ben bilmiyordum. Ne ayıp. Bu benim ayıbım bilmiyordum. Bilmiyordum. Şimdi öğrendim, elimden geldiğince de millete öğretmeye çalışıyorum, ben buyum."

*"I was working in LİSTAG actively. I was the responsible for all PhD, and Masters programs, I was helping people's thesis. I was representing LİSTAG abroad since my English was really good. We went to Tiran together. I was trying to help, attending the meetings with banners in my hand or I was giving interviews to foreign newspapers*

*in English. I was supporting them like that. People have to mature and they have to understand that. But I, who lived in many developed countries, travelled the World, did not know that. Such a shame. It was my fault that I did not know. Now that I learned it, I am trying my best to teach this to others. This is who I am."*

"Socially displaced immigrants" is the other sub-theme. The mothers reported that their sons were having difficulties being themselves, and they were not getting the acceptance of the society as the way they were. All of the mothers wanted their sons to go abroad just to have the opportunity to be themselves freely. Preoccupation with safety due to social threat was observed in most of the mothers. This preoccupation bothers them constantly in their social lives. To be more specific, they are afraid of their sons getting hurt on the streets, they are not sure about the outcomes of their sons fulfilling their military duties, etc. Mother 1 contributes to these statements as follows:

"Şimdi mesela bir el ele tutuşsa erkek arkadaşıyla bir yere gitse arkasından ya taşlarlar, kendi homofobisi olanlar. O yüzden burada yapmaması dışarıda yapması daha iyi diye düşünüyorum."

*"I mean, now if he holds his boyfriend's hand and they go to places together, homophobic people would seriously disturb them. For this reason, I think it is better if he does these things in abroad."*

Similarly, Mother 4 expresses this preoccupation as:

"Yani endişeler kaygılar, nasıl olacak hayatı neler yaşayacak neler başına gelecek onlar çok korkutuyor. Hani diyorum böyle Türk filmi olur ya bir genç kız büyük şehire gider her türlü kötülükler onun başına gelir peş peşe bütün felaketleri yaşar, ben de öyle oğlum hani gey olmuş zamana kadar hiçbir şey bilmediğimi zannediyorken nerden çıkartıyorsam işte, tacize uğrayacak, polis taciz edecek, tecavüze uğrayacak, alay edecekler, şöyle olacak böyle olacak, dışlanacak, yalnız yaşlı olacak, işte mahalle tarafından dışlanan herkes tarafından dışlanan bir yaşlılık geçirecek. Hani bunları nereden çıkartmışım bunları nerede görmüşüm nerden biliyorum onu da bilmiyorum. Hani böyle örnekler var mı hayatımda, yok. Ama böyle bir senaryo oluşturdum kendimce her türlü felaketi içinde barındıran. Onun içinden çıkamaz hale geliyorsunuz."

*"I mean I am worried and extremely scared when I think about how my child would live here. Like in the Turkish movies, a young girl moves to a big city and lots of unfortunate events happen to her. This is how I feel when I think about my son. He will get raped, he will get bullied by*

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*the police, he will be abused. They will make fun of him. He will be excluded; he will get old alone. He will live a life where he is excluded until he dies. I mean I do not even know why I think all these things. There is not really anything like that in my life. But I made this scenario having every single disaster by myself. After that you cannot escape these thoughts."*

The mothers believed that if their sons live in abroad, this would be better for them despite the longing. Mother 4 whose son has been in Canada stated that at least she knew her son will get accepted and not get bullied there. Mother 2 also said that they moved to Ankara from a city in the east just to make his son feel more like himself with the excuse of the university. After considering these examples, it can be said that the pressure exerted by the society and the discomfort arising from it forced the families to change where they live.

"Factors facilitating adaptation" is the seventh sub-theme. Five of the mothers participated in the family associations emphasized the importance of this association multiple times during the interviews. They stated that they adapt to the situation easier because of the acceptance, the feeling of belonging to a group, the opportunity to express their feelings, recognizing the fact that they are not going through this experience alone, getting informed, receiving social support, and benefiting from other parents' experiences. Mother 2 supports this as follows:

> "Sonra zaman içerisinde araştırmaya, aile grubuyla bütünleşmeye, bütünleştikçe öğrenmeye, öğrendikçe değişmeye ve sonra dönüşmeye başladım. Yaşarken, değişimi dönüşümü yaşarken aslında evet ben zaten sadece çocuğuma değil kendime iyilik yapmışım. Kendimi özgürleştirmişim. Benim için çok dönüm noktası. Sonra işte hayatımız böyle devam etmeye başladı."

> *"As time passes, I started to explore, to be more involved with the family association; to learn as I got involved, to change as I learned and then to transform. While living this transformation I actually made myself a favor, not my child. I set myself free. This is my turning point. Then this is how our life continued."*

Similarly, Mother 5 express the benefits of the family association dealing with the guilt and loneliness as:

> "Ta ki LİSTAG denen derneği gördüm. İstanbul'daki Gökkuşağı Aile Derneği'nin eşdeğeri. Onu aradım. Orada bir hanımla konuştum ve onlara katıldım. Ve orada çocuğumun da yanlış olmadığını gördüm.

Benim de yanlış olmadığımı ve yalnız olmadığımı gördüm. Hii ne çok anne baba var, ben farkında değilmişim. Onlar beni bir kucakladılar bir kucakladılar bir sarmaladılar. Hiç tahmin edemeyeceğiniz insanların çocukları LGBTİ artık. Hiç tahmin edemeyeceğiniz. Yani sokakta görsen ihtimal veremeyeceği kadar çok ki. Onlara çok müteşekkirim. Orada ben rahatladım. 4.5 5 yıl oluyor söylemişti ben onlara katıldım 1 yıl oldu, toparladım kendimi. Yani o zaman yalnızım sanıyordum, niye bana oldu ben bir şey yaptım, kötü, yaptım diyordum. Onları görünce çok rahatladım, çok mutlu oldum. Yani dedim ki yalnız değilim çok şükür."

*"Then I saw the society called LİSTAG. It is equivalent of the "Gökkuşağı Aile Derneği" in İstanbul. I called them. I talked to a woman there and joined them. Then I saw that my child was not wrong. I also saw that I was not wrong or alone either. There are lots of mothers and fathers like that, I was just not aware of it. They embraced me, they kept me close. Children of whom you cannot even imagine are LGBTİ nowadays. You would be surprised. I mean you wouldn't even imagine. I am really thankful to them. I got relieved there. It has been 4.5 – 5 years that I joined, and after a year I got myself together. At that time, I thought I was alone, I was asking whether it was about something bad I did. After seeing them, I was relieved, I got very happy. I was glad I was not alone."*

The mothers reported numerous factors that helped them throughout the process. Mother 4 stated that not having the fear of his son getting killed helped her to adapt the situation easier. Getting help from an expert that is not homophobic was considered as another facilitating factor by the mothers. Children's efforts such as recommending the family association, bringing brochures, and having their parents watch related documentaries were also facilitating factors. Perceived social support from both the family association and the people that they shared this information with during the adaptation process played an important role as well. To be more specific, Mother 1 explained how helpful sharing this with her brother was as follows:

"Öyle bir rahatlatıyor ki yükümün yarısını neredeyse aldı kardeşim. O bir de moral veriyor insana."

*"It is such a relief that my burden is almost halved thanks to my brother. It also boosted my mood."*

Mother 5 had a similar statement:

"Çok iyi geldi. Çok iyi geldi yani yanımda beni destekleyecek, öyle tu kaka demeyecek birileri, tabi onlar bir başkası olsa tu kaka diyeceklerdi ama en yakınımız olduğu için onlar da öğrendiler benimki gibi beni desteklediler. Yani ilk destekleme amaçları geylik normal değil de ablacığım sen ne yaşıyorsan biz yanındayız desteğiydi. Onlar da zamanla öğrendiler bütün terminolojiyi falan. Yani her şeyi, LGBTİ+'nın ne olduğunu sonra öğrendiler. Onlar beni desteklemek için yanımdalardı. Oğlunun durumu şey değil de, biz senin yanındayız merak etme gibi."

*"It was really helpful. It was really helpful that there were people to support me, and not to disgust by that. Since they were the closest people to us, they also learned just like me and supported us. At first, they still considered being gay as something bad, but they tried to help me with that. Later on, they also learned all the terminology and stuff. They learned everything, like what LGBTİ+ means. They were there for me. They did not really accept my son's situation, but they were supporting me."*

Mother 6:

"Ya bana bazen çok iyi geliyor gerçekten. Paylaşmak bazen çok iyi geliyor böyle yakın insanlarla, beni anlayabilecek insanlarla bunu paylaşmak iyi geliyor yani gerçekten. Bir de hele hele o yakın bulduğun insanlar bunu duyduktan sonra sana daha büyük destekçi oluyorlarsa her bakımdan yani, çocuğun açısından da, senin açından da, o zaman çok daha iyi geliyor."

*"Sometimes it really helps me. I mean, sharing this with people close to me, people that can get me, makes me feel better for real. If those people who are close to you become a big supporter in every aspect, both for you and your son, then it is even better."*

Another facilitating factor is "the absence of an offensive father". This was mainly reported by two of the mothers. For instance, Mother 6 explained this as follows:

"Şu andaki eşim çocuğumun biyolojik babası değil. O yüzden bizim sürecimiz biraz daha sanki diğer ailelere göre daha kolay geçti denebilir mi, denebilir aslında. Çünkü erkeklerin ya da babaların diyelim kabullenmesi biraz daha zor oluyor. Ama diyorum yani biyolojik babasının olmamasının burada çok büyük katkısını gördük. Çünkü diğer ailelere mesela bakıyorum, baba en son kabul eden, kabullenen. Ataerkil bir toplum, erkekliği işte bir kenara itip işte biliyorsunuz yani bunları. Kadın rolü ya da ne bileyim bu daha çok trans bireyler için geçerli ama eşcinseller için de eşcinsel babaları için de geçerli bu. Gerçekten geylerin babaları için de. Yani orada çok şey avantajlar yaşadım yani."

*"My current husband is not the biological father of my child. For this reason, I think I can say that this process was easier to deal with compared to other families. Because it is harder for men or fathers to accept that. But the fact that he was not the biological father was really helpful. When I look at the other families, the father is the last person that accepts that. You know, it is patriarchal society, putting manhood aside is hard for them. Although this applies mostly to trans people it applies to both homosexuals and homosexuals' fathers as well. Fathers of gay people too. I mean I had it easier for this reason."*

Previously existed family strengths are reported to be another facilitating factor in this process. These strengths can be listed as: conflict management skills, open communication, cohesion, solidarity and supporting relationships. Mother 2 who already had strong relationships explains this process as:

"Ya zaten benim oğlumla zaten sağlam bir ilişki vardı. Tabi zaman içerisinde yöneliminden dolayı açıklamasından dolayı sonraki zaman diliminde de tamamen güçlendi ve düğüm oldu. Yani kopma ihtimali çok çok az, tamamen düğümlendik. Tabi ev hayatımızda 7/24 güllük gülistanlık değil. İnsan olarak sesimizin yükseldiği kızdığımız noktalar oluyor. Ama dönüp özüne baktığımızda çok sağlam."

*"I already had a strong relationship with my son. Of course, when he came out, this bond got even stronger. The possibility of this bond to weaken is really low. This of course does not mean that our every-day life is amazing, and there is no problem. We have our disagreements and heated discussions. But as a whole, the bond is really strong."*

Mother 6 express the importance of tolerance and unconditional acceptance as the key factors of holding them together as follows:

"Bizim ailemizde sevgi çok önemli bir yer kaplıyor yani. Bu aile fertlerinden bazıları için artık aşmış vaziyette, koşulsuz sevgi var. Yani mesela teyzesi çocuğumu koşulsuz seviyor yani. Anne yarısı falan derler ya aynı o şekilde. Mesela o bende de vardır, o koşulsuz sevgi. Ama bu ebeveynlikten mi annelikten mi bunu tam olarak bilmiyorum. Ve bizim ailemizde hoşgörü de önemli bir yer kaplıyor. Hoşgörü var ailemizde yani. Herhalde bunlar sayesinde biz burayı biraz hızlı geçtik yani. En önemlisinin ben yine de vurgulaya vurgulaya söylüyorum sevgi olduğuna inanıyorum. Sevgi olunca her şey çözülüyor."

*"Love is a really important concept to our family. For some family members this went even beyond that there is unconditional love. For instance, his aunt loves my son unconditionally. You know they say that aunt is like half-mother. This is also the same for me. I mean I am not sure if it is related to being a mother or a parent. Our family members*

*are also really tolerant people. I guess these are the reasons why we had this process easier. But for me, I want to really emphasize that, the most important factor is love. Love solves every problem.*"

"Ruptures with the society" is the seventh sub-theme of this section. It has been observed that the mothers had the dilemma of caring or not caring about to society. Although they expressed that they were no longer affected by the negative reactions of the society and they thought they could overcome these, such reactions still had an impact on their lives because the perceived violence was a real threat for them. In addition, the threat of violence and the social rejection their sons faced, they wished their sons were heterosexual if it was possible For instance, Mother 4 expressed the following conflicting feelings, her dilemmas on different occasions of the interview:

"Bir de el alem, çevre ne derse desin'i attık kafamızdan. Eskiden toplumun istediği çocuklar, toplumun istediği insanlar yetiştirmeye çalışıyormuşuz. Hep böyle iyi bir mesleği olan, terbiyeli, saygılı, toplumun kabul ettiği çocuklar yetiştirmeye çalışıyormuşum. Çünkü dışlanmasın istiyorsunuz. Yine çocuğunu düşünüyorsun. Çünkü tezat bir çocuk tezat bir insan toplumda dışlanıyor, yalnız kalıyor. Çocuğum bu toplumda kabul görsün, sevilsin değer görsün istiyor her anne baba ve ona göre yetiştiriyor çocuğunu. Ama bu olaydan sonra çocuğum nasıl mutlu olacaksa öyle yaşasın, istediği gibi yaşasın'a dönüyorsunuz. Toplum reddederse etsin, orada iki tane arkadaşı, bir tane dostu varsa yetiyor. İnsanların ne düşündüğü artık umurunuzda olmuyor."

*"We don't care about what other people say anymore. Back then, we tried to raise children that society wants. I was trying to raise respectful children that will have good professions that society would accept. Because you don't want them to get excluded. You care about your children. Because an abnormal child, or a person becomes alone, excluded by the society, every parent wants his child to get accepted, to be loved by the society and raise them accordingly. But after such an event, you say that your son can live as he likes. It does not matter whether society rejects him or not, if he has one or two close friends, that is enough. Then you don't care about what other people think anymore."*

And she adds:

"Hani bazen böyle büyük laflar ediliyor ya toplantılarda falan, anneler gey çocuğum olduğu için çok mutluyum, işte gurur duyuyorum çocuğumla, çocuğum çok farklı çok özel diyorlar. Valla 9 sene oldu ben çok mutluyum diyemeyeceğim. Keşke heteroseksüel olsaydı (Gülüyor). Mutlu olmak değil de artık mutsuz olmamayı öğrendik. (gülüyor)

Çocuğum çok özel, çok farklı, çok iyi bir çocuk tamam onlara bir şey demeyeceğim ama heteroseksüel eşcinselliğine gelince tabi ki olsun mu olmasın mı diye seçeneğim olsaydı olmamasını tercihe derdim. Bunu neden şimdi yalan olarak söyleyeyim. İçimden öyle geldi çünkü neden toplumun dışladığı bir şeyi tercih edeyim, neden zor olan bir şeyi tercih edeyim"

*"I mean there are mothers saying that they are really happy since they have a gay child, they are really proud with their child, saying that their child is so special. Well, it has been 9 years, and I cannot really say I am extremely happy. I wish he was heterosexual (She laughs.). It is not about being happy but more like we learned not to be unhappy (She laughs.). I mean, yes, my son is really special and so on. I am not saying otherwise but when it comes to being heterosexual or homosexual, of course if I had a choice, I would choose him to be heterosexual. Why would I lie about that? Why would I choose something the society would exclude? Why would I choose something harder?"*

Mothers also mentioned the biases surrounding them. "If he is gay, he is not a man.", "They are perverts, they are sick people."," Religion is against the homosexuality.". "They are the reason of the earthquakes" are the examples of these biases the mothers have been exposed to. The mothers also added that they felt psychological pressure in addition to being exposed to these biases. Psychological pressure in the form of abusive attitudes, stigmatization and intrusive behaviors of the environment was the reason making them feel really uncomfortable. At this point, secrecy was the way of protecting themselves from the ruptured society. Mother 3:

"Yani o çocuğun yaratılışında olan bir şey. Ya işte bunları topluma kabullendiremediğimiz için sanki biz vebalıymışız gibi yüz kızartıcı bir suç işlemişiz gibi bakılıyor, o şekilde hissettiriliyor. Bu da benim hiç hoşuma gitmiyor. (…) Mesela şöyle söyleyeyim yurt dışında benim bir yeğenim var, abimin büyük oğlu. Bu yabancı bir kızla evlendi. Hatta iki üç sene önce bize geldiler. O zaman oğlum evdeydi. Evlendiği kızın kardeşleri hep eşcinselmiş. Onlardan bahsetti, hala bunların kardeşlerinin hepsi ibne, erkek erkeğe yatarlar, şunu yaparlar bunu yaparlar diye. Avrupa'da hayat yok hala, kültür yok, kimin eli kimin cebinde belli değil, işte bunun kardeşlerinin hepsi ibne diye anlattı. (…) Yani bunu insanlarla paylaşırsam başımın daha çok ağrıyacağını düşünüyorum. Hani insanların bana gelişine göre. Gerçekten beni anlayıp, benim çocuğum da olabilirdi benim başıma da gelebilirdi, yani bu şekilde ben de bununla savaşabilirdim deyip de samimi olduğuna inanırsam bunu herkesle paylaşabilirim. Ama bunu görmediğim için bunlar beni üzecekler, daha çok yargılayacaklar, o ona söyleyecek, biriyle paylaştığınız zaman o söylediğiniz kişiyle

kalmıyor, o da bir başkasıyla paylaşıyor. Ondan sonra bir sürü kişi duyuyor sanki milletin meselesiymiş gibi. E bunlarla haşır neşir olmak istemiyorum.

*"So, it's something in that child's creation. Because we can't make society accept these stuffs, we are received as if we have the plague, as if we have committed a disgraceful crime, and we are made to feel that way. I don't like this either. (…) For example, let me tell you that I have a nephew abroad, my brother's eldest son. He married a foreign girl and they came to us two or three years ago; my son was at home at that time. The siblings of the girl he married were homosexual. He talked about them, and said that all of their brothers are faggots, they sleep with men, they do this and that. He said there is no life in Europe, there is no culture, it is not clear whose hand is in whose pocket, that's all her brothers as fags. (…) So, if I share this with people, I think it will bother me more. I can share it with people who really understand me, who say it could have been my child, it could have happened to me, and I could have fought it too. If I believe they are sincere, I can share it with everyone. But I don't see this sincerity. I know that if I share, they will make me sad, they will judge me more. When you share it with someone, they share it with someone else, what you share does not stay between the two of you. After that, a lot of people hear it as if it's everybody's business. I don't want to deal with them."*

The last sub-theme of the post-coming out process is the "Mothers' coming out experiences". In addition to their son's disclosure process, mothers have also gone through the coming out process to their social circle. After their son came out, five of the mothers disclosed to at least one person and four of them disclosed to someone important to them. To whom the mothers came out and their post-disclosure experiences can be specified as follows: Mother 1 and 2 shared it with their brother and got a positive reaction from their brother. The brother of Mother 1 stated that "My friends' child is gay too, I also have a neighbor like that.". Mother 3 has not disclosed that her son is gay to any of her extended family or friends and also, she said that the people around her did not create a suitable environment to share this information. Similarly, Mother 4 has not shared it with anyone. However, she explained the reason for not sharing this information, rather than being accepted, as follows:

"Bir de işte dediğim gibi bütün aile oğlumu çok sevdiği için, oğlum kendini çok sevdirdiği için herhalde öğrenseler diyordum benim gibi şok yaşarlar, yani benim yaşadıklarımı yaşarlar. Çok sevmelerine rağmen benim yaşadıklarımı yaşarlar ama eninde sonunda hani

sevgileri ağır basar diyordum. Önce bir şok geçirip tabi ki bir şeyler yaşayacaklar, hemen birdenbire olmaz, anne olarak ben kabullenemedim yani zor kabullendim muhakkak ki başkaları daha zor kabullenir. Benim çevremde olanlar da beni sevdikleri için bana güvendikleri için çocuğumu da sevdikleri için muhakkak onlar da şoklar yaşayacaklar onlar da bir sürü evreler yaşayacaklar bizim yaşadığımız gibi, ama dışlama olayı olmayacak buna eminim. Öyle bir endişem yok. Sadece üzülmelerinden şu anda onlara öyle bir şok yaşatmaktan çekindiğim için söylemiyorum."

*"Also, because the whole family loves my son very much, and because my son makes them love him so much, I think that if my family finds out, they will be shocked like me, I mean, they will experience what I went through. Although they love him very much, they live what I go through. But in the end, I think their love will outweigh. First, they will be shocked and of course they will experience something like that, it will not be accepted right away. As a mother, I could not accept that, I mean, it was hard ,I'm pretty sure this will be harder fr others to accept. Surely, they will experience shocks too, they will go through many phases as we do, but I am sure they will not exclude us because they love me, they trust me and they love my child. I have no such worries. I don't share it just because I'm afraid of making them sad and shocking them."*

Mother 5 stated that she shared it with her sister and brother right after she learned it, and also she shared it with four of her close friends a few years later. Mother 5 described her siblings' reaction as follows:

"Tabi onlar bir başkası tu kaka diyeceklerdi ama en yakınımız olduğu için onlar da öğrendikleri gibi beni desteklediler. Yani ilk destekleme amaçları geylik normal değil de, ablacığım sen ne yaşıyorsan biz yanındayız desteğiydi. Onlar da zamanla öğrendiler bütün terminolojiyi falan. Yani her şeyi, LGBTİ+'nın ne olduğunu sonra öğrendiler. Onlar beni desteklemek için yanımdalardı. Oğlunun durumu şey değil de, biz senin yanındayız merak etme gibi."

*"Of course, they would have said scumbag if it was someone else. But since they were our closest, they supported me as soon as they learned it. In other words, their initial support was like although gayness is not normal, we are here for you no matter what you are going through They also learned all the terminology over time. I mean, they learned everything later, what LGBTI+ is. They were like, dont worry, your son's situation is not okay but we are on your side"*

Mother 6 described her own coming out experience as follows:

"4 tane yakın arkadaşımla paylaştım, ablamla bir de ilk zamanlar ağlamamak için buraya gelmiş birkaç tane müşteriyle paylaştım durup dururken böyle. Ben mesela ablama oğlumun izni olmadan söyledim. Sonradan da çocuğuma söyledim, teyzen biliyor ben ona anlattım çünkü ben ölmek üzereydim, yani patlamak üzereydim, biriyle paylaşmak istiyordum ve bu en yankımızdaki kardeşimdir yani dedim. O da tamam önemli değil dedi ve teyzesinin bizim hayatımıza çok büyük bir katkısı oldu. Hiçbir hareketi değişmedi mesela çocuğa karşı. Sevgisinde en ufacık bir azalma hiçbir şey olmadı hatta tam tersine daha korumacı, işte daha sevgisini göstererek hayatına devam etti. Bunun mesela bize katkısı oldu."

*"I shared it with 4 of my close friends and my sister. To avoid crying, I also shared it with a few customers who came here. I mean, I told my sister without my son's permission. Later, I told my child that your aunt knows, I told her because I was about to die, I was about to explode, I wanted to share it with someone who is closest to me like my sister. He said it's okay, it's not important. His aunt made a great contribution to our lives. For example, none of his aunt's behaviors have changed towards my child. There was not the slightest decrease in her love, on the contrary, she was more protective and more affectionate. This has helped us."*

# CHAPTER 4

# DISCUSSION

The current study aims to understand the experiences of parents with gay sons in Turkey from an in-depth and exploratory perspective. In addition, this study aims to reveal the facilitating factors in the adaptation process of parents after their children came out. Although many studies have been conducted on disclosure and factors related to disclosure, the studies in this area from parental perspective are lacking (Tyler, 2015). In this context, parental experiences were gathered under three superordinate themes according to data gathered through the interviews. These are (1) pre-coming out process, (2) coming out process and (3) post-coming out process. The first superordinate theme, pre-coming out process, consisted of pre-coming out experiences and family system dynamics around the homosexuality. The second superordinate theme, coming out process, consisted of mothers' initial reactions, meaning making efforts, bargaining, ambivalence, transfer of the emotional burden from child to mother and relief of the child. The third superordinate theme, post coming out process, consisted of what mothers experience as loss, secrets, lies and isolation, factors facilitating adaptation of mothers, reorganization of the boundaries to facilitate adaptation, experiences of socially displaced immigrants, ruptures with the society, growth and improvement as a result of chain transformation and mothers' own coming out experiences.

Generalizing the results of the study is questionable due to the nature of the qualitative method, nevertheless current study still provides useful insights regarding the unique experiences of mothers living in Turkey who have a gay son. In addition, one of the strong aspects of the study is that the socioeconomic status of the participants is in a wide range. For example, the first mother is a primary school graduate and does a cleaning job whereas the fifth mother was the former CEO of a private company. This study also shows the common and distinct experiences of people from different socioeconomic status without generalizing them. Another important contribution of

this thesis is focusing on how parents and children transform each other, rather than a one-way perspective in parent-child relationship.

## 4.1 Pre-Coming Out Process

The mothers' statements about the pre-coming out period were gathered under two axes. These are pre-coming out experiences and family system dynamics around the homosexuality. Pre-coming out experiences consisted of stressful life experiences and relationship between father and child. Family system dynamics around the homosexuality consisted of three sub-themes about whether parents are aware of their children's sexual orientation in the pre-coming out period, retrospective recalls about the pre-coming out period after their children's disclosure, and the ambiguous situation they called limbo.

Before the disclosure process, all of the mothers except Mother 2 had experienced loss. These loss experiences consisted of loss of spouse, loss of children and divorce. There was no specific study regarding how previous stressful experiences affect parents' experiences during coming out process and afterwards. Although it was not directly asked in this study, this sub-theme emerged because mothers established the relationship between their previous stressful experiences and the process of coming out and after. This relationship may be established between previous stressful experiences, especially their loss experiences, mothers' post-disclosure reactions and later adaptation processes. Although this cannot be entirely deduced from the interviews, there may be some predictable reasons. Some of the reasons may be unfulfilled mourning of previous losses, prolonged mourning, and inability to process traumatic experiences, in other words, unfinished business. On the other hand, as emphasized by the family stress theory, the coping skills acquired by families in previous stressful situations can be a resource for future experiences (Hill, 1949). For example, Mother 1, who had lost her three children before, supported her son with the thought of not wanting to lose another child. Mother 3 who lost her husband stated that she and her children became closer to each other after her husband's death and that she

wanted to maintain the value her deceased husband gave to freedom. Mother 4, who divorced her husband, said that after the divorce, her relations with her children became stronger and that the coping skills they gained at that time was also useful in this process.

Son's relationship with their father was emerged as the other sub-theme. Although mothers were not asked directly about the relationship of their children with their fathers, one of the topics that mothers frequently mentioned during the interview was the relationship of their children with their fathers. It was deduced from the mothers' statements that regardless of the children's coming out process, fathers were physically and/or emotionally absent from the family system for all participants. This may also explain why fathers did not participate in the current study. Although the announcement of participation in the study was made to include both parents, only mothers volunteered to participate in the study. In Ece (2017)'s dissertation conducted in Turkey, it was found that fathers were out of the disclosure process compared to mothers. Similarly, in a study conducted in Japan, LGBT youth did not feel the need to disclose to their fathers because they stated their father was not important to them and they expressed that their father was unavailable physically and/or emotionally (Tamagawa, 2018). Therefore, the reason why fathers did not participate in this study may be both because they did not know or they did not want to be involved in this process.

Never cross once mind and retrospective recalls of the signs is the other sub-theme. Five of the mothers stated that they never thought that their children might be gay before their son came out. Unlike the results of this study, in Van Bergen, Wilson, Russell, Gordon and Rothblum 's (2020) research, 43 out of 155 participants stated that their parents, especially their mothers, predicted and/or they were certain of their children's sexual orientation before they disclosed to their parents. In the current study, after their son came out, they stated that they realized some of the signs from the past that could have been associated with the situation. These signs are generally described by the mothers as non-heteronormative behavior that does not conform to gender roles. For example, playing Barbie instead of enjoying football like "the other boys", or being more emotional and naive instead of being mischievous like "other boys". Similar to

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the signs that mothers in this study remembered, in Lee and Lee's (2006) study, parents remembered their sons with traits generally attributed to girls during their son's childhood, such as being sensitive, nurturing, and quiet. In a similar vein, although the parents did not describe a particular trait as a signal in their son's childhood, they emphasized that he was different from other boys (Aveline, 2006) This difference stems from the fact that their sons' choice of friends, interests and their personal characteristics not conforming to the traditional gender roles expected from men.

Although mothers said they never thought of their sons being gay before, they also stated they felt deep inside that there is something she connot name/ "different" with their child. Although this is not a conscious awareness, it can be said that there is something implicit that mothers suspect and cannot name. Similar to the experiences of the mothers in the current study, Aveline (2006) indicated that most parents had suspicions, albeit these suspicions were implicit. In addition, although some parents suspected something, they made retrospective recalls when their son came out and they found "evidence" that their son was gay. Only 22 of 80 parents stated that they had no suspicions in their research. Also, 58 out of 80 parents stated that they had at least one doubt, although not all of them could make retrospective recalls. While 2 of the 14 parents Lee and Lee (2006) interviewed stated that they had no doubts before, the remaining parents reported varying degrees of awareness about their children.

As Jaspal (2020) pointed out, parents are often in denial before their child come out. Although there are differences in their children that parents can't quite name but they sensed, it is not easy for parents to face these "differences". That's why denial is a common defense mechanism among parents until the inevitable confrontation occurs. Mother 2 named this ambiguity situation as "limbo", the situation where mothers both perceive a difference in their children and do not want to face this difference. Likewise, in Lee and Lee's (2006) research, parents stated that they did not dwell on their implicit awareness until their son stated that he is gay.

## 4.2 Coming Out Process

Mothers' experiences during and right after their children disclosed their sexual orientation are revealed under six sub-themes. These are the mothers' initial reactions, meaning making efforts of the mothers, bargaining, transfer of the emotional burden from child to mother and relief of the child, ambivalence and father's expected reactions/ reactions.

## 4.2.1 Initial Reactions of The Mothers

Mothers' initial reactions consisted of negative feelings and reactions such as crying, self-blaming /questioning her motherhood, despair, sadness, shame and be disgusted; accepting reactions, reactions that are difficult to accept such as withdraw/isolation, vacuity, shock/confusion, alienation, avoidance, denial; a death like suffering, hiding mothers' sorrow inside to support the child and somatic reactions. As Kircher and Ahlijah (2011) said "Parents of LGBT go through an emotional roller coaster of feelings, from sadness, grief, relief, and love." In the current study, in addition to the wide range of emotions and reactions they experienced, the mothers stated that they experienced many ups and downs intensely at the same time. Moreover, all mothers vividly recalled the moment of their child's disclosure. Most of the mothers described what they experienced "that day" in great detail and therefore, the coming out of their children can be considered as a turning point for mothers. Mother 5 even reported the exact time and date her child disclosed to her. Some mothers were very emotional when they remembered the moment of child's disclosure. While some of them had tears in their eyes, and trembling voices.

According to the frequencies in the coding, the most emphasized reactions of the all mothers when talking about the process of coming out and right after the disclosure were self-blame/questioning their motherhood and crying. The mothers' anger towards themselves instead of their children and their intense self-blame may be related to their

personal characteristics but its cultural dimension should not be ignored. It can be argued that mothers' initial reactions are mostly driven by the cultural attributions regarding both homosexuality and motherhood. Mothers' initial reactions point to homosexuality as situation to be ashamed of and blamed. Mothers' frequent self-blame may be related to the fact that the mother is held responsible for the rasing and caregiving of the child in patriarchal cultures. Although loss and sadness were the most frequently reported experiences by parents in studies (Lee & Lee, 2006; Freedman, 2008; Horn & Wong, 2017), self-blame and guilt were also stated (Phillips & Ancis, 2008; Conley, 2011; Maslowe & Yarhouse, 2015).

Although the initial reactions of mothers participating in the study are largely similar to those in the literature, mothers' hiding their sorrow inside to support their child and somatic reactions are not very common initial reactions experienced by parents in the literature. Not so coincidentally, parents who suppress their initial feelings so that their children don't get upset are also those who give somatic reactions afterwards. For instance, Mother 1 stated that she had severe headaches, while Mother 5 stated that she had temporary facial paralysis after their children disclosed. In this study, although the theme of silence does not appear for parental reactions, in some studies, it has been found that parents react to their children's disclosure with silence (Van Bergen, Wilson, Russell, Gordon and Rothblum 2020; Jaspal 2020). Although silence can mean many things, parents who respond with silence in order not to hurt their children and the theme of "hiding mothers' sorrow inside to support their child" converge to a similar point.

In the current research, withdrawal and loneliness were themes frequently mentioned by mothers like some other parents participated in other studies (Freedman, 2008; Salzburg, 2009). Four of the mothers stated after they learned that their children are gay, they did not talk to a single person for a while. The mothers explained this state of withdrawal with shame, not knowing how to explain it to others, and fear of being judged. In Saltzburg's (2009) study, parents of LGBTs stated that their experiences were ignored and were not considered as valid by others, and also, they added that they felt alone.

According to the results of the study, one of the initial experiences of mothers is alienation from their children. Some of the mothers reported that they felt estranged from their children in this process. In fact, Mother 2 stated that she was disgusted with her son at that time, so she distanced herself from him. Mother 6 expressed that her son is like a new person, so he felt like a stranger to her. "Feeling her son like someone new and someone else" can be associated with ambiguous loss (Boss, 2007). Mothers may feel as if they have lost her son they knew until that day. Therefore, they may need to redefine their son, their relationship with their children and even themselves. The ambiguous loss concept will be addressed in post-coming out section. In previous studies, the theme of alienation emerged as children's feeling of distance and alienation from their parents (LaSala & Friersonand, 2012), and parents' alienation from their own environment (Saltzburg, 2009).

### 4.2.2. Meaning Making Efforts of The Mothers

Meaning making process has been a period in which mothers falter after children disclosed to them, they did not know what to do with this new information that enters the family system and they tried to make sense of it. According to the results, the meaning making processes of the mothers can be represented under eight domains. The first mental representation of homosexuality, consulting with others, looking for a treatment, information seeking, having difficulty to make sense of it, questioning ("Why me?") and causality attributions. As in the initial reactions, the mothers stated that they experienced numerous thoughts and feelings simultaneously. Therefore, it seems to represent a very confusing and challenging process for mothers. All of the mothers stated that they had a very difficult period during this transition. If it is interpreted from the family system perspective, the balance in the family, namely homeostasis (Becvar & Becvar, 2017), has been disrupted by the coming out of their children. Although the members of the family want to maintain the existing balance in the system, they have to change and transform in order to adapt with the new

information entering the system. The meaning-making process of mothers at this point is actually one of the steps taken to ensure homeostasis in the family.

Perhaps one of the most challenging situations for mothers in this process is "to be unable to give meaning". Not being able to name the situation and define exactly which emotions they experienced caused the mothers to falter. Three out of six mothers reported that one of the first things that came to their minds was Bülent Ersoy when their children came out. In this generation of the mothers, the mental representation of LGBTI+ emerged as Bülent Ersoy because she is perhaps the only "different person" who is a public figure and is frequently featured in the media after Zeki Müren. According to this mental representation, it can be deduced that the mothers' knowledge of sexual orientation and gender identity is actually quite lacking.

Information seeking was one of the first things mothers did in this process. Mothers stated that they generally tried to obtain information from the internet however after receiving an expert support they realized the internet was an unreliable source. In addition, the mothers stated that they searched for information to understand what it was like to be "gay", whether there was a treatment or not, and etiology of homosexuality. Similarly, in Maslowe and Yarhouse's (2015) study, parents began to seek information from ministries (Christian parents), books and seminars. Depending on the characteristics of the participants, the situation of seeking information from a religious institution did not arise in the current study.

In addition to seeking information, mothers felt the need to share this with others and tried to find the right people to consult. Mothers mentioned that they needed to get ideas from someone because they did not know how to deal with this crisis and they tried to find answers to the endless questions in their minds. In addition to the purpose of counseling, mothers also stated that they needed someone to share their feelings with and receive support from. For example, Mother 5 stated that she would really want to find someone who has had the same experience as her because only she/he can understand her. Some of the point of contacts that parents applied for counseling were psychiatrists and psychologists. However, some of the mothers stated that they applied to experts not only for consultation but also with the desire to have their son treated. Since they did not come across a homophobic expert, the mothers who wanted to have

their sons treated left the expert after obtaining the correct information. Similarly, Freedman (2008) stated that sixteen of 59 parents sought and received family treatment. Although some of these sixteen parents only took their son for treatment, the therapist found it appropriate to involve the family.

While on one hand, mothers actively tried to make sense of the situation, on the other hand, they felt like a "victim" and they made inquiries as "Why me, why did this happen to me?". Along with these inquiries, they began to make causality attributions to their children being gay. As a result of living in a patriarchal culture, mothers' causality attributions were often self-directed. In particular, the absence of a father figure at home and the fact that their children grew up with women were among the underlying reasons for their son's being gay for them. Although they abandoned these attributions after being informed, in the first stage, the causality attributions of the mothers were mostly related to their own child-rearing style. In Jaspal's (2020) study, British South Asian parents blamed themselves for their children's homosexuality. Similarly, in Goldfried and Goldfried's (2001) research, causality attributions of the mothers were failed marriages and their mistakes they made while raising their children. In other words, it is not only unique to Turkish culture that mothers hold themselves accountable, but it can also occur in other cultures. Because although the appearance and degree of patriarchy changes in various cultures, its dominance does not change.

### 4.2.3. Transfer of The Emotional Burden from Child to Mother and Relief of The Child

The children kept that they were gay as a secret until they felt ready to come out to their parents. They had to lie to their mothers from time to time because they were hiding that they were gay, and the effort to hide it was a burden for them. Mothers described a relief in their children after they opened up to them. In fact, the children shared the burden of keeping a secret alone with their mother. Therefore, mothers have taken over some of their children's burden to help them keep this secret. Until the

mothers felt safe and shared it with someone, mother and son kept this secret together. Although the mothers participating in the current study did not mention a relief in themselves, in the literature, the relief in the parents after the disclosure has been emphasized rather than the relief in the children. Mothers in some studies, especially those who guessed their child's sexual orientation as gay before they came out, reported that they were relieved when their children came out to them (Freedman, 2008; Goodrich 2009; Kircher & Ahlijah 2011; Horn & Wong, 2014; Maslowe & Yarhouse, 2015; Horn & Wong, 2017; Gattamorta, Salerno, & Quidley-Rodriguez, 2019). Consistent with the statements of the mothers in this study, there are also other studies that show relief in children after their coming out process (Herdt, & Koff, 2000; Grafsky, 2014). In fact, in Grafsky's (2014) study, a mother described the relief in her child with this striking expression as follows "It just seemed like the universe came off his shoulders".

### 4.2.4. Ambivalence

Ambivalence is one of the experiences of families that is frequently mentioned in the literature. Consistent with the literature, five of the six mothers who participated in the current study mentioned various ambivalent feelings and thoughts after the coming out of their children. The parents mentioned that, at the initial stage, they had neither fully accepted nor denied that their son was gay. For example, similar to this study, participants in Bergen's (2020) study stated that their parents did not approve of their "lifestyle" even though they loved and accepted them. The ambivalence experienced by parents can be both a sign of denial and difficulty in accepting. Herdt and Koff (2000) considered ambivalence as a part of the parental acceptance process. In summary, they stated that the parents went through the stages of disintegration, ambivalence, and integration, respectively.

In addition, Van Bergen, Wilson, Russell, Gordon and Rothblum's (2020) study found that parents' ambivalent responses were associated with parents' race and ethnicity. Minority parents have been found to show more ambivalent responses to

protect their children. Since the ethnicity of the parents was not asked in the current study, it is not convenient to comment on this.

### 4.2.5. Father's Expected or Actual Reactions

Although the fathers did not physically participate in the current study, they were present in the interview with their "absence". One of the themes mothers frequently emphasized was that they were alone in this process. This loneliness is closely related to the fact that their spouses were not involved in the process. One of the interview questions was whether the fathers knew their son was gay, and if they did, how they reacted to it. It was also asked that if fathers did not know it, how they would react to that if they find out their son was gay. Three of the six mothers who participated in the interview stated that the fathers knew the sexual orientation of their son. Mother 4 reported that the father did not reject his son after getting t know that his son was gay, but he asked the mother to hide the fact that he knew from their son. Such a reaction may also be an example of ambivalence because neither an acceptance nor a rejection can be mentioned here. Mother 5 stated that the father didn't care when he heard it, he said it was a normal thing and accepted his son. But one of the points that should be noted here is that the father and son have not seen each other in years. Therefore, it may not be correct to describe the father's reaction as accepting. Although the father's attitude seems to be accepting, his behavior to his son may be different than his attitudes. Mother 6 reported that after the father learned that his son was gay on the phone, he never spoke to his son again. However, it may be wrong to describe this reaction of the father as rejecting because when the family history is considered, father and son have not talked on the phone or met face to face for years. Therefore, it may be misleading to interpret the father's reaction as accepting or rejecting. In families where fathers are unaware of their son's sexual orientation, the expected reactions of fathers were different. Mother 1 stated that if the father found out that his son was gay, the father would reject him, and he would kill him. Mother 2 stated that if the father finds out that his son is gay, he will eventually accept it because he has a wife and child to help him through the process but she stated that they did not need to say it.

This statement has been found consistent with Tamagawa's (2018) research. At the end of her research, Tamagawa (2018) put forward a main idea. This was Japanese LGBTI individuals had more difficulties to disclose to their fathers compared to their mothers and, similar to the statements of some mothers in the current study, they did not feel the need to disclose to fathers because they did not have close relationships with their fathers. On the contrary, Horn and Wong (2017) showed that the fathers' relationships with their sons changed positively after their son came out. Even fathers stated that not only their relationship with their sons was getting stronger but also they experienced personal growth.

## 4.3 Post-Coming Out Process

Although there is information in the literature about what parental reactions are and they can change over time, studies on how the change takes place over time are scarce. How the process of adaptation and transformation is experienced by mothers, which is one of the important focal points of the thesis, is not a subject that has been studied much in the literature. The post-coming out process, which is the part that the current study aims to illuminate the most, have emerged under nine themes. This process, which can also be called the adaptation process of the mothers, includes sense of loss; secrets, lies and isolation; reorganization of the boundaries to facilitate adaptation; redefinition of family beyond blood relationship; growth and improvement as a result of chain transformation; socially displaced immigrants; factors facilitating adaptation; ruptures with the society and mothers' coming out experiences themes.

### 4.3.1. Sense of Loss

In the literature, loss is a frequently encountered theme among the experiences of LGBTI+ families. Although there were numerous types of losses expressed by the parents, the descriptions of loss in this study largely overlapped. For instance, in some

studies, the parents' sense of loss appeared as loss of dreams and expectations (Aveline, 2006; Lee & Lee, 2006)), whereas in Broad's (2011) study, it appeared as loss of their child. In Newcomb, Feinstein, Matson, Macapagal and Mustanski's (2018) research, parents stated that they lost "the future they envisioned for their child". In addition, religious parents expressed that they lost the probability of becoming a grandparent, continuing their bloodline and their family relationship (Freedman, 2008).

Similar to the literature, in the current study; family gatherings, heteronormative expectations, role of grandparent, their sons' future and the meaning of life were described as losses by the mothers. In addition, although the ambiguous loss was not directly expressed by the mothers, it overlapped with the experiences conveyed. According to Boss (2007), the term ambiguous loss is used when the loss is unclear and it is hard to define what is lost by the people experiencing it. In the current study, the mothers lost the children they knew, although their children were the same people and were there physically. As a result, the mothers went through a state where the boundaries in the family and their roles became ambiguous and uncertain. From a similar point of view, in the Maslowe's (2015) study, ambiguous loss was observed in the form of "experiencing their child as foreign and unknown".

### 4.3.2. Secrets, Lies and Isolation

Upon examining the interviews, it was observed that all mothers had to keep secrets. Function of the secrecy was protecting the boundaries between the family and the environment. The need of protecting their family was due to the mothers perceiving the environment as dangerous for them. The perceived danger is not only a suspicion but it is also a reality in Turkey considering the hate crimes against LGBT+ people. To maintain this secrecy, lying has emerged as the tool mothers used. In the similar vein, Saltzburg's (2009) research demonstrated that parents built walls from lies in order to protect their families. As a result of the secrecy and the lies, the isolation became inevitable for the mothers. Even though secrecy and lies causing isolation might be regarded as a negative aspect, it can be said that this was also helpful for the

mothers to preserve their families. This result was also demonstrated by Saltzburg (2009), Chrisler (2017), and Jaspal (2020). In the current study, the mothers wanted to protect themselves from the extended family, while this was not the case in the study conducted by Lee and Lee (2006), in fact, the relationships with extended family was observed to be improved.

### 4.3.3. Reorganization of The Boundaries to Facilitate Adaptation

Families review their boundaries, roles and goals, both in transition periods as a requirement of the life cycle and in stressful life periods in order to maintain the family homeostasis and adapt to new situation (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2012). This was also evident in the accounts of mothers who participated in the current study. When the code frequencies were examined, one of the most prominent sub-theme in the post-coming out period was the "reorganization of the boundaries to facilitate adaptation". The reorganization of boundaries emerged in three ways. These are negotiation on the permeability of the boundaries, tightening of the boundaries with the marginalizing outside world and loosening the boundaries to contain the elements of LGBTI+ life style. The reorganization of boundaries began with the mothers' negotiation on the permeability of the boundaries. In the system, which tries to find its new balance with the deteriorated homeostasis, mothers cogitated how far they could flex their boundaries. As a result, they implemented a strategy of stretching their boundaries based on their necessities rather than fully tightening or fully loosening boundaries. As it is in the functional system explanation given by Goldenberg and Goldenberg (2012), the mothers were able to balance between the openness and closed of the system. While mothers closed the family system against others who marginalized, excluded and stigmatized them, they were able to make room for the lifestyle changes that came with their son's coming out.

### 4.3.4. Growth and Improvement as A Result of Chains of Influence

Another prominent subtheme in the post-coming out process is growth and improvement as a result of chain transformation. As Goldenberg and Goldenberg (2012) pointed out that disruption of homeostasis in the family might create a chance for transformation, all mothers talked about this phenomenon which could be interpreted as growth either in themselves or in their relations with their sons. These improvements increased the awareness of sexual minorities, the liberalization of their gender role perspective, and they strengthened the mothers' relationships with their sons and increased transparency in their relationships, sense of empowerment and freedom in themselves and these improvements also enabled mothers to transmit experiences to others. In the similar vein, Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996)'s growth inventory consists of five domains. These are appreciation of life, relationships with others, new possibilities in life, personal strength, spiritual change. In the current study mothers showed varying levels of improvement in these five domains.

Becvar and Becvar (2017) stated that one of the assumptions of the system perspective is that an individual in the family system both affects and gets affected by other individuals in the family system. An example of this chain of influence has also emerged in this study. To be more specific, the mothers questioned traditional gender roles after learning that their children were gay, and as a result of this questioning, their gender roles perspective became more liberalized. This helped them to accept their children easier, and this acceptance reflected positively on their relationship with their sons. One outcome of this positive relationship has been increased sharing and transparency in their relationship with their son. These findings are consistent with parental experiences in the literature. Other studies have shown that the relationship between parents and their children evolves into a stronger and deeper relationship after their son disclosed (Lee & Lee, 2006; Goodrich, 2009; Cassar & Sultana, 2021).

Parents' questioning of gender roles and the change in the definitions of gender roles have also been revealed in some other studies (Cassar & Sultana, 2017; Cassar & Sultana, 2021). Cassar and Sultana (2017) found that the Maltese parents' definition of

masculinity changed after they learned that their son was gay. In addition, the fathers questioned their fathering style and became more tender to their sons. Not only gender roles but also moral values were questioned by parents (Phillips, & Ancis, 2008; Cassar & Sultana, 2016). Some Catholic Maltese parents also questioned their religious teachings because of their religion's view of homosexuality.

### 4.3.5. Socially Displaced Immigrants

Five out of six mothers stated that they thought their son would be more comfortable and could exist on their own in a foreign country because they were concerned about their son's safety. Although worrying about the safety of their children is one of the themes encountered in the literature, feeling obligated to change the place where they live has not been a theme encountered among parental experiences. For example, Cassar and Sultana (2021) stated that parents tended to protect their children from stigmatization and provide them with safe spaces where their children could live as the way they are. Another example is that Lee and Lee (2006) demonstrated that parents were afraid of their children getting a negative reaction from the environment due to their sexual orientation. In both studies, although parents were concerned about the marginalization and negative reactions towards their children, they did not make statements about their children's migration or trying to exist in another country. At this point, it may be appropriate to seek culture-specific answers. It is understandable that mothers in Turkey described this experience due to the increasing violence and discrimination against LGBTI+s in Turkey. Maybe mothers in Turkey are more worried about their sons because of the higher threat of violence compared to the Western countries where the studies were conducted.

### 4.3.6. Factors Facilitating Adaptation

The mothers drew attention to some factors that facilitate their adaptation process and help them in constructing homeostasis in the family. According to their frequencies, these factors were respectively, involvement in LGBTI+ communities, perceived social support, getting informed and gaining knowledge, strengths of the family (conflict management, open communication, cohesion, solidarity and supporting relationships), thought of being not alone in these experiences, absence of the offensive father and support of the right expert.

Joining the LGBTI+ family group is the most frequently mentioned factor in facilitating the adjustment process of mothers. By joining the family group, the mothers realized that they were not alone, they learned about LGBTI+ concepts they had never known, they received information from parents who had similar experiences and perhaps most importantly, they were able to share their feelings and thoughts without being judged. In LaSala and & Frierson's (2012) study, the presence of a reliable and open-minded person with whom parents could share all their positive and negative feelings with, facilitated the transition of parents into the acceptance process. In the current study, only one of the mothers (Mother 3) had never attended to an LGBTI+ family group. It can be said that Mother 3 felt lonelier compared to other mothers. Not joining to a family support group was not the only reason behind this loneliness. Lack of social support for this situation in which she did not share the fact that her son was gay with anyone was another reason.

Parallel to these factors cited by the mothers, the importance of accessing family support groups and information resources in accepting process were also emphasized (Freedman, 2008; Goodrich, 2009; Cassar & Sultana, 2017; Ghosh, 2020). Similar to family support groups in Turkey, Broad (2011) stated that PFLAG (Parents, Friends and Family of Lesbians and Gays), one of the family support groups, is for both parents making a room for grieving for their loss and human rights activism.

### 4.3.6. Mothers' Own Coming Out Experiences

Similar to their sons' coming out processes, the mothers disclosing their sons' sexual orientation to their environment can also be regarded as a coming out process. When the mothers felt safe and thought that they would not be judged or at least excluded, they came out to their environment. Only Mother 3 was not disclosed to anyone in the study. Mother 3 often emphasized "how unreliable people are" in the interview. She stated that the reason why she did not disclose to anyone was that people did not create a suitable environment for her to come out. Because other mothers joined the family support group, it was easier for them to create an environment where they could come out. In Lee and Lee's (2006) study, just as their children, parents experienced similar feelings before they disclosed to their environment.

### 4.3.7. Ruptures with The Society

This sub-theme consisted of the reactions that mothers received or expected to receive from their environment when they came out. These received and/or expected reactions were acceptance, violence, abusive attitudes, stigmatization, intrusiveness of the others, psychological pressure, biases, lack of acceptance and social rejection/anticipated rejection. All mothers emphasized that they were very uncomfortable due to the homophobic attitude of the society. While the mothers who participated in the family support group chose the path of activism to combat homophobia, the mother who did not participate in the family support group (Mother 3) tried to prevent exposure to homophobia by concealing that her son is gay, which could be interpreted as avoidance.

In studies conducted in Western cultures, concern about how the extended family would respond was not observed among parental experiences, although this concern emerged in both the current study and the Jaspal's (2020) study conducted with British South Asian parents. Parallel to the results of this study, discrimination, stigmatization,

psychological pressure and anxiety about their children's exposure are common experiences of parents (Caasar & Sultana, 2016). Unlike the results in the literature, intrusiveness of the others was a theme frequently mentioned by the mothers in this study. The mothers were very disturbed by the fact that others persistently asked questions about their sons and made inquiries about their sons even though they did not want to share it. This intrusiveness may be related to the collectivist culture. In collectivist cultures, people may not hesitate asking questions about people's personal life because the boundaries between "me" and "you" is more ambiguous than in individualistic cultures. Another different outcome is mothers' dilemmas about whether they pay attention to the reactions of the society or not. Although the mothers said that they no longer care about the reactions of the society, they stated that they would prefer their sons to be heterosexual if possible due to social pressure and homophobia. In the literature, it has been found that generally parents do not want their children to change after their own acceptance process (Lee & Lee, 2006). Similar to the current study, in Cassar and Sultana's (2021) research, all parents except one wanted their children's sexual orientation to change. Although Cassar and Sultana interpretted this request of the parents as a kind of denial, considering the statements of the mothers in this study, this request may not only be a denial, but also a result of social pressure.

**4.4 General Conclusion**

This thesis mainly aims to understand the experiences of the parents of gay youth and how the family system was transformed with their children's coming out process. In this context, parental experiences are presented under three main stages as pre-coming out process, coming out process and post-coming out process. The current study presents an example of the concept of equifinality from systems theory. Equifinality means coming from different paths and meeting at the same point (Becvar & Becvar, 2017). Also, it emphasizes the importance of the process rather than the starting points. In the current study, even though the mothers came from different backgrounds, their

standing point in the interview was quite similar. It is important to note that attending to family support groups was the key factor in reaching to equifinality in this thesis.

Moreover, this thesis is an example of how a change in one sub-system resonates with other sub-systems. The disclosure of the youth has had an expanding effect, first in their relationship with their mothers and then across systems outside the family system. The mother-son relationship has become more transparent and deeper, and both the mothering styles and the ways of perceiving the world have been liberated. Another important effect was the change in mothers' concept of family. The mothers emphasized the importance of the constructed family relations instead of blood relationship in the definition of family. The expanding effect of youth's disclosure is that the mothers chose the path of activism to combat homophobia and that they want to build a livable world for their children.

## 4.5 Clinical and Social Policy Implications

The current thesis suggests that when working with parents of sexual minorities, psychosocial support is important for their adaptation process. In the first place, helping the parents to name the situation, providing accurate information about sexual orientation and gender identity, identifying and activating the resources of the family would be supportive for families who went through a disclosure process. Listening to the narrators, that is, the people who directly experience the event, is a valuable source of information for psychologists. The components of psychosocial support based on the mothers' expressions can be listed as creating an environment where families can express their feelings and thoughts without fear, informing families about gender identity and sexual orientation, normalizing their feelings about the ups and downs they have experienced, supporting families in naming ambiguous losses, encouraging families to mourn their losses, and perhaps most importantly, recommending family support groups in order to show them that they are not alone. Although it is inconvenient to discard the importance of the professional support for families in normalization process; being together with families who have had similar experiences,

working to build a better world for their children by taking active roles are the key factors of the acceptance and adaptation processes. It should be emphasized that, apart from the clinical settings, another important role of psychologists is constructing the language of peace against discourses of discrimination, stigmatization and marginalization.

## 4.6 Limitations and Future Directions

In scientific studies, limitations are frequently encountered. This thesis is also no exception as some limitations were present. Firstly, although this thesis aims to understand parental experiences, only mothers participated in the study. This study, even though attempted, could not cover the gay youth's fathers' experiences because these were mothers' perceptions regarding the fathers' reactions. In addition, although the mothers' experiences were described in detail as the strength of the qualitative study, the generalizability of this study is quite low because of the small sample size. More importantly, the sample group participating in the study was far from representing the universe. The handicap of all studies in this field can be explained as the participation of people who have already entered the acceptance process and who are relatively more positive to their children, showed itself in this study as well. In addition, since this thesis is a retrospective study, the mothers may remember their experiences with sme bias.

Lastly, four out of six interviews had to be conducted online due to COVID-19 pandemic. In qualitative studies, participants' gestures and facial expressions during the interviews are as important as what they say. Information on gestures and facial expressions in online interviews was limited in the current study.

In future studies, research involving various family members can be conducted to understand the family system better and comprehensive. In addition, in future studies, it may be aimed to reach at least parents who are not attended with the family association to reduce bias in the sample group. Hereby it  can be commented on the

differences in experience and adjustment between parents who join the family group and those who do not.

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# APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

## GÖRÜŞME SORULARI

1. Çocuğunuz size ne zaman açıldı?

2. Çocuğunuzun cinsel yönelimini size açıklama süreci nasıldı, biraz anlatır mısınız?

3. Açılma sürecindeki ilk tepkilerinizden bahseder misiniz? Süreç içinde tepkileriniz nasıl değişti?

4. Bu durum aslında sizin tanıdığınız, bildiğiniz çocuğunuzu farklı olarak yeniden tanımlamayı gerektiren bir süreç. Bu süreçte ailenizde neler değişti?

5. Bu süreçte aileniz açısından kayıp olarak nitelendirdiğiniz şeyler oldu mu?

6. Bu süreçte neler aynı kaldı?

7. Bu süreçte kazanımlarınız neler oldu?

8. Gey/Eşcinsel (aile nasıl adlandırıyorsa) bir çocuğa sahip olmak sizce nasıl bir şey? Sizin için ne anlam ifade ediyor?

9. Çocuğunuzla ilişkinizde şimdiki rolünüzü nasıl tanımlarsınız?

10. Çocuğunuz size açılmadan önce çocuğunuzun cinsel yönelimine dair bir fikriniz var mıydı?

11. Çocuğunuz size açılmadan önce cinsel yönelimlerle ilgili ne kadar bilgi sahibiydiniz?

12. Aile tanımı, kan bağıyla bağlı olduğumuz ve içinde doğup büyüdüğümüz çevredeki kişileri kapsayabileceği gibi insanların zihninde ailelerine kimi dahil ettiklerine göre de değişebilir. Sizin zihninizdeki aileniz kimlerden oluşuyor? Kendi aile tanımınızı yapar mısınız?

13. Aileler farklı yaşam evrelerinden geçerken sınırlarını kimi zaman genişletirler kimi zaman da daraltırlar. Şu andaki yaşam evresinde sizin aileniz nasıl değişti? Kimleri ne tür rollerle ailenize dahil ettiniz?

14. Çocuğunuz size cinsel yönelimini açıklamadan önce ailenizle ilgili gelecek planlarınız nelerdi? Çocuğunuzun açılmasıyla bu planlarda değişiklikler oldu mu? Aynı kalan planlar neler?

15. Çocuğunuzun cinsel yönelimiyle ilgili hem bireysel hem aile içinde aynı anda birbiriyle çelişen gibi görünen duygular, düşünceler, görüşler olabilir. Hem bireysel olarak hem aile içinde yaşadığınız ikircikli duygulardan, düşüncelerden, durumlardan biraz bahseder misiniz?

16. İnsanlar yaşantılarına anlam yüklemek isterler, yaşadıklarını anlamlandırmak isterler. Siz bütün bu yaşadıklarınızı nasıl anlamlandırıyorsunuz?

17. Bu süreçte kendi anne babalığınıza baktığınızda kendinizi nasıl değerlendiriyorsunuz? (Alternatifi: Yeni durumlara uyum sağlamaya çalışan geçiş sürecindeki aileler, biliyoruz ki kendilerine de bir dönüp bakarlar. Siz bu süreçte kendinize dönüp baktığınızda rolünüzü nasıl değerlendiriyorsunuz?)

18. Aileler doğumdan itibaren, hatta doğumdan da önce çocuklarıyla ilgili birtakım şeyler tasarlarlar. Nasıl biri olacak, neyle meşgul olacak, arkadaşları kimler olacak, nasıl bir kimliği olacak, nelerden hoşlanacak, ileride ne yapacak gibi. Sizin doğumdan itibaren/doğum öncesinde çocuğunuzla ilgili tasarımlarınız nasıldı?

19. Çocuğunuzun açılma sürecinden önceki zamanları düşündüğünüzde aileniz için karşılaşacağınız dönüm noktalarının neler olacağını düşünüyordunuz? Şimdi ne tür önemli dönüm noktaları olabilir önünüzde? Bundan sonra sizi neler bekliyor olabilir?

20. Bu dönem aileniz için geçiş dönemi olarak adlandırılabilir. Bu geçiş s ürecinde ailenizin sahip olduğu güçlü yönler, kaynaklar nelerdir?

21. Aile olarak yaşadığınız değişime uyum sağlamak için ne tür başa çıkma yöntemleri kullandınız? Bu değişim sürecini nasıl ele aldınız? Hangi ailesel kaynaklarınız, güçlü yönleriniz işe yaramış olabilir?

22. Geldiğiniz kültürün cinsel yönelim çeşitliliğine karşı tutumları nasıldır? Sizce bu açıdan uyumunuzu kolaylaştıran ve zorlaştıran kültürel faktörler nelerdir?

23. İçinde bulunduğunuz çevre eşcinselliğe nasıl bakar? Kadın-erkek rolleri nasıldır? Bu artalanla çocuğunuzun eşcinsel olması nasıl bir şey?

24. Çocuğunuzun cinsel yönelimini başkalarıyla paylaştınız mı, paylaştıysanız kimlerle?

25. Çocuğunuzun cinsel yönelimini açıklaması geniş aile ilişkilerinize nasıl yansıdı? İlişkilerin niteliğinde ve yapısında ne tür değişimler oldu?

26. Sosyal çevrenizle ilişkileriniz ne yönde değişti? Biraz anlatır mısınız?

27. Çocuğunuzun size açılmasından önceki aile ritüelleriniz nelerdi? Aileniz için özel günler var mıydı? Şimdiki aile ritüelleriniz nelerdir? Şu anda beraber kutladığınız özel günler var mı?

# APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT

**Sayın Katılımcı,**

Yüksek lisans tezi kapsamında yapılan bu araştırma, TED Üniversitesi Psikoloji Bölümü Gelişim Odaklı Klinik Çocuk ve Ergen Psikolojisi Yüksek Lisans Programı'nda Doç. Dr. Ilgın GÖKLER DANIŞMAN danışmanlığında, Deniz KORKMAZ tarafından yürütülmektedir. Araştırmanın amacı kendisini gey olarak tanımlayan gençlerin, cinsel yönelimlerini ebeveynlerine açıkladıktan sonra aile sistemlerinde yaşananları derinlemesine anlamaktır. Bu çalışmanın katılımcılarını kendisini gey olarak tanımlayan 18-25 yaşları arasında ve ebeveynlerine cinsel yönelimini açıklamış gençler ve bu gençlerin anne-babaları oluşturmaktadır.

Bu araştırmaya katılmayı onayladığınızda, Ekim 2019 - Haziran 2020 tarihleri arasında Psikolog Deniz Korkmaz tarafından yapılacak bir görüşmeye katılacaksınız. Sizden beklenen görüşmeci tarafından sorulan sorulara açıklıkla cevap vermenizdir. Çalışma süresince ve sonrasında kimlik bilgileriniz hiçbir şekilde istenmeyecek, çalışmaya takma isimle katılabileceksiniz. Bu çalışma kapsamında elde edilecek olan bilimsel bilgiler sadece araştırmacılar tarafından yapılan bilimsel yayınlarda ve sunumlarda kullanılacaktır. Toplanan veriler isiminiz silinerek, bilgisayarda şifreli bir dosyada tutulacaktır.

1-1.5 saat sürecek aile görüşmesinde yer alan hiçbir aşama, kişisel rahatsızlık verecek nitelikte değildir. Ancak herhangi bir nedenden ötürü kendinizi rahatsız hissederseniz, görüşmeyi bırakıp araştırmadan çıkmakta serbestsiniz. Böyle bir durumda vermiş olduğunuz bilgilerin araştırmacı tarafından kullanılması ancak sizin onayınızla mümkün olacaktır. Bu çalışmaya katıldığınız için şimdiden teşekkür ederim. Çalışma hakkında daha fazla bilgi almak ve yanıtlanmasını istediğiniz sorularınız için deniz.korkmaz@tedu.edu.tr e-posta adresinden ulaşabilirsiniz.

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*Bu çalışmaya tamamen gönüllü olarak katılıyorum ve istediğim zaman yarıda kesip çıkabileceğimi biliyorum. Bu araştırma kapsamında gereken aile görüşmesinde yer alacağımı biliyorum. Verdiğim bilgilerin bilimsel amaçlı yayımlarda kullanılmasını kabul ediyorum. Araştırma süresince ses kaydı alınacağını biliyorum. Ses kayıtlarının bilimsel makaleler ve akademik sunumlar dışında kesinlikle kullanılmayacağını biliyorum.*

Araştırmaya gönüllü olarak katılmayı kabul ediyorum.                    Evet  /  Hayır

Ses kaydının araştırma amaçlı kullanımına izin veriyorum.            Evet  /  Hayır

Takma İsim:

Katılımcının İmzası:

Tarih:

Teşekkürler,

Araştırmacının adı, soyadı ve imzası

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