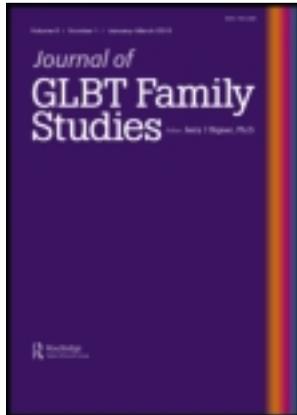


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### Mars to Venus or Earth to Earth? How Do Families of Origin Fit into GLBTQ Lives?

Esther D. Rothblum <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> San Diego State University , San Diego , California , USA

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## **Mars to Venus or Earth to Earth? How Do Families of Origin Fit into GLBTQ Lives?**

ESTHER D. ROTHBLUM

*San Diego State University, San Diego, California, USA*

*This article examines some of the themes in the special issue about the families of origin of people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or queer (GLBTQ). Coming out to families of origin is a pivotal event that changes the family system. Race, ethnicity, and immigration intersect with a family member's disclosure of sexuality and gender identity. Families are both private and public institutions, and are influenced by, and influence, the media. Families may take advantage of professional advice about GLBTQ issues but may also need to educate professionals about these issues. This article concludes with suggestions for further research.*

**KEYWORDS** *GLBTQ families of origin, coming out to family, gender-nonconforming family members, transgender family members*

### INTRODUCTION

Gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer (GLBTQ) individuals and families of origin were oil and water in past decades; the two terms didn't mix. When GLBTQ people discussed the families they were born into, it was with negative emotions—fear, anxiety, anger, disappointment, or rage. Research on GLBTQ youths focused on the risks of running away from home, with concomitant substance abuse and suicide, as the result of physical violence or lack of support from family members (see D'Augelli & Patterson, 2001, for an overview). Gender nonconformity in childhood was associated with violence by family members as well (Factor & Rothblum, 2008a). GLBTQ people of all ages who came out to family members braced themselves for negative reactions and often moved far away from their hometown (Rothblum,

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Address correspondence to Esther D. Rothblum, Women's Studies Department, San Diego State University, 5500 Campanile Drive, San Diego, CA, 92182, USA. E-mail: erothblu@mail.sdsu.edu

Balsam & Mickey, 2004). In turn, parents and relatives kept the knowledge of a GLBTQ family member secret not only from friends and neighbors, but even in conversations with one another. It was as if GLBTQ people and heterosexual families of origin were living on different planets.

Lukes and Land (1990) have pointed out how members of religious, ethnic, or immigrant minority groups often grow up in minority families and neighborhoods, so that they first become acculturated into the dominant culture by the media or when they enter school. In contrast, GLBTQ individuals grow up in heterosexual families and need to find their community. In the decades before the Internet, this meant knowing where to look for GLBT communities, knowing what GLBT people looked like, and needing to “queer” oneself in order to be identifiable to these communities.

Unable to rely on their immediate or extended family, GLBTQ people looked for a supportive community. Sometimes they used the term *family of friends* for this endeavor. Kurdek and Schmidt (1987) found same-sex couples to report more support from friends than from family of origin compared with heterosexual couples. The book *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* (Weston, 1991) has a chapter titled “Is Straight to Gay As Family Is to No Family?”

There has been little research focusing on families of origin of GLBTQ individuals, and so the current journal issue is a welcome addition to GLBTQ family scholarship. The articles are both interdisciplinary and international, focusing on case studies, qualitative interviews, and media analysis in Australia, Canada, Italy, Slovenia, Spain, and the United States. Participants in the research studies include lesbians, gay men, bisexual women and men, transgender and gender-nonconforming individuals, and those who are intersex. In this article I discuss some of the themes that transcend these articles, and provide suggestions for future research.

### Coming Out to the Family Is Pivotal

By the time GLBTQ people come out to their family of origin, they have usually come out to a number of friends. Alenka Švab and Roman Kuhar describe how, regardless of the number of friends to whom GLBTQ individuals have disclosed their sexual or gender identity, coming out to family members is a pivotal stage for lesbians and gay men because it “importantly shapes family reality and relationships between family members” (p. 16). In their study of the daily life of lesbians and gay men in Slovenia, some of their respondents perceived the coming-out process to family as “the only real coming out since no other instance of coming out is as demanding in terms of the emotional strain involved” (p. 21). Not surprisingly, younger respondents came out to their families at an earlier age than did older respondents, who had lived through a time when homosexuality was still a crime in Slovenia.

Parents too describe the experience as very important. Erika L. Grafsky interviewed eight parents in the United States whose son or daughter came out to them in adolescence. Parents described that coming-out experience as stressful, emotional, tearful, surprising, and shocking. Some parents felt “as if the picture they had envisioned of their child’s life was shattered” (p. 47). Chiara Bertone and Marina Franchi state how the discovery of their child’s non-heterosexual identity “requires parents to address unexpected problems of action since a taken-for-granted element of their scenario, heterosexuality, has been disrupted” (p. 59). Just as Švab and Kuhar found younger respondents to come out to their families at an earlier age, Grafsky reports that younger parents were more comfortable with a child coming out than were older parents.

Similarly, Michela Baldo compares the closet to the “confessional.” She describes scenes from the Canadian film *Mambo italiano*: the gay main character, Angelo, calls an anonymous gay helpline, his sister confesses his sexuality to her psychiatrist, and the entire family enters the Catholic Church confessional booth.

### Coming Out Changes the Family System

Švab and Kuhar emphasize how the coming-out-to-family process is relational in that everyone is affected by the disclosure, whether the reaction is positive or negative. Some parents rationalize homosexuality as the “lesser evil” (p. 24) when compared with substance abuse or academic problems. Others look for cures. Some respondents told their mother and asked her to serve as the mediator to their father; others interpreted a neutral reaction or silence as positive since they had feared worse reactions. But whatever the reaction to coming out, new relationships with family members needed to be forged after the disclosure.

Echoing Švab and Kuhar, Baldo states, “coming out is a family matter” (p. 175). Angelo, the main character in the film *Mambo italiano*, “fears losing pieces of himself” (p. 174) if his family reacts negatively to him after he comes out. The family is a large piece of his identity. Furthermore, Angelo’s family is in “continual evolution (. . .) creation of possibilities coming from apparent impossibilities” (p. 183). Grafsky states, “Becoming the parent of a queer son or daughter is a complex process that emphasizes the relational nature of the experience of disclosure to family (. . .) It is an active, ongoing process” (p. 49).

Susan L. Johnson and Kristen E. Benson offer an extensive case study. When Sarah, the mother of Lee, a six-year-old transgender child in the United States, was willing to raise her child as female, the mother received “accusations from her family suggesting child abuse or neglect” (p. 132). Consequently, the mother and child were not invited to some family gatherings. Sarah states, “I went from patting myself on the back for being such a

progressive parent . . . to being really concerned that I must be doing something terribly wrong to cause this gender ‘confusion.’ EVERYONE, mostly my mother and ex-husband told me I was being too permissive . . .” (p. 133). In this case study, it was the child’s mother who “came out” about her child’s gender nonconformity and had to deal with negative repercussions from the family. Surprisingly, it was Sarah’s conservative Christian grandmother who was the most supportive.

Janet B. Watson portrays bisexual individuals as having “nomadic trajectories” (p. 107) in relation to their families of origin, given the fluidity of their identities. How does the family adapt to a daughter who had been heterosexually married, monogamous, and planning to have children later coming out as bisexual, in a relationship with a woman, and polyamorous? Or what does it mean if a man living in rural Australia sees himself as a bit gay? Further complicating notions of identity are individuals whose gender identity changes along with their sexual orientation.

I want to focus specifically on Švab and Kuhar’s use of the term *gate-keeping* for the phenomenon where one family member begs or demands that no one else be told, or that the information be kept from a specific family member. The consequence of this is that sexual orientation cannot freely be discussed at family gatherings, and so the conversation stays in the closet, so to speak. For example, in the film *Mambo italiano* it is the main character’s sister, Anna, who warns her gay brother not to come out to his parents because his disclosure could kill them.

### Sexuality and Gender Identity Intersect with Race, Ethnicity, Immigration, and Religion

Valerie Q. Glass interviewed black lesbian couples in the United States about their interactions with extended families of origin, focusing on family rituals. She explains how family rituals create a sense of belonging in an oppressive society; these events can be major holiday or life cycle celebrations as well as daily routines. Baldo also describes family rituals, such as the large family dinner, as a ritual in ethnic immigrant families. Yet for lesbian couples, feeling part of an extended family means making decisions about how to integrate sexuality, outness, and identity of their partner into extended family gatherings and rituals. Lesbians might attend a family celebration without their partner, or be asked not to express physical affection to their partner. In other words, lesbians found extended family events crucially important yet could not present their real selves at these events.

Racquel (Lucas) Platero interviewed a Roma couple in Spain who had a gender-nonconforming child. The parents had to deal not only with strict gender roles in the Roma community, but with negative stereotypes about Romas in their child’s school.

Baldo draws on theories of migration to understand how the two Italian immigrant families in the film *Mambo italiano* come to terms with gay sons. She emphasizes both the importance of family among immigrants and the generational differences between the parents who came from “the old country” and their children who grew up familiar with gay sexuality. Yet immigrant families are themselves stereotyped and marginalized. This means that heterosexual immigrant parents, like their GLBTQ offspring, have been targeted by the mainstream culture as deviant—a shared experience.

In Watson’s narratives of bisexual women and men in Australia, those from Asian immigrant families had to juggle progressive language and attitudes about sexuality and gender with the more covert ways in which gender and sexual nonconformity are expressed when visiting family of origin in Asia. GLBTQ individuals of color thus led different lives when working in Australia or visiting families of origin in India or Sri Lanka.

Glass describes how white GLBTQ individuals often leave families of origin when they or their partner are not accepted. When I teach about race and ethnicity in my Lesbian Lives and Cultures course, I ask students why white lesbians are so estranged from their families. Immigrant families and families of color can serve as a model for white GLBTQ people about how to work on staying connected with extended family members. GLBTQ individuals of color are also more likely to have children, and in that sense may feel more connected with, and want their children to be aware of, their family heritage and rituals.

Bertone and Franchi interviewed 46 parents of lesbian or gay children in Italy in order to examine the role of Catholicism in the coming-out process. They describe the intersection of religion and sexuality, particularly the role of organized religion in “framing sexual orientations outside the heterosexual norm as a social problem and in upholding social hostility” (p. 59). Consequently, parents need to integrate their child’s experience with the dominant heterosexual discourse of the Catholic Church. Some parents frame love, regardless of gender, as a fundamental tenet of Christianity. Some search for open-minded priests as well as friends and family members. Parents may cope by “claiming a direct connection with God bypassing institutional mediation” (p. 72) in order to separate religion from the bigotry of their individual church.

### Families Are Both Private and Public Institutions

Watson collected narratives of bisexual women and men in Australia about coming out to families of origin. She emphasizes that the “social space of family is (. . .) uniquely located at the interface of private and public domains of engagement. Consequently, the ‘family closet’ is drawn in complex ways that sees it as a source of both sanctuary and censorship depending upon family dynamics” (p. 107).

Valeria Cappellato and Tiziana Mangarella interviewed parents of lesbians and gay men in Italy who described themselves as accepting of homosexuality. Defining citizen rights as “the right to occupy space” (p. 213), the authors explain how parents with a lesbian, gay, or bisexual son or daughter negotiate this identity in public settings. Parents described the need for their adult child to move away from home in order to escape public homophobia in small towns and find a supportive community. Some parents had joined the Association of Parents and Friends of Homosexuals (AGEDO), in order to meet parents with similar issues and concerns. Parents were asked specifically how they felt about gay pride marches; some felt that the public expressions of sexuality were unacceptable whereas others had participated in the marches. In this way parents of GLB children similarly make decisions about coming out to the public. Ethnic and migrant families in particular may have thin boundaries between the family and their ethnic/immigrant community, so that having a child come out also affects the family’s standing in the community.

Negotiating private and public spaces is even more salient for parents of transgender children. Platero describes the various strategies that parents of young, gender-nonconforming children use when the children want to “pass” as the other gender in public parks or playgrounds. Similarly, a single mother of a six-year-old transgender child in the United States, in Johnson and Benson’s extensive case study, had not informed the community that her daughter’s birth sex was male.

### The Media Educate Families about GLBTQ Issues

Luca Malici describes how television broadcast companies portray families in TV programs, thus influencing millions of viewers about what is “normative” in family relationships. Consequently when what Malici terms “queer TV moments” appear in situation comedies, these are viewed by families at home and influence their opinions about what is normative sexuality. Heterosexual family members may view the TV characters as people who would not be accepted in their own rural town, for example, but they find the characters, played by popular film stars, interesting, important, and positive. In this regard, television is transformative in changing family attitudes about GLBTQ topics.

According to Malici, the television set has replaced the fireplace as the site where families gather. Despite the advent of the Internet and multiple-TV households, the majority of Italians still watch television in the living room. Malici quotes a lesbian daughter who watched television with her mother and noticed her mother becoming more accepting of lesbianism while watching a sitcom about a conservative father coming to terms with his lesbian daughter. Television network executives are nervous about programming that may shock or offend their audiences, yet Malici’s research indicates that

Italian audiences are ready for this programming and don't in general believe that GLBTQ themes should be limited to late-night time slots when young children aren't watching.

Baldo examines how the film *Mambo italiano*, about an Italian-Canadian family living in Montreal, portrays a young adult son, Angelo, coming out to his parents, in the process outing his lover, who works as a policeman. Baldo describes how the "coming out movie genre" faces the pressure of depicting coming out as a positive process, which "... is in itself a burden that limits gay characterization" (p. 171).

### Families Often Educate Professionals about Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Several authors describe how family members, rather than finding supportive and informed professionals, instead had to educate these professionals about GLBTQ issues. As a mother stated in Cappellato and Mangarella's study: "Social services and the health services have to adapt... to get up to speed and train their workers" (p. 223).

Platero interviewed parents in Spain who had gender-nonconforming children aged 4 to 19 years old. A major theme was the lack of information among public service organizations and professionals, so that parents had to educate their children's teachers, social workers, and health care workers. Parents had to search the Internet and often travel a considerable distance to find a professional who was knowledgeable about transgender issues. Sarah, the mother of a transgender child in Johnson and Benson's case study, referred to the mental health services as "crappy" (p. 134) and professionals as poorly educated about transgender issues. Some of the parents in Bertone and Franchi's study not only obtained professional help but told the Catholic priests to get more informed about sexuality issues.

Yet when families need to take the lead in educating professionals about sexuality and gender identity issues, they often feel a sense of agency and pride in their support of their child, according to Platero. Johnson and Benson similarly describe how Sarah and her child, Lee, feel like pioneers.

### Legal Status May Not Parallel Social Change

No country had legalized same-sex marriage at the national level until the twenty-first century when same-sex marriage began in the Netherlands in 2001. As of this writing, Argentina, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Denmark, France, Iceland, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and Uruguay have same-sex marriage. A number of other countries have same-sex legislation at the national level that is legally equivalent to marriage but is called something

else, such as civil pacts or registered domestic partnerships. These include Andorra, Austria, Colombia, Czech Republic, Ecuador, Finland, Germany, Greenland, Hungary, Ireland, Isle of Man, Jersey, Lichtenstein, Luxembourg, Slovenia, and Switzerland.

Yet legal status of same-sex marriage or other nondiscrimination legislation may be different from social acceptance. Despite the fact that Spain was one of the first nations to legalize same-sex marriage, Platero describes how transgender rights and even basic information about transgender issues lag far behind. Conversely, even though Italy is strongly influenced by the Catholic Church and has no anti-homophobia legislation, Malici's television audience research indicates that the Italian public has "come to terms" with queer TV moments.

### Need for Continuing Research

In sum, families of GLBTQ individuals as well as families in general are becoming more open to discussions of sexuality and gender identity. They are often ahead of media executives, health and mental health professionals, schoolteachers, and policymakers when it comes to knowledge about GLBTQ issues, particularly on gender nonconformity and transgender activism.

This collection has significantly added to the scholarship on GLBTQ families of origin. It is striking how heavily the focus is on parents in the preceding articles; parents are obviously the most important figures in the family constellation for most people. It would be interesting to have a follow-up issue in a few years that "extends out" to other relatives, including siblings, grandparents, aunts, and uncles.

In the film *Mambo italiano*, Angelo was close to his aunt, who modeled a nontraditional path for him when he was young (the film seems to imply that she died soon after she was pressured into marriage). In what ways does the "maiden aunt" or "bachelor uncle" serve as a mentor for young GLBTQ individuals, modeling alternative lifestyles without marriage or children?

Research by Patterson, Hurt, and Mason (1998) about grandparents' contact with children of lesbians in the United States demonstrates that children had regular contact with the parents of both the biological and nonbiological mother, contrary to stereotypes that these children would be isolated from the extended family of origin. Furthermore, children with more contact with grandparents had fewer behavioral problems.

Brothers and sisters are demographically very similar, but take many of these similarities for granted. They usually have the same race and ethnicity, and are often similar in age. Being raised in the same family, they shared the same religion in childhood, and grew up in a particular socioeconomic class. They went to the same schools, and may even have shared a bedroom. Such shared environments should result in high sibling similarity. Yet some

researchers have questioned the influence of shared environments of siblings, demonstrating that each sibling may experience the family environment quite differently. Developmental psychologists such as Feinberg and Hetherington (2001) argue that parenting should be viewed as a within-family variable, given that parents treat children differently on such variables as warmth and negativity. Research in child development (e.g., Whiteman & Christiansen, 2008) and clinical settings (e.g., Schachter, 1985) indicates that siblings de-identify with one another so as to emphasize their own uniqueness. Indeed, research has suggested that siblings are actually quite different from one another (Dunn & Plomin, 1992).

When I began my research comparing U.S. lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual sisters (Rothblum & Factor, 2001), I had assumed that lesbians and bisexual women would come from liberal families so that the sisters too would be nontraditional. I was wrong. Heterosexual sisters of lesbians were married with children, still practicing the same religion as their parents, lived closer to their parents, and had moved to their current location for their husband's job or children's education. Lesbians, in contrast, had attended a college that was farther from home, were more highly educated, less religious, more politically liberal, less likely to have children, and perceived less support from and had less contact with their families of origin. Bisexual women, like lesbians, were more highly educated, less likely to have ever been married, less likely to have children, and less religious than the heterosexual women. Gay men too had less contact with and perceived less support from families of origin than did heterosexual men (Rothblum et al., 2004). Gay men were less religious, less likely to have children, and had often moved to large urban areas. Gay men who became fathers reported more social support from friends than from family of origin (Crosbie-Burnett & Helmbrecht, 1993). In contrast, bisexual men were more like heterosexual men—they tended to be married, have children, live in smaller towns or rural areas, and have lower levels of education than gay men (Rothblum et al., 2004).

Later research comparing transgender and non-transgender siblings in the United States (Factor & Rothblum, 2008a,b) found that transmen, transwomen, and those who identified as genderqueer were more highly educated, less religious, less likely to be married or have children, and less likely to perceive social support from their families than non-transgender brothers and sisters. In addition, transmen lived farther from their parents than non-transgender siblings, and transwomen were less likely to be out about their gender identity to their parents than transmen or genderqueers.

As the articles in this journal demonstrate, greater awareness of GLBTQ issues has allowed increasingly complex research into families of origin. Bertone and Franchi state that “parents’ strategies show us the possibilities of combining contradictory elements of different cultural repertoires, while helping us to identify the common frames underlying seemingly

divergent understandings” (p. 60). As families become more comfortable with the spectrum of sexuality and gender identity, it is becoming easier to conduct research on GLBTQ issues. In that regard, the twenty-first century is a promising time to learn more about GLBTQ families of origin.

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