Walking the tightrope: LGBTIQ individuals' experiences of perceived support received whilst coming out

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of support received among individuals who identify as gay, lesbian and bisexual, whilst coming out. Six participants contributed to this study by sharing their experiences of received support within the Maltese context. Data acquired through semi-structured, in-depth interviews was analysed through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Thus, data was coded and clustered, and emergent themes were identified. The extracted themes include: emotional responses characterising the coming out process, participants' perceptions of supportive factors in their contexts, hindering factors during the coming out process; the need for safety during coming out; the effects of coming out on significant others; and positive outcomes following their coming out experiences. One major implication of the study outlines participants' need for belonging within a predominantly heteronormative community. Recommendations for future research, policy and counselling practice are presented.

Keywords: Support during coming out; LGB individuals; qualitative; IPA; Malta; Counselling; lived experience.

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List of Abbreviations

LGBTIQ	Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Intersex and Queer
FREC	Faculty Research Committee
UREC	University research committee
LGB	Lesbian Gay Bisexual
MGRM	Malta Gay Rights Movement
PFLAG	Parents Families Friends of Lesbians and Gays
PSCD	Personal Social Career Development

Dedication

Dedicated to the memory of my late father, a figure inspiring hope, good-will, and strength.

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Introduction

It was a normal day, just like any other. I remember I was texting a very close friend of mine, probably discussing something frivolous, when suddenly I received this text from her: "listen, I have something important to tell you". I recall getting distracted by another matter at that point in time, becoming oblivious to what was about to happen. Some time passed and I glanced at my phone again, remembering that she had wanted to disclose something. Her message read that she was bisexual. I was overwhelmed with pangs of guilt and jolts of panic. These feelings did not relate to the disclosure itself. Rather, they were triggered by the statement which preceded my long-awaited reply: "listen, I know it's a lot to take in, but I was hoping that this does not change our relationship. If you have something against it I would rather you just tell me about it". At that moment, I was consumed by guilt. Guilt about the fact that my absence had been perceived as an act of rejection. I recall rapidly texting her back, genuinely communicating my unconditional positive regard and reassuring her that she would still be one of my dearest and closest friends. It was a moment where I had touched upon this person's fear of being rejected for being herself, an experience I knew would stay with me.

Sexual orientation

There are a myriad of definitions concerning sexual orientation, and although there are many, there seems to be a lack of agreement on how sexual orientation should be defined. Some define sexual orientation on the basis of sexual behaviour (Grierson & Smith, 2005), while others define it in light

of sexual attraction (Perrin-Wallqvist & Lindblom, 2015). There are also some theorists who believe that sexual orientation is a matter of identity (Schulz & Tompins, 1990). Cass (1996) described sexual orientation as a process of the development of one's sexual identity and outlined a series of stages in the development of non-heterosexual identity. Movement from one stage to another is not linear but displays fluidity alternating with phases of identity confusion and sexual experimentation. Another definition of sexual orientation which I came across is the one put forward by Lehmiller (2014): "the unique pattern of sexual and romantic desire, behaviour, and identity that each person expresses" (p.145).

Scholars contend that sexuality is rather complex and lies on a continuum and that individuals can rarely be fit into a narrowly defined category (Bohan, 1996). Despite such arguments, sexual orientations have been identified and labelled, giving rise to the acronym LGBTI which includes all individuals whose sexual orientation does not fall in line with the rest of the heterosexual community (Martin, 2014). In Malta, during recent years, this definition has been changed to LGBTIQ (Bartolo, 2018), and it represents individuals who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transexual, Intersex and Queer (MEDE, 2015). Although participants in the present study belonged to lesbian, gay and bisexual groups, I will be using the term LGBTIQ interchangeably throughout the text so as to faciliate the representation of all members of the group. I will also be using other terminologies such as LGB, and LGBTI whilst representing literature and other studies.

Inspiration for the research question

The research questions for the study is 'What is the experience of perceived received support during LGBTIQ individuals' coming out process in Malta? Do they perceive their contexts as adequately supportive?' The process of coming up with this topic was a lengthy one, characterised by a reflection on potential questions related to the area. Other areas of interest were the impact of attachment on the coming out process, and also which types of support seem to be the most supportive during the coming out process. I chose this particular topic because I wanted to represent LGBTIQ's experiences of support received. It is worthy of mention that the decision to come out is often dependent on the person's perceptions of the nature of interpersonal relationships, as well as the presence of social support (Ranade & Chaktravarty, 2016). Upon a deeper reflection for my motives, I realised that my interest arose out of my unconscious attempts to compensate for my 'rejection' of my friend's coming out, which is an experience that I seem to carry with me till this day.

The recent introduction of same-sex civil union in Malta left me wondering about the implications this would have on support offered to LGBTIQ individuals. I questioned whether the introduction of this law would bring about a change in society's perceptions about same-sex relationships, and whether same-sex marriages would be welcomed by the broader context. Whilst embarking on a review of literature, I also started to wonder about whether school teachers and administrative staff are properly

equipped to address and provide support in cases of LGBTIQ-related issues, as well as advocate for this minority group.

Further reflection on the motives behind this study made me reflect deeper on the choice of my profession, which arose out of a desire to make a difference in people's lives. Encountering experiences of minority groups, such as the LGBTIQ community, kindled a wish in me to represent the voices of this minority group through my research, whilst also identifying other potential areas and social contexts which also require a certain level of support. Furthermore, I wanted to represent the LGBTIQ community within a local context, especially since most literature seems to focus on other contexts. It is worth mentioning, however, that research on the topic in Malta, is burgeoning.

My interest in the topic thus stems from both personal experiences with LGBTIQ minority groups, and through my role as a trainee counsellor working with LGBTIQ students in schools. These two roles exposed me to the complexity, anxiety, and pain that LGBTIQ persons often have to endure during the coming out process. Such experiences have motivated me to voice experiences of this minority group in Malta, whilst attempting to raise awareness on how to provide beneficial supportive contexts to facilitate mental-wellbeing. Additionally, given the introduction of same-sex marriage law recently promoting equal rights, I felt that research on the area would further contribute to the provision of contextual support for this minority group. Through all this, I became aware of the admiration I have towards

people who come out, due to my perception of the courage it requires to go against society's gender norms and expectations.

My positioning

I have always been a person who believes in the importance of respect and the right to be respected. I am aware that these values arose out of my family roots, since respect and love were significantly promoted. Furthermore, I realise that growing up in a heteronormative society meant that dominant gender roles and expectations surrounded me. I also realise that being heterosexual puts me in a position of privilege earning me acceptance in society.

As a little girl, my family's connections and friendships with persons from overseas, enabled me to observe and to be exposed to different ways of interacting and dissimilar beliefs. I presume that such experiences and backgrounds have shaped the manner in which I look at diversity, not in a way of depreciation or dismissal, but rather in an appreciative manner and as something which enriches the community.

Current insight

My training as a counsellor, as well as experiences mentioned in the previous sections, have combined into an appreciation of the rights of equality for diverse populations. I hope that this research promotes the development of an increasingly supportive society, one that lets go of micro-aggressions and misconceptions, and welcomes sexual diversity. I also hope that working towards a more inclusive society helps bridge the lacuna created by perceptions of heterosexism as 'normal' and alternative sexual orientations as 'abnormal' I believe that such change would render the coming out experience far more rewarding for the persons involved. I pursue this research in the hope that it contributes to paving the way for a more welcoming and supportive context for sexual minority groups, which might act as a buffer against the stressful experience of coming out

Helping sexual minority groups in my work has driven me to explore already existing areas of support and also unsupportive factors, with the hope of clarifying needs of LGBTI individuals and to identify potential areas for development. Shedding light on such issues may provide the opportunity for the development of a healthy sexual identity and emotional wellbeing. Crucially, identification of areas of improvement may provide direction for future training with professionals who work with LGBTIQ issues.

Conceptual framework

My conceptual framework is based on the desire to promote wellbeing, and in helping in the empowerment of others with the aim of achieving greater public good. It is also based on the aim of buffering against the effects of pain and suffering (McLeod, 2003). Coming out as LGBTIQ has been found to be an arduous and stressful experience due to a perceived possibility of rejection from one's sociocultural context (Philip & McIntosh, 2016). I hope that my research will help bridge the lacuna between the adversities in LGBTIQ individuals' sociocultural contexts and the possibility for a more positive coming out experience.

The two theoretical paradigms at the core of this study are phenomenology and social constructionism. Social constructionism posits that linguistic interactions shape experiences (Corbin Dwyher & Buckle, 2009). A social construct arises out of perceptions of events, and may be a shared reality or not (Creswell, 2007). In this study, my aim is to explore participants' construction of their experiences and reality. Furthermore, I adopt a phenomenological approach in this study, thus aiming to explore the meanings that LGBTIQ individuals ascribe to their experience of support within the Maltese context; I seek to attain this by immersing myself and interpreting the data provided by participants (Cresswell, 2007).

Bronfenbrenner's (1994) ecological systems theory is another pillar underlying this study. This theory considers the influence of the varying contexts which surround the individual. Bronfenbrenner (1979) stresses that

each system affects other systems surrounding the person, even if the individual is not directly present in such settings. This theory thus constitutes an important backbone to my study, since it exemplifies how systems around the individual interact and shape individual and family experiences. Supportive, as well as unsupportive, factors can be found in varying societal structures and contexts around the individual. My own experience suggests that, when systems and contexts around LGBTIQ persons and their families are supportive and nurturing, this facilitates mental and emotional wellbeing in those going through the coming out process.

I also subscribe to Rogers' person-centred approach, which views clients as experts of their own life, and that awareness fosters the ability to resolve challenges (Corey, 2013). Rogers' approach within the therapeutic context provides the space for individuals to free themselves from ascribed societal norms. I regard congruence, genuineness, and unconditional positive regard as core tools in the therapeutic setting. In fact, I attempt to adopt this attitude throughout this research, in an attempt to gain a deeper understanding of participants' inner world.

Conclusion

This initial chapter highlighted motives and relevant theories which formed the basis for this research. Chapter 2 will present a review of literature. Chapter 3 delineates the methodology adopted during this research, together with details on participant recruitment, the tools used for data analysis, and ethical considerations taken into account. Chapter 4

provides a picture of emerging themes and findings, together with a discussion in light of existing literature. The final chapter concludes the present study by summarising the findings, providing suggestions for future research, outlining implications for the counselling profession, and also addressing limitations of the current study.

Literature Review

This chapter presents relevant literature on the topic of support during the coming out process among LGBTIQ individuals. Although this research focuses on specific areas, the concepts presented are associated and linked. The literature review highlights a lacuna across studies exploring the lived experience of support received during coming out. Since literature directly related to this research was not found, I explored similar related areas which I deemed relevant to the topic at hand. Furthermore, since local literature on this particular area is scarce, I will be outlining related literature across various contexts and countries.

Identified literature could be grouped in categories that address the following issues: definitions of sexual orientation and coming out, including stage models and implications of coming out; a historical overview of stigma, social support, and impact on mental health and identity development, and counselling LGBTIQ groups

Coming out, that is, the disclosure of one's non-heterosexual sexual identity, is potentially full of discomfort, fear and anxiety due to a variety of reasons (Manning, 2014). Looking into the support systems of individuals who come out, may help in the discovery of the needs of LGBTIQ persons who are in the process of coming out, and in bridging the gap between negative feelings and support.

The research for this literature review was obtained through HyDi on the University of Malta library website. The searches through the website led me to other online resources namely Elsevier SD, EBSCOhost, PubMed Central

and SpringerLink Journals, where a large range of journals and articles could be accessed and read. Articles which were found to be relevant to the literature review were noted, and other resources which were deemed relevant from the references of such publications were sought and read. Some information was also gathered through Google Books. The initial search started off by trying to look for research which had the same aims as mine. This included looking for key terms such as coming out as LGBTIQ and Perceived received support, LGBTIQ and the coming out experience, support and coming out, social support during coming out. After finding a dearth of literature on the exact area as this study, the search was extended to include other terms including coming out experience; coming out + counselling; coming out + support; coming out +attachment patterns; support for LGBTI; experience of LGBTI; psychology of sexual identity; sexual identity + support; experience of LGBTI; support + mental health in LGBTI; types of support for LGBTI persons; typologies of support during coming out; sexual identity + coming out; needs of LGBTI + coming out; social support + coming out.

The literature review produced no research in my specific area in Malta or other contexts, although it did find other related research in the area of LGBTI across different contexts, albeit within limitations. For example, a quantitative longitudinal study by Vincke and Van Heeringen (2002) looks into the influence of support on mental well-being of gay and lesbian Belgian adults. Another quantitative study by Lyons (2016) looks into the correlation between social support and mental health for Australian older gay men. Due to their quantitative nature, these two studies did not directly investigate the

experience of support during one's coming out process. Goldfried and Goldfriend (2001) carried out a qualitative study in America, looking into the need for parental acceptance and support in ensuring psychological well-being of gay, lesbian and bisexual individuals. It does so by also outlining the importance of simultaneously supporting the families of lesbian, gay and bisexual adults who have come out. Thus, the aim of this particular research was not to look at the direct experience of those who came out to their parents, but rather to explore the benefits of providing parental support while their children are coming out. Goldfried and Goldfried (2001) find that supporting parents would simultaneously create an appropriate support system for those coming out.

My literature review also yielded studies concerning the effects of coming out on mental well-being. Furthermore, I found a few papers addressing the availability of support during an individual's coming out; however, it was limited to specific groups of LGBTI persons, mainly gays and lesbians, rather than including bisexual, transgendered, intersex, and queer individuals. For example, Perrin-Wallqvist and Lindblom (2015) focused on understanding the adolescents' experience of disclosure of their lesbian or gay identities to their parents, thus eliminating the inclusion of bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer individuals. Few studies investigated solely transgender individuals; this included research carried out by Simons, Schrager, Clark, Belzer and Olson (2013) with American teenagers. Another quantitative study by Newfield, Hart, Dibble and Kohler (2006) looked into the quality of life of female-to-male transgender individuals. Since the aim of my

study includes members from all the LGBTIQ community, I did not deem it fit to exclusively investigate the mental well-being of transgender individuals.

This chapter first focuses on the meaning of the coming out process and sexual identity. It progresses to the impact that social support has on the mental well-being of LGBTI persons, and also on the development of a sexual identity. There will also be a section dedicated to the literature found on the effect of attachment patterns developed in childhood and their influence on the experience of coming out. This aspect was deemed appropriate for this research area since the type of support received from parents links with their attachment patterns (Cooper, Pauletti, Tobin, Menon, Menon, Spatta, Hodges & Perry, 2013). Since an integral aspect of coming out is disclosure and the capability of seeking support from social networks, attachment styles may sharply influence this precarious stage in life (Jellison & Mc.Connell, 2003).

Coming out

Coming out is defined by Hill (2009) as:

> "Coming out is a common term used to describe the process during which individuals with alternative sexual orientations must explore, define and disclose their sexual orientations in a way that straight individuals need not" (p.346).

The key process of coming out was originally outlined as the progression by which the individual becomes aware of his romantic attraction towards same-sex members of society (Floyd & Bakeman 2006), resulting in the

assimilation of a lesbian or gay identity, and then sharing this identity with others (Jellison & McConnell, 2004). Although it was originally used for individuals who had same-sex romantic interests, this definition has been extended to include bisexual as well as transgendered individuals, who seem to be subjected to the same process of coming out (Grierson & Smith, 2005).

The disclosure of one's sexual orientation is a process brimming with anxiety, confusion, dread and distress over conceivable repercussions associated with such a disclosure (Manning, 2015). It has been described as a life changing experience and has a profound effect on social relationships and support networks as well as the person's emotional well-being (Lewis, 2012) and affects the individual as well as their social contexts alike(MacLachlan, 2012).

Stage model of coming out. Outlining the process of the development of one's identity as gay is not an easy feat due to its complex nature. There are myriad models that describe such a process (Ritter & Terndrup, 2002), making it a difficult task to choose an appropriate one which encompasses the actual essence of the experience which is influenced by diverse contexts and the unique individuality of the person (Levy & Reeves, 2011). I found a few stage models which identify the process of homosexual and bisexual identity development (eg. Cass, 1984; Troiden, 1979; Coleman, 1981/82), and due to their overlapping qualities, I will be presenting the commonalities in such stages, as outlined by Wang, Schale and Broz (2010). All stage models seem to incorporate the following factors: awareness of same-sex attraction,

initial exploration of lesbian, gay, bisexual identity paired with internal struggles, confusion, guilt and shame, a tentative adherence to LGB identity whilst socialising with other members of the LGB community, acceptance of LGB identity coupled with pride in orientation and anger towards oppression and discrimination in society, and finally, the assimilation of the LGB identity as part of the individual's multifaceted identity (Wang, Schale & Broz, 2010).

Coming out and its implications. Coming out is a recurring process during which the individual is constantly faced with a dilemma about whether or not to disclose their sexual identity with a new acquaintance (Gagne, Tewksbury, & McCaughey, 2004). Furthermore, it has been found that the biggest stressors during coming out pertains to a perceived possibility of rejection from one's sociocultural context (Philip & McIntosh, 2016). Research indicates that such stress arises out of fears of rejection, marginalisation and isolation from significant others (e.g. Carnelley, Hepper, Hicks, & Turner, 2011; Iwasaki & Ristock, 2007; Perrin-Wallqvist & Lindblom, 2015). The highest levels of stress are experienced prior to the initial disclosure to friends and family as it has been found to be one of the most stressful experiences (Linvingston & Fourie, 2016) and studies have shown that such apprehensions arise due to a fear of hurting significant others (Charbonnier & Graziani, 2016; MacLachlan, 2012). Hetherington and Lavner (2008) claim that disclosing one's sexual orientation to family members is an important decision, and is usually perceived as the most arduous step in the coming out process. The LGBT individual often harbours expectations of rejections and

negative responses from significant others (Carnelley, Hepper, Hicks, & Turner, 2011). In fact, Perrin-Wallqvist and Lindblom (2015) found that such expectations were the main source of fear among those who were coming out.

LGBTI persons who are in the early stages of coming out often adopt different coping mechanisms enabling them to go through the process (Gagne, Tewksbury, & McCaughey, 2004). One common behavioural pattern consists of an urge to hide one's sexual identity from others (Grierson & Smith, 2005). Some studies indicate that such fear arises out of fear of prejudice from close-knit social networks and broader context (Ryan, Legate, Weinstein, & Rahman, 2017). Furthermore, LGBTI individuals are often concerned about becoming targets of discrimination due to the pertaining stigma that prevails in a predominantly heterosexist society (Hayes & Walters, as cited in Floyd, 2006; Lick, Durso, & Johnson, 2013).

Closeting one's sexual identity. The overwhelming fear during coming out promotes the urge to remain closeted. Butler and Astbury (2008) found that South African gay and lesbian youth tried to hide, change or dismiss their emerging sexual identity in an attempt to decrease stress levels. Common defense mechanisms adopted during the process are denial, repression together with efforts to undo one's sexual identity. Denial constitutes the refusal to acknowledge certain dimensions of reality which are perceived to be threatening or painful (Gross, Mcilveen, Coolican, Clamp, & Russell, 2000). Butler and Astbury (2008) stated that lesbian and gay youth in their study disclosed that they denied their sexuality due to feelings of guilt. Suppression

of same-sex attraction was also adopted among LGBTI individuals (Alderson, 2013). Furthermore, LGB persons have been found to hide their sexual orientation until they are provided with a safe context for disclosure; this alienates them and removes the opportunity for needed support (Iwasaki & Ristock, 2007). Willoughby, Malik and Lindahl (2006) argued that such withdrawal may lead the individuals to be unaware of any available support networks, thus possibly decreasing the opportunity for belongingness which is perceived to be a supportive factor.

Stigma, microaggressions and hetero-normativity in sociocultural contexts

Literature about homophobia has suggested that there are historical origins in the oppression against individuals who display an unconventional sexual preference (Condorelli, 2015). Messages and attitudes of oppression that pertain to contemporary Western society arise out of years of historical oppression (Manning, 2015). Wolf (2009)states that developments in society have been made against the oppression of LGBT persons. This came about with the historical Stonewall rebellion in New York in 1969, promoting the rights of LGBT persons and giving them voice against oppression (Wolf, 2009). Condorelli (2015) elaborates that, up until the recent past, homosexuality was associated with psychopathology and deemed to be abnormal behaviour, whilst heterosexuality was considered to be the norm. Condorelli (2015) furthers the argument by discussing how constructionists view homosexuality and heterosexuality as a product of socially constructed categories in relation to gender and sexuality differences. The construction of these two

categories by society has encouraged a division between heterosexuality and unconventional sexualities. Hence, stigmatic views on unorthodox sexual preferences, have been encouraged (Borillo, as cited in Condorelli, 2015). Such pathological attitudes create a perception of homosexuality as a moral deviance from heterosexism, exacerbating homophobia in an unsupportive environment for LGBTI individuals, which, till this day, is still communicated covertly (Scerri, 2016).

Increased awareness and education about LGBTIQ. There has been a transition from oppression towards more open mindedness due to topic (Muñoz-Plaza, Quinn & Rounds, 2002) resulting in a higher acceptance of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered minority groups (Condorelli, 2015; Wang, Schale, Broz, 2010). As a matter of fact, in recent years, a total of twenty six countries all over the world have legalised same sex marriages, and in 2017, Malta together with Germany and Australia, followed suit (Perper, 2017). However, despite the many efforts to eradicate discriminatory attitudes, erroneous beliefs and negative attitudes have been found to prevail through the expression of micro-aggressions against sexual minority groups (Brown & Travethan, 2010). Such micro-aggressions take the form of subliminal messages in language, (Nadal, 2013), and have been found to reinforce stigmatic attitudes regarding sexuality in beliefs and practice communities (Wang, Schale & Broz, 2010).

Minority stress and microaggressions. Meyer's (2003) minority stress theory highlights that minority stress arises out of social processes and structures in a person's context. As a general rule, society at large tends to

assume heterosexism as a norm, and such assumptions are covertly and overtly communicated throughout our day to day interaction (Adams, 2011). Studies found that a heteronormative society is a unique stressor for those who have a non-heterosexual identity (Sarno & Wright, 2013; Wing-Sue, 2010).

Microaggressions are defined as minor verbal, environmental or behavioural actions, communicating intentional or unintentional derogatory or hostile messages towards individuals from sexual minority groups (Sarno & Wright, 2013). One common microaggression found across societies is the assumption of a straight sexual orientation (Herek, 2009), including expectations that one will enter a heterosexual marriage (Ranade & Chakravarty, 2016). For this reason, many LGBTI persons feel an invalidation of their relationship (Ryan, Legate, Weinstein, & Rahman, 2017), and may be left feeling with a sense of obligation to act according to such expectations (Wing-Sue, 2010).

Other types of microaggressions pertaining to society is the over sexualisation of LGBTI groups, that is the perception that people with a non-heterosexual orientation are merely sexual beings without any other qualities or attributions (Wing-Sue, 2010). Another common erroneous belief is to regard sexual minorities as child molesters (Sterzing, Gartner, Woodford, & Fisher, 2017). Such flawed and stigmatising beliefs might cause individuals to withdraw and alienate themselves from the rest of society (Condorelli, 2015), exacerbating minority stress (Wing-Sue, 2010).

Given that belonging to a minority group is in itself a stress-provoking experience, such micro-aggressions exacerbate the fears or rejections from

loved ones, as well as from society in general (Jellison & Mc.Connell, 2004). One effective buffer against such adverse consequences and other negative life experiences is social support. In fact, studies have found that the presence of a strong social support network and the communication of unconditional positive regard eases the processing of adverse life consequences and stresses, such as coming out (Condorelli, 2015; Rhodes, Contreras & Mangelsdorf, 1994). Another point that is worthy of mention is that the decision to come out is contingent on the perceived availability of social support and the quality of interpersonal relationships (Ranade & Chakravarty, 2016). Support networks correlate to the amount of struggle that accompanies coming out (Elizur & Mintzer, 2003).

Social Support, coming out and mental health

Manning (2014) links a lack of perceived support and withdrawal of support with adverse mental health conditions, causing issues such as self-harming behaviours, including substance abuse, as well as other self-destructive behaviours, low self-esteem and identity confusion (Elizur & Mintzer, 2003; Simons, Schrager, Clark, Belzer & Olson, 2013). Statistics from the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom show a higher rate of mood disorders among gay men, when compared to heterosexual counterparts (Mays & Cochran, 2001). Furthermore, studies have shown that due to their unsupportive nature, stigmatic attitudes and microaggressions heighten stress levels and foster feelings of shame in those who are coming out, thus potentially giving rise to mental health issues (Meyer, 2003).

Studies have shown that support from friends was a protective factor against depression and other mental health issues, and drug abuse (Fredriksen-Goldsen, Kim, Barkan, Muraco &Hoy-Ellis, 2013; Masini & Barrett, 2008; Morrow, 1993), which might arise in response to homophobic attitudes and micro-aggressions (Masini & Barrett, 2008). Additionally, research reports that victimised lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals lacking a stable support system are more likely to suffer from anxiety disorders, depression, conduct disorder, attempted suicide, abuse substances, and prostitution, when compared to their heterosexual counterparts (Hershbrger & D'Augelli, 1995; Muñoz-Plaza et al. 2002; Poteat, 2015).

Support typologies. Whilst compiling the literature review, I encountered a classification of different typologies of support, which were deemed relevant to my research. House (1981, as cited in Munoz-Plaza et al, 2002), described different types of social support including: (a) emotional support, during which the other is provided with love, acceptance, trust and related affective behaviours, (b) instrumental support, that is, the provision of tangible resources, including money, time and labour, (c) informational support, which includes suggestions and advice, and lastly (d) appraisal support which comprises encouragement and positive feedback. Mercier and Lyons (2016) argue that the different types of support are not always readily available in homes, communities and educational systems of LGBT individuals, and as a result, LGBT youth might feel isolated. Through an exploration of different types of support and its effects on mental health of older gay men, Lyons (2016) found emotional support as the most effective

since it fosters a sense of belonging and of self-worth, thus enhancing the development of a positive gay identity, whilst addressing the positive effects on mental well-being. Heatherington and Lavner (2008) found that, together with family support, other different sources of social and communal support systems providing emotional, services, and informational support were also protective factors against mental health issues during the coming out process.

The presence of friendships and social relationships within lesbian, gay or bisexual community have been found to be influential support systems (Pachankis, 2007), creating a community feeling acting as a buffer against minority group marginalisation (Alderson, 2013). Relationships within LGBTI groups increase one's ability to share own experiences, thus reducing the unconstructive effects of isolation whilst promoting a better sense of mental well-being (Meyer, 2003). Furthermore, LGB support groups and support centres have been found to help counteract the negative effects of homophobia on the individual and to help the person develop a positive self-esteem (Chaudoir & Fisher, 2010). Similarly, Wilkens (2016) notes that lesbian, gay and bisexual elders with LGB social networks experience lower degrees of loneliness, feel safer and a sense of affirmation.

Research indicates that most support comes from LGBTI person's peers (Gallor & Fassinger, 2010). One reason for choosing peers as opposed to family was due to messages communicating beliefs of homosexuality as being deviant among families (Chow & Cheng, 2010). A study by Munoz-Plaza, Quinn and Rounds (2002) found that peers are more supportive than

family members, especially with emotional and instrumental support. In contrast, they found that family was perceived to provide little appraisal, emotional and informational support. However, it is worth noting that the lack of support was related to the family not being aware of the LGBTI individual's sexual orientation, thus explaining one possible reason for the lack of support. Similarly, Vincke and Van Heeringen (2002) found that, when gay persons come out, they choose to come out to their friends rather than family, thus reducing the possibility for the acquisition of parental support. This could be a reason parental and familial support might not seem available to persons who are coming out.

Parental support has been reported to be one of the most significant buffers against adversities (Fonagy, Lorenzini, Campbell, & Luyten, 2014) and preserves individuals' mental health (D'Augelli, 2002).

In contrast, there have been cases where LGBTI disclosures have caused alienation from families (Perrin-Wallqvist & Lindblom, 2015). Literature exploring coming out to parents found that part of the difficulty in coming out to parents arises due to a perception of family assumptions and expectations of heterosexism, which are assimilated from a broader cultural context (Livingston & Fourie, 2016; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003). This gives rise to the perception that family adherence to such values might bring about rejection, loss of support, and pain to significant others (Valentine, Skelton, & Butler, 2003).

A child's disclosure is inclined to be a shocking revelation which affects the family system at an individual as well as at interpersonal levels (LaSala, 2000), sometimes bringing about disappointment, anger, shock, or guilt (Robinson, Walters & Skeen as cited in Carnelley, Hepper, Hicks & Turner 2011). Goldfried and Goldfried (2001) found that a common parental reaction to disclosure was hiding or encouraging their LGB children to conceal their sexual identity: "When LGBT individuals come out of the closet, their parents and relatives go in" (p. 688). This sends a rather controversial message to the son or daughter: "We think you're ok, but let's keep it a secret." Thus, anything said before the "but" gets negated" (Goldfried & Goldfried, 2001, p. 688).

Alienation and rejection are still a reality for LGBTI persons (Skerett, Kolves, & De Leo, 2017). Research indicates that such reactions motivate LGBTI persons to search for an alternative 'family' in asn attempt to gain support. In fact, Goldfried and Goldfried (2001) suggest the concept of a "chosen family", which is a form of surrogate family chosen by LGBT persons following rejection and alienation from parents. It has been found, however, that these chosen families are in no way a replacement for the individual's actual family ties, and the yearning for the availability for one's family remains strong (Perrin-Wallqvist & Lindblom, 2015). Despite a large body of literature indicating negative reactions from families following coming out, there is also some research indicating that relatives' attitudes develop into more positive attitudes over time, assuming an increasing supportive role,

thus facilitating a person's mental well-being (e.g. Charbonnier & Graziani, D'Augelli et al., 2010; Wisniewski, Robinson & Deluty, 2010).

The impact of support on LGBTIQ identity development. The development of a gay identity development and coming out is brimmed with feelings of anxiety and distress due to unfavourable contextual conditions (Pachankis, 2007). Nevertheless, social support has been found to be a source of encouragement in the face of such adverse conditions (Alderson, 2013). In fact, research in the area of LGBT identity development shows that social support impacts one's emergent sexual identity (Malcolm, 2008). Participants in the study carried out by Muñoz-Plaza et al. (2002) described a sense of alienation at being met with undesirable comments about sexuality from society; this interfered with their sexual identity development. Lack of support is linked to higher degrees of anxiety and denial, resulting in difficulties accepting one's sexuality when compared to others who are supported (e.g. Charbonnier & Graziani, 2016; Zamboni, 2006).

As previously mentioned, the peer group is an important support network during a person's coming out especially for adolescents who tend to look up to, and look for support among their peers during this time (Zamboni, 2006). Poteat (2015) argues that attitudes and beliefs in a peer group have a great impact on attitudes and beliefs of individuals. It stands to reason, therefore, that such attitudes would also exert an influence on one's view of self and sexual identity (Chaudoir & Fisher, 2010). This imbues the coming out

process with denial and stress about one's sexual identity (Goldfried & Goldfried, 2001). Brown and Travethan (2010) found that, being met with adequate levels of esteem upon the identification and disclosure of one's sexuality, brings about the development of self-worth, self-esteem and self-confidence, resulting in a global positive perception about sexuality (Keleher, Wei & Liao, 2010).

Attachment Styles and coming out.

Bowlby's (1988) attachment theory posits that parenting styles exert a great degree of influence on the development of internal working models of the self and others, depending on the availability and responsiveness of significant others during early life stages. Internal working models constitute views about self-worth (Carnelley K. , Hepper, Hicks, & Turner, 2011) as well as beliefs about availability and trustworthiness of significant others (Bowlby, 1988). The attachment style, together with internal working models developed in early life experiences, are carried into adulthood and influence adult relationships with others (Hazan & Shaver 1987).

Attachment security and its effect on coming out. Secure attachment develops when caregivers provide the child with the required soothing and support when needed. Securely attached individuals are able to build positive beliefs about the self, and a positive self-identity. They also gain the ability to trust others (Rosario, et al., 2014). When securely attached, individuals feel valued and are allowed to actively explore (Landolt, Bartholomew, Saffrey, Oram, & Perlman, 2004), fostering the possibility for

individuation which, in turn, allows them to be different from others (Elizur & Mintzer, 2001). Consequently, securely attached individuals may feel more comfortable about, and disclose, their sexuality (Wang, Schale & Broz, 2010). Furthermore, securely attached individuals have been found to have greater ability to reach out for social support during such an arduous experience (Jellinson & McConnell, 2003). Furthermore, securely attached LGBT persons are better able to re-evaluate any negative feelings and perceptions about their non-heterosexual identity, thus protecting them against the stress associated with coming out (Ridge & Feeney, 1998). For example, Jellison and McConnell (2004) found that gay men scoring high on a secure attachment reported positive beliefs towards their own sexuality. They also felt more confident disclosing their own sexuality when contrasted with gay men exhibiting an insecure attachment. Secure attachment style was linked with a more positive experience in coming out when compared to anxiously attached counterparts (Jellison & McConnell, 2004).

Conclusion

The literature review has sought to provide a context for the exploration of the effect of support on sexual identity development and coming out. It is important to consider that the majority of literature pertains to contexts outside of Malta, so LGBTIQ individuals coming out in Malta might report different experiences. Furthermore, most literature did not include all members of the LGBTIQ community, but rather was specific to either gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender individuals (e.g. Charbonnier & Graziani,

2016; Jellison & McConnell, 2003), with most of it focusing on gay persons as opposed to other groups. Also, the research concerned both adults and youths, giving a wide range of perceptions (e.g. Charbonnier & Graziani, 2016; Skerett, Kolves, & De Leo, 2017). Support has been found to be a large influencing factor in determining coming out and its outcomes, thus raising awareness of the importance that such support has for LGBTI individuals. Hence, the current study aims to explore the experiences of perceived support among Maltese LGBTI persons who have gone through the process of coming out, and the effects that support had on their experience.

Methodology

In this chapter, I will be giving a detailed description of the research approach that I used in my study. The rationale and philosophical underpinnings of the chosen research methodology will be discussed in relation to the research topic, which is to explore and understand LGBTI individuals' perception of support during their coming out process. Following this, a discussion of sampling techniques, inclusion criteria, pilot study, data collection methods and procedures will be presented. Ethical considerations will also be discussed.

Aim, objectives and research question

The research question driving this study is: What is the experience of support received by LGBTI individuals during their coming out process in Malta? The main aim of the study was to explore the experience, as well as the different types of support, that persons who were coming out received during their journey. I especially wanted to investigate how LGBTIQ persons experienced their coming out in light of available or unavailable support, both at a family level, as well as at a community level, and how such support facilitated or hindered this process. I desired to explore whether participants felt they got the support they needed, and whether there were any other wishes for support from any other sources.

My choice of a phenomenological approach was deemed appropriate since it allows for an exploration of the participants' perceptions (Coyle, 2007). I chose Intepretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to inform my study, particularly since I was interested in representing

participants' understanding of their own coming out process, as well as the meaning that they attributed to it. The following sections will go into deeper elaboration of the rationale behind my choice.

Conceptual framework

Epistemology is a philosophical branch that is concerned with how knowledge about the world is obtained. It tries to answer questions about *what* we can know and *how* we can know (McAuliffe & Lovell, 2006). Researchers adopt different epistemological positions in accordance with their aims for the study. Thus, different research methods and approaches are associated with different epistemologies (Coyle, 2007). On one end of the spectrum, positivism is underpinned by an empiricist epistemology, which posits that knowledge about the world can be obtained from data inputs such as the senses, and that there is a direct relationship between our perceptions and things in the world (Payne & Payne, 2004). It also assumes that the knowledge gathered needs to be generalisable to the population (Schrag, 1992). Through its inductive method, one can observe the relations between cause and effect and also effects of underlying causes (Cruickshank, 2012). In contrast, the current qualitative research embodies another kind of epistemology and assumptions about how knowledge about the world is acquired (Coyle, 2007).

A social constructivist approach lies on the other end of the spectrum, and concentrates on the influence of utterances on meaning-making and construction of reality (Coyle, 2007). Hence, the knowledge obtained arises

out a personal construction, rather than a representation of causal relationships or generalisable phenomena (Willig, 2013). A critical assumption in social constructivism is that language in discourse influences the development and construction of human experience (McLeod, 2011), and for this reason, social constructivists aim to study discourses (Lyons & Coyle, 2007). Furthermore, social constructionism posits that, disclosures from research participants provide information about their inner reality, about socially available manners in which the experience is communicated, and how these are organised by the participants (Creswell, 2007). Simultaneously, participants represent the effect and consequences of such interpersonal and interactional constructions (Lyons & Coyle, 2007). Social constructionists thus assert that the essence of reality construction lies within conversations in a person's sociocultural context (Cresswell, 2007). Consequently, different versions of reality are constructed, depending on the nature of the social context that individuals find themselves in (Willig, 2013).

My interest in the field of LGBTI stems from my personal experience with people from the community, as stated in the introductory chapter. I have often observed fear and apprehension related to potential implications and negative reactions that would follow their coming out, not only at a social level but also at a personal level. I also note that this fear often arises due to perceived unsupportive conditions in one's sociocultural context, which can be expressed covertly or overtly. Such messages are internalised both from immediate social contexts such as family and peers and also from implicit

messages and micro-aggressions such as erroneous beliefs, stereotypes and gender role and expectations which are embedded in culture. I find that this justifies my choice of social constructivism, since the sociocultural context heavily influences experiential meaning.

Choosing a qualitative approach.

Given that a social constructionist framework is pertinent to this study, it was only natural that I would adopt a qualitative approach. Also, counselling has taught me that reality is not unified across all entities; rather, it is subjectively constructed and tailored to each person, with an interplay of surrounding multidimensional aspects. Given that my aim for this study was to hear and explore the meanings that LGBTI persons assigned to their experiences, the choice of a qualitative approach seemed appropriate. The choice of qualitative inquiry enabled me to give voice to participants (Cresswell, 2007), which was one of my aims for this study. A qualitative approach enabled me to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences.

Phenomenological Research

Phenomenology is a philosophical approach concerned with exploring and comprehending lived experience (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009), aiming to explore the experience in the manner with which it occurs, and on "its own terms" (Smith et al., 2009, p.12). Phenomenology lies on a continuum between a transcendental (descriptive) approach and a hermeneutic (interpretative) approach (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009).

Transcendental phenomenology, founded by Husserl, is about how the world presents itself to individuals (Jansen, 2005). Husserl advocates stepping out of, or 'bracketing' (epoché), our own experiences to help us examine the experience of consciousness on its own terms. Husserl's main interest was to "go back to things themselves and find the essence of the experience" (Smith et. al, 2009. p. 16). Willig (2013), describes the aims of Husserl's transcendental phenomenology:

> "its aim was to return to things themselves, as they appear to us as perceivers, and to set aside, or *bracket* that which we (think) we already know about them. In other words, phenomenology is interested in the world as it is experienced by human beings within particular contexts and at particular times, rather than in abstract statements about the nature of the world in general. Phenomenology is concerned with the *phenomena* that appear in our consciousness as we engage with the world around us." (p.51)

Willig (2013) also states that the phenomenological stance emphasises that objects and subjects in the world cannot be separated from our experience with them.

Other successors, building on Husserl's phenomenological philosophy were Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre (Smith et. al, 2009). Each provided an elaborate understanding of 'experience', calling for an animated process, an expansion of perspectives and meanings, unique to

the individual's epitomised and established relationship to the world (Jansen, 2005).

Hermeneutic phenomenology, developed by Heidegger (Willig, 2013), lies on the other end of the spectrum. Heidegger proposes that we are part of our context and thus cannot separate ourselves from the world. This contrasts with Husserl's concepts of 'bracketing', which suggests that we can separate ourselves from the phenomenon, and that an experience can exist in isolation from external factors and contexts (Willig, 2013). Hermeneutics is therefore a theory of interpretation (Smith et. al, 2009), stating that descriptions of phenomena are rooted in a process of interpretation (Moran, 2000). Interpretative phenomenology also argues that understanding cannot take place without preliminary assumptions on what we are about to investigate (McLeod, 2003). Indeed, the researcher takes on the role of interpreting the client's interpretation of experience, thus engaging in a hermeneutic circle during which a circular movement from assumptions and beliefs to interpretation is created (McLeod, 2003). The researcher attempts to use personal assumptions in a manner which deepens the understanding of the phenomena, creating new insights that come about as a result of the relationship between the data and the researcher (Willig, 2013; McLeod, 2003)

Both phenomenological orientations strive to understand the human subjective experience in the acquisition of knowledge through the use of descriptions (Finlay, 2009). Another similarity between the two branches of

phenomenology lies in bracketing (Smith et al. 2009; Finlay, 2009). Both Heidegger and Husserl mentioned the aspect of bracketing; however, the importance of the process varies in both approaches (Willig, 2013). Husserl argued that in descriptive phenomenology, the researcher is to bracket any prior knowledge and assumptions to allow themes to emerge solely from participants' experiences (Coyle, 2007). On the other hand, Heidegger emphasises that the researcher's knowledge is beneficial to the interpretation of data (Finlay, 2009). Our experiences with the phenomenon in question provide a rich understanding of the experience in question (Willig, 2007). The core difference between the two branches of phenomenology lies in the interpretation of data provided by participants (Cresswell, 2007; Finlay, 2009). The descriptive branch places its focus on the themes that capture the quality of participants' experiences. On the other hand, the interpretative branch places its focus on the interpretation of data provided by participants (Finlay, 2009).

I chose a hermeneutic phenomenological approach because I wanted an in-depth understanding of the experience of support for individuals who came out as LGBTIQ, bearing in mind that my background, experience and point of view would also impact the understanding gleaned from participants' experience. At the same time, I wanted to keep an open mind with regards to the emotive nature of the coming out process for those who took part in my research. Hence, in my research, I wanted to capture the experience and subjectivity of LGBTIQ persons. Furthermore, I identified

with the interpretative phenomenological methodology's assumption that both the realities of the researcher and the participants are influenced by their context, and these realities in turn, have an influence on each other (Creswell, 2007). My beliefs and assumptions may have affected the data gathered in a number of ways. The most prominent assumption that I seemed to carry was that most LGBTIQ persons had a negative experience of support whilst coming out. This assumption arose out of exposure to several persons' negative experiences of coming out, in my career and personal life. Secondly, as discussed, being heterosexual is associated with privilege, thus potentially creating a power imbalance between participants and myself. Being part of a minority group may have influenced the way participants constructed their experience. Thirdly, in this study, I had the role of a researcher as opposed to that of a counsellor. Representing participant voices is qualitatively different from the data gathered and interpreted during a counselling session.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis is a qualitative approach aiming to explore how people make sense of experiences (Smith & Osborne, 2015). The underlying philosophical construct in this approach is Heidegger's interpretative phenomenology. Researchers using IPA are interested in significant lived experiences and the meaning that is assimilated from such experiences (Frost, 2011). In accordance with hermeneutic phenomenology, IPA does not just involve the participants' meaning making process; indeed, it

is based on a double hermeneutic, which involves the participants' interpretations along with the researcher's interpretation of the data (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009; Frost, 2011; Smith & Osborne, 2015).

Although it is interesting to note that IPA shares similar goals with narrative and grounded theory approaches, I particularly chose IPA because my interest lay with the essence and interpretation of participants' stories. Narrative research and grounded theory are based on a discovery of individuals' stories and building a theoretical claim respectively (Cresswell, 2007). I wanted to delve into how people make sense of their significant life experiences (Smith et al, 2009), hence why I chose IPA.

On another note, I deem an approach which captures and explores subjective human experience as a suitable method in counselling research. For this reason, I chose IPA as it mirrors the journey seeking understanding that characterises counselling. Furthermore, IPA creates space where participants have a voice: they can narrate their experiences while, at the same time, understand the meaning that they have attached to these experiences (Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2006).

Limitations of IPA. Although IPA was deemed the best methodology for this study, there are some limitations to this approach. Firstly, in IPA, participants depict and provide their data linguistically (Cresswell, 2007). Due to the heterogeneous nature of language, the same experience can be described in a myriad of ways (Willig, 2013).

A second limitation lies within participants' ability to provide in-depth recollections of their experience. Whilst some may be able to provide in-depth explanations and address delicate aspects of their emotional and physical experience, IPA may be an unsuitable method with people who struggle with articulation of thoughts and feelings (Willig, 2013).

Thirdly, Willig (2013) argues that IPA focuses on individuals' perceptions of the experience, as opposed to providing a general understanding of the phenomenon. Although rich descriptions are extracted from the data, IPA does not allow for deep exploration into why these experiences take place and what makes participants' experiences different (Smith & Osborne, 2015); hence it lacks an explanation for lived experiences (Cresswell, 2007).

The Research Process

Choice of participants. Due to the idiographic nature of IPA research, the focus is on in-depth analysis as opposed to large quantities of data, making a small sample more appropriate for this type of research (Cresswell, 2007; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Thus, I interviewed a homogenous purposely-selected sample of six participants, one of whom was used as a pilot study. This was carried out prior to the interviews, and no alterations were made to the interview guide following feedback gathered. Thus, data from the pilot interview was included in the findings. All participants in the study were LGB adults between 18 to 30 years of age who had come out at least 18 months prior to this study.

The recruitment process. Prior to the research process, I sought the ethical approval from the faculty and university research committees (Appendix A). I also contacted MGRM, who acted as a gatekeeper, for the recruitment of participants who met the criteria for inclusion (Appendix B). A gatekeeper enabled participants to take part in the study willingly, ensuring an opt-in approach. I also opted for a snowball sampling method, whereby my social networks also acted as gatekeepers. Prospective participants were given an information sheet (Appendices C and D) about the study, together with my contact details so they could contact me if they wished to participate. Once participants volunteered to take part in the study, they were contacted through phone or email, and debriefed about the aims of the study and the interview process. Participants were given the opportunity to choose a time and place for the interviews, allowing them to feel more at ease.

The research tool. Face to face semi-structured interviews allowed for an in-depth exploration of LGBTIQ individuals' experiences, which is one of the aims in IPA research (Smith, 2004). Furthermore, they provide the possibility for dialogue to emerge between researcher and participant, including further exploration of any relevant issues arising during the interview (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). I drafted an interview guide, both in Maltese (Appendix E) and English (Appendix F), which included relevant probes to allow for flexibility. This provided me with the opportunity to take on the role of a collaborator, helping participants describe and provide meaning to their

experience. My experiences in the counselling field and working with teenagers during their coming out process were useful whilst compiling the interview guide. Moreover, I was able to implement some of my counselling training during interviews, which facilitated the process of looking into the meanings attributed to experiences.

Each interview lasted approximately an hour, and was audio recorded to allow for a careful exploration and analysis of experiences (Wimpenny & Gass, 2000). Since IPA also requires a degree of reflexivity (Shaw, 2010), notes were recorded immediately following each interview (Appendix G). These notes included my own feelings and reactions to the participants' description of experiences, which were compared to the themes that came up during the analysis of interviews. This served the purpose of identifying parts of the story which were mine, as opposed to parts of stories which were the participants' (Smith et al. 2009).

Analysis of data. The initial step in conducting the data analysis in IPA is the transcription of the recorded interviews (Appendix H). Each interview was read multiple times allowing an immersion and a familiarisation with participants' experiences (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Each reading generated additional information and links. I annotated my thoughts with each reading and started listing common salient themes which arose from the participants' stories. After compiling a list of themes for each transcript, I clustered the most salient themes into categories, connecting

them across participants. Each category was given a super-ordinate theme title and these were illustrated in a table (Table 1 in Chapter 4).

All six interviews were originally transcribed verbatim (Appendix H) in the language they used during the interview. The verbatim transcriptions were handed to participants for their corroboration. Allowing participants to review their transcripts ensures more truthful representations of experience (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). All participants confirmed the information in their transcript.

Ethical considerations. During the research process, I made sure to keep in mind ethical issues and considerations. Research in counselling is guided by a set of ethical guidelines which are applicable to investigations of human subjects (Heppner, Kivlighan, & Wampold, 2008). Such ethical considerations are in line with ensuring the beneficence of subjects, non-maleficence, autonomy and fidelity towards participants (McLeod, 2003). For this reason, it is important to be aware of the effects that the study might have on all participants involved (Firth, Shapiro, & Parry, 1986).

Throughout the research process, a number of precautions were adopted to ensure ethical practice (McLeod, 2003). A consent form (Appendices I & J) was given to participants, outlining aims, objectives and other details about the research. It also highlighted the procedures that would be taken to ensure participants' confidentiality including the use of fictitious names. Participants were also informed that interviews would be recorded and that the recording would be destroyed within a year following

completion of the study. They were informed about their right to withdraw from the research at any point in time, and their right to preview the transcripts to ensure accuracy of information. Lastly, I spoke to participants about their right to be informed about the research and the purposes of such research upon completion (Heppner, Wampold, & Kivlighan, 2008).

During the interview process, I observed any behaviours and non-verbals that could indicate signs of discomfort or distress. There was a participant in particular who did exhibit signs of distress during the interview and upon further exploration, he was offered free counselling at an appropriate organisation.

Quality, validity and trustworthiness. During my research, I attempted to adopt guidelines which would increase the trustworthiness of this research, especially since it is was imperative to represent participants' experiences as authentically as possible. McLeod (2013) asserts that notions of credibility, validity and reliability of qualitative studies are acquired from "discovering human experiences as they are lived and perceived by the participant" (p.93). It has been argued that validity in IPA studies is supported by four general principles, which I will briefly discuss. Firstly, the researcher needs to have an understanding of the contexts and the factors entangled in the data collection process such as cultural differences, power differentiations, and the adequacy of the relationship with participants (McLeod, 2013). Yardley (2000) also suggests the principle of "commitment and rigour" where the researcher is expected to devote a considerable amount of time to

guarantee a meticulous process of data collection together with a thorough profound analysis. Yardley (2000) proposes a third principle whereby through consistency and transparency, the researcher abides to the duty of indicating and verifying how they came to their conclusions. Finally, "impact and importance" requires the researcher to inform the reader of useful or important information (Yardley, 2000).

My role in the research process

It is vital that researchers of any study present their own reflexivity and biases about their position in the rigorous process of analysis (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). As previously mentioned, I have some exposure to the field of LGBTI. This position facilitated the process of designing the study and interpreting the data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). My sensitivity to the area made it more critical for me to be mindful about my biases during this study, so as to optimise the credibility of the study (McLeod, 2003; Corbin Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Given that I belong to a heterosexual part of society, it is possible that I may have overlooked certain aspects that are taken for granted in LGBTIQ related issues.

The participants took me on a journey characterised by a lot of bittersweet memories, emotions, sadness, anxiety, as well as a road characterised by fulfilment and positivity. I can recall feeling a myriad of emotions that mirrored those of the participants' during their recollection of experiences, such as anger, uncertainty, happiness and enthusiasm. This made me aware of the interaction of personal dynamics which are common

to all interview settings such as power struggles, transference and counter-transference (McLeod, 2003).

Given my counselling role at work, I struggled to suspend my usual practice of providing therapeutic intervention during interviews, especially when one of the participants got emotional during the interview. I was aware that I needed to restrain from providing interventions since such acts would have tainted the data. I responded with empathy and acceptance, which are two counselling qualities shown to be helpful in qualitative research (Ashworth, 2003). Analysing the participants' experience allowed me to immerse myself further into their experiences, taking me on a roller coaster ride of emotions where I was influenced by the presented emotions. For instance, when participants communicated burdensome experience, my feelings were laced with distress and anxiety, possibly indicating transference.

I felt somewhat surprised during the pilot study where I was met with a positive experience of coming out. I realise that this arose out of my prior belief and assumption that coming out was always experienced as a negative.

The counsellor vs. the researcher. I initially found it difficult to engage in the pilot interview due to arising concerns about the interview process. The most prominent feeling was the uncertainty on how to implement my role as a researcher during the interview. Setting aside my identity as a counsellor felt very threatening to me, even more so since I was unsure on how to adopt the detached role of an interviewer (McLeod, 2003). After discussing this

issue with my dissertation supervisor, I became aware that the process entailed combining the similar aspects between the role of a researcher, and the role of a counsellor for the research, while at the same time being careful not to immerse myself completely in a counsellor's role. I then felt I could embrace the process with a new-found curiosity, thus letting go of the anxiety that I felt prior to the first interviews. I was also concerned about the power imbalance that could exist during interviews, given that I belong to a privileged part of the community due to my heterosexual orientation, even though it seems that the pride and sense of self-fulfilment in the participants acted as buffers against this potential power differentiation.

I found that some skills obtained from my counselling training proved useful, particularly during times when participants seemed emotional and upset. I thus responded with empathy one of Rogers' essential conditions in the counselling profession (Rogers, 1961) as well as silence, so as to help establish rapport with my participants and facilitate safety (McLeod, 2003).

Conclusion

IPA involves a dynamic process which provided me with an opportunity to embark on an exciting way of conducting the research within the conditions surrounding the study (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Thus readers can anticipate a representation of reflections of both participants and researcher alike (Brocki & Wearden, 2006).

The following chapter presents the findings and their link to existing literature, according to the emergent themes.

Findings and discussion

This chapter presents the results obtained from the data analysis. The purpose of the study is to explore LGBTIQ individuals' experience of perceived support during their coming out process. The first part of the chapter will provide a brief description of demographic data, together with participants' sexual orientation and the person they chose for initial disclosure. This is followed by a representation of core emerging themes derived from questions asked of the whole group of participants. Some quotes from participants' accounts are used to substantiate these emerging themes. Findings from the current study will be discussed in light of relevant literature.

Demographic details of the participants

A sample of six individuals participated in this study. This sample consisted of adults ranging between 23 and 34 years of age, who came out to someone at least 18 months prior to this study. The participant sample has an equal number of males and females, with different sexual identities. Although the study aimed at including individuals with intersex, transgender and queer identities, no participants from such groups opted to take part in this study. Thus the emerging themes do not account for the whole LBGTIQ population. Each participant has been given a pseudonym so as to preserve their anonymity. Also, some specific details which would make the participants easily identifiable were withheld. The demographic data is presented in table 1 overleaf.

Table 1: Demographic data for participants.

Pseudonyms	Age	Gender	Sexual orientation/ Identity	Age at point of disclosure	The first person of disclosure	Occupation
Berry	34	Male	Gay	31	Friends	Therapist
Julie	23	Female	Bisexual	21	Friends	Social worker
Samantha	30	Female	In a relationship with a woman – no specific label given	19/20	Parent	Education Department
Albert	26	Male	Gay	18	Friends	Architect
Mark	25	Male	Gay	18	Friends	Marketing
Victoria	28	Female	In a relationship with a woman – no label given	19	Friends	Social Support Services

Super-ordinate themes identified

Eight super-ordinate themes emerged during the process of data analysis (see table 2). Due to the multiplicity of influencing factors on the experience, some themes, despite being representative of distinct aspects of the coming out experience, have a degree of overlap. For this reason, it was difficult to ascribe sub-themes exclusively to one super-ordinate theme.

Table 2: The super-ordinate themes and subthemes

Super-ordinate themes	Sub-ordinate themes
Theme 1: Fear of anticipated responses.	1. Expectations of rejection 2. Anticipated loss of life opportunities 3. Fear of judgement and discrimination 4. Fear of disappointing others 5. Fear of being unwillingly outed
Theme 2: Consequences of fear/An emotional response to fear	1. Feelings of anxiety 2. Attempting to conform to heterosexism 3. Withdrawal from social circles 4. Feeling stuck 5. Living a "double life"
Theme 3: Looking for people who provide safety – associated with reassurance and protection	1. Assessing safety in people 2. Testing the waters 3. Coming out to safe people first 4. Safe relationships are supportive 5. Building internal support systems
Theme 4: Feeling undermined by micro-aggressions in the external environment	1. Messages laced with micro-aggressions 2. Coming out as an act of self-proclamation 3. Sensationalism about the topic 4. Demeaning messages
Theme 5: Parents perceived to be the most difficult people to come out to	1. Parents are the last persons to come out to 2. Parental expectations for their child. 3. Parents need time to process revelation 4. Coming out as a process for parents
Theme 6: Perceived sources of support	1. Intrinsic sources of support 2. Support from LGBTIQ people 3. Safe friendships 4. Parental support 5. Societal education
Theme 7: Gained supportive relationships and improved existing relationships after coming out	1. Permitting others to be part of their life 2. Enhanced existing relationships 3. Inclusivity in social interactions 4. Authentic living is empowered 5. Re-building relationships
Theme 8: A celebration of one's sexuality as a consequence of coming out	1. Assimilation of LGBTI identity 2. Increased self-confidence 3. From shame to pride 4. A sense of liberation

Theme 1: Fear of anticipated responses.

Participants in the current study seem to recall a common experience of fear during the initial stages of coming out. This relates to Manning's (2015) description of coming out as a process filled with confusion, dread, distress, and anxiety over prospective repercussions following disclosure.

Expectations of rejections. One of the described fears was from "other people's reactions" (Mark) following their disclosure. Albert describes his fear-inducing thoughts eloquently: "it's scary because you know that everyone in your life can kind of reject you if they want to". Similarly, Victoria captures the fearful experience of coming out:

> I think the…the main feeling with coming out is the fear of rejection. I think that is the, the underlying fear, which I had. You know fear of how you, if you'll be accepted once you come out to your parents, will they accept me? Will they be angry? Will they resent me?

Correspondingly, research across different contexts highlights that coming out can be a daunting experience, laced with fear and stress about possible rejection (e.g. Heatherington & Lavner, 2008; Iwasaki & Ristock, 2007; Perrin-Wallqvist & Lindblom, 2015). Such findings suggest feelings of being out of control over potential outcomes, which also seems to be a common feeling described by participants throughout the current study. In a transcultural counselling context, it is imperative

that such fears are acknowledged and worked with therapeutically, especially since such fears are a reality for most minority groups, including LGBTIQ communities (Bidell, 2013).

Anticipation of loss of life opportunities. The issue of concerns and distress about the prospect of losing significant life opportunities was mentioned by participants. Albert encapsulates this when stating that, "I used to be very sad about the fact that I couldn't have kids naturally". Some participants attributed potential negative career implications to the influence of social stigma. Samantha conveyed her apprehension about not "being on equal terms" as a result of her sexuality; this was echoed by Albert, who recalled that, "I thought I would be less successful in life because I'm gay". Consistent with these findings, a number of studies found that LGBTI persons reported greater stress levels with regards to their prospective future, such as fears of lack of opportunities due to discrimination, and the loss of important milestones in life (Charbonnier & Graziani, 2006; Legge, Flanders & Robinson, 2018; MacLachlan, 2012). This suggests a need for the development of policies in the workplace addressing rights for LGBTIQ employees in the workplace. In Malta, constitutional protection against the discrimination of gender identity and sexual orientation was developed in 2014, protecting the rights of LGBTIQ individuals (Bartolo, 2018). As part of this act, local school policies addressing the rights for safety of LGBTIQ individuals in local school settings, have also been developed (MEDE, 2015).

Fear of judgement and discrimination. Participants in the present study felt that coming out would result in society judging and discriminating against them. This was exemplified by Albert, who described coming out as act of "putting yourself out there for anyone and everyone to judge you, and…that's scary". A Charbonnier and Graziani (2016) study highlighted this, as coming out was described as an act of exposing oneself to judgment. Participants in this study attribute the fear to micro-aggressions from their surroundings, a finding which was consistent with Charbonnier and Graziani's (2016) study. Victoria describes her concerns about coming out to some of her colleagues: "you know, the associations that might come into play and, how some people would question and how you could be targeted". This suggests that coming out becomes an arduous task in the face of anticipated erroneous beliefs. In fact, Ryan, Legate, Weinstein, and Rahman (2017) found that levels of disclosures are driven by fears of rejection and prejudice.

Fear of disappointing significant others. Participants reported feelings of anxiety about the prospect of being a source of disappointment for their parents. Mark and Albert outline this fear: "the fear that you're going to disappoint others" (Mark) and "fear of disappointing my parents especially" (Albert). Similarly, a study with LGB adults by Charbonnier and Graziani (2016) found that participants felt that their disclosure would bring about parental disappointment. Likewise, MacLachlan (2012) argues that coming out does not solely include personal risks, but also carries a responsibility towards

others. Victoria associates coming out to a discrepancy between her own wishes and the needs of others: "…the dreams other people have for you, they…they're not the same one you have for yourself". Willoughby, Malik, and Lindahl (2006) suggest that the fear of being a disappointment arises out of the perception of coming out as a challenge to family values and expectations of heterosexism.

Fear of being outed. Participants feared that their sexuality could be used as something "to talk about" and to "gossip about" resulting in the possibility of involuntarily "being outed" (Victoria). Mark expressed his frustration: "it's like you're giving them something to talk about, I used to hate it" [*qisek qed ittihom x'jgħidu, kont nobgħod*] . Such a perception suggests a desire for LGBTIQ persons to retain some control over their disclosure. In fact, MacLachlan's (2012) argues that self-disclosure leaves little control over how such information is used by other individuals and how the individual is perceived by others; this might potentially create an unpleasant consequence of coming out to people whom the LGBT person does not want to share their disclosure with (Iwasaki & Ristock, 2007). One might also wonder whether the fear of being outed is related to feelings of shame about one's sexuality, possibly indicating an area which counsellors and other mental health professionals could work on in a therapeutic setting. Shame in fact, has been found to be a common emotion among LGBTIQ persons, and it drives individuals to remain invisible (Greenan, 2003). Therapeutic work in conjunction with a positive therapeutic relationship, has been found to

encourage letting go of such feelings of shame whilst moving towards a more positive self-concept (Singer, 2003)

Theme 2: An emotional response to fear

Anxiety. This common emotion among participants during the coming out process, leading to uncertainty and questioning: "Will they accept me? Will they be angry? Will they resent me? What about their goals being dismissed all of a sudden, you know?" (Victoria). Albert narrated the intensity of his anxiety by providing a description of its aftermath: "for the first year or two after I had come out to my parents, I used to wake up every morning and I'm like: *gasp**sighs* they know." Such intense anxiety is a characteristic feature during coming out (Manning, 2015).

Attempting to conform to heterosexism. One behavioural response to anxiety included attempts at conforming to societal gender roles and assumptions, and efforts to repress non-heterosexual sexuality, as exemplified by Berry, Albert and Mark. Such compensatory strategies develop as an attempt to conceal same-sex attraction (Dunlap, 2014). One example of such a dynamic was Berry's attempt to repress his sexuality by engaging in a six-year relationship with a woman, whilst trying to convince himself that his same-sex attraction was "just an illusion, a frivolity"[*biex forsi ngħid hija xi ħaġa tiegħi, ħmerija*]. Similarly, Mark recounts how he "still gave it a try with girls" whilst Albert admitted a need to "put up an act" as an attempt to fit in within his peer group. Troiden (1989) reports that defense mechanisms such as avoidance, denial, and "repairing" one's sexual identity are common,

and are adopted as attempts to undo same-sex attractions. Such mechanisms were found to be related to avoiding pain and humiliation (Butler & Astbury, 2008), and although such emotions were not reported in this study, I could not help but wonder whether this could represent unacknowledged motives within participants in this study, possibly indicating an area of therapeutic intervention. One might also wonder whether the need to conform is a direct result of a discrepancy between an LGBTIQ person's growing non-heterosexual identity and societal expectations of heterosexism; this was reported by Butler and Asbury (2008).

Withdrawal from social circles. Withdrawal from one's social context was another common behavioural pattern among participants. Samantha encapsulates this when she describes how she chose to go about it: "things my way, sort of, everything at my own pace" [*do things my way, speċi ta kollox dejjem bit-temp tiegħi*]. Consistent with these findings, other studies have reported similar patterns of behaviour, and showed that withdrawal from families, significant others, and society was observed among those experiencing sexual identity issues (Butler & Astbury, 2008; Matthews & Salazar, 2012; Savin-Williams, 2003). One could argue that such behaviour alienates the individual from the possibility of acquiring support, thus leaving one wondering whether a partial reason for lack of support is due to such behaviours.

Feeling stuck. Feelings of being "stuck" and "in a fix" due to overwhelming fear arose among the participants' recollections as

prominently communicated by Victoria and Berry; however I could not feel that this was a general feeling in all participants' experiences. Berry captures this feeling of stuckness and the related distress: "This barrier is preventing me from moving forward. So there are times where I feel that it's breaking me. Times where I feel I cannot move forward, I feel…stuck in society." Findings reporting similar experiences seem to be lacking, possibly due to the fact that other studies are mostly quantitative, hence they do not explore the in-depth experience. However, there seems to be a consensus on how coming out seems to be an overwhelming experience in general among participants in the present study.

Living a "double life". Another common response to fear was hiding their sexuality as a means of avoiding disclosure of their sexual identity; some participants referred to this as living a "double life". Victoria illustrates situations when she adopts such a position: "when you talk about gay people in the 'them', 'us' the straight ones, and 'them', and I'd be having the discussion as the 'us', but I'm really a 'them'". Participants also recall withholding their partner's identity: "you meet someone secretly, if you're in public, you introduce him as your friend not your partner" [*bil-moħbi, jekk tmur x'imkien, tipo, dan huwa ħabib tiegħi, mhux il-partner tiegħi*] (Berry). Other studies have found that such behaviour stems from the fear of relationships with family and peers changing for the worse (D'Augelli, Grossman, Starks & Sinclair, 2010), and out of fear of being found out (Ranade & Chakravarty, 2016). Similarly, other studies report that such

withholding is linked to a desire to remain safe (Butler & Astbury, 2008); perhaps this was also true for participants in the current study, although it was not directly mentioned. Studies have also shown that concealing is mostly adopted during adolescence (Safren & Pantalone, 2006). Although most participants did seem to engage in such behaviours during their late teenage years, most seemed to experience this process even in their adult years.

Theme 3: Looking for people who provide safety, reassurance and protection

Assessing safe people to disclose to. Fears around personal safety push LGBT persons to be selective in their disclosure of sexual orientation (e.g. Beals, Peplau & Gable, 2009; Cole, 2006; Legate, Ryan & Rogge, 2017), leading many individuals to opt to disclose their sexual identity to a close friend but not to a parent (Butler & Astbury, 2008). This was mirrored in participants in the study; all seemed to go through a process of selection of people with whom they felt safe enough to disclose, and also of evaluating the endurance of support networks following their disclosures. For instance, Mark illustrated this process as "weighing" the likelihood of losing significant others by examining people's attitudes towards LGBTI. Samantha feels that this is an important step to undertake, and she presents this as a suggestion to other LGBTIQ individuals:

I still think that they need to test their ground. Because I think that if you manage to pluck up the courage to tell someone, and this someone lets you down, you will retreat back, further than before. So I think they need to be safe.	*Jiena xorta naħseb li they need to test their ground. Għax naħseb li mbagħad inti jekk tkun għamilt kuraġġ u għedt lil xi ħadd, u this someone lets you down, tagħmel bħal bebbuxu inti, terġa tidħol iktar il-ġewwa. Jiġifieri naħseb li they need to be safe.*

Testing the waters. Tied to the concept of assessing safe networks for disclosure, participants seemed to 'test the waters' prior to coming out. They adopted methods of determining provision of safety, reassurance and acceptance from others. Mark reveals how he underwent such a process: "people with whom I brought up the subject about gays, I knew their thoughts and attitudes about it". Studies seem to support this finding, and suggest that individuals look for cues and prospects of support and threat as an attempt to predict whether disclosure will be beneficial or harmful (Legate, Ryan, & Rogge, 2017). Indeed, studies show that LGB persons are more likely to come out to people who have positive beliefs about non-heterosexuality (Lewis, 2011), and that such beliefs are supportive factors and encourage coming out (Elizur & Mintzer, 2002).

Coming out to safe people first. Participants presented what seemed to be a hierarchical progression of disclosures, where they initially disclosed to people who they were certain would accept them. Such a process was

deemed by participants to be "automatic" and a decision which was not made consciously. Julie eloquently described how she felt within a safe social context: "you know when you found the people that are really home and that you feel safe with". Similarly, Lewis (2011) found that people perceived to embody characteristics which made them more likely to accept LGB persons, such as being in contact with other members from the LGBTIQ community, are equated with safety for disclosure. Interestingly, one finding in this study which is not mentioned in existing literature, is participant's perception that female friends are more likely to be understanding than their male counterparts: "I expected some boys to react negatively" (Mark); "I felt that women are more understanding somehow" (Albert). It is possible that such finding is unique to the Maltese context, possibly explaining why it did not come up in related studies abroad. Perhaps such findings can be attributable to a traditional patriarchal society within the Maltese context (Grixti, 2008). Other studies also found that negative reactions from fathers were anticipated more than negative reactions from mothers, making the mother the first person amongst parents that LGBT individuals disclosed to (Valentine, Skelton, & Butler, 2003; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003). However, such studies do not specifically address the differences between male and female peer disclosure, possibly indicating an area for future research.

Safe relationships as supportive. Some participants reported that safe relationships reinforced their coming out. Berry provides an account: "once I meet someone I believe in, someone I trust, then I feel I can open up" [*once li qisni, niltaqa' ma' dak ix-xiħadd li nemmen fih, li tipo I trust, hemmekk orrajt, I*

open] . Similarly, Mark describes his experience: "when you feel that you're being supported, it helps you think that, it's okay, I have those people left to tell". [*inti tibda tara s-sapport dieħel, li jgħinuk tgħid: "mela it's okay, mela fadalli ngħid lil dawk*]. My literature review presented findings linking autonomy support with safety of disclosure, potentially indicating that different social contexts have varying degrees of autonomy support (Lynch, LaGuardia, & Ryan, 2009). Contexts perceived to be high in autonomy support tend to reinforce the individual's ability to live authentically (Hodgins, Weisbest, Weinstein, Shiffman, Miller, Coombs, & Adair, 2010). This makes me wonder whether it is autonomy support alone that accounts for the increased ability for authentic living or whether other support typologies such as emotional and instrumental support which have been found to be supportive in other studies have a role as well (e.g. Dirkes & Barrett, 2014; Lyons, 2016). It might be worth exploring the extent to which the Maltese society encourages autonomy, especially since it is such a close-knit, interdependent nature.

Internalisation of support networks. Being met with support, reassurance and safety, seemed to help participants internalise this support. Mark articulates this process:

if you accepted me when I disclosed [my sexuality] to you, I can carry you with me whilst coming out to other people, so that if I'm not accepted, I have you to support	*jekk għedt lilek u inti aċċettajtni, mela jiena lilek nista' nieħdok miegħi biex noħroġ out għal dak, biex għalinqas jekk inti ma taċċettanix,*

me. So I sort of started carrying around my support networks (Mark).	*għandi lilek. So qisni bdejt, and I carried my support miegħi.*

Although no literature describing such a process was found, one might wonder whether it might parallel Bowlby's (1988) attachment theory, whereby he posits that internal working models and views of the self and others develop as a result of our relationships with others. Thus, being met with care and trustworthiness may reinforce beliefs about the trustworthiness in other people (Carnelley, Hepper, Hicks, & Turner, 2011). This might indicate a need for further research on this area.

Theme 4: Feeling undermined by micro-aggressions in the external environment

Communication of micro-aggressions. As previously mentioned in the literature review, various types of micro-aggressions about sexuality are communicated in interactions. Participants in this study deemed gender role expectations and mistaken beliefs about LGBTI issues as unsupportive factors in their coming out process. They described stereotypes as "unfair" and stated that people who held on to stereotypical negative beliefs and "negative associations" "put [them] off" from coming out. Victoria responds to a person who equated LGBTIQ persons to sexual predators: "But..how…how…and she has one-to-one sessions with the girls?". Indeed, Dunlap (2014) argues that such stereotypes are a barrier to seeking support (Dunlap, 2014; Wing-Sue, 2012). Similarly, Flegge, Flanders and Robinson (2018) found bisexual individuals were commonly considered as incapable of

engaging in monogamous relationships, sexually promiscuous, and greedy; obviously, such beliefs were unsupportive. The absence of gay affirmative language and images seemed to be a stressor for participants in the current study and others (Ranade & Chakravarty, 2016). What is concerning about the communication of such misconceptions about sexuality, is the potential it has to impede self-discovery (Dunlap, 2014; Fine, 2106). Although participants in the current study did communicate hurt and anger about stereotypical attitudes, they did not mention any implications on the process of self-discovery; however, this could be a result of not having focused on the process of self-discovery in the present study.

Coming out as an act of self-proclamation. Participants keenly felt they had to "announce/broadcast" their sexuality. The disclosure of one's LGBTI sexuality implies that one is different, when compared to the dominant heterosexual society (Charbonnier & Graziani, 2016). Participants' feelings were possibly a result of having to develop their LGB sexuality in a society brimming with expectations of heterosexuality (Sanders & Kroll, 2000). Victoria captures this by describing instances when she finds herself in a predominantly heterosexual group: "the assumption is that everyone is straight", and how she feels that "people look at you as a girl, as a woman, and automatically ask: are you married?" and or, "do you have a boyfriend?". Consistent with the findings in the present study, research shows that the use of terms such as "boyfriend" and "girlfriend", instead of "partner", makes LGBTI persons feel undermined and unequal (Wing-Sue,

2010). Such expectations seemed to make participants in this study feel compelled to disclose their sexuality to others. In fact, Albert described the act of coming out as: "something that you have to do. To inform everyone around you, so you don't just show up with a boyfriend one day. Unfortunately we're not there yet, where everyone raises their kids with such…". Mark shared similar feelings of obligation: "I have to inform everyone about what I am, because society is expecting me to be with a woman" [*irrid navża lil kulħadd jiena x'jiena, għax il-pubbliku qed jistenna li jiena nkun ma' mara*] . Berry divulges the painful experience of having to share his sexuality:

Why is it that as a gay person, I have to tell my mother: "mum, I'm gay"? I have siblings, none of whom had to disclose to her: "mum I'm straight", "mum I have a girlfriend". Automatically things settled on their own. Why is it that, because I'm gay, I have to disclose: "Mum, I'm gay?" (Berry)	*Għalfejn jiena bħala persuna gay għandi mmur noqgħod ngħid lil ommi: "ma jiena gay"? Jien għandi ħuti, ħadd minnhom ma ġie fuqha qallha: "ma jiena straight", "Ma', jien sibt tfajla", "ma jien hekk". Tipo awtomatikament l-affarijiet qagħdu waħedhom. Għalfejn jiena, il-fatt li jiena gay għandi noqgħod ngħid: "ma jiena gay"?*

It is likely that such feelings of obligation arise out of the use of heterosexist language and expectations, which applies pressure on individuals to disconfirm such expectations (Wing-Sue, 2010).

Perceived societal sensationalism about the LGBTIQ topic. A number of participants perceived "sensationalism", saying that sexuality is still a hot topic in Malta. Berry, contrasts being out in public with his partner in Malta to other contexts abroad: "Here, in Malta, you don't feel comfortable doing certain things" [*hawn Malta, ehe, ma tħossokx komdu tagħmel ċertu affarijiet*]. This point was not mentioned in the review of literature. This could possibly be attributed to the fact that Malta was relatively late in addressing the LGBTIQ field, potentially because homosexuality was, until recently, associated with psychopathology and deemed to be abnormal behaviour (Condorelli, 2015). It is possible that due to the fact that same-sex marriage legalisation has occurred only recently (Perper, 2017), societal attitudes are still in the process of developing and changing.

Demeaning comments. Participants in the study described their experience when faced with demeaning comments and messages in society. Julie recalls an experience where she was faced with comments such as "not normal" and "unstable", causing her to feel "completely misunderstood" and under "personal attack". Similar findings were reported in a study with bisexual individuals by Legge, Flanders and Robinson (2018), who found that bisexual participants experienced demeaning comments about their sexual orientation. Such findings, however, exclude the

representation of lesbian, gay, transgender and intersex individuals. One survey carried out by the Human Rights Campaign (2010) in Washington, found that 58% of LGB individuals reported hearing offensive and derogatory messages from colleagues. Participants in the current study also mentioned micro-aggressive jokes, and how these are experienced as unsupportive factors. Berry expressed the grief he feels upon being faced by jokes concerning gays: "others are not aware about how you feel."[*ma jkunux jafu huma kif qed iħossok*] . This was echoed by Samantha: "Imagine that I am going through the process of questioning my identity, and hear a counsellor, for example, make a joke. It could be a simple joke, but the person may be taken aback by it." [*Immaġina inti, jiena I'm questioning u nisma' counsellor per eżempju, u din tgħaddi joke. Inti taf tkun a simple joke, imma forsi dak li jkun jeħodha iktar]*. Wing-Sue (2010) discusses the interactional use of the word "gay" as a label for something deemed "weird" or "dumb", and how such language is derogatory towards LGB individuals. Nadal (2013) furthers this argument by stating that such language reinforces negative views and beliefs about LGB groups.

Participants also feel that society generally devalues same-sex relationships. Samantha elaborates: "it is stated in the law; however, in reality, in people's views and perceptions, are they on equal grounds? I feel that it is not always the case" [*Bil-liġi u fuq il-karta, imma fil-verità imbagħad, f'għajnejn in-nies u f'moħħ in-nies huma on equal grounds? Dik inħoss li ovvjament mhux dejjem qiegħda hekk*]. This echoes findings from a study by Haines, Boyer, Giovanazzi, and Paz Galupo (2017), where participants

perceived an invalidation of their same-sex relationship. Similar findings were reported in a study by Scerri (2016), where gay and lesbian participants reported that societal attitudes and perceptions need to alter in light of recent legal advancements related to same-sex rights. In line with this, Butler and Astbury (2008) observe that, despite legislation promoting the rights of LGBTI individuals, societal attitudes and habits are harder to restructure in favour of LGB rights; in fact, attitudes towards sexual orientation are still largely intolerant. Such micro-invalidations are a source of emotional distress (Wing-Sue, 2010), and although participants in the current study did not explicitly mention such emotions, I felt that they did experience degrees of anger and hurt about this matter during their recollections. It is important for such emotions to be validated and addressed within counselling and therapeutic settings (Davies, 2003).

Theme 5: Parents perceived to be the most difficult people to come out to

Parents as the last persons to come out to. The majority of participants reported that they only came out to their parents at the end of the coming out process, as stated by Julie: "the last phase of coming out was to my mother". Indeed, this was perceived by participants to be one of the hardest steps in the process. Albert recalls this experience as being "the biggest hurdle". For Berry, this fear is still a current reality for him: "I still haven't found the courage to verbally come out to my mother and father" [*Għadni ma sibtx dak il-kuraġġ li mmur verbalment ngħid lil ommi u missieri*]. Similarly, a number of studies noted that that parents are rarely the first people to whom

individuals disclose their sexual identity (Carnelley, Hepper, Hicks, & Turner, 2016), due to feelings of anxiety and fear (Charbonnier & Graziani, 2016; D'Augelli, Grossman, Starks, & Sinclair, 2010). Albert gives an account of what makes coming out to parents so difficult: "When you're young, your parents are your world, you look up to them and they're infallible", perhaps indicating the reason why coming out to parents is perceived to be such an arduous step. In fact, Heatherington and Lavner (2008) report that coming out to parents during late adolescence or late adulthood occurs at a time during which the family is regarded as a crucial source of support. Victoria reflects on the heavy burden she experienced prior to coming out to her mother: "when this comes out of my mouth to my mother…that listen, I'm in a relationship with a woman..., that is going to change my life, and you feel the heaviness of that". Research suggests that, due to an awareness about the irreversibility of such action, coming out to parents is often the last step (Rossi, 2010; Willoughby, Malik, & Lindahl, 2006).

Parental expectations. Participants spoke about their sense that coming out could be perceived by parents as defying their hopes and wishes for their children, thus resulting in parental disappointment. Livingston and Fourie (2016) suggest that the family of origin of LGB individuals tends to be immersed in a broader heterosexist community, thus carrying heterosexist biases and values, potentially adding to the adversity of the experience. In the current study, Victoria, Samantha and Albert were clear about their parents' wishes for them. Samantha, whilst recounting her mother's reaction and process after coming out, highlights her parents' previous expectations

of her: "study, graduate, finding a good job, and having a family and settling down" [*tistudja, tigradwa, issib xogħol tajjeb, u li inti jkollok il-familja tkun issettiljata*]. Similarly, for Victoria, "before I came out, my mother had wanted me, had wished for me, to get married, to have kids". She elaborates on how she felt burdened as a result of such expectations: "you carry that as well, the responsibility we all have for each other's happiness". Albert paints a poignant picture of his feelings: "I felt that somehow I was going to disappoint my parents, especially my parents that I wasn't…I didn't turn out to be the son they wanted me to be, or planned for me to be." Studies seem to suggest similar fears of disappointing parents across LGB groups (Charbonnier & Graziani, 2016). However, many of the studies attribute such concern to a fear of loss of support or of the parental-child relationship taking a turn for the worse (Stein & Cabaj, 1996; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003; Valentine, Skelton & Butler, 2003), as opposed to a direct fear of disappointing parents. Perhaps this issue in the Maltese contexts is more prominent due to a society characterised by close-knit family ties, thus creating a sense of responsibility towards maintaining such a close proximity to one's family of origin. This suggests a prospective area for further research.

Need for parental processing. Participants seem to acknowledge that coming out is also a parental process rather than simply an individual process. This is eloquently described by Victoria:

> …our lives are merged, it's not just about us, and I think that is why, why it's hard for a lot of people, because

> we know it can change our life, but it can also impact,
> and does impact the life of the ones closest to us.

Participants noted that parents seemed to need time to process their coming out. Albert witnessed his mother's process: "the stages parents go through, the denial, the grief, and all that stuff. I could see it very clearly." Similarly, Samantha recalled her mother's experience: it was "a bit difficult for her to accept". In fact, she needed time to "put a name to the situation and she got used to it, that it's just a way of life". Findings across studies seem to confirm this, whilst describing initial parental reactions including anger, shock, disappointment, and guilt (Robinson, Walters & Skeen as cited in Carnelley, Heppner, Hicks & Turner, 2011). These gradually give way to more positive responses (eg. Charbonnier & Graziani, 2016; D' Augelli et al., 2010; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003), harbouring increased support and acceptance of their child's happiness and welfare (Wisniewski, Robinson & Deluty, 2010). Victoria spoke about an incident during which her mother challenged her sexuality, and although it angered her, further reflection helped her realise the source of her mother's reaction: "it was because she had questions, unanswered questions, she was maybe confused". This is consistent with findings in a study by Wisniewski, Robinson, and Deluty (2010) which showed that some parental reactions indicated the need for time to process their child's disclosure.

Coming out experience is shared by parents. A point which I think is worthy of mention due to its saliency, is the fact that parents seem to go

through a parallel process of coming out. Samantha describes this process as, "to some extent it affected her personally" [*lilha to an extent, qisha affetwatha personali*], in terms of what people were going to say about it. A local study by Sultana (2014) reported that parents reported concerns about negative implications that could impact their children (Sultana, 2014). One might ponder on whether such reactions are perceived as unsupportive. Some participants discussed their observations of parental coming out when faced with questions about their children's lifestyle and sexuality. This parallel process was especially the case for Victoria's mother:

> …I got to know that my mother had to, explain some things. My mother was being questioned about my lifestyle. And so, she had to through the process of coming out, well, it's not the exact same term, but explaining that herself, carrying the same fears of rejection, of stigma, of shame that I had when I was coming out to her.

Following their LGBTI child's disclosure, parents start to question their family values, including their beliefs about sexuality and sex (Willoughby et al., 2006). Livingston and Fourie (2016) argue that personal factors related to the manner with which parents handle stressful circumstances also influenced this process; however, no such data emerged in the current study, perhaps because it was an area that was not explored. Participants also mentioned parental concerns about their child as described by Albert and Samantha described parental anxiety and fear of judgement towards their child. Parents

also seemed to be concerned about their children facing loss of opportunities and discrimination. No literature supporting such arguments were found, possibly because parental coming out process has not been explored in depth. Such findings suggest the importance of counselling families of persons with LGBTIQ individuals, since coming out also affects people in a person's immediate context.

Theme 6: Perceived Sources of support

Intrinsic sources of support. Participants mentioned intrinsic factors as one of the support systems helping them during their coming out process. Such intrinsic support systems, including "self-esteem" (Mark), "self-confidence" (Mark), and awareness of being able to "get through it one day" (Mark), were reassuring factors which facilitated coming out. Julie disclosed the mind-set that seemed to support her: "if I lose someone, because they didn't understand it's not much of a loss at the end of the day" "…I know I can get out of it,that I know" (Julie). Similar findings were reported in a study by Matthews and Salazar (2012), whereby self-esteem was found to be a factor determining a positive coming out experience and the development of a positive LGBTI identity. High self-esteem is shown to lower anxiety related to one's sexual identity, thus improving mental health outcomes (Bernal & Coolhart; Rosario et al., 2001); this might render the assimilation of sexual identity smoother. The identification of self-esteem as a supportive factor outlines a potential aspect to work on during the counselling setting (Davies, 2003).

A number of participants in the current study chose to adopt a self-reliant approach as opposed to seeking support from external sources. Samantha, for example reported: "I went through most of the process on my own" [*jien għaddejt ħafna minnħa waħdi*], at her "own pace" and in her "own way". Similarly, Albert disclosed that he worked through most of the process on his own by preparing himself through research on the topic: "I used to read a lot about coming out to your parents, how you should do it, when you should do it" . He also recommends that other individuals who are facing the coming out process adopt the same method. Such findings made me reflect about the loneliness that may accompany such a process. In fact, other studies report periods of loneliness prior to a person coming out (Halpin & Allen, 2004; Simons, Schrager, Clark, Belzer, & Olson, 2013). Although dealing with the process alone was in itself supportive, it is can also be a lonely process.

Other members from the LGBTIQ community. Participants in this study reported that other members from the LGBTIQ community were a source of support; they specifically referred to their romantic partner. Similarly, studies found that members from the LGBTI community are supportive (Meyer, 2003; Pachankis, 2007). It is worth noticing that these other studies made no specific reference to romantic partners. Participants perceived partners as attenuating their anxieties and worries when compared to other people, due to similar emotional experiences during the coming out process. This was vividly portrayed by Victoria:

> My partner herself was…was very helpful you know? I could discuss with her the feelings I was having... she would share the excitement, she would share the…you know acknowledge my fears, and my concerns. So I think that was a very supportive part in...in the whole process.

Similar findings emerged in a study by Bowland, Foster and Voster (2013): participants surrounded by people having similar life experiences were instrumental in them developing better mental health outcomes. This support network also provides LGBTIQ individuals with emotional and instrumental support (Muñoz- Plaza, Quinn & Rounds, 2002), thus creating a community feeling that acts as a buffer and fosters feelings of validation (Bernal & Coolhart, 2005). In addition, it alleviates feelings of alienation and increases feelings of safety, affirmation, and belonging (Wilkens, 2016).

Safe friendships. Safe friendships were found to be the most widespread source of support among participants. Friends who were accepting seemed to help increase participants' self-confidence. Mark eloquently describes the meaning and effect of supportive friendships:

And that gives you a lot of power. A lot of power and self-belief whilst you say to yourself: "qalleċ man, There is nothing wrong with me because everyone accepted me." It literally	*U hemmekk, it gives you a lot of power. A lot of power and self-belief li tgħid: "qalleċ man, jien m'għandi xejn ħażin ta għax kulħadd aċċettani." U it gives you literally the*

gives you the go ahead that…kind of, today I'm totally comfortable. (Mark)	*go ahead li tipo, illum-il ġurnata komdu kif kont mija fil mija.*

In a similar vein, a number of studies show that friends are one of the most supportive factors, and that disclosures with friends who provide autonomy support, that is, empowering authenticity, helps increase self-esteem (e.g. Gallor & Fassinger, 2010; Levy, 2012; Ryan, Legate, Weinstein, & Rahman, 2017). This reminded me of Goldfried and Goldfried's (2001) notion of friends being a "chosen family"; however, in contrast with the present study, friends who "replaced" the family of origin were sought following rejection from the family of origin.

Parental acceptance. Although parents were the last persons to disclose to, participants seem to have been met with support from their parents. It seems that this was the most significant buffer against the stressful experience of coming out. As previously mentioned, coming out to their parents was no easy feat for participants, and being met with unconditional love was significant for them, as explicitly stated by Victoria:

> She assured me that she loved me and all that, you know? But even though I dismiss it and all that, it was a very significant moment, and they were the words that I needed to hear at the time, that it's okay, that I'm accepted that it doesn't change anything that I am as a person.

Samantha seconds this when she discusses the meaning that parental support has for her: "you feel happy that you're still somewhat making them proud, even if it's in a different way, than they expected [*tkun kuntenta li you're still somewhat making them proud, avolja differenti milli ħasbu huma*] A study by Roe (2017) found that the more explicit and overt the support from family members, the more powerful the effects on the individual. Similarly, other studies suggest that LGB adolescents who perceived their parents as providing positive support, had better mental health outcomes, higher self-esteem (Espelage et al., 2008), became more accepting and comfortable with their sexual identity (D'Augelli, 2002), and increased psychological adjustment (Carnelley, Hepper, Hicks & Turner, 2011). Parental communication of unconditional acceptance in this study can perhaps be linked with Roger's (1951) notion of unconditional positive regard, which has been found to be beneficial in parent-child relationships (Asmussen, 2011) . In a counselling context, unconditional positive regard is one of the core conditions, having a supportive function which is crucial for the counselling relationship (McMillian, 2004).

Societal education. Participants in this study disclosed that societal education has the potential to act as a buffer against micro-aggressions. However, most feel that societal education regarding sexuality is lacking. They attributed the presence of misconceptions and micro-aggressions in society to a lack of societal education. In support of this finding, research suggests that minority stress links to the effects of societal discrimination and

the inadequacy of supportive institutions (Meyer, 2003), thus generating perceptions of inferiority of non-heterosexual identities and stigmatisation (Iwasaki & Ristock, 2007). Such beliefs and attitudes predict higher levels of anxiety, depression and other negative mental health outcomes (Meyer, 2003; Iwasaki & Ristock, 2007).

Victoria suggests "normalising the fact that it's okay to be gay" as part of the educational process. Mark claims that "everyone changes when they learn", and that education brings about a "change in people's attitudes" [*in-nies jibdlu l-attitudni tagħhom*] . Berry also suggests that education in schools should address supportive actions towards LGBTIQ individuals: "how am I going to react around them?" [*kif ħa nirrejaġixxi madwar il-ħajja tagħhom jiena?*] . This is consistent with Gonzalez's (2016) finding that participants addressed the important roles of school teachers and administrators in the education of LGBT-related topics, including dealing with issues of sexuality with empathy and sensitivity. In fact, since LGBT persons are at higher risk for mental distress due to social minority stress (Meyer, 2003), counselling can provide them with a supportive therapeutic space characterised by empathic understanding, potentially alleviating distress. Furthermore, counsellors and other mental health professionals can educate family members of LGBTI individuals, possibly helping them develop increased acceptance and tolerance of their children (D'Augelli et al., 2005).

Theme 7: Gained supportive relationships after coming out and improved relationships

Participants in this study seemed to feel that support was gained following their disclosure to other people. Correspondingly, Beals, Peplau and Gable (2009) found that gay and lesbian individuals experienced a greater sense of well-being after they disclosed their sexual identity, as disclosure provided them with support and understanding. Similarly, MacLachlan (2012) argues that coming out may enhance quality of life due to the acquisition of social support, friendships and solidarity, which are essential components in the promotion of well-being and a healthy lifestyle.

Permitting others to be part of their life. Participants commented on the link between sharing such an intimate aspect of their identity with close-knit friends and family, and gaining support and trust from others. They also felt that it allowed them to share any troubles and concerns they had about their romantic relationships in their social circles: "I can tell my mum that we had a disagreement for example" (Victoria). Samantha defined this process as, "it's like more of an invitation to talk about it and for you to be open about it rather than a direct disclosure." [*qisek iktar milli tgħidilhom, iktar qisek ittihom il-permess li kważi jitkellmu dwarha u li inti tkun open]* . Although existing research does not comment on this process, one could perhaps connect it to the ability to live authentically across social settings. In fact, Bosson, Weaver, and Prewitt-Freilino, (2012) found that concealing one's sexual identity hinders the ability to interact and behave authentically during

social interaction, creating increased levels of distress among LGBTIQ individuals.

Strengthened relationships. Participants seem to have experienced "strengthened" (Samantha & Victoria) and healthier relationships characterised by mutual increased trust, respect and honesty. Albert depicts his experience:

> I think they're more pure and honest the relationships, and I think like with family, with friends the same, like we became closer, and once you open up to people about something so deep and personal, I think they feel more comfortable opening up to you about their issues. So if I was courageous enough to trust you with me coming out, automatically, they're reciprocating.

Similar findings in a research by Uysal, Lin, Knee and Bush (2012) found that relationships improved following disclosure. Indeed, they found that LGB individuals correspondingly reported enhanced well-being, since disclosure satisfied participants' needs for relatedness and autonomy. Participants in the current study contrasted openness in relationships with concealment, and perceived the latter to cause limitations in their relationships. Research linked suppressing one's identity to a worse outcome in relationships with peers and family, which arose out of the inability to live authentically (Legate, Ryan, & Rogge, 2017). Legate, Ryan and Rogge (2017) also found that sharing oneself provided the opportunity to gain emotional proximity with significant

others, a finding which seems congruent with other studies (Legate, Ryan, & Rogge, 2017).

Feeling included. According to participants, coming out has fostered a sense of inclusivity in social circles. Samantha explains this process: "people who know will accept you, and they invite you, they're inviting both of you. So then, you feel more comfortable" (People who know will accept you, and they invite you, they're inviting both of you. Mela mbagħad inti you feel more comfortable). The review of literature has not yielded any similar findings although this may be attributable to the possibility that other research focuses on the negative aspects of coming out, as opposed to positive aspects. It is also possible that this finding is inconsistent with other research since other research seems to explore the experience prior to coming out as opposed to exploring the effect that coming out has on existing relationships (e.g Malcolm, 2008; Poteat, 2015).

Authentic living is reinforced. Due to enhanced relationships, participants feel encouraged to engage deeply in relationships by being authentic, thus leading to more open interactions. Simultaneously, such interactions helped increase self-confidence about sexuality due to the communication of unconditional positive regard and thus, acceptance of one's own sexuality. Victoria, for example, elaborates on her experience of authentic living in her social circles: "Being comfortable, knowing that people are comfortable with me". This finding could potentially be linked to research indicating that support for a person's autonomy fosters the ability to

live authentically, enhances mental well-being (Lynch, La Guardia, & Ryan, On being yourself in different cultures: Ideal and actual self-concept, autonomy support, and well-being in China, Russia, and the United States, 2009), increases one's ability to integrate in social circles, and aids the development of a positive self-concept (Weinstein, Deci, & Ryan, 2011). Perhaps this finding could relate with the concept of unconditional positive regard in a counselling setting, which might help empower LGBTIQ persons to live authentically both inside and outside of the counselling relationship (Bernal & Coolhart, 2005).

Re-building relationships. Re-building relationships following the coming out experience was another positive effect for participants. Although Julie and Mark spoke about relationship turmoil with significant others following their coming out, they admitted that such relationships eventually became stronger and increasingly supportive. Julie recalls her experience after drifting apart from some of her friends following her disclosure: "at first it took a step back, but now I think we're even closer" . A similar experience was echoed by Mark who claimed that relationships with his family: "had to start afresh, the relationship had to be rebuilt from scratch" *[kollox kellu jerġa' jibda mill-bidu, ir-relazzjoni u hekk terġa' tinbena from scratch*]. Research indicating similar findings seems to be lacking. Again, it is possible that since the existing body of literature seems to be largely focused on negative experiences of coming out, such positive experiences may be under-reported or unaccounted for.

Theme 8: A celebration of one's sexuality as a consequence of coming out

Assimilation of LGBTI identity. Despite being a long and anxiety-provoking experience, most participants described reaching a point where coming out to themselves and to others enhanced their ability to openly identify themselves as gay, lesbian or bisexual, and letting go of shame around it. For example, Julie captured the moment where she was ready to assimilate her bisexual identity: "Then I knew, because it's something that made me happy internally, so I was ready to face, kind of, external conflict from people, because I knew it was me, I knew I was happy with it" . Although coming out is mostly described as being a stressful event causing negative mental health outcomes (Beals, Peplau, & Gable, 2009), there are instances where it can be perceived as a positive experience (Iwasaki & Ristock, 2007). One might wonder whether positive effects of coming out could be linked to overall perceived acceptance. In fact, research indicates that LGB persons who were met with rejection experienced worse mental health outcomes (e.g. Elizur & Mintzer, 2003; Simons, Schrager, Clark, Belzer & Olson, 2013). Other studies have found a link between familial acceptance and a development of a positive sexual identity (Charbonnier & Graziani, 2016). A positive integration of one's sexual identity improves mental health and overall wellbeing (Weinstein, Deci, & Ryan, 2011).

Increased self-confidence. As already stated, data in this study suggests that, being met with acceptance, paved the way for increased self-confidence. Victoria stresses this point: "I am very confident about myself".

Similarly, Mark illustrates a process of acquired self-confidence after being met with acceptance from friends following his disclosure and how he felt that it gave him "a lot of power and self-belief" . Participants also reported that increased self-confidence empowered them to live authentically. Similarly, researchers found that in a supportive and accepting context, LGB individuals develop higher self-esteem and self-acceptance, making them increasingly able to cope with challenges, allowing for a positive coming out experience (e.g. Bernal & Coolhart, 2005; Espelage, Aragon, Birkett, & Koening, 2008; Savin-Williams, 2001).

From shame to pride. Despite a phase of turbulence prior to coming out, most participants in the study seem to have now reached a stage of calm and serenity after they came out, symbolising a transition from shame to pride. Affirmative feelings allow the participants to move past the fear of showing their true self in public, due to their increased ability to face rejections from social contexts. Victoria reflects on her new-found pride: "I owe it to myself and to my relationship not to lie about it" . Similarly, Mark illustrates an acquired sense of esteem:

Nowadays, I am public, I post photos with my boyfriend if I want to post, and I don't give… I don't care. Those who are interested will know, those who aren't can ignore it.	*Jien illum il-ġurnata I am public, I post photos with my boyfriend if I want to post, and I don't give…ma ngħatix kaz. U min irid ikun jaf, ikun jaf, min ma jridx ikun jaf, ma jkunx jaf.*

Similarly, Albert reported a phase where he let go of his shame: "I was proud of it, I didn't want to hide it anymore" (p.6), whilst admitting that, "there is nothing to hate yourself about. Nothing." One might wonder if the shift from shame to pride among participants was influenced and encouraged by available support from significant people. A study by Halpin and Allen (2004) seems to indicate that feelings of pride are contingent on the availability of social support.

Self-fulfilment. Feelings of self-fulfilment were delineated among those participants who had a strong support system. Self-fulfilment seemed to arise out of the assimilation of a positive gay identity and in the ability to live authentically. Albert eloquently describes what it was like to reach a stage of self-fulfilment:

> when I used to hear people say that it gets so much better like, it's true. I never knew how much better life could be after coming out, cause I used to see it as the doom and gloom, it's the end of everything, it's the end of life as I know it. And it's true, it was the end of life as I knew it, but the new life was so much better, and when I say to others, when people do, it's not so…you can't even anticipate how much better your life can be.

Correspondingly, Butler and Astbury (2008) found that participants reported increased feelings of self-fulfilment, liberation and pride after coming out. Other research has also reported that some LGB individuals carry the

perception of being "lucky" (Gorman-Murray, 2008), possibly suggesting that, for some people, coming out can become a negative experience and result in a lack of self-fulfilment. Thus, it is possible that such feelings of self-fulfilment relate to the presence of stable social support networks in participants' lives, since that seems to be a common factor among participants. Obviously, since the sample of participants is very small, one cannot infer such statements with any certainty.

Conclusion

This chapter has presented and discussed the main themes that emerged out of participants' experiences of received support during the coming out process. Participants went through different stages whilst coming out, describing associated emotional responses and perceptions, as well as challenges in the process. The early stages of coming out were described as the most daunting phases of the experience due to emotions of fear and negative expectations. Participants spoke about a transition from fear and shame towards feelings of pride and self-fulfilment. Such a transition seemed to be contingent on the availability of support from close-knit social networks, which acted as buffers against the adversities provoked by micro-aggressions. Furthermore, participants highlighted areas of development in terms of social support across a broader context, which they feel might increase support. It is worth mentioning that the subthemes have several degrees of overlap due to the ties between external sociocultural factors and personal experiences and perceptions. The next chapter will discuss the

strengths and limitations of the present study, together with implications for the counselling profession and recommendations for future research.

Conclusion

This study aimed to explore LGBTIQ individuals' perceptions of received support in Malta. In this chapter, I will summarise the research findings, explore the limitations of the study, and address recommendations for future practice and research.

Data was collected from six LGB participants through interviews, which were transcribed and analysed. IPA methodology was used in an attempt to investigate participants' lived experiences.

Key findings and Implications for counselling practice

This research illustrates that participants' coming out process was indeed laced with fear and anxiety. Most participants claimed that their fears pertained to potential consequences that could be caused by their disclosure, such as rejection, discrimination, and being a disappointment to their families.

This study has also shed light on the many societal unsupportive factors that could exacerbate fears and expectations of rejection. Despite the recent introduction of same-sex marriages in Malta, many spoke about lingering daily micro-aggressions, and participants felt that society needed to become more accepting and validating. Participants also disclosed the variety of coping methods which they adopted in order to hide their sexual identity due to fear.

Participants seemed to go through a process of assessing the safety of support networks prior to their disclosure. An interesting finding related to the fact that the presence of supportive relationships reinforced individuals'

internalised support system, similar to Bowlby's (1988) concept of attachment and internal working models. Furthermore, participants found it hardest to come out to parents. Some participants mentioned that their families have to go through a parallel process of coming out themselves.

Although participants faced some adversities when coming out, a number of supportive factors served as buffers in the development of a positive sexual identity. Participants mentioned various supportive factors, including self-esteem, self-preparation and research, other LGBTIQ individuals, parental acceptance, and unconditional positive regard. One surprising finding was that coming out was in itself an invitation for support, through allowing others to be a part of the individual's life. Participants spoke about how coming out allowed for a strengthening of relationships; in some cases, friendships which regained after having been lost following disclosure. Furthermore, the ability to live authentically was reinforced after coming out.

Finally, participants spoke about the fact that coming out was overall a positive experience. Support seemed to facilitate the assimilation of a positive LGBTIQ identity, resulting in increased self-confidence and self-pride.

Implementation for policy and practice

In light of this study's findings, I suggest that a number of practices are adopted.

Counselling. To bridge the lacunae between theory and practice, I recommend that counselling training includes particular skills that empower against oppression, such as narrative therapy and relational cultural therapy.

The former works on challenging communal discourse filled with microaggressions and oppression, whilst fostering empowerment through the creation of a safe space for the exploration of a person's narratives (Freeman, 2011). Relational cultural therapy focuses on acknowledging the effect of historical oppression and its influence on daily scripts during interactions (Jordan, Walker, & Martling, 2004). Given that microaggressions are a unique stressor among minority groups (Ranade & Chakravarty, 2016), it is essential that they are understood and addressed in the counselling setting. This may provide LGBTIQ clients with a safe and supportive space, which might be lacking in broader society. Furthermore, counselling may be instrumental in empowering LGBTIQ to overcoming obstacles that hinder their coming out. Counselling may also help bridge the gap between societal misconceptions and microaggressions and LGBTIQ sexualities, by educating persons and providing interventions in society and in schools (Nadal, 2013). Gay affirmative counselling practice (GACP) is a therapeutic model which combines existing practice with existing stressors and difficulties rooted in the experience of being a sexual minority in a predominantly heterosexual world (Ritter & Terndrup, 2002). Thus, specialised counselling training in this area could help professionals become better suited to work with this minority group.

It is important for mental health professionals to develop awareness about attitudes, therapeutics skills, and practical knowledge around working with LGBTIQ client groups (Bidell, 2013); this can create a supportive

therapeutic environment. Villalba and Redmond (2008) suggest that cultural immersion and exposure to an LGBTIQ community enhances counsellors' repertoire of knowledge. This can be done through service learning, community outreach, and films (Villalba & Redmond, 2008). Prejudice and biases triggered by sexual orientation and gender identity issues have been found to negatively impact LGBT counsellor competency (Henke, Carlson, & McGeorge, 2009); thus it is important for counsellors to engage in self-exploration of attitudinal awareness when working with such client groups (Bidell, 2013).

Counselling contexts may also provide LGBTIQ clients with the opportunity to experience an environment characterised by unconditional positive regard and genuineness; this, in turn, encourages the development of a positive internal working model, which could enhance self-confidence and acceptance of one's sexual identity (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Additionally, the provision of unconditional positive regard may create conditions within which a secure attachment bond can be built with the counsellor (Fonagy, Lorenzini, Campbell, & Luyten, 2014), thus facilitating the development of a positive internal working model of the self and of others whilst enhancing a positive view of the self.

Schools. Administrative staff, teachers, and school counsellors, who are constantly in contact with students, as well as parents, need to be equipped to deal with LGBTIQ issues in school settings. Training should include initiatives and action they could take to help support LGBTIQ

teenagers who are coming out. Furthermore, it is important to educate students on how to support peers who are going through their coming out process; this would act as a crucial buffer during a potentially anxiety-provoking time. A local Trans, Gender Variant and Intersex Students in Schools Policy (2015) started being implemented in local state schools; this seeks to promote a safer school environment for children and adults, irrespective of gender and sexuality characteristics. I deem this a positive step, since educating peers and teachers alike would help the inclusion and support LGBTIQ individuals' coming out, possibly enabling the development of a positive sexual identity. In fact, research indicates that discrimination is less prevalent in schools implementing inclusive policies and practices (Chesir-Teran & Hughes, 2009).

Schools might consider appointing a key person to be responsible for guiding professionals working with children with emerging sexual identity issues. Key persons may include counsellors and trained guidance teachers. This recommendation is also provided by the Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays organisation (PFLAG, 2003), highlighting the need for a person who advocates for, and moderates, any arising LGBT issues.

School Curriculum. School curricula should be inclusive of the myriad of different types of sexual identities, and avoid assumptions based on heterosexism. Furthermore, it would be useful for PSCD education to allow for exploration and discussion of diversity in sexual orientations and identities, thus fostering and encouraging respect for diversity. PSCD could also help

raise awareness of micro-aggressions and how these affect LGBTIQ individuals. Furthermore, since micro-aggressions might be a result of bullying in schools, the PSCD curriculum in conjunction with school policies addressing safety of gender variant, and diverse sexual identities act as protective factors against bullying based on diverse sexual identities.

Furthermore, persons who come into contact with students need to be mindful of any values and biases they might hold in relation to LGBTIQ individuals, and ensure that such attitudes do not interfere with the provision of psychosocial supportive services. Mindful educational practice and self-awareness could be encouraged and addressed during professional development training.

Normalising LGBTIQ sexual identity. Given that the topic of LGBTIQ is still largely laced with sensationalism, it is possible that increased normalisation of non-heterosexual identities can lessen the degree of taboo and exaggeration surrounding the topic. Whilst same-sex couples do sometimes feature on social media, this tends to be an exception rather than the rule. It is important that different media outlets thus promote and encourage equal representation. Furthermore, family training on the issue of diversity, based on awareness of attitudes and the extent to which such beliefs and attitudes affect diverse individuals might help increase awareness on how to better support LGBTIQ individuals.

Limitations of the study

Although the study is important in understanding the perceived support networks and perceived unsupportive factors, findings need to be interpreted with caution due to its limitations. As a researcher, I am duty bound to report any limitations that pertain to the study (Shipman, 2014). Whilst the methodology adopted was suited to the type of research, the following limitations must be outlined:

- Firstly, although participant recruitment letters were addressed to all members of LGBTIQ community, no transgender, intersex or queer individuals volunteered to take part in the study. One possible reason for such discrepancy could arise from a fear of being easily identifiable, or potentially due to discomfort about disclosing personal experiences. It is also possible that transgender, intersex or queer individuals might perceive greater degrees of stigma related to their sexuality. Another possible reason could be related to the fact that these groups are still surrounded by higher levels of misconceptions and erroneous beliefs when compared to gay, lesbian and bisexual members of the community.
- Whilst this study's aim was not to generalise, but rather to achieve deeper understanding, it might be worth carrying out quantitative research that could be generalisable to the whole population; this would complement the current study.

- Given that there was no prior relationship with participants in the research, they might have felt a level of discomfort, perhaps limiting the nature of disclosure and contribution to interviews. With reference to this point, McLeod (2003) in fact argues that the amount of information obtained is dependent on trust and rapport between the interviewee and interviewer
- The data gathered was highly dependent on the type of questions that I formulated; these may have been influenced by my subjectivity and experience whilst counselling LGBTIQ client groups. While my experience could have enriched the data acquired due to my curious stance and desire to understand, it could have missed elements that I might not have previously encountered in my experience.

  Furthermore, the nature of data gathered was dependent on my skills as a researcher and interviewer. The questions could have limited the depth and breadth of the information gathered, due to the fact that I am still in training. The data analysis is my own interpretation of the participants' experiences, so my own subjectivity and experience in the area necessarily influenced the analysis of data. Another researcher might have gleaned different findings.
- Given that data collection in IPA depends on the use of discourse, the language capabilities of both participants and myself were influential in the presentation of data. A wider use of communication modalities might have generated different results (Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999). Furthermore, it is possible that the participants in this study were

better able to articulate their experience due to the fact that they passed the stage where they had sufficiently processed their experience. Hence, participants' accounts may have been more detailed due to an increased awareness about their experience.

Recommendations for future research

Findings from this research tap upon a number of areas in which future research may be beneficial.

The effects of coming out on parents. Findings in this study suggest that coming out is not just an experience for LGBTIQ individuals, but also affects close-knit social networks. Although there is some research exploring the effects of coming out on parents, it might be useful to carry out such research in the local context. This is especially the case since the Maltese social milieu constitutes a unique combination of religious and cultural influences. Furthermore, such research might help identify areas of needed support.

Research on mental health during coming out. Although participants in this study did refer to periods of anxiety and fear during their coming out process, the wider implications on their well-being was not explored. Future research on the effects of coming out and its influence on mental health in the Maltese context could identify areas warranting support among LGBTIQ individuals.

Research on internalised homophobia and effects on coming out. Research indicates that internalised homophobia due to the effects of a

heteronormative society is one of the reasons why coming out becomes an increasingly arduous task (Ranade & Chakravarty, 2016). No such findings were reported in the present study since it was specifically aimed at exploring perceived support. Thus, research linking the effects of internalised homophobia on coming out could shed light on another issue which could possibly be tackled in the counselling setting.

Conclusion

One of the most fundamental aspects I encountered whilst interacting with participants was a resilient disposition. Despite the perceived hardship of their experience, I could not help but admire their positive outlook and strong LGB identity that most participants have acquired, perhaps because the participants who volunteered to take part were individuals who had already processed their experience sufficiently to be able to articulate it.

Nevertheless, LGB participants in this study provided me with a fresh perspective; I used to deem coming out as an overall negative experience, and I feel that participants have taught me that coming out can turn out to be a positive experience when met with adequate support. Furthermore, it seems that such adequate support aids the integration and disclosure of one's LGBTIQ identity and facilitates the development of a positive self-worth and self-confidence. This may strengthen counsellors' determination to help provide a safe space, where LGBTIQ individual's needs could be addressed with sensitivity. Reflecting on the previously mentioned personal experience mentioned in the introductory chapter, leaves me pondering on my

motivations for this study. Perhaps such an experience has provided me with the hopes and aims of increasing awareness about the need to change negative beliefs and attitudes about the LGBTIQ community whilst creating a society which is increasingly tolerant of diverse populations devoid of heteronormative thinking. Creating such a community could potentially ease one's coming out experience whilst simultaneously increasing confidence about the fact that the individual will be met with unconditional acceptance. Perhaps in such a society, my previously mentioned friend would not have perceived rejection when met with the absence of my immediate text reply.

Appendices

Appendix A – UREC Acceptance

Dear Ms Jade Farrugia,

Your ethics proposal with regards to your research entitled *Coming Out as LGBTIQA in Malta: A Qualitative Exploration of Perceived Received Support* was **discussed by UREC**.

I am pleased to inform you that **UREC has accepted your ethics proposal**. Hence, you may now **start your research**.

Once your documentation is sent back to me from UREC, I will inform you via email so that you are able to pick everything up.

Thanks and regards,
Charmaine

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Appendix B – Recruitment letter

Dear Ms. Farrugia Bennett,

With reference to our correspondence of March 13th 2017, I am a counsellor reading a Masters degree at the University of Malta. As part of my Master in Counselling degree coursework, I will be doing a dissertation intended to explore LGBTIQ adult's perception of support during the coming our process in Malta, which will be carried out under the supervision of Dr Marlene Cauchi. In order to carry out this research I will be adopting a qualitative approach, for which I will be needing between 6 to 8 LGBTIQ adults, who have experienced the coming out process in the past to take part in this research. The inclusion criteria are as follows: Adults must be aged between 18 and 30, who have already experienced the disclosure of their sexual identity at least 18 months prior to this research.
The interview will last approximately an hour and will be audio-recorded and transcribed. After I have analysed all the information and the dissertation process is complete (a year from completion), I will destroy the recordings. I would appreciate it if you were to distribute the attached recruitment letter and consent forms to your members. Please note that:

· Participation in this study is entirely voluntary and one is free to decline participation.

· All the collected raw data will only be seen by me and my supervisor/advisor

· Anonymity will be respected and identities will not be disclosed at any point.

· Participants have the right to not answer any questions they would not like to answer.

· Participants may withdraw from the study at any time without having to provide an explanation for your withdrawal. Their data would then not be used.

· Participants will be given their transcripts and later on the results chapter to review and verify (Audit trail), as well as a copy of the study once the correction process is complete.

Should you have any queries, please call me on or contact me at farrugia.jade@gmail.com and I will be very happy to answer any questions that you may have. Thank you for your time, support and consideration.

Yours truly,

Jade Farrugia

Appendix C – Information sheet for Participants (English)

I am a counsellor reading a graduate degree at the University of Malta. Part of my Master in Counselling degree coursework includes a dissertation, which I will be carrying out under the supervision of Dr Marlene Cauchi. I will be exploring the experiences of support for gay and lesbian adults during their coming out process. Young gay and lesbian adults who agree to participate must be aged between 18 and 30. Participants must have a first-hand experience of the coming out process at least 18 months before this research.

I will be using individual interviews as the research tool to collect data for this study. The interview will last approximately an hour and will be audio-recorded and transcribed. Interviews will be carried out at a time and place convenient to participants. After I have analysed all the information and the dissertation process is complete (a year from completion), I will destroy the recordings. Please note that:

- Participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you are free to decide not to participate.
- All the raw data will only be seen by me and my supervisor/advisor
- Anonymity will be respected and identities will not be disclosed at any point. You will be given to option to choose your own pseudonym
- Participants have the right to not answer any questions they would not like to answer.
- Participants may withdraw from the study at any time without having to provide an explanation for your withdrawal. Their data would then not be used.
- Participants will be given their transcripts and the results chapter to review, as well as a copy of the study once the correction process is complete.

Should you have any queries, please call me on or contact me at farrugia.jade@gmail.com and I will be very happy to answer any questions that you may have.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Yours truly,

Jade Farrugia

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Research Supervisor
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Appendix D – Information Sheet for participants in Maltese

Jiena *counsellor* u qed naħdem fuq *graduate degree* fl-Università ta' Malta. Parti mill-ħidma tiegħi għall-grad ta' *Master in Counselling* tinkludi dissertazzjoni, li jiena se nagħmel taħt is-superviżjoni ta' Dott. Marlene Cauchi. Jien se nesplora l-esperjenzi ta adulti 'gay' u 'lesbian' li fil-passat esperjenzaw il-*coming out,* u l-perċezzjoni ta' sapport li rċevew waqt dan il-proċess. L-adulti żgħażagħ bid-dislessija li jaqblu li jieħdu sehem irid ikollhom bejn 18 u 30 sena, ikunu diga' għaddew mill coming out mill-inqas sa tmintax il-xagħar qabel.

Bħala għodda ta' riċerka sabiex niġbor id-dejta għal dan l-istudju, jien se ninqeda b'intervisti individwali. L-intervista ddum madwar siegħa u se tiġi rrekordjata b'mod awdjo u traskritta. L-intervisti jsiru f'ħin u post komdu għall-parteċipanti. Wara li nkun analizzajt l-informazzjoni kollha u temmejt il-proċess tad-dissertazzjoni (sena minn meta titlesta), jien neqred il-materjal irrekordjat. Jekk jogħġbok, innota li:

- Il-parteċipazzjoni f'dan l-istudju hija kompletament volontarja u inti liberu/libera li tirrifjuta li tieħu sehem.
- Id-dejta kollha mhux ipproċessata se narawha biss jien u s-superviżur/konsulent tiegħi.
- L-anonimità se tiġi rrispettata u l-identitajiet mhuma se jinkixfu f'ebda stadju. Inti tingħata l-possibbiltà li tagħżel il-psewdonimu tiegħek.
- Il-parteċipanti jkollhom id-dritt li ma jwiġbux kwalunkwe mistoqsija li ma jixtiqux iwieġbu.
- Il-parteċipanti jistgħu jirtiraw mill-istudju meta jridu mingħajr ma jagħtu spjegazzjoni għala rtiraw. Id-dejta tagħhom imbagħad ma tintużax.
- Il-parteċipanti se jingħataw it-traskrizzjoni tagħhom u l-kapitlu dwar ir-riżultati sabiex jeżaminawh, kif ukoll kopja tal-istudju ġaladarba jkun intemm il-proċess tat-tiswija.

Jekk tkun tixtieq tiċċara xi ħaġa, jekk jogħġbok, ċempilli jew ikkuntattjani fuq farrugia.jade@gmail.com u nwieġeb il-mistoqsijiet tiegħek bil-qalb kollha.

Grazzi tal-ħin u tal-konsiderazzjoni tiegħek.

Tislijiet,

Jade Farrugia

Riċerkatur
Jade Farrugia
ID 178190(M)
Numru tal-mowbajl: 79433583
Indirizz elettroniku:
farrugia.jade@gmail.com

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Appendix E – Interview guide in Maltese

1. X'jiġik f'moħħok meta tisma' il-fraži '*coming out'?*
2. Tista' tgħidli dwar il proċess tiegħek waqt li kont għaddej/a mill-'*coming out'*?
   - Kemm kellek żmien?
   - Kif kienet l-esperjenza tiegħek wara li tkellimt fuq l-orjentazzjoni sesswali ma nies oħrajn?
   - X'giegħlek tiddeċiedi biex titkellem fuq l-orjentazzjoni sesswali tiegħek man-nies?
   - Min kienet l-ewwel persuna li għedt?
   - X'influwenzak biex tgħid lil din il persuna l-ewwel?
   - X'kienu il-fatturi li ddeterminaw lil min tgħid dwar l-orientazzjoni sesswali tiegħek?
3. Kif ħassejt li rreagixxu in-nies li magħhom stqarrejt l-orientazzjoni sesswali tiegħek?
   - Kif antiċipajt li ser jirreagixxu dawn in-nies/ il-familja għall-istqarrija li inti '*gay'/'lesbian'?* Kellhom reazzjoni differenti milli ħsibt inti?
   - Din l-istqarrija kellha xi tip ta effett fuq ir-relazzjonijiet tiegħek ma familja, ħbieb, jew nies oħrajn important f'ħajtek?
4. Kien hemm xi ħaġa li ħassejt li għenitek waqt li kont għaddej/ja mill-proċess tal- '*coming out'?*
5. Kien hemm xi ħaġa li ħassejt żammitek lura milli tistqarr l-orjentazzjoni sesswali tiegħek?
6. Kemm inti lest li tistqarr l-orientazzjoni sesswali tiegħek ma nies oħrajn illum il-ġurnata? (ix-xogħol? Id-dar? Ma nies ġodda?)
7. X'suġġerimenti tagħti lil nies li għaddejjin mill-proċess tal- '*coming out'*
8. X'suġġerimenti tagħti lil professjonisti li qegħdin jaħdmu ma individwi li għaddejjin mill-proċess ta' '*coming out'?*
9. Tixtieq iżżid xi ħaġa oħra?

Appendix F - Interview guide in English

1. What comes to mind when you hear the phrase 'coming out'?
2. Can you tell me your 'coming out' story?
   - What age were you?
   - What has it been like for you after coming out to others?
   - What made you decide to come out?
   - Who did you come out to first?
   - What influenced your choice of this person?
   - What factors determined who you came out to?
3. How did the people you came out to respond to your coming out?
   - How did you anticipate that these people/your family to your coming out? Was their reaction different than you thought it would be?
4. How has coming out affected your relationships with your family, friends and other significant people?
5. Was there anything or anyone that you found helpful whilst coming out?
6. Was there anything that you felt hindered you from coming out?
7. How open are you about your sexual orientation (at work? At home? With new people?)
8. What suggestions would you give to other individuals who are going through the coming out process?
9. What suggestions would you give to professionals working with individuals who are coming out?
10. Would you like to add anything else?

Appendix G - Process notes excerpt:

The following process notes were penned down after my interview with Berry:

One thing that struck me during the interview was the pain that Berry seems to be experiencing due to his gay identity. I notice that he seems to need badly the safe space where he can be listened to without being judged about his sexuality, especially whilst he discusses issues in his sociocultural contexts which increase his discomfort with living authentically and showing his sexual orientation in public and with his loved ones. A lot of pain and hurt was reflected in Berry's tone of voice whilst recollecting his experience. I wondered whether this interview was an opportunity for him to open up about his feelings.

It was challenging for me not to intervene therapeutically especially when Berry broke down. I struggled with directing my focus on listening to him rather than intervening and I felt obliged to respond empathically to his distress. I did carry Berry's distress with me after the interview and perhaps in a way this pain motivated me to represent participant's voices and experiences of pain and suffering.

Appendix H - Transcript excerpts in original language

Albert

Transcript in original language	My notes	Sub-themes
Interviewer: what made you decide to come out?		
Albert: **To be honest, I don't really remember why. As in, I…if I had to think of the obvious reasons…cause I realised that I wanted to be with a man, not a woman as everyone else was imagining for me. So I felt like I had to tell them: "listen, I know you want me to get married to a woman and have children, but that's not gonna happen." So it's…more a…something that you have to do. To inform everyone around you so you don't just show up with a boyfriend one day. Unfortunately we're not there yet where, everyone raises their kids with such…like an equal, you know…whatever they are, it doesn't matter. That you can just show up to a wedding with a boyfriend and no one is going to: "aa ara ara". So I felt like I had to come out to give everyone a heads up about it. And I was very determined to be honest. With myself, and everyone around me. I didn't want to be…because I had started experiencing it you know, every group of guys like:**	Having to explain why he has a male partner. Use of word "had" suggests pressure to come out? Feeling obliged to explain sexuality perhaps due to society's expectations of heterosexuality Inequality with heterosexism? Feeling obliged to come out? Not coming out willingly?	Coming out as an act of self-proclamation? Society's expectations of heterosexism Societal pressure on heterosexism Pressure on heterosexism Desire to be included and honest

“ara dik!..” you know like…and I was very like, not interested and everyone would be like…you know I didn’t want to. I’d rather they don’t speak to me, than everyone speaking to me about all these things that are fake to me. So I wanted to be honest. That’s why I think I came out.	Not feeling included in social circles? Desire to live authentically among social circles?	Living authentically and honestly

Berry

Transcript in original language	My notes	Sub-themes
Interviewer: kif kienet l-esperjenza tieghek, hekk minn wara li, naf li ma hrigtx ma kulhadd kompletament. Però kif kienet l-esperjenza tieghek wara li hrigt?		
Berry: **mela, basically, dak kien żmien fejn anke kelli dik li jiena nsejhila 'relazzjoni mohbija'. Qisek tiltaqa' ma persuna imma ma tridx turi li inti gay. Allura, anke tipo, qisek titlaqa' bil-mohbi, jekk tmur ximkien, tipo, dan huwa habib tieghi, mhux il-partner tieghi, dak it –tip. Erm...imbaghad tipo, ma hassejtnix komdu li nibqa, imma sentejn tipo ghadni ha nalaqhom, ghax f'Jannar nalghaq is-sentejn, ma persuna, u tipo, biddilli hajti totalment, urieni vera, il-vera relazzjoni x'inhi. Anka laqqani mal-familja tieghu jiġifieri, u hu open mal-familja tieghu jiġifieri, ghalkemm, hemm jiena ghadni minix. Erm...u inhossa id-differenza, anka hu stess itini dak ic-certu sapport, li ikollok bżonn. Ghax ghalkemm inti tghid qed tinbidel, qed tohrog, xorta taqa' f'fazi fejn tiġi back to square one. U terga qisek tibda....jiddependei fejn ikun l-ambjent li qed tghix fih.**	Hiding one's sexual orientation and one's partner Shame? Hiding partner's identity – lack of authenticity perhaps due to shame. Support from same-sex partner. A stage process – not a linear process. Context seems to play a big part on coming out	Living a double life Shame about sexuality Lack of authenticity due to shame Support from LGBTIQ members of society Context as an influencing factor on the coming out process

Julie

Transcript in original language	My notes	Sub-themes
Interviewer: And, what actually made you decide to take this step to come out? What was the final...what made you take the final decision to ...		
Julie: **I think it's, once you feel emotions, like the emotional connection with another woman, and I knew that my, the relationship I had with my boyfriend didn't end because of this issue, it had ended before because we were not compatible. He was older than me, I was, always had a different idea of my lifestyle, I wasn't about to settle, I'm still travelling and waiting to do my masters, so there was always that issue. But, this just came at the same time basically. But then I knew because, it's something that made me happy internally, so I was ready to face, kind of, external conflict from people, because I knew it was me, I knew I was happy with it, I knew it was time that...I explore this side of me more, so...I wasn't afraid to come out.**	Coming out driven by perceived "wrong" relationship. Discrepancy between societal expectation and own wants and wishes perhaps?	Discrepancies between own needs and societal expectations
	Positive feelings about sexuality – no shame about it. Expectations of contextual conflicts Motivated to come out	No shame about sexuality. Society's value on heteronormativity
	Self-sustaining and self-support through positive thinking. Different than what I expected.	Intrinsic supportive factors
Interviewer: so it was sort of the acceptance of yourself as you are		

Julie: **exactly. My mentality is, if I lose someone, because they didn't understand it's not much of a loss at the end of the day. And even though I lost some friends, they came back, once they understood. I'm not really afraid of losing people, because the right people will stay, and they will eventually come around. If you need space for a few months, if they need to figure out it's a shock for them. I don't worry about that too much. Eventually…**		

Mark

Transcript in original language	My notes	Sub-themes
Interviewer: Il-coming out, kif affetwatlek ir-relazzjonijiet tieghek ma familja, hbieb jew forsi hbieb ohrajn important?		
Mark: **ma hbieb ma affetwax nista nghid. Ma familja...Ma familja, kif ghedtlek, kien hem il-clashes, kien hem il-clashes u…sitt snin down the lane…llum il-gurnata, xorta gieli jkun hemm kummenti bhal per ezempju, jekk ha mmur, jien naf, party, certu party…per ezempju jekk ha mmur..jekk ghall argument tiela paceville ma shabi, ma tantx ghadni nitla ta twenty five imma, meta nitilghu, id-daddy jghidli: "oqghod attent, ghax hem iz-zibel." U nghidlu: "xi trid tghid biha pa din?" Jghidli: "hemm min ma jaccettakx." So, s'issa ghadu concerned, fuqha l-affari. Then again ukoll, per ezempju, meta nghidlu: "ha mmorru gay party," missieri iktar minn ommi, ommi would be feeling the same thing but she wouldn't say it. missieri jghidieli imma, jghidli: "oqghod attent, ma jmurx jidhlu u jghamlulkom xi haga." Ezempju, whatever. Affetwat mill-media forsi ukoll. Imma li ghad hem certu hsibijiet mill-generazzjoni ta qabel, u li generazzjoni li huma persuni li vera jghatu kaz. Ghax ovvjament iridu ghall-**	Support from friendships. Family seemed to find it difficult to accept, although acceptance was achieved by time – coming out as a process for parents?	Supportive friendships – safe friendships Coming out as a process for parents – a parallel process
	Unsupportive messages? Perhaps met by some anger from Mark's end.	Demeaning comments and messages. Feeling devalued and angry.
	Parental concern for child and fear of discrimination.	Parental fears for child
	Cultural views on sexual orientation.	Cultural views and erroneous beliefs.

gid tieghi. Gieli per ezempju ehe, inhoss certu restrictions minn missieri…ghax jghidli: "jiena kburi bik, ghax mintix gay iffemminat." So, nibda nghid: "kieku jiena kont iffemminat hafna, ma kienx ha jaccettani?" dik tberren. Jiena hrigt forsi minix daqsekk iffemminat imma….my partner is quite feminine per ezempju, u ghall-bidu kien qalli, kien qalli: "ma jdejqekx meta jferfer idejh ghall argument?" ikun hem dawk il-mumenti. Imma, llum il-gurnata, dawn li qed nghidlek tliet snin ilu meta kien qalli: "ma jdejqekx meta jferfer idejh?". Illum il-gurnata jitrattah qisu ibnu, u meta ma jarahx isaqsi fejn hu, u llum il-gurnata ghandhom relazzjoni sew. Illum il-gurnata he looks beyond it-tferfir ta l-idejn so to speak. Imma, that's…I believe that everyone changes when they learn. U jindunaw li dan billi jferfer idejh xorta bniedem uman, ghandu qalb whatever.	Unsupportive comments from society and family contexts. Feeling hurt about certain comments? Parents needed time to process their child's sexual orientation and the presence of a male partner? Societal learning encourages a more supportive environment. Looking past sexuality and looking at the person as a human being rather than a sexual being.	Demeaning comments and messages Feeling hurt due to demeaning comments and messages Parallel process for parents. Societal learning is supportive

Samantha

Transcript in original language	My notes	Sub-themes
Interviewer: Kien hem xi haga li hassejt li forsi tefghetek lura milli tohrog?		
Samantha: **Erm…hi, il-biza' x'ha jahseb haddiehor, erm lu li b'xi mod tkun discriminated against anke fuq il-post tax-xoghol. U l-fatt li nara certu kummenti u l-injoranza, f'areas fejn nahdmu ahna, jigifieri anke qabel, xorta kont in a social services environment jiena. Mela tajjeb mela qieghda ma' bunch ta social workers, u nies b'psychology background uekk, u xorta tisma' l-kummenti. Ahseb u ara ma the lay people. Kwazi, minn certu nies kwazi tghid: "uiwa", tippretendiha, jew tistenniha, jew tghid isma hem certu eta', nifhem li it-s unconventional. Imma dawn suppost nies which are working with vulnerable people u qed insibha hawn f'dawn l-areas, ahseb u ara ma nies ohra. U kultant, l-images, kultant anke li nghatu fuq it-television. Qisu, l-istereotypes. Erm…dawk narahom a bit unfair jiena, kif konna qed nghidu, per ezempju din li ghax…erm…ghax tfajla jogoghba tfajla ohra, xi hadd irid ikun ir-ragel f'relazzjoni, jew ghax ragel ghandu**	Coming out hindered by fear of discrimination and erroneous beliefs in society. Demeaning comments heard from professionals heightens fear of coming out. Hint of anger? Erroneous beliefs and stereotypes are unsupportive.	Fear of discrimination Erroneous beliefs in society are unsupportive Demeaning comments and messages Anger and hurt Demeaning comments and messages

boyfriend, somehow iridium jkunu jiblsu pulit u jkunu pinna, when it's not like that. A lot of people are just common "normali" ragel jidher qisu ragel u jagixxi bhal ragel u jhobb ragel. Jew li mara, m'hemmx alfejn tkun vera butch u vera tomboy or whatever, speci. Kultant l-image qisu, qisu….iwa maria santa, qisu dejjem trid tkun…taf kif?	Hint of anger at erroneous beliefs and stereotypes in society?	Demeaning comments and messages – anger and hurt.

Victoria

Transcript in original language	My notes	Sub-themes
Interviewer: so, if I understood correctly sort of what you're saying is, the coming out process is not just for you as a person, but rather, it's also includes the family.		
Victoria: **of course…I mean it's primarily about you you know. It's like having something really big to tell, you say it, and all of a sudden, everything is very calm, that, well in my case, I saw that the reactions were all positive you know, and and…I remained exactly the same…my mother loves me, and my father and my brother they all accepted in this. It didn't make that much of a difference to them. but, then they have to deal with it. and it's a whole pro…it's not just, coming out is not just something which happens once. It is a process, jien naf, I came out to my parents and my brother, but, I never told my uncles or my cousins. I mean, eventually, it became an unspoken issue, something which no one ever really questioned. If I wanted to take my partner home, I would just introduce her by her name, you know, without explaining: "this is my girlfriend, this is my partner," but neither saying: "this is just a friend, or this is my**	Pressure of coming out. Relief following disclosure? Perhaps self-fulfillment? Familial acceptance. Coming out is a process for parents as well – they need time to process child's disclosure. Coming out does not occur all at once – different relationships and proximity to others influences coming out. Hiding partner's identity prior to coming out.	Relief following disclosure Family acceptance as supportive Coming out as a parallel process for parents. Coming out to safe people first?

roommate." And eventually, people got used to that, people got used to me being with her…but then, I got to know that my mother had to, explain some things. My mother was being questioned about my lifestyle. And, so, she had to go through the process of coming out, well, it's not the exact same term, but, explaining that herself, carrying the same fears of rejection, of stigma of shame, that..i had when I was coming out to her. And probably, this is shared…by, by…my father, possibly, but my father doesn't, he's not one to talk about feelings or…he's a man. But, you know, people are different	Parental experience of coming out- parent faced questions from other sources. Parents carrying same fears and rejections, shame and stigma.	Parents experience coming out in their own way. Parents carry similar emotions and fears as person who comes out.

Appendix I – Consent form in Maltese

Isem ir-Riċerkatur: Jade Farrugia (ID 178190 M)
Indirizz: 55 'Horse Shoe' flat 2, Triq in- Nahal, Mosta
Nru tat-Telefown: 79433583
Indirizz elettroniku: farrugia.jade@gmail.com

Titlu tad-dissertazzjoni: COMING OUT AS LGBTIQ IN MALTA: A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF PERCEIVED RECEIVED SUPPORT

Dikjarazzjoni tal-iskop tal-istudju: Jien se nesplora l-esperjenzi ta adulti f'Malta li huma *gay* jew *lesbian*, u l-esperjenza tagħhom ta' sapport waqt li kienu għaddejjin mill-*coming out*. L-involviment ta adulti żgħażagħ li huma *gay* jew *lesbian* fl-istudju jgħinni nesplora l-veduti suġġettivi tagħhom dwar l-esperjenzi ta' sapport li sabu waqt li kien għaddejjin mill-*coming out*, kif ukoll biex nesploraw x'seta jkun ta għajnuna għalihom waqt da nil-proċess.

Metodi ta' ġbir tad-dejta: Intervisti individwali semistrutturati u rrekordjati b'mod awdjo

Kif se tintuża l-informazzjoni: Bi skop ta' riċerka għad-dissertazzjoni biss.

B'din il-Formola ta' Kunsens jien, Jade Farruia, imwiegħed li nonora l-kundizzjonijiet li ġejjin matul il-proċess kollu tar-riċerka. Jien se nintrabat b'dawn il-kundizzjonijiet:

i. L-isem reali/l-identità tiegħek mhuma se jintużaw f'ebda stadju tal-istudju u inti għandek il-possibbiltà li tagħżel il-psewdonimu tiegħek.
ii. Inti liberu/libera li tirtira mill-istudju fi kwalunkwe stadju u għal kwalunkwe raġuni mingħajr ma jkun hemm konsegwenzi. Fil-każ li tirtira, ir-rekords u l-informazzjoni kollha miġbura jiġu meqruda.
iii. Mhu se jkun hemm ebda forma ta' qerq fil-proċess tal-ġbir tad-dejta.
iv. L-intervista se tkun irrekordjata b'mod awdjo.
v. Inti se tingħata kopja tat-traskrizzjoni tiegħek, kif ukoll il-kapitlu dwar ir-riżultati, għar-reazzjonijiet u l-verifika min-naħa tiegħek.
vi. Il-materjal irrekordjat se jinqered sena wara li jkun intemm il-proċess tar-riċerka.
vii. Tingħatalek kopja tar-riċerka fuq CD jew f'għamla stampata fuq talba tiegħek.

Parteċipant

Jien, _____ naqbel mal-kundizzjonijiet:

Isem il-parteċipant

_____ _____ Data

Firma tal-parteċipant

Riċerkatur

Jien, _____naqbel mal-kundizzjonijiet.
Data:_____
Jade Farrugia (farrugia.jade@gmail.com)

_____
Data:_____
Dr Marlene Cauchi, superviżur tad-dissertazzjoni
(marlene.cauchi@um.edu.mt)

Appendix J - Consent Form in English

Name of Researcher: Jade Farrugia; (ID 178190 M)
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Title of dissertation: COMING OUT AS LGBTIQ IN MALTA: A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF PERCEIVED RECEIVED SUPPORT

Statement of purpose of the study: I will be exploring the experience of support that LGBTIQ adults have experienced during their coming out process in Malta. Involving young adults in this study will enable me to explore their subjective views and the support systems that each individual had whilst coming out, and also to reflect on what might have been supportive of this process.

Methods of data collection: Individual audio-recorded semi-structured Interviews

Use made of the information: For dissertation research purposes only.

With this Consent Form I, Jade Farrugia promise to keep to the following conditions throughout the whole research process. I will abide by the following conditions:

i. Your real name/identity will not be used at any point in the study and you have the option to choose your own pseudonym.
ii. You are free to withdraw yourself from the study at any point in time and for whatever reason without there being any consequences. In the case that you withdraw, all records and information collected will be destroyed.
iii. There will be no deception in the data collection process of any form.
iv. The interview will be audio-recorded.
v. You will be given a copy of your transcript, as well as the results chapter, for your feedback and verification,
vi. The recording will be destroyed one year after the research process has come to an end.
vii. A copy of the research will be handed to you through a CD or as a hard copy at your request.

Participant

I, _____ agree to the conditions:
Name of participant

_____ _____
Signature of participant Date

Researcher

I, _____agree to the conditions.
Date:_____
Jade Farrugia (farrugia.jade@gmail.com)

_____
Date:_____
Dr Marlene Cauchi, dissertation supervisor
(marlene.cauchi@um.edu.mt)

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