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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,  
IRVINE

After Coming Out: Parental Acceptance of Gay Men in India and the United States

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements

for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Sociology

by

Apoorva Ghosh

Dissertation Committee:  
Professor Francesca Polletta, Chair  
Professor David John Frank  
Professor Charles Ragin

2020



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## EXPRESSION OF GRATITUDE

An expression of gratitude, or “acknowledgment,” is customary in doctoral dissertations. This expression becomes even more necessary at the time of COVID-19 crisis when this dissertation was completed. We all will look back to this time ruminating how scholars had been struggling to maintain their health, sanity, and well-being at this key moment of the global history.

I understand that advising an independent-minded, foreign-born, non-traditional doctoral scholar of color is challenging amid the unsettled race relations and the nativist exclusions in the United States and the norms of power hierarchy and collegiality in American graduate schools. So, my first expression of gratitude goes to my advisor and dissertation chair, Francesca Polletta, for graciously and patiently advising me for three years. My gratitude also goes to the first member on my dissertation committee, David John Frank, for supporting and advising me on several crucial matters. Last, but not the least, I express my gratitude to Charles Ragin, the second member on my committee, for supporting me and my dissertation during difficult times.

I am also grateful to Kenneth, whom I had interviewed in 2013, for sharing his insightful story which inspired me to study parental acceptance of gay men as a contextual phenomenon.

Apoorva Ghosh

August 20, 2020

**APOORVA GHOSH**

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**EDUCATION**

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2020 PhD in Sociology, University of California, Irvine  
2009 MS in Quality Management, BITS Pilani  
2004 BE in Mechanical Engineering, Gujarat University

**EMPLOYMENT**

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2020- Lecturer in Sociology, University of California, Merced

**AREAS OF INTEREST**

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Sex & Gender, Sexualities, Social Movements, Culture, Organizations, Global & Transnational Sociology

**PEER-REVIEWED PUBLICATIONS**

---

- 2020 Ghosh, Apoorva. "From Moral Ambivalence to Differential Congruence: Understanding Transnational Sexuality using Cultural Schemas." *Sexualities* 23(4): 549-573.
- 2020 Ghosh, Apoorva. "After Coming Out: Parental Acceptance of Young Lesbian and Gay People." *Sociology Compass* 14(1): 1-20.
- 2020 Ghosh, Apoorva. "The Global LGBT Workplace Equality Movement." In N. Naples (Ed.), *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Sexuality Studies* (pp. 445-463). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
- 2015 Ghosh, Apoorva. "LGBTQ Activist Organizations as 'Respectably Queer' in India: Contesting a Western View." *Gender, Work & Organization* 22(1): 51-66.
- 2014 Ghosh, Apoorva. "Culturally Competent Behaviors at Workplace: An Intergroup Perspective for Workplace Diversity." *South Asian Journal of Management* 21(3): 73-95.
- 2013 Ghosh, Apoorva. "Interpersonal Cross-Cultural Contact: Exploring the role of Cultural Encounters as Antecedent to Cultural Competence at Workplace." *Management and Labour Studies* 38(1&2): 81-101.
- 2012 Ghosh, Apoorva. "Leveraging Sexual Orientation Workforce Diversity through Identity Deployment." In C. Scott, & M. Byrd (Eds.), *Handbook of Research on Workforce Diversity in a Global Society: Technologies and Concepts* (pp. 403-424). Hershey, PA: Business Science Reference.
- 2012 Ghosh, Apoorva and Pranabesh Ray. "A Contemporary Model for Industrial Relations: Relook from Global Perspective." *Management and Labour Studies* 37(1): 17-30.
- 2011 Ghosh, Apoorva. "Power Distance in Organizational Contexts: A Review of Collectivist Cultures." *Indian Journal of Industrial Relations* 47(1): 89-101.

## PEER-REVIEWED ARTICLE IN PROGRESS

---

Ghosh, Apoorva. "The Politics of Alignment and the 'Quiet Transgender Revolution' in Fortune 500 Corporations, 2008 to 2017." (Conditionally Accepted)

## MANUSCRIPTS IN PREPARATION

---

After Coming Out: Parental Acceptance of Gay Men in India and the United States (Work-in-progress doctoral dissertation)

"It's a Win-Win for Everybody": Social Movement Strategies in Institutions as Repertoires of Alignment (With Mary Bernstein)

Benchmarking Diversity: Social Movement Outcomes in the Workplace (With Mary Bernstein and Malaena Jo Taylor)

Workplace Incivility and Gendered Institutions (With Mary Bernstein)

## AWARD, GRANTS, AND FELLOWSHIPS

---

2020	<i>UCI Graduate Division</i> Graduate Dean's Dissertation Fellowship \$5,000 <i>UCI Graduate Division</i> James Harvey Scholar Award \$7,409
2019/16	<i>Associated Graduate Students, UCI</i> Conference Travel Grant \$800
2019	<i>School of Social Sciences, UCI</i> Associate Dean Fellowship, Spring Quarter \$6,900 <i>Center for the Study of Social Movements, University of Notre Dame</i> Young Scholar Conference Travel Grant \$500
2017/18/19	<i>American Sociological Association (ASA)</i> Travel Grant \$975 <i>Society for the Study of Social Problems (SSSP)</i> Travel Grant \$1,652 <i>School of Social Sciences, UCI</i> Travel Grant \$1,575
2017	<i>Critical Realism Network, Yale University</i> Honorarium \$1,450 <i>University of Tampere, Finland</i> Travel Grant €1,200 ~\$1,278
2016/.../20	<i>Department of Sociology, UCI</i> Summer Research and Travel Grant \$8,100
2015-21	<i>School of Social Sciences, UCI</i> Social Science Merit Fellowship \$20,500
2013	<i>The Williams Institute, UCLA</i> Research Grant for the project proposal entitled "LGBTQ Identity and Politics at Work" (Co-PI: Mary Bernstein) \$5,000
2012-13	<i>The US Department of State and the Fulbright Commission in India</i> Fulbright-Nehru Doctoral and Professional Research Fellowship \$18,135
2010	<i>University of Maastricht, The Netherlands</i> METEOR Visiting PhD Student Fellowship €4,284 ~\$5,857
2009-13	<i>XLRI- Xavier School of Management, Jamshedpur, India</i> Fellow Program in Management INR 1,390,000 ~ \$27,800



## TEACHING

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Fall 2020	Sociology 110: Social Movements, University of California, Merced
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Summer 2020	Sociology 161: Sociology of Sex and Gender, University of California, Irvine
Summer 2019	Sociology 161: Sociology of Sex and Gender, University of California, Irvine
Spring 2018	Sociology 311-05: Global Organizations and Social Processes, CSU Dominguez Hills

## CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS\*

---

2020	Ghosh, Apoorva. "The Politics of Alignment and the 'Quiet Transgender Revolution' in Fortune 500 Corporations, 2008 to 2017" <i>ASA Virtual Engagement Meeting</i> .
2019	Ghosh, Apoorva. "A Strategic Social Movement Intervention and the 'Quiet Transgender Revolution' in Fortune 500 Corporations, 2008 to 2017" <i>Young Scholar in Social Movements Conference</i> , University of Notre Dame, South Bend, IN.
2018	Ghosh, Apoorva. "Workplace Activism, Corporate Institutions, and LGBT Health Benefits in the New Millennium." <i>ASA Annual Meeting</i> , Philadelphia, PA.  Ghosh, Apoorva. "When the Local Meets Global: A Take on LGBTQ+ Activist Organizations in India." <i>ASA Annual Meeting</i> , Philadelphia, PA; <i>SSSP Annual Meeting</i> , Philadelphia, PA; <i>International Sociological Association (ISA) World Congress</i> , Toronto, ON.  Ghosh, Apoorva. "Understanding Transnational Sexuality in India: Globalization and Institutional Schemas." <i>ISA World Congress</i> , Toronto, ON.
2017	Ghosh, Apoorva. "Understanding Transnational Sexuality in India: Globalization and Institutional Schemas." <i>ASA Annual Meeting</i> , Montreal, QC; <i>Critical Realism Network Conference</i> , Montreal, QC.  Ghosh, Apoorva. "Workplace Activism, Corporate Institutions, and LGBT Health Benefits in the New Millennium." <i>SSSP Annual Meeting</i> , Montreal, QC; <i>Institutions in Context: Healthcare Institutions and Policy</i> conference, Tampere, Finland.  Ghosh, Apoorva and Mary Bernstein. "Workplace Incivility and Gendered Institutions." <i>ASA pre-conference</i> sponsored by the Economic Sociology and the Organizations, Occupations, and Work sections, Montreal, QC.
2016	Ghosh, Apoorva. "From Moral Ambivalence to Differential Congruence: Transnational Pathways to the Global Queer in India." <i>SSSP Annual Meeting</i> , Seattle, WA; <i>Pacific Sociological Association Annual Meeting</i> , Oakland, CA.
2015	Bernstein, Mary and Apoorva Ghosh. "'It's a Win-Win for Everybody': Social Movement Strategies in Institutions as Repertoires of Alignment." <i>ASA Annual Meeting</i> Chicago, IL.
2014	Bernstein, Mary, Apoorva Ghosh, and Malena Jo Taylor. "Benchmarking Diversity: Social Movement Outcomes in the Workplace." <i>ASA Annual Meeting</i> San Francisco, CA.

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\* In panel sessions

- 2012 Ghosh, Apoorva. “Culturally Competent Behaviors at Workplace: An Intergroup Perspective for Workplace Diversity.” *Academy of Management Annual Meeting* Boston, MA.
- 2010 Ghosh, Apoorva. “A Contemporary Model for Industrial Relations: Relook from Global Perspective.” *International Human Resource Management Conference*, Birmingham, UK.
- Ghosh, Apoorva. “Power Distance in Organizational Contexts: A Review of Collectivist Cultures.” *International Human Resource Management Conference* Birmingham, UK.

## PROFESSIONAL SERVICE

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- 2020 Session organizer, Panel Session: Intersections, Policy, and Movement Consequences,” ASA Virtual Engagement Meeting (with Zakia Luna)
- Session organizer, Workshop on “Navigating Power Relations, Hierarchies, and Anxieties as Graduate Students,” ASA Virtual Engagement Meeting (with TehQuin Forbes and Kelsey Broadfield)
- 2019-20 Chair, Student Forum Advisory Board, ASA
- Member, Best Book Award Committee, Sexualities Section, ASA
- Member, Lee Founders Award Committee, SSSP
- 2019 Session organizer, Panel Session, ASA Annual Meeting: “Embodied Resistance: Activism and Protest for Social Justice” (with Kjerstin M. Gruys)
- Session organizer, Sociology of Sexualities Refereed Roundtables, ASA Annual Meeting (with D’Lane R. Compton, Máel Embser-Herbert, and Alithia Zamantakis)
- Session organizer, ASA Student Forum Workshop on “Transcending the Academy: How, Why, and When to Practice Public Sociology,” ASA Annual Meeting (with Ellen Whitehead)
- Session organizer, Workshop on “Navigating Power Relations, Hierarchies, and Anxieties as Graduate Students,” SSSP Annual Meeting (with Maria Duenas)
- Committee Chair, Joseph B. Gittler Award for Scholarly Promotion of Ethical Resolution of Social Problems, SSSP
- 2018/19 Session Organizer, Global division Refereed Roundtables, SSSP Annual Meeting
- 2018/19 Member, Outstanding Book Award Committee, Global division, SSSP
- 2018-19 Member, Student Forum Advisory Board, ASA<sup>†</sup>
- 2018-20 Member, SSSP Board of Directors<sup>‡</sup>
- 2018-22 Board Member, RC48: Social Movements, Collective Action, and Social Change, ISA
- 2018-19 Council Member in the Sociology of Sexualities section, ASA<sup>‡</sup>

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<sup>†</sup> Elected position in the academy

- 2018 Member, Max Weber Book Award Committee, Organizations, Occupations, and Work (OOW) section, ASA
- 2017 Member, Best Journal Article Award Committee, Sexualities section, ASA  
 Presider, Gendered Sexualities panel, ASA  
 Presider, Critical Dialog Session on Sexuality, Gender, and Reproduction, SSSP  
 Member, Distinguished Career Award Committee, OOW section, ASA
- 2016-18 Council Member in the Sex and Gender section, ASA<sup>‡</sup>
- 2015 Member, Transnational Research Best Conference Paper Award Committee, Gender and Diversity in Organizations (GDO) division, Academy of Management (AOM)
- 2012/13/14 Member, Best Student Conference Paper Award Committee, GDO division, AOM
- 2011 Member, Committee of Membership, GDO division, AOM
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 Equality, Diversity and Inclusion- An International Journal  
 Gender, Place & Culture  
 Journal of Homosexuality  
 Management Decision  
 Men & Masculinities  
 Qualitative Sociology  
 Social Problems  
 South Asian Journal of Business Studies

## **LANGUAGE SKILLS**

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English	Fluent in reading, writing, speaking, and comprehending
Hindi	Fluent in reading, writing, speaking, and comprehending
Bangla	Fluent in speaking and comprehending; basic knowledge in writing and reading
Gujarati	Fluent in comprehending; conversant in reading, writing, and speaking;
Sanskrit	Basic knowledge in writing, reading, speaking, and comprehending

## ABSTRACT OF THE THE DISSERTATION

After Coming Out: Parental Acceptance of Gay Men in India and the United States

by

Apoorva Ghosh

Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology

University of California, Irvine, 2020

Professor Francesca Polletta, Chair

This dissertation examines the process of parental acceptance for gay men in India and the US. In academic literature and public discourse, parental acceptance of gay men is often seen as a linear, albeit often gradual, process. However, interviews with gay men conducted for this study show that this acceptance waxes and wanes in patterned ways. It is found that gay men often experience *contextual* parental acceptance. Acceptance becomes weaker or stronger at different points and stages in the life course and in different interactional settings. Parental acceptance becomes stronger or diminished in these contexts depending on how gay men's parents respond to the forces of heteronormativity and homonormativity, and whether gay men align with the racial normativity while experiencing their sexuality, in these time and spatial contexts. This study also explicates the role of parents' agency, and the idiosyncrasies in how spatial contexts unfold, to explain how the forces of heteronormativity in spatial contexts produce behavioral outcomes on acceptance differently from different parents. Finally, this study incorporates the experiences of queer gay men from India to show that the understanding of parental acceptance through the lenses of homonormativity is more exclusive to American national culture. Parental acceptance in the Indian national culture is better understood through how queerness, in addition to homonormativity, shapes gay men's perceptions of parental acceptance.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the academic year 2012-13, I was interviewing gay men and lesbians from India and the United States to examine how they experienced their sexual identity in their everyday lives. The scope of my interviews was broad but some of my respondents wanted to delve deeper into specific aspects of their lives which they felt strongly about. Kenneth (American, b.1957) was one of them. Kenneth was a managing partner in a law firm based in Philadelphia, PA. I had interviewed him on April 4, 2013. When I asked him about his experiences with his parents after coming out to them, he spoke extensively about his father's attitudes toward him.

Kenneth's father Phillip was a second-generation Greek immigrant. He was a priest at an Episcopalian Anglican Church in the East Coast. Since the 1970s—and much before Kenneth and his older brother came out to him as gay in the early 1980s—Phillip was active in his church as a gay rights advocate. Phillip wanted to make sure that gay priests were acknowledged and treated with respect in his denomination. As part of these efforts, he organized an AIDS awareness day at his church sometime during the late 1980s. When Kenneth and his brother attended this event, it became clear to them that none of Phillip's parishioners knew that his sons were gay.

Phillip was welcoming toward Kenneth and his partner. He often visited Kenneth's home and admired its decor. He also enthusiastically invited his friends to show his son's beautiful home. However, he did so only when Kenneth and his partner were away. When the couple decided to marry, Phillip suggested that they meet a priest in Los Angeles if they wanted ceremonial blessings at a church. Kenneth's partner was pleasantly surprised with Phillip's gay-friendly gesture, but Kenneth laughed him off and said that if his father was really affirmative, he would have blessed them at his own church instead of asking them to travel 3000 miles to meet a priest whom they had never known.

According to Kenneth, if his father accepted him as gay, he would not have concealed his sexual identity to his parishioners and friends, and he would have blessed Kenneth and his partner at his own church. However, if Phillip had rejected Kenneth as gay, he would not have established a loving bond with Kenneth and his partner. He would also not visit their home to affirm their relationship as frequently as he did.

Phillip's attitudes toward Kenneth's sexual identity is more complex than being simply accepting or rejecting. Kenneth's understanding of his father's acceptance was contextual in nature. He felt more accepted by his father when they spent time at home than he felt at his church or when his father spent time with his friends. Kenneth focused on how his father's acceptance of his sexual identity waxed and waned across the contexts where he interacted with him.

Kenneth was sure that his father accepted him as gay. However, he was critical about his acceptance. He successfully siloed his father's gay-affirmative public stand from how he treated his own gay son. He did not make a simplistic proposition that his father accepted him as gay and affirmed his same-sex relationship because he was a gay rights activist. Along with other information, Kenneth also chose to share that his father *never* acknowledged his sexual identity and that he chose not to bless him and his partner at his own church. Clearly, Kenneth held a more nuanced view about his father's acceptance of his sexuality instead of viewing him simply as accepting or rejecting.

Kenneth's story gives a couple of important insights on parental acceptance of gay men. One, this acceptance may not be absolute in nature. It may wax and wane in patterned ways depending on the settings where parents interact with their gay sons. Two, gay men may not have a sweeping view about their parents as either accepting or rejecting. Like all children, gay men, too, have a considerable influence from their parents who raised and socialized them. In many

ways they are similar to their parents and think alike. Yet, when they become independent adults, they might start viewing their parents more critically and analytically than they would do at a younger age.

Therefore, parental acceptance of gay men, or simply parental acceptance, may not always be achieved as an absolute outcome. It could rather be a contextual phenomenon. Like Kenneth, other gay men may also critically analyze parental attitudes toward their sexuality or share contrasting experiences they had with their parents to help theorize the contextual nature of these attitudes. These ideas motivated me to write my PhD dissertation on parental acceptance of gay men. I continued interviewing gay men by probing them more specifically on how their parents' attitudes toward their sexuality changed *contextually*. By context, I mean both place and time period (Frank, 2020) to account for the settings where gay men interact with their parents, as well as the key moments and life stages that evolve their relationship with their parents.

I conducted this study by comparing the experiences of gay men in India with their counterparts in the US to examine how the distinctive social norms in these countries can shape the contextual patterns in parental acceptance differently in these two countries. Below, I describe the extant scholarly understanding of parental acceptance, including the relevant theoretical frameworks which motivate to study this phenomenon contextually. I also explicate the rationale for doing an Indo-US comparative and intergenerational study for this topic. Then, I describe this study and its methods. Finally, I give brief summaries of the ensuing chapters of this dissertation.

## 1.1 | Theoretical background for the study

In the last two decades, a range of studies conducted in Australia (e.g. Brown and Trevethan, 2010; Carastathis, Cohen, Kaczmarek, and Chang, 2017), Israel (e.g. Bebes, Samarova, Shilo, & Diamond, 2015; Shilo and Savaya, 2011), South Africa (e.g. Livingston and Fourie, 2016), and the United States (e.g. Freedman, 2008; Goodrich, 2009; Hicky & Grafsky, 2017; LaSala, 2010; Mena and Vaccaro, 2013; Savin-Williams, 2005) have examined gay men's experiences with their parents after coming out to them. Gay men often consider coming out, i.e., disclosing their sexual identity to friends, family, extended family, or coworkers, as vital to claiming their sexual identities (Seidman, 2013). According to Mattison and McWhirter (1995), coming out often preceded the process of parent's eventual acceptance of their gay child. Parents are more likely to accept their gay child's sexuality if they come out, rather than the parents figuring it out themselves or the child being "outed" by someone else.

Carastathis, et al. (2017) and Mena and Vaccaro (2013) highlight that gay men often come out to their parents because they want to be authentic about their personal lives and that they expect their parents to accept and affirm them. Brown and Trevethan (2010) suggest that gay men generally want their parents to accept them and shield them from the discrimination and stigma they experience outside the home. In the 1990s and earlier, studies often claimed that gay men typically delayed coming out to their families and first disclosed their sexual identity to their friends (e.g., D'Augelli, Hershberger, & Pilkington, 1998). It was also claimed that they would generally be apprehensive about coming out to their parents for fear of potentially disrupting their relationship (Muller, 1987; D'Augelli et al., 1998). However, recent studies suggest that gay men more readily disclose their sexual identity to their parents than was previously true in a former period (e.g. Hicky & Grafsky, 2017; Livingston & Fourie, 2016) and that increasingly,



they are coming out to their parents, siblings, and friends at approximately the same age (Savin-Williams, 2005; Shilo and Savaya, 2011).

Parental attitudes toward gay men's sexual identity has broader implications for society and the family. When these reactions are incriminating, the tensions they cause can result in familial disintegration (Freedman, 2008), failure of same-sex relationships (Meyer, 1989), and homelessness among gay youth (Chrisler, 2017). In contrast, acceptance and affirmation may aid in positive gay identity formation (Elizur & Mintzer, 2001; 2003), involve families as advocates in lesbian and gay social movements, enhance educational outcomes for young gay men (Mehus, Watson, Eisenberg, Corliss, & Porta, 2017), and promote gay-friendliness in schools (Brandon-Friedman & Kim, 2016; van Bergen & Spiegel, 2014). Families with accepting attitudes may also avert gay men's suicidal ideations or substance abuse (Bebes et al., 2015; Becker & Todd, 2015; Carastathis, et al., 2017; Glick, Krishnan, Fisher, Lieberman, & Sisson, 2016; Lee, Oliffe, Kelly, & Ferlatte, 2017; McManama et al., 2016; Mitrani et al., 2017; Shilo & Savaya, 2011; Skerrett, Kølves, & De Leo, 2016; Willoughby, Doty, & Malik, 2008). Accepting families may improve young gay men's psychological and sexual health and encourage them to adopt safer sexual practices (Brashers, Neidig, & Goldsmith, 2010; Folch, et al., 2006; Deuba, et al., 2013; LaSala, Fedor, Revere, & Carney, 2016; Lee et al., 2017). Parental acceptance of gay men, thus, has vital consequences not only for these men themselves, but also for such important institutions as the family, education, and public health.

Parental acceptance can be understood as consisting of a parent or parents' continued affirmation and expressions of warmth and affection toward their gay child while being fully aware of their sexual identity (Freedman, 2008; Bebes, et al., 2015). Fortunately, a range of studies examine parental acceptance of gay men. The extant literature examines parental acceptance as either a binary outcome—that is, parents accept or reject their gay child absolutely (e.g., Brandon-

Friedman & Kim, 2016; Dawood et al., 2000)—or a partial outcome whereby they accept or reject their gay child through certain degrees (e.g., Diamond & Shpigel, 2014; Gibson & Macleod, 2012). These studies also examine the multiple ways parents react to coming out or indirect disclosures of sexual identity (e.g., Goodrich, 2009; Muller, 1987), and how parental attitudes might change to become more positive over time (Chrisler, 2017; Freedman, 2008; Hickey & Graftsky, 2017). We also know how mothers and fathers might react differently to such situations, and what roles siblings play in parental acceptance (e.g., Jadwin-Cakmak et al., 2015; Toomey & Richardson, 2009). A detailed overview of these themes on parental acceptance is available elsewhere (Ghosh, 2020). Clearly, numerous scholars have illuminated our understanding of parental acceptance as an important phenomenon that affects our society, families, and the lives of gay men.

However, the extant literature treats parental acceptance, whether full or partial, largely as a form of blanket acceptance or a one-time decision which is consistent across all contexts. Acceptance may take time, but once granted, it is consistent and unvarying in gay men's families across time and space. The family development theory offers a different possibility suggesting that parental acceptance may wax or wane along the life course. Literature also suggests that parents may vary in their heteronormative attitudes across the settings of familial interactions depending on how gay-inclusive people involved in these settings are. Below, I explain both theoretical perspectives to show how gay men's experience of parental acceptance could be contextual in nature.

## **1.2 | The contextuality in parental acceptance: Family development theory**

Family development is a theoretical perspective that explains how familial relationships change over time. It does so by accounting for the various stages and events that a family undergoes along its historical life course (Bengtson & Allen, 2009). Family development theorists often

view family as a “life cycle” comprising of a succession of critical stages that a family passes through such as childbirth, children leaving home, marriage, becoming grandparents, the post-children or the empty nest period, and death (Glick, 1977). Therefore, the family development theory is also often referred as family cycle, life cycle, or life span development theory (Bengtson & Allen 2009).

The family development theory argues that familial relationships do not change continuously; they rather change at certain disjunctures or “critical transition points” in a family’s life course (Mattessich & Hill, 1987; Mederer & Hill, 1983). These transition points may include change in the number of family members (such as through marriage, childbirth, or death); change in the age composition of the family (such as when children reach adolescence or adulthood); major status changes within family like getting partnered, married, divorced, and attaining grandparenthood; change in personal or professional roles like entering or leaving school, becoming employed, or changing jobs; residential and locational changes; and changes in network affiliations in family, social, and work circles (Mederer & Hill, 1983). These transitions often bring some amount of disorganization in familial relationships (Hansen & Johnson, 1979) because they involve critical life events which change the meaning of family members’ relationship with one another (Bengtson and Allen 2009). Some transitions could be more intense than others; however, most of them challenge family members to seek innovative solutions to resolve disorganization and maintain harmony and equilibrium in the family (Hansen and Johnson 1979).

In a nutshell, family development theory argues that familial relations change at certain predictable points in the life course because of the disorganization these points of transition bring for the family. Following this theory, gay men’s relationship with parents and therefore, parental acceptance of gay men, can also change at these points. In fact, an emerging view, much less

common in the literature of parental acceptance, concurs with the family development theory and suggests that parental acceptance could occur as a “complex and ongoing dialectical and reconciliatory process” (Livingston & Fourie, 2016, p. 1647) in the life course of families with gay men. After parents learn that their child is gay, they cultivate a reciprocal understanding of homosexuality through conflicts and adjustments (LaSala, 2010; Trussell et al., 2015). For example, Jadwin-Cakmak et al. (2015) suggest that these conflicts and adjustments may pertain to expectations from gay men to be androcentric in their behavior and relationships. The authors find that some fathers can accept their gay son more easily when they see him and his partner performing “hegemonic masculinity,” characterized by androcentric behaviors, such as watching or playing football, and defying the stereotype of gay men as effeminate in expressions and gestures. For these fathers, acceptance of their gay son may be contingent on the androcentrism of his partner and the performance of masculine activities by the couple. These fathers’ acceptance of their gay son may wane in future if he moves into a relationship with a genderqueer or effeminate man. Therefore, Jadwin-Cakmak et al. (2015) view that parental reactions should continually be observed to understand the changes in them from initial disclosure.

In addition, research suggests that several factors may shape parental attitudes toward gay men’s sexual identity. These factors include ideological views on homosexuality, conservative religiosity, number and gender of siblings, status of the parent–child relationship, physical and emotional separation from family, place of residence, age of disclosure, (hyper)visibility of same-sex behaviors, involvement in a same-sex relationship, and external sources of support (Hickey & Grafsky, 2017; LaSala, 2010; Livingston & Fourie, 2016; Savin-Williams & Dube, 1998). Some of these factors may vary over time and context. Therefore, as a result of changing circumstances, parental acceptance may not remain a static outcome. Parental attitudes may also

sporadically become overly accepting or overly rejecting in extraordinary situations, such as when their gay son experiences hate crime or attempts suicide. Understanding these behaviors would be crucial to understand how familial processes unfold over time, and how parents can become more accepting of their gay sons.

### **1.3 | Heteronormative settings waning parental acceptance**

In addition to occurring across time, as the family development theory suggests, the conflicts and adjustments that parents undergo with regards to having a gay son may also have more salience in some settings of familial interactions than others. In the example from Jadwin-Cakmak, et. al (2015) above, a father's acceptance of his gay son may also wane in contexts where he engages in queer activities with his partner, like watching or participating in drag shows, as compared to when the couple does yardwork or watches football. Another example of parental acceptance waning across contexts comes from Hickey and Grafsky (2017). They observed that gay men in Christian families may be committed to both their sexual and religious identities. However, their parents may find these identities mutually exclusive or even contradictory to each other. This perception can make these parents less affirmative to their gay son's sexual identity in the church-related contexts.

Similarly, Trussell et al. (2015) observed that even after accepting their gay son, parents had to confront their own heterosexist attitudes and conflicted emotions on several occasions.

Especially during a family outing, parents felt more concerned and discomforted by their son's public display of affection with his partner due to onlookers' heterosexist gaze on them as compared to in other family occasions which were bounded within the four walls. When parents cannot enjoy their family moments on a vacation under these circumstances, they might put the

blame on their son and his partner. Therefore, on occasions when a public display of same-sex affection is discomfiting to parents, they could become less accepting toward their gay child.

Broadly, the above examples show that parental attitudes toward a gay child can best be understood through the process of “doing family” that is continuously evolving in various social “spaces.” These spaces are the contexts of interaction that contain a variety of significant others<sup>1</sup> in parents’ lives. When these spaces involve gay-exclusive significant others, parents may not be able to show accepting behaviors to their gay son as much as they would be able to do in spaces with more gay-inclusive significant others. When observed for short durations of time, an observer may feel that parental behaviors have changed to become rejecting or accepting. In reality, these behaviors could be contingent on the contexts of interaction and might simply be changing from one context to another. Hicky and Grafsky (2017), therefore, suggested that families are best understood in terms of processes rather than outcomes.

The ideas from family development theory and the role of heteronormative settings offer a sound imperative to studying parental acceptance of gay men as a contextual phenomenon, and to the proposition that parental acceptance may not be a static outcome across all contexts. Drawing on these ideas, this dissertation answers the following research questions: does parental acceptance of gay men wax and wane in patterned ways? If yes, how might these patterns differ for gay men in India vis-à-vis their counterparts living in a different cultural environment like the US? And how might these patterns differ across different generations of gay men? Below, I will explain the rationale for conducting this study from an intergenerational and Indo-US cross-cultural perspectives.

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<sup>1</sup> The term “significant others”, per Charles Horton Cooley, refers to people, such as close family members, peers, and friends who have great influence on one’s behaviors and self-esteem. This meaning applies exclusively here. In the rest of the dissertation, significant other colloquially refers to a committed partner or spouse.

## **1.4 | The case for an Indo-US comparative study**

A comparative study would help in understanding parental acceptance from international and cross-cultural perspectives. Studies on gay men's familial experiences have often stressed on examining this phenomenon from comparative lenses, especially to contrast these experiences in non-Western cultural settings with those in Western ones (e.g. Altman, 2002; Newman and Muzzonigro, 1993). Therefore, I compare the contextuality in parental acceptance of gay men in India as a non-Western cultural setting with that in the United States as a Western one. Both countries offer a compelling site for comparative research because of the contrasts in how families operate in these countries. Below, I enumerate how different sets of questions on contextuality in parental acceptance may apply to these countries owing to their cultural distinctiveness.

### **1.4.1 | India**

Dennis Altman (2002) observes that the experiences of being gay are often conditioned by the cultural contexts unique to the country of residence. Concurring to this line, Shahani (2008) argues that gay men in India exemplify an "Indianized" gayness, meaning that the familial experiences for gay man in India are often conditioned by a litany of social norms more unique to Indian families. They include, maintaining proximity with relatives and allowing interference in family matters (Mullatti, 1995; Katz, 2008), social and familial pressures on young adults to get married (Bhugra, 1997; Khan, 2001; Kole, 2007), preferring arranged marriages over love marriages (Abraham, 2001), respect for parents as a moral authority (Srivastava and Singh, 2015), same-gender socialization (Boyce and Khanna, 2011; Khan, 2001; Kole, 2007), family as the source of security and protection at the older age (Seabrook, 1999; Mullatti, 1999), the importance of social respect for a family, the culture of shame, and the family's fear of losing its

reputation in the society (Narrain, 2004; Srivastava and Singh, 2015). These social norms around family can influence parental acceptance across time and place contexts in the Indian cultural environment.

### *Social norms*

The norm of compulsory heterosexual marriage and procreation for young adults is a strong feature of Indian families. It is very common for parents to pressure their sons to get married after they complete education and start earning (Bhugra, 1997; Khan, 2001; Kole, 2007). Young men may perceive these pressures within the ambit of the general parental control which parents often exert on them to influence their personal and career decisions (Abraham 2001). In contexts where these persuasions intensify, gay men may feel less affirmed. Hence, the practice of parents persuading their sons to marry women can become the source of parental rejection for gay men.

India has several norms related to marriage, one of which is to conduct “arranged marriages” whereby parents choose their children’s marital partners to establish affinal alliances with families, preferably, of their own caste and religious groups. Arranged marriages are generally preferred over love marriages by both parents and children (Abraham, 2001). Arranged marriages also stem from the norm of asking children to consider their parents as a moral authority which restricts children to talk about sex, sexuality, or prospective partners directly with their parents (Srivastava and Singh, 2015). A cultural preference for arranged marriages and the role of parents as the moral authority in the family can influence gay men’s parental acceptance. In the absence of cultural practices for searching same-sex partners by parents, gay men wanting to have a partner must find a partner on their own and introduce him to their parents. This practice may contradict the moral authority that parents often tend to assume.



Therefore, how parents might view their son finding a partner by himself could affect their attitudes toward their gay son's sexual identity.

An interesting feature of Indian families is the tolerance of homo-affectionate sexual interplays. Indian cultural norms strongly enforce same-gender socialization in the family, work, and other social settings (Boyce and Khanna, 2011). This norm allows considerable leeway for enjoying same-sex intimacies, which are often tolerated in familial and social environments as long as these sexual activities are not formalized and identified as relationships (Khan, 2001; Kole, 2007). This norm can affect how parents view their son's sexuality. Given that parents generally do not restrict their son's sexuality as much they restrict their daughter's (Abraham, 2001), they may be tolerant of their son's homosexual behaviors. However, they may be perturbed by him identifying his relationship with a man and claiming him as his partner, which they might perceive as a Western, and therefore, an alien, practice (Khan, 2001).

Another social norm requires families to maintain their respect and reputation in the society comprising of their neighbors, coworkers, caste and religious groups, and the extended family. Indian families are known to be very sensitive to how their reputation is being perceived by the society (Srivastava and Singh, 2015). Satirical and incriminating reactions from the society for violating the social norms of marriage and family can make a family feel ashamed, which Vanita and Kidwai (2008) refer as the "shame culture" in Indian society. Having an unmarried son who has crossed his marriageable age can bear a strong stigma for Indian parents. Unmarried gay men and their families are known to have been teased and verbally persecuted by their neighbors, relatives, and coworkers. Gay men's siblings may be looked down upon as well and arranging their marriages could become difficult (Narrain, 2004). The society, as identified by Indian families, can expose parents to strong heteronormative contexts wherein their support and acceptance of a gay son might wane as compared to in more private settings such as home.

The last social norm relevant for this discussion pertains to the role of family in providing security and protection in the old age. Familial norms in India often require a male child, especially the oldest one, to take care of his parents in their old age and as far as possible, cohabit with them or live near them (Seabrook, 1999). In a traditional household, however, men often find themselves pulled in several directions while performing the roles of caregiving and breadwinning for not only their elderly parents but also for their children (and wife as well, if she is a homemaker) (Mullatti, 1995). Gay men who have chosen to not marry traditionally can give more undivided attention to their elderly parents than their traditionally married brothers can. Hence, while parents might resent their gay son for not raising a family at his young age, at an older age they could become more affirmative to him for his availability as a caregiver and hence, show less reticence to his sexual identity than how they did at a younger age.

#### *Other cultural characteristics*

In addition to these norms, a few cultural characteristics need mention as well. Indian families are generally tied in an extensive kinship system that traces its origins to the tradition of living in “joint families” in villages, whereby several generations of family units comprising of siblings and their affinal families cohabited in a single large dwelling. With urbanization and an increasing sense of individuality, these joint families have disintegrated to a large extent, with the constituent nuclear family units migrating to the cities (Mullatti, 1995). Despite being geographically distant, these family units maintain close ties. Electronic communication technologies, like the social media and phones, have helped them in playing important day-to-day roles in each other’s lives. The ease of long-distance travel has facilitated frequent meetings of these nuclear families during holidays and wedding ceremonies (Katz, 2008). These proximities can attract intense inquiries and social pressures related to the marriage of young

adults in a family. These inquiries and social pressures can influence parental acceptance of gay men in contexts where parents interact with their relatives.

Another factor that may render contingency to gay men's parental acceptance pertains to how masculinity is shaped in the Indian culture. Leena Abraham (2001) observes that in practice, Indian parents restrict their young daughters in matters of sexuality more than they restrict their young sons. However, young sons often perceive their parents to be more restrictive toward them than how young daughters perceive them to be. Young men, therefore, may expect more non-interference from their parents while pursuing their sexuality. The extent of parental scrutiny of their dating lives and the lack of privacy at home can shape their perceptions of being accepted as gay by their parents.

Another social characteristic pertains to how Indian parents generally view male homosexuality. Most parents embrace a popular understanding of sexual minority identities through stigmatized, socially marginalized, but highly visible transgender communities like *Hijras*. Indian parents are known to have assumed that being gay could be either same as being transgender or could eventually lead to becoming a transgender person (Bhugra, 1997). Hence, Indian parents may continuously be assessing their son's sexuality in terms of how close he gets or how far is he situated from being a transgender. Gay men's participation in queer communities could be painted by parents as similar to the communal living of transgender people. In addition, Indian parents may also perceive their gay son's participation in these communities and the associated visibility in the media as a cause of shame to the entire family (Narain and Bhan, 2005). Therefore, contexts involving gay men's collective advocacy through queer communities and visibility in the media may affect their experiences of parental acceptance.

The social norms for Indian families and other cultural characteristics make it likely that parental acceptance of gay men in India could wax and wane in patterned ways. The above discussion shows that Indian gay men may feel dilemmatic or even “ashamed” to introduce a male partner to their parents. Young gay men often feel the lack of privacy in their homes where they may experience intense scrutiny from their parents. They may perceive a diminished parental acceptance in these contexts. Parents may also restrict their son’s participation in lesbian and gay communities due to the societal shame. Therefore, parental acceptance may get diminished in these communal contexts. As compared to in home, parental acceptance may wane for gay men also in contexts that are marked as being about marriage and family lineage. In weddings and other extended family gatherings where parents get intense inquiries about their gay son’s marriage, they may disregard his sexuality and pressure him to marry a woman. When gay men reach their mid-life, parental acceptance may be contingent on their ability to live with their elderly parents, and not by institutionalizing them, to provide them care. Possibilities like these which are more specific to Indian national culture make it likely that the contextual ways of waxing and waning parental acceptance for Indian gay men may differ from how they would occur in the United States.

#### **1.4.2 | The United States**

The heteronormative barriers in accepting gay men exist in the United States as well which mostly comprise of a family’s location in rural settings (D’Augelli and Hart, 1987; Cody and Welch, 1997; Yarbrough, 2004), homophobia arising out of the religious beliefs (Freedman, 2008; Goodrich, 2009; LaSala, 2016; Hicky and Grafsky, 2017), the right wing political beliefs (Frank, 2013; Williams, 2018), and the stigmatization of homosexuality due to its association with the HIV and AIDS (Turner, Hayes, and Coates, 1993; LaSala, et al., 2016). In addition, parental acceptance of children’s spouses are often shaped by parents’ racial preferences (Char,

1977; Portedield, 1978; Watts and Henriksen Jr, 1999; Qian, 2005; Sklar, Pak, and Eltiti, 2016; Maldonado, 2017 )—these preferences can translate to parental acceptance of gay men’s partners as well.

In rural America, gay men have often been perceived as strongly violating the norms of traditional family living and gender performance which are at the heart of American rural traditions (D'Augelli and Hart, 1987). Hence, studies on rural gay men have often highlighted the imposition of censorship on them by their parents in the form of silence, disinterest, ambivalence, and lack of support (Cody and Welch 1997; Yarbrough 2004). Censorships like these may become stronger when parents have limited exposure to gay people which is more typical in rural areas than in urban areas (Yarbrough, 2004). Rural gay men have often chosen to stay away from their families of origin by moving to urban areas where they can live more openly and freely as a gay man (D'Augelli and Hart, 1987). A few studies have portrayed family environment for gay people in rural areas more positively, such as by Mary Gray’s study (2009) of rural Kentucky which highlights the role of lesbian and gay political activism in making families inclusive to their gay children. However, the rural versus urban gap in the quality of familial experiences for gay men prominently exists, with such progressive social activism often being perceived as an “urban phenomenon” by the rural inhabitants (Kazyak, 2011).

Religion (Christianity) and morality create another set of issues for American families which impact parental acceptance. The literature on Christian parents with gay children has generally highlighted homophobia in parents by considering their gay child’s sexuality as sinful (Freedman, 2008) and a conduit to hell after death (LaSala, et al. 2016). A comprehensive overview takes a more balanced position by contrasting the effects of orthodox and progressive Christian denominations and highlighting that parents with progressive denominations have often been affirmative to their gay children (Ghosh, 2020). Hicky and Grafsky (2017) show that gay

men in Christian families may embrace a gay Christian identity. The parental acceptance of these gay men often depends on how well their parents understand this integrated identity and are able to reconcile the conflict between being gay and being a Christian.

The political beliefs of American parents may augment their religious beliefs while accepting or rejecting their gay children (Goodrich, 2009). The United States has had a history of anti-gay conservative social movements, of which the Save Our Children (SOC) political campaign led by Anita Bryant in the 1970s is of particular importance for this discussion. This Right-wing movement urged American parents to save their children from “homosexual influences”—this campaign was joined and supported by a rally of parents. This movement had long seeded a dissent among politically conservative parents toward accepting their gay children (Frank 2013). Williams (2018) shows that conservative politics still affects American families on issues of homosexuality. He analyzes the SOC campaign together with Kim Davis’ refusal in 2015 to issue same-sex marriage licenses in Rowan County, KY. He views these two events as having “associative chains” in the history of anti-gay politics which are shaping familial attitudes toward gay people. He argues that the sociopolitical values of religious freedom and personal conscience that American families often embrace in contemporary times hinges on a narrow conception of liberty that appeals to the Christian heterosexual family. These sociopolitical values do less for enshrining liberty and freedom for gay people and do more toward reinforcing parental beliefs on the traditional family values which hardly accept gay men and their partners. These analyses show that aligning with conservative politics would help American parents very little in accepting their gay children.

The United States has also had the history of AIDS crisis which heavily stigmatized male homosexuality, especially during its peak period of the late 1980s and the early 1990s when thousands of Americans died of AIDS amidst strong perceptions that this disease was caused

primarily by sexual intercourse within men (Lerner and Hombs, 1998). Studies, such as Cleveland, Walters, Skeen, and Robinson (1989), Turner, et al. (1993), and Kadushin (1996), have extensively reported the association of AIDS crisis with American parents' rejection of their gay children. At the time of this crisis, gay men generally found it very difficult to come out to their parents (Cleveland, et al., 1989). Kadushin's study of gay men living with HIV/AIDS observes that the sexual health of these men posed a primary barrier for their parents in accepting their sexual identity. In Ben-Ari's study (1995), 41 percent of gay respondent cited the possibility of contracting HIV/AIDS as a concern for getting accepted by their parents. In recent times as well, gay men often associate the concerns about their sexual health with their parents' acceptance of their sexual identity (LaSala, et al., 2016). Hence, the sexual health stigmatization associated with male homosexuality can impact American parents' decisions of accepting their gay son.

Just like India is known to be a gender-segregated society, as discussed in the last section, the United States is known to be a race-segregated society. American parents' racial preferences for their children's dating partners is well documented (Char, 1977; Portedield, 1978; Watts and Henriksen Jr, 1999; Qian, 2005; Skylar, Pak, and Eltiti, 2016; Maldonado, 2017). Asian-American parents have been known to follow a racial hierarchy for approving their children's partners whereby they preferred prospective matches from their own ethnic communities or from White racial backgrounds (Sklar, Pak, and Eltiti, 2016). Asian, Latinx, and White parents have often objected to their children's dating relationships with African Americans (Watts and Henriksen Jr, 1999; Maldonado, 2017). Both Black and White parents have been known to object Black-White conjugal relationships for their children by perceiving such relationships as a rebellion against their authority and a way of offending them (Char, 1977; Portedield, 1978). The racial norms for selecting partners can affect parental acceptance of gay men as well, when

“acceptance” is understood more broadly as acceptance of gay men’s partners. Although the extant literature applies this norm largely to heterosexual relationships, its traversing to same-sex relationships is plausible. Hence, American parents’ acceptance of their gay son may also be contingent on his following the racial norms in partner selection.

The above discussion shows that parental acceptance may flag and deepen in various time and spatial contexts for American gay men, as well. It suggests that parental acceptance for American gay men may change by parents’ changing their religious denominations from an orthodox to a more progressive one, or vice versa. It also shows that American parents’ changing their residence to a new area may have implications on their gay son’s acceptance depending on how conservative or progressive their new place of residence is. Likewise, these patterns of fluctuations could be noticed across physical settings as well, like in the church, workplace, and communities of affiliation, depending on the liberal or conservative nature of people that parents socialize with in these settings. Parental acceptance may also change on key moments in gay men’s lives, such as when they are diagnosed with HIV, which are perceived to be related to their sexuality. And finally, parental acceptance of American gay men may also be contingent on the race and ethnicity of their partners. Hence, examining the contextuality of parental acceptance is equally relevant in American national culture as well.

Broadly speaking, the extant scholarly knowledge suggests the possibility of parental acceptance being contextual in nature, both in India and the United States. The unraveling of this contextuality, however, needs answers to different sets of questions arising out of the distinctive social norms and cultural characteristics around family in these two countries. The diversity in the experiences of Indian and American gay men can clarify the cross-cultural nature of parental acceptance. This would provide a more robust analysis of boundary conditions affecting parental acceptance than by studying American or Indian experiences alone.



## **1.5 | The rationale for an intergenerational study**

Parental acceptance needs to be examined intergenerationally as well. An intergenerational effect is evident in the extant works on gay men's familial relations. Recent empirical studies have focused more on gay men's experiences after coming out to their parents and how they achieved parental acceptance (e.g. Goodrich, 2009; Hicky & Grafsky, 2017; LaSala, 2010; Livingston & Fourie, 2016). This focus contrasts the general claims made by scholars in the 1980s and 1990s (e.g. D'Augelli, et al. 1998; Muller, 1987) which highlighted the secrecy surrounding gay men's sexual identity in their families far more than their prospects of achieving parental acceptance. These claims also foregrounded gay men's fears of disrupting familial relations if they came out to their parents.

The AIDS crisis was particularly a time in the US when gay men of the baby boomer generation did not expect much support and affirmation from their parents. Turner, Hays, and Coates' study (1993), for example, showed that in the decade of 1980, parental support for HIV-infected men was particularly low when their parents knew that they were gay. While the fears of HIV infections remain prevalent among parents even today, recent studies (e.g. Brashers, Neidig, & Goldsmith 2004; Zeininger, Holtzman, & Kraus 2017) highlight the comfort that gay men feel in discussing and telling about safer sexual practices to their parents far more than earlier studies did.

The progressive legal rulings of the times when millennials became adults (e.g. Lawrence v. Texas 2003 and marriage equality 2013) have helped parents in accepting their gay sons. My interviews show that the affirmative visibility of lesbians and gay men in the media during the ongoing legal struggles and the positive court rulings thereafter made them feel more confident of coming out to their parents. Many gay men that I talked with felt that the court rulings and the

positive portrayal of gay men and lesbians in the media had made their parents more affirmative or supportive of their sexuality.

The possible role of media in the intergenerational shifts in parental acceptance was long highlighted by Serovich, et al. (1993). This study's respondents believed that the visibility of gay people and an increasingly positive tone in the media for gay rights could set the stage for parental acceptance. Recent studies support this view. Trussel et al. (2015) showed that some gay people believed that their parents became more accepting of them after watching television sitcoms and movies like *The Family Stone*. They felt that their parents' media consumption exposed them to the positive portrayals of gay characters. Therefore, they decided to reconsider their relationship with their own gay children. Around eight percent of gay respondents in Samarova, Shilo, and Diamond (2014) believed that the parental acceptance they received was an outcome of changing societal and familial attitudes toward homosexuality.

The intergenerational shift in parental acceptance is noticeable in India as well. Earlier studies (e.g. Seabrook 1999) showed that Indian gay men were quite unlikely to come out to their parents. These gay men often led a "double life" whereby they often raised traditional families by marrying women and raising kids, or planned to do so, while simultaneously pursuing casual same-sex sexual encounters by searching men on "cruising spots." My recent study (Ghosh 2020) highlights that for Indian gay men of the baby boomer and Gen X generations, coming out to parents was often a remote possibility. Gay men that took the route of becoming financially and emotionally independent, however, did overcome the parental persuasions of getting married. While they broadly hinted their sexual identity to their parents, they did not receive much support or affirmation from them. While the tendencies to remain closeted still exist among Indian gay men, studies examining the experiences of millennial gay men (e.g. Shahani 2008) brightens the possibilities for parental acceptance. One gay respondent in Shahani (2008)

told that his parents accepted him if he did not make public appearances in the media by participating in pride marches or advocating for the gay and lesbian equality. This example shows that the conditional acceptance from parents while respecting certain boundaries is achievable for millennial Indian gay men. Another respondent in Shahani (2008) who felt accepted by his parents attributed this acceptance to this parents' education and professional training in psychology. Like how it happened in the US, the possible effect of gay affirmative court rulings on parental acceptance of millennial Indian gay men was suggested by Tonini (2016). Tonini (2016) observed that many Indian gay men came out to their families after the Delhi High Court legalized homosexuality in 2009. In light of these examples, the intergenerational changes in parental acceptance of gay men cannot be negated in India as well. Therefore, comparing the experiences of baby boomer and Generation X gay men with their millennial counterparts may offer a more robust analysis of boundary conditions that determine and operationalize parental acceptance.

## **1.6 | The study**

To conduct this study, I interviewed self-identified gay men to examine their familial relationships after their parents became aware of their sexual identity. My interviews with them lasted for 90 minutes on an average which helped me gather in-depth accounts of their interactions with their parents across their life course and various settings of interaction. I conducted 55 interviews in 2019. I also picked 15 interviews, like that of Kenneth's, from the ones that I had conducted in 2013 which gave extensive details about familial experiences of gay men. Of these 69 gay men, 29 are from India and 40 are from the United States. The details of my respondents, including their year of birth calculated from their age at the time of the interview, social identification, location of residence, country of residence, and occupation are

provided in Table 1 in the methodological appendix. For confidentiality purposes, I use a pseudonym to identify my respondents.

My study participants had spent their entire or most of their life in their country of residence. All of them were residing in either India or the US at the time of their interview except for three of my Indian respondents who were living abroad on a short-term basis for higher education or work. Broadly, these interviews allow this study to examine parental acceptance in different cultural set ups by comparing the experiences of Indian gay men living in India and American gay men living in the United States.

For this study, I carefully recruited those gay men who had never married a woman in their lifetime. I do believe that experiences of gay men who married women sometime in their life is valuable and worth studying, as scholars like Steve Seidman (2013) have done. However, these experiences fall beyond the theoretical and empirical scope of this study. The extant literature discussed in the theoretical background shows a growing trend among gay men in the recent decades to embrace their sexual identity instead of aligning with the social norm of raising a traditional heteronormative family. This study endeavors to have an incisive understanding of parental acceptance of these gay men who have affirmed their sexual identity by not marrying a person of the opposite sex. This condition does favor, especially in the Indian context, gay men of the millennial generation for inclusion in this study over their counterparts from the baby boomer and Gen X generations who grew up with the stronger norms of heteronormative family systems. However, my respondent pool does include a sizeable proportion of gay men of these earlier generations as well to make a meaningful comparison with the millennials. 30 percent of my respondents from India and 67 percent of my respondents from the US are non-millennials. Considering the overall sample, 11 are baby boomers (born between 1946 to 1964), 24 are Generation Xers (born between 1965 to 1980), and 34 are millennials (born in 1981 or after).

Hence, while I have interviewed more respondents from the later generations, my sampling criterion did not skew my respondent pool heavily toward younger gay men. The age distribution of my respondents helps in making a meaningful intergenerational comparison of gay men's experiences with their parents under the condition of not following the route of traditional marriage in their life course.

### **1.6.1 | Recruiting respondents**

I recruited my study participants from several communities of gay men. I wrote a posting for my potential respondents briefly explaining the purpose of my study and the qualifying criteria for my study. This posting is attached in the methodological appendix. For getting participants from the United States, I emailed this posting to the LGBTQ employee caucuses in the US-based business corporations. These caucuses are intra-corporation networks formed by LGBTQ and ally employees who work for achieving and maintaining inclusive employment policies and work climate for LGBTQ employees (Creed and Scully, 2000; Ghosh, 2012). I recruited most of my American respondents through these caucuses. These caucuses were particularly useful in recruiting gay men of a diverse age group as the membership of these caucuses comprises of both senior employees of the baby boomer and Gen X generations as well as the relatively junior employees of the millennial generation.

In order to recruit a more diverse and multicultural pool of American respondents, I also sent my email invitation to several non-profit organizations that connect LGBTQ people for advocacy, social support, and other forms of networking. Respondents from these sources came from more diverse racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds than those recruited from the LGBTQ employee caucuses.

The sources for recruiting Indian gay men were more dispersed in nature. In 2013, I had recruited my Indian respondents through a gay dating website and from several LGBTQ activist organizations in India. In 2019, I recruited them from several other sources as well. I sent my recruitment posting on the social media communities of gay men in India. I also reached out to a non-profit organization of LGBTQ people, the Humsafar Trust in Mumbai, that connected me with gay men in their network. In addition, I recruited several study participants through snowball sampling by asking my current respondents to connect me with their contacts.

Those who showed interest in my study were asked to fill out a short survey questionnaire composed of questions based on the qualifying criteria for this study. These questions asked about their sexual self-identification, age, country of residence, racial/ethnic self-identification, whether any of their parents were aware of their sexual identity, and whether they had married a person of the opposite sex in their lifetime. I have attached this survey to the methodological appendix. Respondents that were adult, male, identified as gay, lived in the US or India, never married a woman in their lifetime, and whose parent(s) knew that they were gay, qualified for this study. I contacted them informing that they qualified to participate in this study. I set up appointments to interview them on phone or internet telephony.

This study exclusively examines gay men, instead of examining gay men and lesbians, in both countries in order to use gender as a frame of reference while comparing parental acceptance across two national cultures and three generations of gay men. The gender norms applying more exclusively to women as compared to men (Abraham, 2001) can produce revealing dynamics in parental acceptance of gay men versus that for lesbians which can be a subject matter of another study.

## 1.6.2 | Interviews

I decided to do interviews remotely over doing them in-person, first, because of the cost effectiveness. Call rates for phone calls done using internet telephony have become cheaper in the last few decades. Doing in-person interviews was not possible for me due to insufficient funds available to me for travelling. Second, interview recordings done on phone or on the internet using digital applications have a clearer audio than the recordings done in physical settings such as in restaurants or meeting rooms. This helps in an accurate transcription of the interviews and minimal loss of data. Third, remote interviews are more convenient for study respondents as they do not have to travel for the interview meeting. To some extent, this comfort offsets the respondent's inconvenience of sitting through a 90-minute intense interview for no financial remuneration. And fourth, and quite importantly, remote interviews also helped in breaking the barrier between me and my respondents all of whom were meeting with me for the first time. My previous interviewing experiences show that conversations on sensitive topics, like sexuality, with an interviewer whom the respondent has never met can be more difficult on an in-person mode than on a remote mode. In an in-person interview, the respondents may be distracted by the physical appearance and body language of the interviewer as well as by the presence of a recording device in front of them. These distractions do not occur in a remote interview. Therefore, the inconvenience of sharing personal experiences to an unknown interviewer can mitigate in remote interviews. Based on my interviewing experience, the nature of the topic, and the nature of familiarity with my respondents at the time of the interviews, I preferred the remote mode of interviewing on phone or internet telephony to get more efficient outcomes than that from the in-person mode of interviewing, both in terms of the costs and otherwise.

My interview questions examined respondents' experiences with their parents over their life course and across different settings of familial interactions after they came out to their parents. My first substantive question recalled their response on the survey that their parent(s) knew that they were gay. I asked them, "In the survey you mention that at least one of your parents knows that you are gay. Tell me how they got this information." Most of my study participants responded by saying that they came out their parents at some point of time, indicating that coming out is still a primary mode for parents to know that their son is gay. My next question followed this lead by asking their motivations to come out to their parents and their experiences after this disclosure. If they had not come out to their parents, I asked them to tell about other experiences which made their parents aware of their sexual identity. My subsequent questions focused on the chronology of my respondent's interactions with his parents after they became of their son's sexual identity. I probed specifically on critical transition points like leaving parents' home, getting into a relationship, marrying with the partner, parents' aging into retirement, and death of a family member to examine how parental acceptance waxed or waned at these points. I also probed into various contexts of interactions like the extended family, friends and coworkers, and church contexts to examine the patterns of parental acceptance across these settings. A detailed interview guide is provided in the methodological appendix.

### **1.6.3 | Analysis of interviews**

For accuracy, I had all the interviews recorded and the audio recordings transcribed. Memo-writing and multiple iterations of coding to arrive at patterns of interest are accepted procedures in qualitative research. I wrote memos and coded the transcribed interviews to carry out a thematic analysis of the interviews. These methods follow the conventions of grounded theory analysis and qualitative coding (Charmaz, 2006).



Interview-based research often uses symbolic interaction and dramaturgical analysis, introduced by Erving Goffman, as social psychological tools for generating data, interpreting data, and arriving at the findings (e.g., Cairns & Beach, 2003; Oliver et al., 2006; Zurcher, 1985). I used dramaturgical analysis to examine the role, performance, and status of the actor (here, the respondent) and others whom they brought into their plot. My goal was to analyze the context of human behavior and not the causes of human behavior (Zurcher, 1985).

One of the strengths of dramaturgical analysis is to let the main lead, supporting actors, and audience swap their roles—also known as the “mutual constitution of self and audience” (Salter, 2008, p.329)—for making sense of the story in a way that answers research questions (Cairnes & Beach, 2003). Understanding the context and identifying the roles of actors on the stage that the respondent’s story creates is the key to conduct dramaturgical analysis. I analyzed the interview data while listening to my respondents during the interview as well as by preparing memos and thematically coding the interview transcripts after the interview. While analyzing, I was parsing out the roles of the protagonist, supporting actors, and audience in the scene, focusing more on the motivations and intentions of the protagonist followed by that of other actors.

A good narrative often has multiple participants in the form of actors and audience, and therefore it is multi-dimensional in nature. Multi-dimensionality means that although a narrative has a particular set of acts, it can be narrated differently by different participants in the plot because the worldview and the knowledge of symbolic resources involved in the story differ from one participant to another. The narratives in my interviews often had the respondent at the center, i.e., as the protagonist, whose actions primarily built the scene. In those contexts, my probing questions intended to know more about his motivations that led him to perform those actions. Other times, my respondent either became a supporting actor or an audience in the context of his narrative. As a supporting actor, he did not lead the act but participated in it. As an audience, he

described what he saw without participating much in the scene. In these two situations, and especially when my respondent was an audience, he was partially aware of the symbolic resources responsible for what occurred in the scene. In those moments, I took the role of the main actor for interpreting the context of those instances. I did that by gathering more information about the protagonists involved in the scene by asking probing questions about them to my respondent. When my respondent couldn't tell me much, I looked for information from other scenes in the interview that would throw more light to that particular scene. While collecting and examining the data, I put the pieces of the puzzle together to address the questions that were interesting for this study. For doing that, I used the narrative of my respondent and my own interpretation of that narrative as data.

In a nutshell, I used dramaturgical analysis, memo writing, and thematic coding to arrive at the findings. With the progression of interviews, the breadth of cases in the interviews and an evolving understanding of various contexts that bring variations to parental acceptance, offer generalizable and rich results.

## **1.7 | Chapter Summaries**

The ensuing chapters in this dissertation tell about how gay men understand parental acceptance, and how this acceptance varies contextually—across the life course following key moments and life stages, and across the settings of familial interactions.

The *Chapter 2* of this dissertation, entitled “Parental acceptance, as understood by gay men” describes how gay men have generally understood parental acceptance. Though each of them had their own definition, their criteria can be broadly classified into two. One, acceptance meant for them that their parents acknowledged their sexuality, verbally or non-verbally, to other people.

And two, they also generally understood acceptance by their parents' accepting their partners as family members or sons-in-law, and not their friends.

*Chapter 3* "Parental acceptance along the life course" argues that gay men's contextual experience of parental acceptance on their key moments and life stages do not occur automatically or by chance. How the contextuality in parental acceptance unfolds in these time contexts depends on three normative forces which act on gay men and their parents in these contexts. The first is, how well parents have relinquished their *heteronormative* expectations while traversing these time contexts to accept their gay son. The second is, how well parents have embraced a *homonormative* outlook in these time contexts to accept their gay son. The third normative force applies to gay men, more exclusively to Americans. Parental acceptance also depends on how well gay men have followed racial normativity while experiencing their sexuality in these time contexts.

*Chapter 4*, "Parental acceptance across familial settings of interactions" shows that spatial contexts also matter. Interrogating extant literature which descriptively suggests that parents would become less accepting to their gay children in more heteronormative contexts, this chapter produces an analysis for why this may not always be the case, and why some parents can show more acceptance to their gay son in spatial contexts than others would. This chapter shows that parents' agency, and the variations in how spatial contexts unfold for different parents, are the keys to understand how parental acceptance contextualizes across various settings of familial interactions.

The concluding *chapter 5* explicates the macro-sociological contribution of this project, which is to show that normative social forces which act on families are also inconsistent and varying in nature. This dissertation shows that families experience the forces of heteronormativity,

homonormativity, and racial normativity more acutely on particular time and spatial contexts. In addition, the concluding chapter answers the two research questions posed in this chapter on how the contextual nature of parental acceptance differs 1) in India from in the US, and 2) across the generational cohorts of baby boomers, generation Xers, and the millennials. It ends with recommendations for gay men and their parents.

## 2. PARENTAL ACCEPTANCE, AS UNDERSTOOD BY GAY MEN

Parental acceptance can be understood as a continuous show of warmth and affection by a parent to their gay child while knowing that their child is gay and being affirmative about his sexual identity (Freedman, 2008; Bebes, Samarova, Shilo, & Diamond, 2015). How does this definition translate into practice? What parental behaviors can be considered parental acceptance?

This chapter shows that irrespective of the cross-cultural and intergenerational differences, gay men's perceptions of parental acceptance often constitute their parents' acknowledging their sexual identity either verbally or non-verbally. Gay men's definition of acceptance evolves when they unite with a partner or a husband. When that happens, they understand acceptance also as their parents' welcoming their partners as family members or sons-in-law, and not as their sons' "close friends."

### 2.1 | Acknowledging and conversing

Gay men often understood acceptance through their parents' acknowledgement of gay men's sexuality. Avery (American, b.1991) and Ken (American, b.1984) felt that their fathers did that by talking about gay men respectfully. Avery, for example, felt that his father was willing to be a part of his sexuality in a way that was comfortable for him and yet, he was willing to challenge himself. Once, Avery's father struck a conversation with him about a gay manager in the NBA. Avery said:

I think one example is like –I'm very [much] into NBA basketball. The general manager for the Golden State Warriors is a gay man. And he has a partner. And my dad brought it up to me randomly one day. He's like, "Did you know that [the] Golden State Warriors GM, he's gay and he has a partner? They were interviewing him on 60 Minutes." We had talked about this interview for [about] 20 minutes...

Avery felt accepted because his father came up with an example that was related to Avery's sexual identity as well as to NBA—a sport organization that Avery followed. Avery believed that by striking this conversation, his father acknowledged Avery's sexuality and he accepted it. Avery knew that his father would not go to a Pride carrying a rainbow flag with his name on it saying, "I accept my gay son." Avery still said, "I think that's the biggest thing for me—acknowledgement of it, right, from my [father]? He'd given that to me. And if it evolves more, great. If it doesn't, great." For Avery, his father's willingness to talk about gay people respectfully was good enough for him to feel accepted.

The bar of parental acceptance for Avery and Ken was limited to their parents talking about gay men respectfully. Others, like Martin (American, b.1988) and Daniel (American, 1976), however, raised the bar by wanting their parents to acknowledge their *son's* sexual identity in public settings. Martin, for example, felt accepted when his father told a young gay man in the neighborhood that he had two gay sons—Martin and his brother. Daniel gave a concrete example of how non-acknowledgment in public settings translated to non-acceptance. He often asked his parents to not lie about his sexual identity to their friends. Once, Daniel's mother was talking to her friend who was trying to match Daniel with her daughter. Daniel's husband Jerry was present in that meeting, and Daniel's siblings had introduced him as a "good friend" of the family. Daniel was absent in that meeting, but when he learnt about the incident, he was wanting his mother to acknowledge to her friend that Jerry was his husband and not a friend. Daniel said:

I don't want to impose it on [my parents] that like, "You need to do these. And you need to accept it. [But] You need to be vocal about your gay son." If I was there, then yeah, I'll ask my mom to respect my husband. I'll say like, "No, you need to tell them I'm married to [Jerry]." And I'll tell the same to my siblings (sic).

Daniel sounded exasperated by the fact that he was tried to be matched with a person of the other sex in his husband Jerry's presence. He also found it disrespectful that his siblings lied about Jerry. Daniel wanted his mother to intervene and tell the truth, which she did not do. Hence, he felt rejected as a gay man by his family.

Acknowledging sexual identity as a way of acceptance emerged strongly among Indian gay men as well. Eshan (Indian, b.1989) expected his parents to not feel ashamed of his sexual identity. He wanted them to acknowledge openly that their son was gay without feeling burdened by what others would say about him and his family. Hemant (Indian, b.1984) also believed that acknowledging the "existence" of homosexuality by his parents was important to feel accepted by them. He expected his mother to not deny his sexual identity anywhere. Jagrit (Indian, b.1989) felt rejected by his mother when she "rose her hands" in denial in 2015 when he came out to his family, and that her attitude had not changed until 2019 when I interviewed him. Kirtan's (Indian, b.1986) parents, too, did not acknowledge his sexual identity. Kirtan felt that they did not take a combative approach toward his sexuality because they needed him as a caregiver and to help the family take important decisions. According to Kirtan, this non-acknowledgment was short of what he viewed as "full acceptance." He also felt that his parents had accepted him as an "option" to meet their familial needs from him. In contrast, Rajiv (Indian, 38) felt that his mother fully accepted him by acknowledging his sexual identity. He said:

So, accept[ing] me as a gay man in the sense that she is fine about – she is all accepting, and she has acknowledged my sexuality...she doesn't care anymore about my sexuality for that matter. Then she knows how I want to lead my life and she is understanding enough to be supportive when it's needed and yeah, that's about it. (sic)

In contrast to Rajiv who was calm about his mother's acknowledging his sexual identity, Suyash (Indian, b.1995) was exuberant and ecstatic while describing this acknowledgment. He said:

Way more than accepts, [my mom] celebrates it... She is not ashamed, she is not shy, she is very proud of what I am... She's okay with talking about it everywhere as well because everyone in her family, she's the eldest, she has three sisters, they know about it. Their husbands know about it, their children know about it, and everyone like treats me very normally, nothing different. So, she's talking about it, she is proud of it, she's not ashamed of it.

While "talking" was a keyword in all these acknowledgment narratives, a few of my respondents, especially Americans, felt accepted by the non-verbal ways of acknowledgment. Edwin (American, b.1986), for example, felt accepted by his mother for putting his picture with his husband on her cellphone background and on her work desk along with a collection of several other family pictures. For Edwin, this acceptance stemmed from the fact that his mother did not hesitate to *show* her coworkers that her son was gay. David (American, b.1982) said that his mother accepted him "in her own way" through actions that explicated his sexual identity. She invited David and his husband to all family gatherings. She was also present in David's wedding and had seen the pictures of his marriage posted on the social media. David, however, also recognized the importance of acknowledging sexual identity verbally and did not give his mother full points for acceptance. He felt that his mother showed "modified acceptance," whereas "full acceptance," according to him, was the explicit acknowledgment and affirmation that the "moms" of HBO series *Queer as Folk* showed. David viewed these characters as "super pro-gay moms" and idealized them as epitomizing full parental acceptance.



Bob (American, b.1991), however, differed on David's views of "modified acceptance." He did not feel any need for the acknowledgment of his sexual identity by his parents. He said:

I view acceptance as kind of like [my parents] treat it as if it's part of a norm, it's no different than – my marriage is no different than my sister's marriage. My career is no different than my sister's career and I view it as kind of just acceptance equals normal, and *they don't even need to acknowledge it* because what's there to acknowledge? [My parents] really don't even make mention of it all day at all really, almost it's my mom sending like an article or news thing about some laws or what not, but we don't even talk about that too much, it's not an elephant in the room. I don't, I think they're just becoming, that's just become part of their life (emphasis added).

In Bob's case, his parents' considering him as equally valuable as his sister in terms of marriage and career choices was their *silent* acceptance. Bob also felt accepted when his mother sent him articles and news items on gay-affirmative court rulings. The experiences of Edwin, Bob, and David give an important insight that acceptance may stem from the non-verbal, or even no, acknowledgment of gay men's sexuality. While most gay men that I talked with appreciated verbal acknowledgements, these few gay men were appreciative of the silent cues of acknowledgment or affirmation from their parents.

More data may be needed, but from what I have got, it seems that this "silent acceptance" applied more for American men than for Indian ones. Indian respondents insisted more on verbal acknowledgment. I asked Sudheer (Indian, b.1961) if he thought that verbal acknowledgment was important for Indian gay men. Sudheer has been working as a leading gay activist in India for several decades. He has extensive experience of working with families of gay people, and he coordinates a community of parents of gay people in Mumbai. Sudheer believed that the

insistence for verbal acknowledgment was a way for millennial and Generation Z gay men to raise the bar of acceptance that was achieved by their older counterparts. He said:

I would say that many [young gay men]... today are now pushing the envelope. They are kind of saying that okay, so I need *acknowledgement*. Like people *talking* to their parents and getting them into [our parents'] group, getting partnered, and then *acknowledgement* of the partner—it is like pushing acceptance to the next level which is what they've started doing now... *So, yeah, the youth today is asking for more.* (emphasis added)

Sudheer saw an intergenerational change among Indian gay men whereby millennial and Gen Z gay men had been asking verbal acknowledgment from their parents far more than the Gen X and baby boomers did. Bob, Edward, and David felt accepted by the non-verbal acknowledgment, or the “silent” acceptance, of their sexuality. The views from Indian, and most American, gay men show that acknowledging gay men’s sexuality by talking had been their way of understanding acceptance for them.

### **2.1.1 | Unquestioning or conversing on private life?**

When do gay men feel more accepted—when their parents remain discrete and unquestioning on how they experience their sexuality or when they take an active interest in knowing their son’s experiences of sex, dating, or relationship? This interesting question became a criterion of acceptance for many gay men. This question, however, also divided them into two camps. The first camp wanted parents to remain more discrete about their gay son’s private life and sexual identity, whereas the second one was more enthusiastic to have these conversations with parents.

*The first camp*

Here is my conversation with Anirban (Indian, b.1976) on how he understood parental acceptance:

Apoorva: So, tell me, how do you understand acceptance? What are the few criteria that would make you feel accepted by your parents?

Anirban: That the same for heterosexual couples. How will you accept that? Same way.

Apoorva: Can you give me examples? What are the different ways of accepting that you—which would have made you feel accepted?

Anirban: No questions, number one. Number one is no questioning.

Apoorva: No questions about what?

Respondent: About anything. It's my private life. We two are together. That's it.

Anirban was very clear that to be accepted, he wanted no questions from his parents on how he experienced his sexuality with a man. Avery was of the similar view except that his concern was more about his father's comfort than his own. He felt happy that his father met his boyfriend, and he knew who he was, but it was very normal for them to not talk about how they were doing together. He said:

And at this point, [my father has] met my boyfriend. He's cool with it. He talks to me about different – I mean he talks to me about whatever. It's not a thing to him at this morning. It's who I am. I've never been very open to him about who I date because of that. So, I think it's normal for [him] to just not continue to not talk to me about it... But I would agree that he was waiting for me to say something so that he could at least be willing to learn more about me, right? Then once I told him, he's -- yeah, I agree. I've come to learn that he's much more progressive, progressively thinking than my mom is.

For Avery, his father's not talking to him about his private life did not make him an orthodox person. Instead, he believed that his father was progressive and accepting. Harry (American, b.1959) had the same view. He felt discomfited by the idea that his mother might imagine him having sex with his husband if she talked to Harry about his private life. When I asked him how he understood acceptance, he replied:

In my opinion, what my body does sexually, [my mom would have] nothing to do with [that], in my life, me having sex with them. You know, it shouldn't matter [to my mom] like my older sister said to one of my other sisters "oh, I just hate to think about what he does in bed." And the other sister said, "oh, my God, why are you thinking about what he does in bed. That's a little bit perverse." She said "do you think about what my husband and I do in bed." Well, no, well, then why do you think about what your brother does in bed. See, I have a good family, I have other sisters who defend me against my older sister. And my brother doesn't care at all.

Harry's understanding of a "good family" comprised of an unquestioning attitude from his mother about his sexual life that he contrasted with his older sister's questioning attitude towards how he might be performing sex. Likewise, Mahesh (Indian, b.1990), too, felt accepted for not being questioned about his sexuality or who he dated or met with. Manoj (Indian, b.1970) was one of the few gay men I talked with who never came out his parents, but he was confident that his parents knew about his sexual identity. When I asked him, what made him confident of his parents about knowing his sexual identity, he responded:

My parents, as a matter of fact—my father, they are educated people, so I'm quite sure that they know, I mean I'm not a young boy or something. So, you know, they put—they managed to put, I think, two and two together, it's a kind of a situation where we haven't

spoken about it. I haven't told them, but I think they know... They don't insist on asking anything about my personal life; they do not interfere, so they have—I'm seeing somebody since the last 12 years. And they have met this person on several occasions at even family or get-together, he's together with me. So, I think you have to be extremely stupid not to know what's going on there.

Manoj felt that his parents accepted his sexual identity by meeting with his partner, but they never questioned about him or his relationship with Manoj. That made Manoj feel accepted. Like Manoj, Sripad (Indian, b.1991) also wanted his parents to meet his partner, but further conversations would make him uncomfortable. He said, “if my parents are happy after meeting my partner, then we're happy too... *Not big dialogues* [though,], I don't expect big dialogues, but then this is fine. *This will work wonders actually*” (emphases added). Clearly, Sripad preferred that his parents do not engage in extensive conversations with him and his partner.

Mayank (Indian, b.1993), too, felt very uncomfortable with the idea of talking. Like Harry, he felt hounded by the question of “what two men might do on the bed” if he struck a conversation on his personal life with his parents. His response to my question, on what would make him feel accepted by his parents, was:

I don't want to tell [my parents] *what kind of a sexual preference do I have on bed*, I mean nobody has any business with that. So, I would not like to tell them, I mean if they're very much interested then I would tell them, that's not a big deal. (emphasis added)

Indirectly though, Mayank told me that no personal conversations with his parents made him feel accepted. Like how Harry anticipated, Mayank, too, felt that a conversation with his parents on his sexuality could bring up the question of what role he generally performed while having sex with his partner—an active or a passive one? This question was uncomfortable for him, and

hence, acceptance to him meant that he and his parents avoided questions about his relationships and sexuality as far as possible. A non-conversational attitude may also help in avoiding conflicts or arguments about sexuality in the family. Udit (Indian, b.1993), for example, felt accepted by his father because he did not fight, protest, or strike any conversation with Udit on who he “met” with and whether he should continue “meeting” gay men.

Some gay men may perceive a quieter relationship with their parents as getting a more “personal space” to pursue their lives. Ujjwal (Indian, b.1990) is one of them. When I asked him how he understood acceptance, he replied:

[My mom] gives me a *total space*... I would define [total space] in a way that she never double questions me. She asks me, “where you are going,” “whom are you dating,” or “who’s this guy.” But she never over questions me like to why or – so she gives me a *total space* of leading my life. She had even caught me with guys where I was like literally kissing the guy or something. She has never questioned me for that, “why you were doing” or why or anything. So, she has completely given me understanding of the fact that yeah, even a gay [man] or even my son has that sexual needs and all, so it’s completely fine. Even I have dated guys—she has never questioned me about anything. (emphasis added)

Ujjwal did not mind getting preliminary questions on his dating partners but he appreciated that his answers did not yield follow-up questions. He felt that his mother’s non-questioning attitude gave him a “total space” of living his life in his own way, which made him feel accepted.

### *The second camp*

I will now examine the second camp of gay men who felt that having personal conversations with parents was affirming and showed them acceptance. Avery wanted his mother to ask and talk about his partner and their relationship. He felt rejected when his mother avoided that topic

or talked about his relationship without referring to its same-sex nature. Adrian's (American, b.1982) mother differed from Avery's on this aspect. Her interest in Adrian's dating life made Adrian feel accepted. When I asked him, how he understood acceptance, he replied:

She'll ask about who I'm dating, or she'll ask like, "Who are you seeing?" And...if she could not wrap her mind around it, then she wouldn't even ask the question or broach the subject. So just her asking, "Who are you seeing? Are you dating anyone?"...Or, she would ask, "What did you do this weekend?" I'd say, "Oh, I went and hung out with friends at so and so bar. And she would say, "What kind of bar is that?" And I was like, "It's just a gay bar." And she'd be like, "Oh, okay."... If I am seeing someone, she'll ask about them. She wants to know about them. She wants to make sure they're good enough for her son...

Adrian understood his mother's acceptance through her curiosity about his relationships and how he spent his weekend. Russ (American, b.1959) felt accepted when his parents did not show an attitude of "let's not talk about his relationships." He felt that his parents' welcoming nature and talking about his partners created an open and honest relationship with his parents. Wayne (American, b.1992) felt that way too. For him, acceptance stemmed from his observation that his parents did not shy away from conversations on him and his partner. He said:

My parents are eloquent to me as my partner, my friends, and they were there at my wedding and spoke for my wedding. They took active interest in my life in what I do and so much of my clinical success is focused on treating queer folks and trans and binary sex that...if you want to talk to me about what I'm doing in my life then they hear about sexuality to some extent like there's no way to keep that [away] – yeah, I think it was the active interest in how I'm doing, what happened to my husband being engaged, being

connected, not shying away from conversations that are hard to talk to them or better about my identity or my experience, right.

According to Lester (American, b.1980), parents that avoid conversations on their gay son's relationships do not fully accept them. Like Adrian, he felt accepted by his parents when they welcomed his dates on Christmas, gave him gifts, and engaged in active conversations with them. William (American, b.1976), too, felt accepted by his parents through conversations on his dating life.

Indian gay men joined this camp as well, but the topics they sought parental conversations on were not exclusively on sex, dating, and relationships. Jagrit (Indian, b.1989) expressed his father's inquisitiveness about his sexual identity as an indication of his acceptance. Jagrit said:

At least having *conversations* with me about [my sexuality] and trying to educate yourself about it more -- I guess that would count definitely as acceptance... [My father] was the most inquisitive of all [my family members]. He would actually ask me questions about oh, is this how, it is, or is it how, it is not, and everything, and all of that stuff. Not to like a very high extent...but that would be like time and time again he would be inquisitive, oh, so yeah, he does *acknowledge*, he does tell me... I think me and my dad have had the most amount of *conversations* amongst anybody in the family aside from my cousins and everything.

I think, and talking about my immediate family, my mom *never* had a conversation with me about anything of that sort, my brother *never* really bothered to ask me much. She has to tell me, or I mean I don't also want to ask her, I don't know what I want to ask her. I mean I can't go up and tell her like "mom, do you accept me?" I mean, I don't even know where the *conversation* would begin, I mean she rose her hands back in 2015, it's 2019 now, I still



don't know, I really don't. My dad [has] *definitely* accepted me as a gay man, he has.

(emphases added)

Clearly, Jagrit felt accepted by his father because he was conversant and inquisitive about his sexual identity and not by his mother because she was not. Like Jagrit, Purab (Indian, b.1982) also understood acceptance as being able to have a “heart-to-heart” conversation on his dating relationships with his father. Although he felt that his father could not understand several important aspects of his relationship, his mere willingness to talk about it made Purab feel accepted.

Sayan (Indian, b.1993) broadened the canvas of conversations further. Sayan felt accepted by his mother's willingness to hear about his LGBTQ friends, how they spent time together, as well as his feelings about being gay. When I asked how he understood acceptance, he said:

I can say [to my mother] whatever I want to say. I can be with my friends who are from the “community” whether straight, gay, lesbian whatever. I can roam with everyone, I can talk with everyone, I can spend time with everyone, even I can share each and every feeling with my mother. The main thing is that I can share everything with my mom whether it is related to our [LGBTQ] community or not. I can share everything, my feeling, my thought, my life everything, my journey whatever.

For Sayan, free conversations with his mother about his social circle of LGBTQ friends made him feel accepted. For a few others, their mother's emotional support and counselling on dating behaviors made them feel accepted. For example, after Bento (Indian, b.1991) came out to his parents, his mother often inquired about his feelings and how was he doing. When Bento felt demoralized, she boosted his morale. When I asked how he understood acceptance, Bento replied:

First of all, the phase that I was going through, she started supporting me in an emotional way. She started knowing me better. I mean she started—she asked me like, “What's going on? How is your day? What kind of thoughts are coming in your mind?” And I used to say that I'm feeling that I should go ahead and die or something like that. She was like, “No. You don't need to die.”

There's one more thing which was going on apparently with my breakup as well. And she was like, “See, if someone is going out from your life, it doesn't mean that you should go ahead and end your life.” So that acceptance, I was feeling because of her support, because if she didn't accept me, then that support doesn't come. It was not a [pretentious] thing. It was like she wanted me to...feel secured. Yeah.

And it was coming from her emotions. That was a warm support. It was not [a pretentious] support... She cared for me even after knowing my sexuality...*Don't you think that the emotional support is...what we want when we come out?* I mean, other things are not important at that time. The emotional support and [your] getting that feeling that someone is there who will understand you, that was more important. (emphasis added)

Bento's pleading to me to validate his understanding of acceptance as his mother's emotional support for him said it all. Kartik (Indian, b.1993), too, understood acceptance through his mother's emotional support. She often advised Kartik to keep himself “safe” while meeting men through social media and dating apps. He said:

I think she has been accepting, like now if I'm going to date a guy like if I'm going to meet someone I think that after I came out to her, she always makes sure of one point...She tells me, “whomever you meet, whatever you do you—be in a very ‘safe zone.’” [meet with a safe person]. So, I think these words of her telling me [makes me feel accepted].

So, [whosoever] you're meeting they shouldn't make use of you, or they shouldn't cause a problem in your life in some manner because they're not like your school friends or your college friends...She is just...concerned that...every individual on social media...might look good but there might be fake people too. So, she's like if you're meeting so many individuals you have to see who you're meeting are not fake people.

Kartik felt accepted by his mother through her counselling him on safer dating practices. Kartik felt blessed because he did not know any gay friends who talked about their dating behaviors so freely with their parents. He felt fortunate to have a guide that constructively monitored his dating experiences with unknown men.

Broadly, the interviews show that conversations on dating and same-sex relationships with parents can construe rejection to some gay men but acceptance to others. Anirban, Avery, Harry, Mahesh, Manoj, Mayank, Sripad, Udit, and Ujjwal belong to the first camp that preferred no or limited questioning about their sexuality from their parents. The second camp that felt accepted by these conversations included Adrian, Avery, Jagrit, Ken, Purab, Russ, Sayan, Suyash, and Wayne. On one extreme was Adrian who perceived acceptance through his mother's asking questions about his relationship. On the other extreme was Anirban for whom no questions on how he spent time with his partner was his way of understanding acceptance.

The views explicated so far show that gay men have often understood acceptance through the acknowledgment of their sexuality by their parents. Most of them preferred verbal expressions and conversations, but a few did not—they preferred normalizing actions from their parents over conversations. There might be several possible reasons for this variation. One that emerges from the literature is that gay men often carry internalized homophobia, meaning negative attitudes towards oneself for being gay (Allen and Olsen, 1999). Internalized homophobia can be found

among closeted, as well as out, gay men (Frost and Meyer, 2009). Research shows that gay men with internalized homophobia may feel uncomfortable by the direct acknowledgment of their sexuality (e.g., D'Augelli and Grossman, 2005; Weber-Gilmore, et al., 2011). Gay men with internalized homophobia, therefore, may feel rejected when their parents verbally acknowledge them as gay. They may, instead, prefer normalizing actions or silence from their parents to feel accepted. This tendency might be true for men like Avery and Ken as well who applied their acknowledgment-as-acceptance model exclusively to other gay men.

## **2.2 | Accepting the significant other**

For a long time, Thomas has been wanting me to meet some of his friends. I told him, "I accept you. I love you just as much as I did before, but I want no part of your gay life, I don't want to meet your gay friends, and if you have a lover, don't tell me about it."

-A gay man's mother in Borhek (1993, p.269)

The last section examined how gay men felt accepted through their parents' acknowledgment of, and supporting, homosexuality. Being gay can also involve being in a committed relationship with a male partner or a husband as the significant other. Samarova, Shilo, and Diamond (2014) observe that gay men feel accepted when their parents meet with their significant others and considering them a part of their family. Therefore, parental acceptance is bi-faceted. It involves accepting a gay men's sexual identity as well as their significant others.

Griffin, Wirth, and Wirth (1986) and Silverstein (1977) noted that the stability of gay men's intimate relationships can bond them stronger with their parents. Parental acceptance of gay men's significant others makes numerous financial and social benefits accessible to gay men that parents generally extend to their children after their marriage (Serovich et al., 1993). This

acceptance often stems from parents' views that a committed relationship matures their son and stabilizes his life, as identified by Diamond and Shpigel (2014).

Research shows that parents who have accepted their gay son's significant other may be predisposed to do so. Although they would generally follow heteronormativity like other parents do, certain exposures in their lives can warm them to their own son's same-sex family. For example, Gorman-Murray (2008) found that parents are more likely to accept their gay son's significant other if they have already had friendship with gay couples in their extended family or friendship circles. According to Trussel, et al. (2015), parents may also be influenced by movies and soap operas like *The Family Stone* which idealize gay couples as part of the mainstream. As a result, they can feel motivated to accept their own gay son's significant other. Gay men can also make use of the family leisure opportunities like vacations and outings to integrate their significant others with their families.

In contrast, some parent's relationship with their gay son may worsen if he commits to a man. My interviews show that this is especially true for parents, like those of John (American, b.1969) and Anirban (Indian, b.1973), who bear rigid heteronormative religious or social views on families. John's parents rejected his partner because of their biblical views, and Anirban's parents did that because of their social views. John and Anirban felt that, in addition to rejecting their partners, their parents would reject their children as well if they had any. Because they both were rejected by their parents, they did not trust their parents to accept another gay man and a child raised in relationship with him.

This section talks about the other set of parents who accepted, or would accept, their gay son's significant other. I examine how they did so. Particularly, I show that gay men often felt that their parents either fully or partially accepted their significant others. The perceptions of full

acceptance were created in the minds of gay men through their parents' giving gifts to their significant others and including them in the holidays and social rituals. They acknowledged their son's significant other as a part of the family, or as their son-in-law, through these rituals. Gay men also felt acceptance for their significant others by their parents talking to them on the phone or on social media. When gay men co-parented with their significant others, their parents often became more respectful and appreciative of the couple, thus making perceptions of acceptance stronger in the minds of gay men.

Gay men often perceived parental acceptance for their significant others to be partial when their parents welcomed them but did not acknowledge their relationship with their sons as much. Gay men who did not formalize their relationship with a significant other through a wedding or a commitment ceremony often felt that the acceptance of their significant other in the family was partial.

### **2.2.1 | Full acceptance**

In order to feel accepted, most gay men wanted their partners to be acknowledged and integrated into their family. Udit (Indian, b.1993) and Zubin (Indian, b.1997), for example, said that they would consider their parents accepting if they accepted their future partner. Udit said that his parents being "fine" with him as an unmarried and unpartnered gay man did not constitute acceptance.

Miles (American, b.1991) felt accepted when his parents showed eagerness to meet his partner and welcomed him with "open arms" to their family. For Mayank (Indian, b.1993) parental acceptance meant that if he were to have a partner, his parents would acknowledge him and treat him like a son-in-law just how they treated their daughter's husband. In 2019 when I interviewed

him, he was hoping that the Supreme Court ruling of October 2018 which decriminalized homosexuality would help in the acceptance of his future partner.

Edwin (American, b.1986) felt fortunate that his mother had accepted his partner. At the time of the interview, Edwin was living with his husband of 15 years. Edwin felt that his mother was quite involved in his life and relationships from the beginning. When Edwin and his husband moved in, they lived with Edwin's mother for a while before getting their first apartment together and becoming homeowners. Edwin further said:

That, to me, also the recognition of my family choices, my choice to make a family and the fact that she accepts and loves my choice in a partner I think to me is a big deal when it comes to acceptance because, like I say, I'm a mama's boy. *So, I probably wouldn't be in a relationship that she completely did not approve of* but she definitely, she loves my husband just like she gave birth to him too. (emphasis added)

The above quote shows that Edwin was sensitive to what his mother would accept. He was reticent to experience his sexuality by crossing the boundaries of his mom's comfort. Jeevan (Indian, b.1992), too, felt accepted though his parents' acceptance of his partner. When I asked him how he understood parental acceptance, he delightfully shared that his mother insisted him to bring his partner Tejas along in family events. Jeevan also felt accepted by his father for introducing Tejas as Jeevan's partner in his college reunion. Clearly, Jeevan's parents had accepted Tejas in settings that involved their friends and relatives. Jeevan further said:

And my parents meeting my partner's parents to discuss the fact that we should have a future and we should have a plan and we should get married if not here then somewhere else and things like that [constitute acceptance for me]. So, taking that effort, you know, it was not required for them to meet my partner's parents. But then my partner's parents were

insisting that they wanted to meet my parents. So, I told my mom and then my mom told my dad and then my dad said “okay, fine, call them for lunch.” And then they had lunch and then they discussed the two of us. And then after a point of time it was more about bitching and gossiping about their respective sons, about how “horrible” they are. And the other side countering that with saying no, no, they’re good, they’re nice. I’ve seen them doing this. You know, there was no difference, *it was like a heterosexual parental meet* (emphasis added).

Jeevan felt excited by the friendly *homonormative* atmosphere where his and Tejas’ families discussed both men. The homonormativity of this meeting hinged on how normally their parents met as if they were discussing their son’s marriage with a woman. Pre-affinal family meetings like these are practiced commonly in India to arrange marriages. Jeevan’s case exemplified that within the homonormative boundary, his parents valued his sexuality as much as they valued heterosexuality. The next chapter will detail the analytical role played by homonormativity in parental acceptance.

### *Gift giving*

Gift-giving is often a way of affirming the expectations of familial bonds that cannot be taken for granted (Caplow 1982). Unconventional familial relationships can be accepted and strengthened by exchanging gifts. This was true for lesbian couples in Iceland who were accepted by their families through exchanging gifts (Einarsdóttir, 2016). Likewise, other family rituals, such as going on vacations, holiday meals, and the rites of passage, can also offer opportunities of family integration to gay couples (Hanke, et al., 2016).

Gay men whom I interviewed strongly confirmed the role of rituals and celebratory gifts in the parental acceptance of gay men’s significant others. When gay couples participated in these



rituals, their chances of being accepted in the family became stronger. We already saw that Harry's mother showed acceptance by wanting to include his partner in her family's Christmas gifts. Sean (American, b.1958), too, felt accepted as a gay man when his parents treated his partner Jacob like a son-in-law. Jacob received the same birthday cards and the \$10 gifts from Sean's parents that Sean's brothers-in-law and sisters-in-law got.

Likewise, Adrian's (American, b.1982) mother accepted his partner by getting him a birthday gift. Adrian said:

What really made me feel accepted was the first time—and this wasn't Christmas. This was somewhere—oh, this was around [my partner] Tim's birthday. And I had mentioned it was Tim's birthday. And my mom said, “Well, what should I get him?” And that made me accepted in that because she wouldn't have asked that, or she wouldn't have gotten him anything if she didn't accept me being gay in the first place. (sic)

Adrian perceived his mother's wanting to give his partner Tim a birthday gift as her acceptance of Tim, and therefore his own acceptance as a gay man. Likewise, Keith (American, b.1978) felt that his parents accepted his partner Joe as a family member. He believed so because his parents brought Joe Christmas presents, and they also had sent birthday cards to him and his parents.

Gift-giving defined acceptance for Indian gay men as well. Rahul (Indian, b.1964), for example, felt rejected by his parents who never gave any gifts to his partners. He felt dismayed that his parents never gave any gift to his partner, although they did that to their son- and daughter-in-law. Rahul said,

[My parents] would not gift a gold bracelet or a gold chain [to my partner] which they had gifted to my brother-in-law. Or, they [had] given an expensive saree to my sister-in-law or something. They would not – *see, in Indian families one of the times acceptance or*

*recognition [occurs] is when you give them a gift. Again, it kind of sounds very trivial but it's very important.* So, in fact, recently one of my best friend's mother gifted his boyfriend a Bengali dhoti—a traditional dhoti—and he was like absolutely ecstatic. And it signifies that the mother finally kind of really accepted the partner as kind of a son-in-law. But in my case, no, that never happened. Like my parents never gifted my partner anything. [In that] instance, I was sure that [my parents' acceptance of me] was not at the same level.

(emphases added)

The above quote shows that in Rahul's family, and in Indian families, gifting gold or traditional clothes is generally a way of accepting or recognizing a relationship. Rahul felt rejected as a gay man when his partner did not get any of these gifts from his parents.

In another part of the interview, Rahul had said,

I think one of the problems—which I really think is a problem in India even now [is] introducing your partner...to your parents. They begin to think that [this relationship] is permanent. So, there are many, many cases where I've spoken to parents where they've been very devastated or disappointed when their son's relationship broke down... My parents had met my second partner more because I was with him for eight years and he eventually married an American guy (laughs). [Their pictures] are all over on [x- a social media platform]. So, he's married to an American and they have a child, and [my parents] just met him more often.

The above quote shows that for Rahul's parents, the permanence of a committed conjugal relationship, whether heterosexual or homosexual, was of paramount importance. Traditional Hindu marriages between men and women ensured this permanence far more than gay partnerships did. Rahul had been with several long-term term partners in his life course. While serial monogamy is more common and often accepted in the US, Rahul's parents did not highly

affirm this lifestyle. Rahul's quote suggests that his parents were left in a bad taste about gay relationships especially when his second partner left him to marry an American national and fathered a child with him. As a result, Rahul's parents did not accept his partners as much as they had accepted their heterosexual children-in-law.

### *Holidays*

Holidays involve several family rituals like dining, vacationing, and traveling that give parents opportunity to accept their gay son's significant other. Sean (American, b.1958) felt accepted by his parents for including his partner Jacob in family holidays like a son-in-law. Todd (American, b.1975) felt delighted that his partner was invited to go on family trips with him. He particularly remembered visiting his grandmother in Philippines with his partner. His partner met his mother's extended family and felt welcomed like a family member.

Caldaron (American, 47) was surprisingly delighted on an Easter holiday. When he was not available to see his parents on Easter, his mother still invited his husband Ken to their family lunch. He said:

When I talk to my mom and my dad, you know it's like, how is Ken doing? You know they'll ask about Ken. They – a good example is I actually was out of town last week, I didn't get home 'til late Sunday night, so I didn't go to my mom's house, it was Easter. And, my mom had a big Easter lunch prepared, so for her to call Ken Saturday and say, I know that [Caldaron] isn't going to be here that doesn't mean you can't come over. You need to come over, *you are family*. Come have Easter lunch with us.

And, for him to be able to go even though I wasn't there, you know that's definitely huge, you know, sign of acceptance for me to, you know, that step. And that was like the first time

because I'm always here that, you know, I've been to – there's been events with my parents that he's gone without me. (emphasis added)

For Caldaron, his mother's personal invitation to Ken for the Easter lunch meant that she accepted Ken as a family member. Like gifts and holiday meals, vacations and traditions can also help parents in accepting gay men's significant others. Manuel (American, b.1963) recalled his family's new year celebration for Y2K, the year 2000. To give a background, his parents lived in Orlando, FL. In the bicentennial anniversary of the United States in 1976, Orlando became very crowded with tourists, and Manuel's father was exasperated by the unavailability of rooms in the Disneyland hotel at Orlando. They had to drive an hour away to Tampa and Daytona Beach to spend their vacation. This experience motivated Manuel's father to make a super-advanced reservation for the next important event, which he thought was the end of the millennium, the new year eve of 1999. He made a reservation for three suites from December 26, 1999 to January 3, 2000 in the Disneyland hotel, one for him and his wife and the other two for his two sons, one of which was Manuel, and their future wives. In the new year eve of 1999, Manuel did not have a wife or a girlfriend. Instead, he had a partner named Gary whom he was dating for eight years. Manuel's father said to him, "Well, Gary and you will get your room." Manuel felt that by saying this, his father accepted Gary as a family member.

On a later occasion, when Manuel was married to Gary, Manuel's father suggested that Gary could also be a part of the family for the last rites. Manuel's father wanted the mortal remains of his family members after cremation to be put in one urn, and he suggested that Gary could be cremated and be in that urn as well. Manuel felt that by including Gary in this family ritual, his father accepted him.

*Talking on phone*

Like gift-giving and holidaying, other family practices can also help parents accept their gay son's significant other. Especially when gay men live away from their parents, their significant others can serve as a bridge between them and their parents. Telephones can help them play this role. David (American, b.1982) lives in Washington DC on the other side of the coast to that of his parents' who live in Santa Ana, CA. David had been living away from his parents for 15 years, and David's mother often reached out to his partner Carl to know her son's whereabouts, who according to her, was very busy to talk to her. David's mother often talked with Carl on phone. According to David, both had become good friends and they often talked and texted each other.

For David, Caldaron, Harry, and Luis, telephones served as instruments that forge familial bonds. For example, Luis (American, b.1978) felt accepted by his mother through her calling on his fiancé Jack on the phone. He recalled an instance when Jack had returned from his school in Connecticut to spend his winter break at Luis' mother's home. Luis' mother was away when Jack was scheduled to arrive, and she had expected Jack to call on her upon his arrival. When he didn't, she called on him. When she could not reach Jack, she left an anxious message on Luis' voicemail asking him to reach out to Jack. Although this was a very minor incident, it made Luis feel that she accepted Jack as his significant other and a member of the family. She had neither called on any of Luis' previous partners nor had shown much eagerness about them. For Luis, his mother's calling on Jack was a "big step" toward accepting him. Her getting upset, by not getting a call from Jack and being not able to reach him either, delighted Luis. For Luis, this construed his mother's acceptance of Jack and him.

In the digital age, social media can also serve the same role that telephones do. Luis' mother used a couple of social media platforms that connected her with Luis and Jack. David's mother

often comments on the pictures of David and his partner, or “liked” them with a “heart” emoji, which according to David, was her way of accepting David and his partner.

### *Becoming a father*

When gay men co-father a child with their significant others, their child, too can shape their perceptions of parental acceptance. Gay fathers often think about how their parents would treat their child, and whether having a child would strengthen their familial bond. David and his partner did not have a child, but to feel accepted, he expected his mother to love their future child as much as she loved her other grandchildren. Eshan (Indian, b.1989) wanted that in addition to accepting his marriage with his partner, his parents should accept his future child as well. In 2019, he was planning to marry a man and becoming a father through adoption in the next five to six years.

Gay men, who were raising a child with their significant other, concurred that parental acceptance encompassed accepting their children as well. When I asked Matias (American, b.1979) how he understood acceptance, he immediately referenced his daughter. He said:

I mean they just – I don’t know, it’s just weird like they always asked me how, what’s up for now, I mean we have a daughter now. So, I have a daughter too so they’re more – I don’t know, they treat me like they would treat anybody else...So that’s how I know that they’re okay with it.

Matias wanted to incorporate his daughter in his understanding of acceptance, but I found him struggling on words to express a coherent definition of parental acceptance. Matias had adopted his older brother’s daughter under difficult circumstances. He and his partner Dylan were raising her as their own child. Therefore, Matias’ parents warmed up to Dylan for enthusiastically

sharing this responsibility with Matias. Therefore, Matias said, “in some ways now my partner, my husband, kind of gets more attention [from my parents] than I do,” and he chuckled.

In Caldaron’s case, the process of adopting a child brought him and his partner closer to his parents. When Caldaron (American, b.1972) and his husband were adopting a child, Calderon’s parents participated in the interviews. Their involvement brought the family together. Caldaron felt that bringing a child to their family helped his parents to accept the couple as a part of their big family. Becoming a father is a key moment in contextualizing parental acceptance which will be examined in more detail in the next chapter.

### **2.2.2 | Partial Acceptance**

We saw that the definition of acceptance evolves when gay men bring a significant other to their lives. According to Serovich et al. (1993), parents often experience two major obstacles in integrating their gay son’s significant other into their family. *One* is the lack of appropriate terms to define him. A “partner” connotes such formal meanings as “business partner,” without suggesting intimacy. The term “lover” may sound too casual or even illicit for a committed relationship. If the couple is married, references to “his” husband may be even more discomfiting to parents. The *second* obstacle concerns parents’ discomfort with their son’s public display of affection to his significant other. Parents may feel more uncomfortable with the public display of intimacy between their son and a male significant other. This is because the intimacy with a male partner signifies, in addition to their son's transitioning to an adult, a departure from the normative sexual behaviors with which parents are familiar with and had envisioned for their son (Serovich et al., 1993).

Freedman (2008) and Mattison and McWhirter (1995) observe that in some families, when gay men are unpartnered or their sexual lives are concealed from their parents, their parents may feel

comforted by avoiding any direct confrontation with their son's sexuality. These parents accept their gay son when he is single but may feel perplexed when he finds a significant other and expects his parents to include him in the family. Works like Hickey and Grafsky (2017) and van Bergen and Spiegel (2014), however, show that parents generally hesitate to explicitly reject their son's significant other because doing so could hurt the family bond. Therefore, not all parents would accept their gay son's partner as enthusiastically as parents of Adrian, Ben, Caldaron, Derek, Edwin, Harry, and Jeevan did. How would such parents treat their son's significant other? And would gay men perceive this treatment as acceptance?

Several gay men that I talked with answered these questions. They often perceive parental acceptance to be partial in nature when their parents were civil and welcoming to their gay son's significant other but did not accept him as a family member or like a son-in-law. Rohit (Indian, b.1959) delightfully shared that his parents welcomed his partner Rajneesh at home, and everyone knew that they had been living together for 18 years. In his last few years, Rohit's father had bonded with Rajneesh quite well as they shared common interests in yoga and spiritualism. He had become exclusively fond of spending time with Rajneesh because his other family members did not share his interests. Rohit told me enthusiastically how much his father enjoyed spending his evening time with Rajneesh:

My father died last year and towards the last couple of years, my father had, in fact, bonded a lot with my boyfriend because my boyfriend had suddenly gone into yoga and spiritualism of late and since my father was into spiritualism, he would always call him and talk to him aside and he thought we were like the disinterested people, so he would kind of exclude us from those conversations and he would have these private conversations with my boyfriend which I suppose very nice, they really bonded well towards the end and my boyfriend really loved those evenings and enjoyed being with my father.



However, Rohit had to introduce Rajneesh as a close friend to his family who would not accept a male significant other for Rohit. Rohit, though, believed that his parents knew about this relationship. Rajneesh often felt uncomfortable to accompany Rohit to his family events, and he tried to decline as many invitations as he could. Rajneesh's relationship with Rohit looked ambiguous in those events because as a "friend." So, he was not formally a part of Rohit's family.

Likewise, Anirban's (Indian, b.1973) parents permitted him to bring his partner home, but they considered him as Anirban's "best friend" and not his significant other. They also insisted Anirban not to share critical information about their family, such as those on finances and extended familial relationships, with his partner. This insistence made Anirban feel that his parents considered his partner a visitor and not a part of their family. Like Anirban, Eshan (Indian, b.1989) also felt that his parents would welcome his partner at home but would not accept his relationship or marriage, either privately or publicly. Eshan felt that this non-acknowledgment was a "hurdle" to parental acceptance.

Charles (American, b.1977) felt that way too. When I asked whether he wanted his parents to accept his partner as a part of their family and not as his friend, he responded:

It's interesting you bring that up because the partner who I was with for 13 years, [my parents] really didn't fully—they were respectful to him. And I would say they met my earlier definition of accepting him. There was no fights or challenges or anything.

But I definitely didn't feel like he was welcomed into the family with the same bigger and open arms and love as my brother's girlfriends and later wives were welcomed into our family. My oldest brother is ten years older. And my middle brother is seven years older. So, I had the benefit of watching how my parents and how the family reacted to them coupling up

and bringing home of their partner and with immediately open arms and, “Let's look at baby pictures. We're so glad you guys got together.”

Charles' earlier definition of acceptance pertained to his sexuality not causing any feud in the family. My probing produced the above example which broadened his canvas of acceptance through his understanding of whether his parents accepted his partner as well. In the above quote, Charles also made a comparison between how the spouses of his heterosexual siblings were treated like a family whereas his partner was not. In cases like Anirban, Rohit, and Charles, parents may welcome their gay son's partner at home, but they may still treat them as outsiders.

Avery (American, b.1991), too, felt his acceptance partial when it came to his dating relationships. He felt nice about being able to discuss them with his mother but also felt disappointed for his mother's not acknowledging their same-sex nature. He said:

When I have issues with my boyfriend or with other -- like when I was dating other people, I would talk to her about it. And she wouldn't acknowledge the fact that it was a man, but she would talk about it as if it were just a relationship problem, which it was. So, in that sense, yeah [, she accepted my relationships]. But I think ultimately, my mom's never going to really deal with it. I think she's going to brush it off as something that's not a part of her life and it's just something that she has to deal with when I'm around. That's what it feels like at least.

Avery seemed to have understood that although his mother supported his relationships, she did not accept them.

### *Marriage or ceremonial union*

I would like to contrast the experiences of Daniel (American, b.1976) and David (American, 1982) to show that formalizing a relationship through marriage or ceremonial union, in fact, can

help in achieving full acceptance of significant others. Both Daniel and David brought their partners home. They also felt that their relationship was acknowledged when their mothers enquired about their partners and said “hugs and kisses” to both during phone conversations. Their experiences, however, differed when their parents interacted with the couple in public settings. David was formally married to his significant other. His parents had attended their wedding, and their wedding pictures were all out on the social media. David’s mother had acknowledged their relationship to her friends and family. In contrast, Daniel’s mother was often in denial of his son’s relationship in public settings. Drawing on the episode that I had described in the last section, Daniel’s mother did not identify Daniel’s partner Jerry as his significant other when her friend was trying to match him with her daughter. This made Daniel feel rejected as a gay man. Daniel said something that peeked me into why his mom probably behaved that way. He had said, “since there was never an announcement that I was getting married or a wedding party or anything, so for them, I’m still single.” Daniel often had to speak upfront about his relationship with Jerry without getting much support or affirmation from his parents. His having to get off the hook every time without much support from his parents and siblings felt him like microaggression from his family and a way of telling him that his relationship with Jerry was not as good as his siblings’ serious relationships were.

The contrast in the experiences of Daniel and David suggest that a ceremonial wedding can help parents accept their son’s significant other fully. It was not clear why Daniel did not marry his partner. However, his belief that his parents hesitated to acknowledge his relationship to their friends because a wedding was not announced suggests that a wedding may help in achieving “full acceptance” at least in some contexts. Daniel considered his parents’ participation in his wedding as a token of acceptance that transcended to other public settings as well.

The comparison of David and Daniel suggest that when gay relationships are not formalized through wedding or a similar ceremony that invites friends and family, parents may hesitate to fully accept their son's significant other. The salience of wedding in parental acceptance of a partner reflected in Wayne's (American, 27) experience as well. Wayne felt that his wedding with his husband, and his parents attending the wedding, motivated them to take an active interest in the couple's lives and accept them fully in the family. A marriage with the significant other, too, is a key moment for parental acceptance, and the next chapter explains in detail how it contextualizes parental acceptance for gay men.

The experiences of these men, along with that of Avery, Eshan, and Charles show that parental acceptance of gay men's significant others can be partial in nature. Their experiences show that some parents may allow their son to bring their partner home, even welcome him, but they would be reticent to accept him as their son's significant other.

### **2.3 | Conclusion**

This chapter showed that gay men often feel accepted when their parents acknowledge their sexuality. One camp defined parental acceptance through being able to talk openly about their dating and relationships with their parents. The second camp considered these conversations, or parental interest in their sexuality, more of an intrusion. This camp felt that these conversations were not necessary for parental acceptance and instead, their parents showed acceptance through silence or normalizing actions.

These themes encompass a good amount of cross-cultural and intergenerational variations, too. Millennial Indian gay men, especially, more strongly felt accepted through parental acknowledgment of their sexuality. Among Americans, fewer understood acceptance through normalizing actions and other acts of silence.

American and Indian gay men also differed on how they wanted their parents to take interest in their sexuality. In general, Americans were more inclined to have conversations on their dating relationships than their Indian counterparts were. Indian gay men understood “conversational” acceptance more through emotional support after coming out, counselling for dating behaviors, talking about lesbian and gay friends, and conversations on sexual identities, in general.

Gay men that I talked with often distinguished between “full” and “partial” acceptance when they included their significant other in their criteria. When their parents acknowledged their relationship with their significant other and considered him like a son-in-law, gay men generally felt that they were “fully” accepted. In contrast, when parents welcomed their gay son’s significant other at home but treated him like a friend without *ever* acknowledging his relationship with their son, gay men generally construed that acceptance as “partial.” In chapter 4, though, we will see that what gay men consider as “full” acceptance can, in fact, be contextual in nature. Gay men have often found that their parents would acknowledge their significant other in some, but not in all, spatial contexts.

The next chapters will examine the contextuality in parental acceptance. When I asked gay men their definition of parental acceptance in the beginning of my interviews, most of them responded as if their criteria of acceptance were met once and for all. Further conversations, however, revealed that what they defined as acceptance were met in some, but not in all, contexts. I discuss the time contextuality in parental acceptance in chapter 3 and the spatial contextuality in parental acceptance in chapter 4.

### 3. PARENTAL ACCEPTANCE ALONG THE LIFE COURSE

Gay men that I talked with revealed that parental acceptance can wax or wane at several key moments and stages over the family's life course. In this chapter, I describe these key moments and life stages, which I collectively term as "time contexts." I examine conditions under which these time contexts made parental acceptance stronger, diminished, or unchanged, as gay men and their families traversed through them.

This chapter has two parts. Part I uses the biographies of 4 gay men—2 Americans and 2 Indians—to show that parental acceptance has worked as a contextual phenomenon along their life courses. These stories are some of the most interesting and complex from among men that I had talked with.

Part II describes the key moments and life stages that contextualized gay men's experiences of parental acceptance over time. What are key moments and life stages? How do they occur in gay men's families? Under what conditions do they make parental acceptance for gay men contextual in nature? How have these conditions differed in India vis-à-vis the US? Part II answers these questions analytically and argues that the social forces of *homonormativity*, *heteronormativity*, and *racial normativity* act on families of gay men to contextualize parental acceptance over time. In the US, especially, parents who embraced a homonormative outlook during key moments of their son's life course showed stronger acceptance to him. In addition, when American gay men followed the racial norm of White superiority in their key moment of choosing their significant other, their experience of parental acceptance grew stronger. In India, gay men generally experienced contextual parental acceptance based on whether their parents had reduced their heteronormative expectations during the key moments and life stages.

## PART – I

In this part, I trace the life courses of Adrian, Caldaron, Rahul, and Sudheer to examine the contextual nature of parental acceptance. These biographies show how parental acceptance became diminished or stronger along time contexts.

### 4.1 | Adrian (American, b.1982)

Adrian works as a cancer epidemiologist in Denver, CO. He is a White millennial, and he grew up in the rural south in North Carolina—Rockingham County, NC. Adrian’s dad had passed away when he was 12 and his sexuality was not much in the picture. His experiences of parental acceptance, therefore, were limited to his relationship with his mom. He shared at the very beginning of the interview that his mom was in the hospice care and was probably in the last month of her life.

When I asked Adrian how he understood parental acceptance, he replied,

[My mom]’ll ask about who I’m dating, or she’ll ask like, “Who are you seeing?” ...So just her asking, “Who are you seeing? Are you dating anyone?” ...Or, she would ask, “What did you do this weekend?” I’d say, “Oh, I went and hung out with friends at so and so bar. And she would say, “What kind of bar is that?” And I was like, “It’s just a gay bar.” And she’d be like, “Oh, okay.”... If I am seeing someone, she’ll ask about them. She wants to know about them. She wants to make sure they’re good enough for her son...

For Adrian, his mom’s showing curiosity about how he experienced his sexuality, including his love life, through affirmative verbal conversations made him feel accepted. In another part of our conversation he said,

What really made me feel accepted was the first time—and this wasn't Christmas. This was somewhere—oh, this was around [my partner] Jim's birthday. And I had mentioned it was Jim's birthday. And my mom said, “Well, what should I get him?” And that made me feel accepted in that because she wouldn't have asked that, or she wouldn't have gotten him anything if she didn't accept me being gay in the first place.

Hence, Adrian felt accepted also when his mom acknowledged and affirmed his partner. Adrian, therefore, defined parental acceptance as his mom's verbally acknowledging, affirming, and showing curiosity for his dating experiences and partners. Below, I describe how Adrian's experience of parental acceptance, understood through this definition, was a contextual phenomenon.

Adrian told me that he came out to his mom at the age of 16. I curiously asked him how that happened so early in his life. Most millennial gay men that I had talked with had come out to their parents in their 20s. He replied,

Sorry. I'm laughing because it's a funny story... So, when I was in high school, you could buy these things with your yearbooks that were basically like journals of the year. You would write in your memories from the year. So, one of those journals, I wrote in about me and Joe, and that I was having feelings for him. And I knew that it was not like the feelings I had towards females. And I knew that these were different. These were stronger. And I had an idea what they were. Then I brought in some stuff about he and I kissing and experimenting.

And my mom was cleaning my room. She found the journal, and she read it. So, I came home. At that point in time, I had a part time job because the deal was -- my family would give you your first vehicle, but you had to pay the insurance and the gas on it. So, at 16, I



was out. I was working at a fast-food restaurant. And I came home -- a nearby city. And I came home, and she was crying. And I was like, "What are you crying about?" And I thought she was crying about my dad because he had just passed away four years earlier. And I saw the journal sitting there. And I was like, "Oh, that's what you're crying about." So, at that point, I was like, "Okay. I'm just going to tell you." And I was like going to tell her that summer after school had ended and everything. But she just kind of beat me to the punch. Yeah, that's how I came out to her.

Adrian's quote shows that his coming out to his mom was accidental. He had not planned to come out to her. His mom may have had no idea about his sexuality until she read his diary. Recounting his mom's reaction to his coming out and other relevant experiences, he said,

There were episodes of denial, which is, that's, the way she copes with stress in life. She just goes through denial with it. And she stayed in denial about it for a few years...When I was 18, she very much wanted me to go to prom with one of my friends that was named Martha, who's a girl...But everyone that knew us knew that I was gay and we just hung out a lot. But mom, that was like her last hope that me and Martha would get together and go to prom. So that was a little bit of a fight. And I told her. I was like, "No, I'm taking Joe to prom." So, there was a fight there... Then she came around and just realized that it wasn't a phase and it wasn't going to change.

Between the ages of 16 to 18, Adrian experienced diminished acceptance from his mom as she hardly acknowledged or took interest in his sexuality. Adrian said in the end that "she came around and just realized that it wasn't a phase and it wasn't going to change." I asked him how that happened. He replied,

Then from 18 to 22, I was in the military. So, when I was in the military, I lived in California. I was physically away on the other side of the country. We would have phone calls. I didn't get to travel at home much because I traveled a lot with my position in the military. So, I didn't get a lot of vacations to come back home. I would be on the phone and she would ask who I was dating. And my answer would be no one or a guy. And at that point, whenever I said a guy's name, she would just be quiet. Then she would change the subject.

Probably around 20, 21, she actually started -- at that point in time, I was dating a guy named Rodrigo. And at that point in time, she would actually start asking, "How's Rodrigo?" So, it's when she turned the corner on it, and I think fully accepted it then.

Adrian's quote suggests that his mom was able to accept his sexuality *after* he moved out of his home in North Carolina. I hypothesized that this move was a *key moment* in parental acceptance for him. For the purpose of this study, a key moment is a specific episode or event occurring in the families of gay men which subsequently makes parental acceptance either stronger or diminished for these men. To confirm my hypothesis, I asked Adrian if he thought that his moving out from home helped his mom in accepting his sexuality. He replied,

Maybe. Maybe the distance. Maybe. Possibly. That's a good question because it could be that me being away started to mature the image in her mind of me as an adult. Since I'm not functioning as a teenager anymore, I'm functioning as an adult. I'm away. I'm living my own life. So very well could be... So, the time I served was during Operation Iraqi Freedom. So, it was during war time. I was deployed in War Theater. So, from her perspective, her son was off fighting in the war, right? So, I think probably that helped clarify that there are more important things than [being] gay because I could die. So that could have led -- that could

have also helped with really bringing everything into resolution for her and saying, “Okay, this gay thing really isn't a big deal because he could get shot.” And that part doesn't matter as much as I'm just being alive.

Adrian's quote shows that two things made his mother more accepting after he left home. One, the distance helped her mature the mental image of Adrian as that of an adult. And two, he was serving in the military at the time of Iraq war. Hence, his mom felt that the possibility of him being shot at the war field was a bigger peril than him being gay. I was not satisfied, however. I was wondering if his mother's mellowing down to him was simply a reduction in her homonegativity or meant a stronger acceptance for him. I went back to his definition of acceptance and asked if he could give me an example to show that his mom acknowledged him and took interest in his sexuality more after his moving out than she did earlier. He said,

When I was with Jim, when I was in a relationship with Jim from 2005 until 2011. Then with that relationship, he was my first real long-term relationship where you do all the things that you typically think of in marriage. So, I'd bring him home. We would trade holidays with our families. One Christmas was my family. The next Christmas was his. And we do the same thing with Thanksgiving and all that. But I would bring him around. It's Christmas the first year. It was a little strange at first. I mean part of it was just that I was gay, but everyone knew I was gay. But it was the first time they were actually seeing me with someone in a serious way. It didn't cause any fights or anything. So that was that first Christmas. Then the next Christmas, mom was asking, “What does Jim want for Christmas? What can we get him?”

Then over that year, he would come with me to visit my mom. I visit my mom probably about once a month or so because we live just one county over basically, like an hour, within an hour, hour to two-hour drive... We're not together anymore. But when I was with him, I lived

in North Carolina. And during that six years, he was involved in all the family functions, the holidays. He would come with me to visit my mom. She knew who he was and knew what our relationship was and all that. She was fine with him. She loved him like a son.

Adrian's recounting shows that his mom took more interest in his partner Jim than she took in Joe whom he was dating in North Carolina before moving out of her home. I drew Adrian's attention to my observation that his mom never accepted him as an older adolescent, even forced him to take Martha to the prom, but things changed after he left home to join the military. I asked him if he thought that his moving out of home helped his mom in overcoming her heteronormative expectations and accepting who he was. He replied, "I would say that's fairly accurate."

Adrian was involved with Jim for six years. Adrian told me that he broke up with Jim because he had cheated on him. When I asked him how he told his mom about this separation and how she reacted, he said,

Yeah. I told her. He had cheated on me. I forgave him. Then he did it again. And that's when I was like, "Nope. Nope, not going to work." And I told her why. She was like, "I just can't believe it. He's so sweet. I can't believe he'd do something like that." And I'm like, "Well, he did." And she said, "I just don't want your heart to be broken again. That was just so painful." And I knew that when she would say that, she wasn't talking about me. *She was talking about her, that it was so painful for her.* (emphasis added)

She cried. Yeah. She cried. It was—that was very tough for her. My sister and brother, they stayed with their spouses the whole time. And she considered Jim and I the same. We were equivalent to everyone else in her mind. Then after we split, she was devastated. She was like, "You mean he's not going to be around for holidays anymore?" And I'm like, "No,

mom. He's not." She's like, "Well, can I call him sometimes?" And I was like, "That's something I will have to work out." It was really tough for her. She even said at one point she felt like she lost a son.

Adrian's separation from Jim was a personal loss for Adrian's mom. I asked him how his sexual life was after Jim, and how his mom felt about it. He replied,

I'd be seeing somebody for two or three months. Then we'd stop seeing each other because of me figuring out, "Okay, we're not compatible." She would get very confused by that. At the same time, I don't think she is -- because my sister and her husband met each other in high school and dated and got married. Then my brother was in the military as well. And he met his wife and they got married. Then my mom, my dad was the only -- that I'm aware of -- is the only guy that she dated because they got married shortly after high school. So, she wasn't really used to seeing someone she was close to dating different people, I guess.

Then I would talk about these things. She would get confused as to why I would see somebody for a couple of months and then we wouldn't be seeing each other. Then I'd spend this long span being single and then not be seeing someone else. So, all that was confusing for her. And she worried about me getting my heart broken and all that.

Adrian's quote developed a second hypothesis in my mind. Maybe she accepted Adrian more enthusiastically when he was in a stable relationship than when he was dating different people for short spans of time. I asked him if that was true. He replied,

Yeah. Yeah. Accepting it, yeah. So, there's the fact that I'm gay. She accepts that. But then there's, the, if I'm with someone, that's better. Because then, I'm with someone, so my life is more complete in her mind. And I think that's also represented in after my dad died when she stopped going to the church. It was because she would see these other couples and they

were still together, but she didn't have her husband anymore. He passed on. So, I think for her, the world functions very much in a way of you need to be with someone to be fully complete in your life or fully happy in your life.

Adrian's interview shows that he was clear on what counts as acceptance for him. He felt accepted when his mom took interest in how he experienced his sexuality, including how he dated and how his partner was doing, in affirmative ways. His mom hardly met these criteria and showed diminished acceptance until before he left home to join the military. His moving out of the home was a key moment that made his mom's acceptance stronger for him. She not only started taking interest in his dating experiences but also affirmed his partner Jim. Adrian's separation from Jim was another key moment which, according to Adrian, "devastated" his mom. She could not affirm Adrian's sexuality as much as she did earlier because this separation took Jim away from her. She felt disappointed by the lack of longevity in this relationship which she, going by how she had seen heterosexual relationships in her family, had been expecting from Adrian and Jim as well. At the time of my interview with Adrian in 2019, he was single. Since his separation from Jim in 2011, he had been dating different men without getting into a relationship with any of them. Adrian's quote shows that his mother hardly approved Adrian's experiencing his sexuality in this way. Going by how Adrian understood parental acceptance, the key moment of his separation from Jim had diminished his mom's acceptance for him.

#### **4.2 | Caldaron (American, b.1972)**

Caldaron is a human resources professional and works as a recruiting manager in Austin, TX. He is a Mexican Generation Xer who grew up in El Paso, TX. When I asked him how he understood parental acceptance, he recounted how his parents surprisingly delighted him on an Easter

holiday. When he was not available to see his parents on Easter, his mother invited his husband Ken to their family lunch. He said,

When I talk to my mom and my dad, you know it's like, how is Ken doing? You know they'll ask about Ken. They – a good example is I actually was out of town last week, I didn't get home 'til late Sunday night, so I didn't go to my mom's house, it was Easter. And, my mom had a big Easter lunch prepared, so for her to call Ken Saturday and say, I know that [Caldaron] isn't going to be here that doesn't mean you can't come over. You need to come over, you are family. Come have Easter lunch with us.

And, for him to be able to go even though I wasn't there, you know that's definitely huge, you know, sign of acceptance for me to, you know, that step. And that was like the first time because I'm always here that, you know, I've been to – there's been events with my parents that he's gone without me.

Caldaron felt accepted when his parents acknowledged his sexuality. In the above example, they did that by acknowledging his relationship with his husband Ken and affirming Ken as a part of the family.

Caldaron's biography begins at his early 20s when he had moved out of his parental home to live in Austin, TX. I asked him how he moved to Austin. He replied,

Well, I moved here and luckily my younger brother was already living here, so I had reached out to him and he and his wife at the time – and I had already come out to them. So, I said, hey, this is my plan and they said, yeah, come here, you can stay with us for six months and settled find your own place, find a job and everything. So, I got here and immediately started looking for work. I did find work within the first three weeks. I started working which is pretty amazing because I just came right here without no job or anything. I had money save

up, so I knew that if I need it for several months, I had that. And then, once I got really settled in my job you know moved into my own place and you know twenty plus years later I'm still here.

Caldaron said that he did not move to Austin with an offer to start a job or a college degree. His brother and his family lived in Austin who had offered him support if he wanted to start his career in Austin. Plus, he supported Caldaron as a gay man. Therefore, Caldaron moved to Austin after completing a college degree in his hometown. I asked him how his parents felt about this move. He replied,

When I decided to move, it was kind of a double whammy like I'm leaving, I'm moving, and I'm moving over in the next few months to Austin, I'm getting ready to move and so forth. It wasn't because I had a job or anything, so of course the question was like why are you—are you leaving? Why are you moving? I was like, “Well, I want to start a new life, I want to be in another place and it's time that I let you know that I want to live my life as I want to live it which is being gay. And, I wanted to officially tell you whether you knew it, you didn't know it, but you suspected it or not, but it was time to tell you.” And, it was not the easiest conversation because, again, it was a double whammy like whether or not, you know, I didn't know how they're going to take it, but whether or not they were going to be accepting or not, I was going to be leaving anyway you know so if like I came out that made me move and I was already planning to move anyway.

In response to what Caldaron said above, I clarified with him that he had already been making plans to move to Austin for several months before leaving, and he came out to his parents just before moving out of their home. As a result, two key moments occurred simultaneously. One



was his leaving home and the other was his coming out to his parents. This happened in the early 90s, and I asked him when he met with his parents again. He replied,

So, I think it was like two and a half, I think almost two and a half, three years after I had actually moved, they made a plan to come visit. And, of course because my brother was here too, I actually had the space, so I made the offer like “I know my brother asked you so you could stay at his place, but his place is very crowded, he’s got two kids, I have a spare bedroom, nobody sleeps in it, I live here alone, you can come stay here if you want.”

They accepted [my offer], they were very reluctant, I can tell. So, they were for a week and the first few days it was more they used my apartment just to sleep like, you know, get up and I had taken the week off like “what do you want to do, we can do this.” “Oh, no, we have all these plans and so forth.” You know they’d get up, go have breakfast somewhere, they wouldn’t even cook at my house [Laughs]. Or go see my brother, go do this and so forth, the kids and everything was like, “oh, we’re doing things with the kids.”

Above, Caldaron tells how he continued to receive a cold reaction from his parents for several years after coming out to them and leaving their home. I asked him how he felt these key moments affected his parents’ acceptance for him. He replied,

It definitely made [acceptance] slower because, again, I didn’t see them for three years. If I had not moved away, and I was still in the same city, I think there would have been more months that I would have not seen them versus years. And I think they wouldn’t – you know they were not visible, or I was invisible to them of who I was. You know, eventually I started dating and so forth because they were not in the same city. And when they did visit it’s like, I didn’t have the opportunities to, you know, like an example I said earlier like *I wanted to*

*introduce them to somebody I was dating, but I couldn't.* So, if they were closer in the same city, I think all that could have happened sooner.

If I were still in El Paso, they'd definitely would have seen me more, they would have known that I was physically well and that I wasn't out doing dangerous things like getting drunk and so forth. You know, because they just thought he wants to be gay; he wants to be wild; he wants to go party; he wants to sleep around. You know these are all things that they were – those were the images that came to their mind when I told them that I was gay, like, “why would you go to that?” You know, “why would you think that?” So, I think just them being able to see that I was doing okay in my mind think would have helped. (emphasis added)

Caldron said that his parents would have accepted him faster if he had continued to live with them after coming out. Caldaron did not feel comfortable to introduce his partner to them. Going by his understanding of parental acceptance as affirming his sexuality and relationships, his move to Austin, therefore, hardly made his parents accepting toward him. Caldaron further shared that he started visiting his parents sometime after their trip to Austin, but the interactions he shared with me hardly showed that they accepted him. I asked him when he started feeling acceptance from them. He replied,

To get to the point that they accepted me a hundred percent was right out when they moved here to Austin. And the reason they moved here is because my sister – my younger sister and her husband moved here to Austin...So, after my sister moved, my parents were like, yeah, maybe we should be there because most of our kids are there except for one more. So, when they moved here, at the time that specific time I wasn't dating anybody, but I had a roommate that was gay and you know they came over to my apartment one day, and I'm like, hey, I have to tell them when you're coming you're going to meet my roommate, he's gay.

We're not dating we're not a couple, but he is gay, and I want you to if you can't accept that, then I don't want you coming to my apartment you know because that is his home too.

[And after my parents moved to Austin,] you know they came over for dinner one night and you know we had a good time. You know they met my roommate, we got dinner, had some conversations and more than, you know, it helped because I think that was the first time when they saw me with another gay person even though that wasn't my partner at the time or it wasn't my partner, but just kind of like seeing some normalcy is the best way to put it. Like they saw like, oh, he's got friends, he's got a normal life, he's got a home. And, that kind of started mending that.

Caldaron's parents' move to Austin was the third key moment for Caldaron. He began the above quote with an enthusiastic phrase of "a hundred percent" acceptance to explain his parents' behavior toward him after this move. The example which he gave, however, did not tie much to his criteria of acceptance. For Caldaron, acceptance meant to acknowledge his sexuality and his partner. Neither of these two things happened in the meeting which he described. However, I noted that Caldaron felt happy by his parents' seeing how "normally" his gay buddy and he lived in their apartment. This possibly destigmatized homosexuality in their minds to some extent. They shared the dinner table with a man, and were civil toward him, while knowing that he was gay. These behaviors can be construed as parental support, as defined in the glossary of this dissertation. Hence, it was more prudent to posit that his parents' move to Austin was a key moment of parental support, and not acceptance, for him.

I continued looking for the key moment that made parental acceptance, and not merely support, stronger for him. While continuing his story, he shared that he was in a relationship with his

partner Ken for seven years. I asked if his parents saw Ken as his partner or merely as a friend. He replied,

You know, it's kind of interesting you said that, because I think they looked at it more of that he's just like a friend of mine for quite a while, then really realizing, you know, that he is my partner. Things started changing because me and him would talk about marriage, we're also talking about adopting, so we both had that conversation with his parents and my parents like, "well, this is what our plan is, we want to have a child, we want to have kids and the only way we can do it is through adoption. And, we want you to be part of that because this child whoever he or she is is going to be your grandchild."

The quote above, interestingly shows that his getting a significant other, too, was not a key moment for acceptance. The key moment which made his parents accepting, in fact, was when he and his partner adopted a child. They both had not married until the time of the interview, but they had adopted a child through his parents' support. Caldaron continued by telling me how supportive his parents were in the process of adoption:

So, I think that is the kind of reality that they were like, okay, this is serious, but also the fact that we're doing this because we also want to have a child, was a very accepting way for my parents specifically because the idea of like, oh, another grandchild was very exciting for them. So, that I think is when it really turned things around for them like, okay, this is serious, there is going to be a child that's going to be part of our family and that's what really helped them.

Above, Caldaron affirms that giving his parents a grandchild was a key moment that helped his parents accept Ken as his significant other. Hence, this moment made his parents accepting towards him.

Caldaron's biography shows that he encountered several key moments in his life course which influenced his parents' support or acceptance for him. The key moment of moving out, and coming out, gained him neither parental support nor acceptance. The second key moment was his parents' move to Austin which made them more supportive, but not accepting, toward him. The third key moment was his getting a partner around seven years before our interview, but his parents' seeing him as a friend did not show stronger parental acceptance. However, the key moment of giving his parents a grandchild was the one that helped his parents to acknowledge his partner enthusiastically. Hence, this moment explicitly gained him acceptance from his parents, based on how he understood acceptance.

#### **4.3 | Sudheer (Indian, b.1961)**

Sudheer is an LGBTQ activist. He heads a nonprofit organization in Mumbai that works on targeted intervention programs for MSMs (men who have sex with men) to prevent them from contracting STIs. His organization also does outreach to transgender communities to support them. Sudheer is a baby boomer and belongs to a Hindu upper caste background. He grew up in Mumbai. His mother had died when Sudheer was in his early 20s. Although she had a subliminal awareness of Sudheer's sexuality, Sudheer came out to his family after she had passed away. Sudheer's understanding of parental acceptance was, therefore, limited to how his father took his sexuality. When I asked Sudheer how he understood parental acceptance, he replied,

I told you how my father wanted me to get married, find a good boy. My father had once told me that I know you work for [X-the organization that Sudheer works for], and I know you will probably be required – because it was very early that you may be required to speak to them in India and he said [son], never worry about that. You're doing a good job, go ahead, give the interview, don't worry [about] what my relatives would ask or what they

would tell if anybody has any questions. They can ask me, and I'll handle them. But you have a job to do, go ahead and do it.

It gave me a lot of confidence that I could speak in the media, otherwise with some other parent I couldn't do that. You know, that he wanted to see me "settled" that like when I had my transgender kids [people from the transgender communities that X supports] coming into my house and him just like he never ever questioned anything. It was like unconditional acceptance that these are the children, they work with [Sudheer], they're his team, they're home. There was nothing like you're gay, you're straight or something. So, yeah, for me these were his acceptance, this was acceptance.

Sudheer felt accepted by his father's wanting to see him "married" with a man. Same-sex marriages are not legally or socially permitted in India. By asking him to "marry" a man, Sudheer's father wanted him to set up homonormative household with a man. Sudheer also felt accepted by his father's enthusiastically allowing him to be out in the media and working as an LGBTQ activist.

Sudheer never came out to his father unlike most American and millennial Indian men included in this study had. When I asked him how his father became aware of his sexuality, he replied by starting his story from the time when his boyfriend, with whom he was in a relationship for few years, had married a woman. He said,

So, I was—after my boyfriend got married, I was under immense pressure to get married [from my family], and at that point of time I [spoke] to my brother. So, I went to his office and I came out to him. I said look, like [your wife] and dad are always standing together [asking me to marry], and this is the reason why I won't get married. And, my brother was a bit horrified because I was always hanging out with girls, and he took some time—about

half an hour—he didn’t talk and then he told me like, “whatever it is, you’ll remain as dear to me as my son is to me.” And he said, “But I have a request, please don’t tell this to dad or my wife because I don’t know how he’ll react and also if you tell her, and if she does something that will hurt you, I don’t want to be torn between my wife and my brother.” And he said, “but give me time, I’ll take care of it.” And then later on my brother actually took care of it.

So, I officially never came out to my dad but in ‘90s started [X], and I was—thank God and suddenly like my family knew that I [was hanging out in a community of people] of the age group of 18, 20 to 70s and the only thing common was that everybody was single, and [my father] never questioned me that. You know, and my father had this whole thing against me that “oh, I don’t want to get married because I wanted to sleep around with different women. I don’t want to accept the responsibility of marriage.” So, at one point which was some time in ’98, [X] got its first grant from the Joe Smith Foundation. We had a grant of 7500 dollars and like Rajesh, [the] chairman [of X], he was on the cover page of Bombay Times holding the check that [X] has gotten this check from the Joe Smith Foundation. So, my dad asked my brother, “isn’t this the same Rajesh who’s friends with Sudheer?” So, my brother said yeah, he is. So, my dad just smiled, and he said in that case I think he’s a lost cause and we shouldn’t push him to get married, we should leave him alone.<sup>2</sup>

Rajesh is a well-known and one of the pioneer gay activists in India. Sudheer’s father knew who he was, and Sudheer’s association with him made him sure that Sudheer, too, was gay. Also, Sudheer’s saying that his brother “took care of it” suggests that his brother, too, might have talked to his father about Sudheer’s sexuality. Sudheer was 37 when his father came to know that

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<sup>2</sup> Identifiers, like the name of the chairman of the organization for whom Sudheer worked, and the name of the foundation that awarded the grant, have been changed to maintain anonymity.

he was gay. When I asked Sudheer how his father's attitude toward him changed after this awareness, he replied,

After that it was a very interesting turn. Like you know, my father who thought that here is a man, oh, he just parties and sleeps around with women and doesn't want to get married. I suddenly saw a change in my father's attitude towards me. He suddenly became more understanding, he suddenly became like,— he wouldn't make strong allegations anymore that “oh, you don't want to get married because you want to sleep around, you want to do this, you want to do that”. So, he kind of started becoming friendlier.

I was living away, I lived in Goregaon, whereas my parents and his brothers lived in Andheri...I lived alone totally because it was – we had two apartments, a bigger one in Andheri and a smaller one in Goregaon.

According to Sudheer, his father supported him. He also permitted Sudheer to live alone, away from his family but in the same city, where he enjoyed more privacy than he would have in his familial home. But not very long time after his father began his support, a key moment occurred in his family. Sudheer said,

Right now, I live in Andheri. I'm like—so when my brother was here I had a separate apartment and when my brother, 20 years ago, when he left for Toronto he told me, he said, “Sudheer, to date I never asked you to do this and now I'm going, and papa is your responsibility now, and try and move closer to him.” So, I sold off my apartment in Goregaon and it was just a coincidence that apartment number 2 where I live now came up for sale and we bought that. I had actually sold my apartment in Goregaon and I was staying in a rented apartment in between for about 15 months. So, it was a very conscious decision to move in with him.



How about me coming to Andheri? Yes, [my father] was very, very proactively involved because this I had got a very small amount for my apartment in Goregaon and this amount like even after I took a bank loan, I was renovating this space. I needed some loans, and [my father] loaned me money. But he was very clear that I owed this to him. So that was there.

Sudheer's older brother's move to Canada with his family was a key moment for Sudheer. He was pressured to move in with his father by his father as well as his older brother. I asked him how he felt about this move, and whether he lost his privacy due to moving in with his father. He replied,

[My father] said, "After certain point I need my privacy, and you need your privacy." But according to him, that was privacy—going [to my apartment] at 11 in the night and coming back [to his apartment] at 6:30-7 in the morning. But that was a very conscious decision we had made...

Sudheer's response was satirical on his father. Sudheer's father slept in Sudheer's apartment at night, and Sudheer did not enjoy much privacy under this arrangement. When I further probed Sudheer, he said,

Did he recognize [that] my sex life was being affected? No, no, no, he didn't think so...I couldn't get people home because I wouldn't know what time he'll just open the door and walk in on me. And that would cause discomfort...I did feel "that" need. So, I was not kind of very happy. So, and my sister would tell me that "hey, listen I'll try my best to get him over [to my home] so that you can have your complete privacy. So, if you want to get someone you can do it over the weekend." So, yeah, that was my escape route that my sister had created for me so maybe like every second weekend he would go and spend the weekend with my sister

so that would kind of give me freedom to call hookups. So, once he would go then I had, and so it was like maybe having sex once in 15 days but that was okay.

Above, Sudheer showed his frustration with how his sexual life was affected because of his moving in with his father. His sister helped him by hosting his father on the weekends. Still, the privacy Sudheer obtained as a result was weaker than that he had when he lived in Goregaon.

Sudheer's quotes show that his brother's moving to Canada was a key moment after which his move to live with his father in Andheri made him feel less supported as a gay man. At the time of his moving in, he felt that had he been traditionally married like his brother was, he would not have been forced to do what his family asked him to do, while also bearing the financial burdens of fulfilling their wishes. Sudheer could not live a life of his choice like his brother did. This made him feel less supported as a gay man.

More conversations with Sudheer showed that not only his father's support, but his acceptance also waned in his later life. Sudheer recounted an incident very vividly. He said,

In the last few years [of my father] when he was very unwell, so he had told one of his doctors that, "you know, my problem is that I'm a very lonely man." She said, "you have a son who stays with you." He said, "yeah, but if he was married and he had children, then his children and I would have been playing with each other." So, the doctor laughed, she said, "your son is a 50-year-old man. Do you think he would have children [at this time] who would play with you?" Because, all my nieces and nephews were like – I have a nephew in New York, and I have a niece and a nephew who are in Toronto. She said, "by now probably even his kids would have been somewhere in the US or Canada. But count yourself lucky that he lives with you." *So, somewhere deep down, [my father had] that*

*desire that oh, if he was straight, he would be married and have kids, and those were like those fleeting glimpses that I saw in him.* (emphasis added)

Sudheer understood his father's acceptance through his approval of homonormativity which he showed by encouraging Sudheer to "marry" a man. In his later life, however, this acceptance waned as he experienced an empty nest period when his other children had left him to pursue their lives independently. Sudheer took his father's expressing regrets to the doctor as his remorse toward Sudheer's sexuality. Because Sudheer did not fulfill his father's homonormative expectations of setting up a household with a man and raising kids, he felt rejected as a gay man during his father's later life.

Sudheer's biography shows that he did not formally come out to his father unlike most American and millennial Indian gay men, whom I talked with, did. However, his father became aware of his sexuality through indirect ways. His father supported him and allowed him to live independently in the smaller apartment owned by his family. This support, however, remained stronger until Sudheer's brother moved to Canada with his family. This key moment left his father alone and therefore, Sudheer was pressured to move in with him, thereby losing his privacy. Sudheer had not met his father's homonormative expectations of setting up a household with a man. He did not marry a woman to give him younger grandchildren to play with in his later life, either. Therefore, his father remorseful of Sudheer's sexuality in his later life and wished he had married a woman and had given him grandchildren. Hence, his acceptance for Sudheer diminished in his later life because Sudheer had not met his father's filial expectations.

#### **4.4 | Rahul (Indian, b.1964)**

Rahul is a gay activist. Professionally, he works as a management consultant in a transnational telecommunications corporation in Mumbai. He is a late baby boomer who grew up in New

Delhi. He has a bachelor's degree in engineering from a premiere university in India and a PhD degree in management from an Ivey league university in the US. He comes from an upper middle class and a Hindu upper caste background.

When I asked Rahul how he understood parental acceptance, he said,

I would [say acceptance means] accepting your son or your daughter as an individual without imposing any social norms on them or without sort of making them feel guilty that they're doing something wrong.

I followed up by asking if he was referring to his parents' foregoing their expectations to see their gay children married to a person of the other sex. He replied,

Yes. Probably primarily because I think that is one of the largest or the biggest guilt that Indian gay guys feel for disappointing their parents. I think I would say that it's probably the single biggest guilt and that's probably one of the reasons many gay men actually decide to get married against their own judgment. So, acceptance would mean [to] not impose their own expectations on the child.

Acceptance would also mean sort of being welcoming to the significant other in your children's or son's life. For instance, if he introduces a partner to be welcoming, I think I would consider that very important because...you don't want [your parents and your partner] to be at the loggerheads. But then, many guys don't first of all have a partner worth introducing to their parents because many people are not dating for whatever reason [laughs] and if they're dating, they're only casually dating so they think it's not really worth introducing to their family. So, yeah, I would say *acceptance of your child's life choices*.

For Rahul, his parents' foregoing heteronormative expectations and not imposing the norm of compulsory marriage was the way of acceptance. Second, accepting his life choices—i.e., being

welcoming to his partner if he had one, or accepting his non-monogamous way of living if he was unpartnered—was also understood as parental acceptance by Rahul.

The moment that I found closest to his coming encounter was the prose below:

After I came to the US I think in my mid-20s, 24-25, when I came to the US there I got my first...exposure to LGBT or same-sex people, then I read up and I spoke to people and I kind of realized that yes, I was gay. And so, I think that was like the first affirmation. And then, I wrote a letter to my parents from the US...where I kind of discussed at length that whatever I had mentioned at the age of 20 or 21 that I didn't have any attraction towards girls was because I had at that time a mild attraction towards boys but now it is kind of confirmed and I'm very sure that I'm only attracted to guys. However, considering the kind of family that we were I would still steer clear of saying anything sexual...I would only say that I have attraction and I would leave it to their imagination whether I was actually doing anything sexual.

In his letter, Rahul mentioned that he was “attracted” towards men. He let his parents guess whether he meant sexual attraction. When I asked Rahul if he considered that letter to be his coming out moment, he replied,

Yes, I think I had spent a lot of time drafting that letter, like maybe a month, and I had to get it exactly right without it being shocking or whatever. So, I had to word it very carefully and I think it came out just right. But basically, it was clearly bland, I mean I didn't talk really anything about [sex], So, yeah, I had just worded [the letter] in a manner that I was more comfortable among men, and I was attracted to men, and that I was not interested in marriage. I think the biggest the coming out line is actually in many Indian gay kids' case is when they declare that they don't want to get married, that is like a de

facto declaration that you're probably not straight. So, there are very, very few straight guys who would say in all seriousness they don't intend to get married. So, I think that is like the punchline, that you're not attracted to women and you are not trying to get married and you should not get married. So, I think that kind of gives that information very clearly.

Rahul's parents did not ask any clarifications, and Rahul believed that his parents understood that he was gay. When I asked how his parents responded to that letter, he said,

They were actually very nice, and I had a feeling that they already knew that I was different and now I think they figured out that I was different in this manner. Their main concern was safety because that was like the peak of HIV or there was all talk about HIV and AIDS and gay communities and so on.

Rahul's parents' reaction to his coming out was calm and far from being catastrophic. Rahul, too, made several efforts to make a personal connection with his parents. For example, he said,

When I was a student, I used to send them like large gifts from the US, every time I would come, I would buy major stuff for them and family. I'm not saying that I did all that only to kind of get into their good books or whatever because I was always very generous by nature.

When I asked him if these gifts helped him in getting acceptance from his parents, he replied,

I think so, absolutely, because they kind of figured that yeah, and also, I think they had a strong feeling that [my sexuality] was not an inborn sort of orientation. So, basically [they started believing] thankfully that it was not something that I had any control over...they had heard other stories about kids getting molested, even Michael Jackson -- there were all these things even 20 years ago people used to read about. And I would tell them, "no, nothing [like that] ever happened." I was like the most sheltered kid and so on. So maybe

that also helped a little bit in their accepting me being gay because they started believing that it was inborn.

Rahul was able to convince his parents that being gay was natural and was not a result of any molestation which he experienced in his childhood. This helped them accept his sexuality and his choice of not marrying a woman. Rahul did not recount any instance when his parents pressured him to marry. Drawing on his other criterion of acceptance on being welcoming to the partner, I asked him if his parents treated his partner like how they had treated their children-in-law. Rahul believed that his parents were civil, but not welcoming to his partners. He said,

They would not gift a gold bracelet or a gold chain [to my partner] which they had gifted to my brother-in-law... They would not – see, in Indian families one of the times acceptance or recognition [occurs] is when you give them a gift. Again, it kind of sounds very trivial but it's very important. So, in fact, recently one of my best friend's mother gifted his boyfriend a Bengali dhoti—a traditional dhoti—and he was like absolutely ecstatic. And it signifies that the mother finally kind of really accepted the partner as kind of a son-in-law. But in my case, no, that never happened. Like my parents never gifted my partner anything. [In that] instance, I was sure that [my parents' acceptance of me] was not at the same level.

(emphases added)

Rahul felt rejected as a gay man when his sexual identity started involving his partner because his parents never gave any gifts to his partners which they used to give to their heterosexual children-in-law.

In another part of the interview, Rahul said,

I think one of the problems—which I really think is a problem in India even now [is] introducing your partner...to your parents. [Parents] begin to think that [this relationship] is

permanent. So, there are many, many cases where I've spoken to parents where they've been very devastated or disappointed when their son's relationship broke down... My parents had met my second partner more because I was with him for eight years and he eventually married an American guy (laughs). [Their pictures] are all over on [x- a social media platform]. So, he's married to an American and they have a child, and [my parents] just met him more often.

The above quote suggests that for Rahul's parents, the permanence of a conjugal relationship, whether heterosexual or homosexual, was of paramount importance. Traditional Hindu marriages between men and women ensure this permanence far more than gay partnerships do. Rahul had been engaged in several long-term relationships in his life. While doing this is more common in the US and is more widely accepted too, Rahul's parents did not highly affirm this lifestyle. From what Rahul said, it shows that his parents were left in a bad taste about gay relationships especially when his second partner left him to marry an American national and fathered a child with him. Hence, parental acceptance for Rahul waned when his sexuality began involving his partners.

The summary of Rahul's biography is that his parents accepted him when he came out in his 20s. In that phase of his life, he was unpartnered and was studying for his PhD in the US. He was committed to not marry anyone in the US and come back to India, which he did. He also made personal connections with his parents by giving them gifts and convinced his parents that his sexuality was natural. His parents did not pressure him to marry a woman. As a result, he experienced stronger acceptance from his parents in his 20s. In his mid-adulthood—when he was in his 30s and 40—however, his parents did not give his partners as much importance as they gave to their other children's spouses. Rahul's parents' acceptance became weaker in his mid-adulthood when heterosexual men of his age would generally marry and set up a stable



household. In contrast, Rahul had been moving in between relationships and had three partners, in total, in his mid-adulthood. Rahul's relationships lacked permanence, and his parents perceived his second partner as unfaithful. Hence, his parents were generally not very welcoming to his partners which diminished their acceptance for him in his mid-adulthood.

## **PART – II**

*Key moments* are specific episodes or events occurring in the families of gay men which subsequently change parental acceptance for these men. The research on family life course tells that these key moments are the “disjunctures” in the family life course that bring some amount of disorganization in the family. These disorganizations may result from the change in several factors such as in the number of family members (such as by children leaving home, marriage, childbirth, or death), marital status of family members (through dating relationships, marriage, or divorce), and the occupational status of family members (young adults getting job or the breadwinner gets promotion or retires from the job) (Mattessich & Hill, 1987; Mederer & Hill, 1983). In my interviews, I found five key moments occurring more frequently in the familial lives of gay men that deepened or flagged their experiences of parental acceptance. These moments included their coming out to parents, moving out of their parental home, entering a same-sex relationship, marriage, and becoming a father.

Parental acceptance may also be contingent on the *life stages* of gay men or their parents. The stories that I gathered showed that for several men, parental acceptance was stronger or weaker depending on the life stages where they, or their parents, were at. The life stages which I analyzed are: gay men in their early adulthood (early 20s); early career / marriageable age (mid-20s to 30s); mid-lives (40s and 50s); and their parents' later lives (60+).

Table 2 shows how gay men, whom I talked with, experienced diminished or stronger parental acceptance along their life courses, depending on how they or their parents responded to the normative forces, of *homonormativity*, *heteronormativity*, and *racial normativity*, while traversing through these time contexts, namely the key moments and life stages. This table produces a matrix of these time contexts and the normative forces. The intersections in this matrix has gay men's names in color coded backgrounds. These backgrounds show whether parental acceptance for these men became stronger (green), diminished (pale-yellow), or remained unaffected (no fill) as a result of how their parents or they responded to these normative forces while journeying through the time contexts.

This table also gives the descriptive statistic of percent Indian among all gay men included in each row of normativity. It also gives the statistic of the percent of gay men for whom parents acceptance became stronger in these time contexts as a result of how the forces of normativity played out in these contexts.

---Insert Table 2 about here---

Heteronormativity can be defined as “the assumption that heterosexuality is the default, preferred, and ‘normal’ state for people because of the belief that they fall into one or other category of a strict gender binary” (Harris and White, 2018). For example, parents wanting their cisgender gay son to date, or marry, a woman shows heteronormativity. The interviews show that parents who were able to overcome their heteronormative expectations while travelling through these time contexts showed stronger acceptance to their gay sons.

Homonormativity is the enforcement of heteronormative ideals and constructs onto gay men's ways of experiencing their sexuality (Halperin, 2012; Orzechowitz, 2010). For example, in the US, gay men's committing to long term monogamous relationships with men, marrying their

male partners, and fathering a child with their partner, mimic, how heteronormativity requires heterosexual people to experience their sexuality. Hence, gay men's following these familial practices shows homonormativity.

In this dissertation, racial normativity means aligning with the norm of the racial superiority that gives unearned social and economic privileges to people identified with lighter races or having a lighter skin color than to those identified with darker races or having a darker skin color (DeCuir-Gunby, 2006; Wander, Martin, and Nakayama, 2005). Interviews of American gay men foreground racial normativity in the contextual parental acceptance generally through White superiority, as prescribed by the American national culture (Bell, 1988). National culture refers to "the set of shared and widely accepted norms, behaviors, beliefs, and customs that exist within the population of a sovereign nation" (Lin, 2014, p.369). White superiority is the racial bias resulting in a natural preference for White over people of color while forming relationships. This bias often results in assigning superior qualities, like being clever, honest, smart, and hardworking, to White-identified people, and attributing inferior characteristics, like being stupid, untrustworthy, and lazy to people of color (Manning, 2004, pp. 527-528). According to Robin DiAngelo (2015), White superiority purports to assign an inferior value to people of color than to White-identified people primarily based on people's racial identification.

Racial normativity can act more saliently on key moments when gay men get a significant other, marry him, or co-father a child with him. In these moments, they experience their sexuality by getting into relationships with new people. Racial normativity ensures that the race of these new people matter. This norm asks gay men to find a significant other of the same or a more privileged racial background (Phua and Kaufman, 2003). The forces of racial normativity may relax if partners of the lesser privileged racial background are more affluent (Schoepflin, 2009) or have other advantages, like in terms of age (Berger, 1996) or attractiveness (Varangis, et al.,

2012) over their racially privileged partners. Likewise, adoption of children, too, has often followed the norm of racial superiority when married couples preferred to adopt children of their own, or a more privileged, racial background than adopting those of less privileged ones (Kennedy, 2012).

Sections 4.5, 4.6, and 4.7 explain how the interaction of these three normative forces with time contexts produce an encompassing pattern of parental acceptance or rejection depicted in table 2.

#### **4.5 | Shedding heteronormative expectations**

Parents have often accepted their gay son while traversing through time contexts when they relinquished or reduced their heteronormative expectations from their gay son. Table 2 shows that parents have often supported their son at the key moment of his coming out by relaxing their heteronormative expectations from him. Parents have also often accepted their gay son following his leaving home, and during the life stages of their later lives, and their son's early adulthood and early career/ marriageable phase, by relinquishing their heteronormative expectations from him. Parents who retained their heteronormative expectations during these time contexts showed diminished, or no change in the, acceptance for their gay sons.

##### **4.5.1 | Coming out to parents**

Gay men come out by telling that they are gay in a face-to-face encounter, on phone, or by writing a letter (Seidman, 2012). However, it may be wrong to presume that parents would be unaware of their gay son's sexuality unless he comes out to them. Research tells that parents often develop a *subliminal awareness* of their gay son's sexuality while watching him growing up. They might have encountered several "telling incidents" when their son's habits, interests, and gender (non)conformance made them wonder about his sexuality (Livingston and Fourie, 2016). A son showing gender non-conforming behaviors, flamboyant expressions, and not taking

much interest in traditional male pursuits, like playing sports, socializing with other young men, and searching opposite-sex dates in adolescence and young adulthood, may have made his parents wonder if he was gay (Goodrich, 2009). This presumption gets confirmed if parents see his romantic attraction toward men (Gorman-Murray, 2008) or get this information from other people (Einarsdóttir, 2016). Some parents may directly ask their gay son about his sexuality (van Bergen and Spiegel, 2014). Those who do not want to embarrass him by asking directly may wait for the moment when he would feel comfortable talking about this aspect of his life (Zeininger, Holtzman, & Kraus, 2017). Others may ignore their son's non-heterosexual-conforming behaviors to remain in the state of denial (Kane, 2007; Trussell, Xing, and Oswald, 2015). In all these scenarios, parents already have a subliminal knowledge of their son being gay, and they may have already developed attitudes of support, reticence, or rejection toward his *presumed* sexuality. Gay men's coming out to their parents serves as a key moment for these parents when their son confirms their subliminal awareness.

Table 2 shows 21 men at the intersection of the key moment of coming out and whether their parents relinquished their heteronormative expectations, at least partially, at this key moment. These parents already had a subliminal awareness of their gay son's sexuality before he came out to them. Most Americans among these 21 men, such as Avery, Bob, Colin, Charles, David, Martin, Matias, and Steven, experienced a stronger parental *support*<sup>3</sup> from their fathers but a diminished support from their mothers when they came out to both. For example, when Avery

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<sup>3</sup> For this dissertation, parental support means how well parents supported their gay son by maintaining a civil relationship with him, and not giving any incriminating reactions to his sexuality, while knowing that he was, or could be, gay. In this study, parental support is different from parental acceptance. Parental acceptance was defined by the criteria set by each gay man for his interview. The diminishing or strengthening of parental acceptance for gay men along the time and spatial contexts depended on whether these criteria were met in those contexts.

(American, b.1991) came out to his father, his learnt that his father knew that he was gay since he was 11 because he had been acting differently from other boys of his age. Avery said,

So, I was almost 24 when I told—no, I guess I was 23. And I called [my father] on the phone and told him [that I was gay]. And he was like, “Oh yeah, I know.” I was like, “You know?” And he's like, “Yeah. I've known since you were 11.” The only thing he said that kind of hurt my feelings was he's like, “Well, I wished you more like me. I wished you weren't gay, but I love you no matter what. I've known about it. It's not a big deal to me.” Honestly, since then, him and I got a lot closer because I'm much more willing to talk to him about things because he's -- I painted him as a certain way growing up. And I've realized he's not that way at all. He's actually very open and mellow about a lot of things.

Although Avery's father hoped that his apprehension about Avery's sexuality would prove untrue, he had been processing this subliminal awareness for around 12 years until Avery officially came out to him. While Avery was closeted, he had been anticipating his father as a heterosexist or a homonegative man. However, when he came out to him, he found his father to be the opposite of how he thought about him. He felt that coming out to him brought them closer, and his father was able to support him much better than he did when Avery was closeted.

Avery contrasted his father's reaction to his coming out to that his mother to assert that his father was far more supportive to him than his mother was. He said,

And, I found more and more that my mom's actually the other way. Yeah, my mom didn't respond well at first. And she still doesn't really like to talk about it. Like now, if I talk about it, she'll going to change the subject. But my dad's totally cool with it. He doesn't mind.

Avery added that in contrast to how his father acknowledged his subliminal awareness about Avery, his mother completely denied it. He said:

Actually, [my mom] said the opposite [to what my dad said], which is another interesting thing because when I told her, she said she didn't know and it was a shock to her and that she was just really worried about her family, how her family would take it. I think that's also what bothered me. She didn't ask about how I felt or anything. It was all about how she felt about it, and how her family felt about it.

She expressed that she had no idea. I don't think that's true. I can tell you why I don't think that's true. ... Well, when I talked to my dad about it, he said he knew this since I was 11. He said that him and my mom used to talk about it when I was younger. So, she had an idea. She just made that up. So, she's had time to figure out this, she just didn't—I think she just hoped it wasn't true... I mean it's not confirmed, but he said they used to fight about it... They would argue about it, about them getting divorced was the reason I was gay. That was one thing he told me.

The quote shows that Avery disbelieved his mom when she denied any subliminal awareness of his sexuality. He had learnt from his father that they both talked and argued on this matter which, according to his father, had went on to become a reason for their divorce. This all happened before Avery had come out to them. Avery felt that his mother simply ignored the possibility of him being gay to remain in a state of denial, doing which was not possible after his coming out. After coming out, Avery felt supported, and subsequently accepted, by his father. His relationship with his mother, however, deteriorated after coming out. He lost the support which he had from her as a closeted gay man.

Jagrit (Indian, b.1989), too, had experienced a stronger support from his father than he had from their mother. However, most Indian men, such as Bento, Eshan, Jeevan, Kartik, Mayank, Rajesh, Sayan, and Udit, experienced stronger or similar support from their mother as compared to how

they experienced from their father in the key moment of coming out. For example, Kartik's (Indian, b.1993) mother supported him far more than his father did after he came out to both of them. He said,

My mom was the first person who asked, when I was in my late 18, that if I'm gay, but I think I was not sure about my sexuality at that point of time. So, I just took two years of time to explore and be sure of my sexuality identity and all. And the age of mid 20s I came out to her that I'm gay, but she was pretty much aware about it. So, my parents, my mom is a super supporter, she has been walking on the Pride for long—several years. She's very supportive but my dad—he's not a full-time supporter, as in, he's a very quiet and reserved person so he speaks less always. So, he's like, "you don't ask me, don't tell me, but I know everything about you." I think that [he accepts me,] but we don't have any conversations regarding the LGBTQ shows with him in person like which I have with my mother. I don't have any such conversations with him.

Kartik sounded confident that his mother supported him when he was closeted, but he felt that she became more supportive, and accepting later, after he came out to her. In contrast to how Kartik's mother accepted him, his father mostly remained silent and non-reactive to his sexual identity. He did not oppose Kartik's experiencing his sexual identity, but he did not much support him either.

The experiences of these 21 men, taken broadly, show that their coming out to their parents, who already had the subliminal awareness of their sexuality, either changed or retained their support for him. This occurred based on whether they retained or reduced their heteronormative expectations after their son came out to them.



Interestingly as well as surprisingly, American fathers were generally more able to overcome their heteronormative attitudes to support their gay son than American mothers could. Indian mothers, however, were more able to overcome their heteronormativity to support their son than Indian fathers could. Further research on gender patterns in parental acceptance can more incisively examine how and why mothers and fathers react differently to their son's coming out when they've already had a subliminal awareness of his sexuality. The experiences of both American and Indian gay men nevertheless concurred that coming out could be a key moment in the familial life course which can change parental support for them. Parents who become supportive after their son comes out to them are more likely to accept them later, as well.

#### **4.5.2 | Moving out of the parental home**

Young men's moving out of their parental home for career or education is a key moment for their families. Several gay men that I talked with gained personal and financial freedom, and minimal interference from their parents, in pursuing their lives by leaving their parental home. After moving out, they were able to selectively expose their parents to the positive aspects of being gay. This helped parents in overcoming their heteronormative attitudes and showing stronger acceptance to their sons following this key moment. Table 2 shows that Avery, Charles, Daniel, Paul, Sripad, Stephen, Udit, and Ujjwal are at the intersection of the key moment of moving out of the parental home and their parents reduced heteronormative expectations. These men felt stronger acceptance from their parents after leaving their home. For example, Charles (American, b.1977) had moved out of his parental home to live in DC after graduating from college. When I asked Charles if he viewed that moving out of home helped his parents to see his sexuality differently from how they saw earlier, he replied,

I do. I would say I do. And I think that for me, where that comes from is when I wasn't living with my parents, they didn't have to see every little step. Like I mentioned about not sharing about individual unimportant dates or disappointment on a really micro level, I think when I lived there, they could see that. And when I didn't live there, as long as I didn't call them and as long as I didn't bring it up in conversation, then they didn't know. So that made it easier for them.

Charles said that leaving home helped him to hide the initial failures in experiencing his sexuality, like the unsuccessful dates, from his parents. I followed up by asking if he thought that his parents' acceptance became stronger after his moving out, he replied,

Yes. Yes, I think so. I think, yeah, living with them and they're watching all of the ups and downs up-close and personal, that makes it harder for them to accept. I think because they see so much more trouble there.

Charles thought that he achieved acceptance from his parents more easily after moving away from them by shielded them from the negative experiences, and selectively exposing them to the positive experiences, of being gay. According to Charles, this dual strategy helped his parents reduce their heteronormative attitudes, and they started believing that being gay was not as abnormal as they thought.

Several older White men and men of color gave a more critical view on how moving away from parents affect their acceptance. Ben, Caldaron, Colin, Jagrit, Jarred, John, Harry, Hemant, Mayank, Rajiv, Sean, and Sripad are at the intersection of this key moment and their parents' retention of heteronormativity. The color coding shows that moving away from parents did not bring them parental acceptance. Except Caldaron, whose moving out actually led to parental rejection, and therefore coded in a pale-yellow background, other men hardly observed any

change in their parental attitudes toward their sexuality, after this key moment, and hence are coded by no-fill backgrounds.

Caldaron's biography in Part I showed how his leaving home, in fact, delayed his getting parental acceptance. First, it came as a shock to his parents. And second, because of the distance, his parents could not see how "normally" he lived his life as a gay man. As a result, Caldaron's moving out of home reinforced his parents' heteronormative attitudes and made them reject his sexuality for several years.

Ben's (American, b.1964) case from those in non-fill backgrounds is particularly insightful. His experience gives the baby boomer's perspective on how the key moment of moving out might not have worked for gay men of his generation as favorably as it did for his younger counterparts. Ben had moved out to join his college to never live with his parents again. When I asked him if this distance helped his parents in accepting him, he said,

I don't know. It just seems to be how people of our generation dealt with things. If you don't see it all the time, you don't have to think about it, you don't have to give it credence or anything... *I mean, during our generation, distance was used to avoid topics.* There was the ability to just put out of your mind unpleasant or confusing things that you didn't want to deal with because they weren't in your face because they were away. (emphasis added)

I also probed him to ask, hypothetically, how his parents' attitudes toward his sexuality would have been if he had been living with them as an out gay man. He replied,

I think it might've been a tighter or a more circumscribed existence that [wouldn't have] allow[ed] for much self-actualization. If you're stuck within your home and parish and city and then that kind of thing, I don't think that you have as much room for self-actualization as you do if you moved on and moved out and moved on with your life.

Ben's response shows that the distance created between him and his parents through his leaving parental home helped his parents more in avoiding his sexuality than understanding it. It happened that way because it was typical for families of his generation to put unwanted things away from the sight to not deal with them. His moving out did exactly that for his sexuality. Ben felt that his staying with parents, as well as moving away from them, would have kept their heteronormative attitudes stronger. Therefore, he felt that he would have experienced parental rejection at that age irrespective of whether he did, or did not, leave his parents. This key moment, therefore, brought no change in parental rejection for him. Hence, his name is coded with a no-fill background, indicating no change, at the intersection of this key moment and his parents' retention of heteronormative attitudes toward him.

The overall experiences of gay men's moving out of their familial home shows that this key moment made parents accepting when they reduced their heteronormative expectations following this move. Shielding parents from the negative experiences, and selectively exposing them to the positive experiences, of being gay helped in this direction, mostly for younger White gay men. However, this dual strategy may not work, as it worked for Charles, for families of color where young men are, instead, expected to live with their parents until they set up their own nuclear family through marriage. Likewise, when gay men's leaving their parental home is followed by the avoidance of their sexuality by their parents, the heteronormative parental expectations from gay men are less likely to wane, and gay men's parental rejection is more likely stay intact.

#### **4.5.3 | Gay men in their early adulthood (early 20s)**

Parents' relationship with their children evolves as they become adults, and gay men are no exceptions. In table 2, Colin, Deepak, and Mahesh are at the intersection of the life stage of early adulthood and their parents' reducing their heteronormative expectations. Colin (American,

b.1984), for example, felt more accepted as a young adult by his father than he felt in his late adolescence. In his early 20s, he was able to talk about his sexuality with his father like an adult. He said that when he reached his early 20s and was going to a college in Orlando, FL, he became closer to his father. He said,

I think there's always this part when your parents, like the fairy tale of your parents, and you become an adult and they're able to actually have a real discussion with you... One thing that did change was when I was in my 20s and living in Orlando in college [was that] I was going out to the [gay] bars and hanging out and doing some “bad things.” I would talk to my dad about that. My relationship with my dad became actually a lot stronger when I was in college to the point where my mom felt like she was getting neglected.

Colin’s father could overcome his heteronormative attitudes in Colin’s early adulthood by affirming his ways of experiencing his sexuality. Hence, Colin felt more accepted by him.

However, not all gay men felt freer, and therefore, more accepted, by their parents in their early adulthood. In table 2, Udit, Suyash, and Zubin stand at the intersection of this stage and their parents’ retention of heteronormativity. Udit (Indian, b.1993) beautifully summarized the experiences of these three Indian men, through his own experiences and extensive interactions with young gay men. I asked him if he thought that parental acceptance was contingent on the life stages of gay men. He replied,

I don’t know about other countries; in India it matters a lot, it matters the most actually ....When somebody comes out [at] a very young age [their] parents think that the child is in a bad influence or something, and they’re being strict not letting them go out, not letting them use phone, media or something [hoping] that will change their sexuality. When somebody comes out [at] an age like when he is in college or something, then [their parents] think that “

if we won't let them leave the city, they'll stay with us then . If they'll go, they'll definitely experiment or maybe get there. They will definitely go in this – they'll meet the people from the [LGBTQ] community, [and] nothing will change.”

The above view, contrasting with Colin's experience, and summarizing Udit's experiences as well as that of Suyash and Zubin in their early 20s, shows that some parents think that their young adult son became gay because of the “bad” influence from gay people. These parents can become stricter and stop their young adult gay sons from going out or using the phone or the social media, hoping that these restrictions will help in changing their sexuality. Zubin's (Indian, b.1997) experience added another dimension to this view. His parents intensified their pressures on him to get married after he came to them, although he was too young to marry at the age of 22 when I had interviewed him. Recounting his recent experiences with his mom, he said,

Only recently I found out that she thinks that “no, you'll find someone, you'll find a girl who will ‘understand’ you and will still want to live with you.” That's when I wanted to restart that this is not going to happen. And I'm not going to do that with my life, and I'm not going to ruin two lives because of your needs or because of being afraid of the society... [I am dating someone, but] I'm too young; So, there's no point of bringing that up and stirring the pot unnecessarily.

Zubin's mother's persuasions were based on her belief that it was possible to find a woman who would marry Zubin while knowing that he is gay. Zubin's reaction suggests that these persuasions were rooted on her fears of incriminating societal reactions to her family for having a gay son. Clearly, his mom was staunchly attached to her heteronormative expectations during Zubin's young adulthood and hence, accepting him was impossible.

The experiences of these young men cumulatively show that when parents have a highly heteronormative attitude toward marriage and family, they are less likely to accept their gay son in their young adulthood. They could go to the extent of curtailing his freedom and persuading him for a heterosexual marriage, hoping that these restrictions could make him heterosexual while he is younger.

#### **4.5.4 | Gay men in their early career or marriageable phase (mid-20s and 30s)**

Gay men in their 20s and 30s—who have completed their college education and have started earning—have often found themselves in the zone of “marriageable phase”. Many have found their parents persuading them to marry a woman, despite knowing that they are gay. These persuasions disregarded these men’s sexuality and therefore, were construed as parental rejection by gay men. In table 2, Edward, Harish, Hemant, Kirtan, Purab, and Sudip are the intersection of this stage in their lives and their parents’ retention of heteronormativity. Hence, these men felt rejected in the phase of their early career or when their peers married.

Hemant (Indian, b.1984) told me that his mom often pressured him to marry a woman by citing intense inquiries about his marriage from her extended family. When I asked him if she still persuaded him to marry, he replied, “No, not at all, it completely stopped.” I asked him why he thought they stopped. He replied,

Earlier she used to go, and after she came back from a marriage, she used to come and tell everyone was asking about your marriage. Nowadays I ask her, and she says, “no one asked about your marriage.” She said, “no one is concerned, they’re all busy with their own lives.” I said “okay, good for you guys, actually.”... I think it’s the age, you know. I have crossed the *marriageable age* is what I understand, so for Indian guys, the marriageable age they presume

it is within 28 to 32. That's when all my cousins are getting married, all my cousins.

(emphasis added)

Hemant was 35 at the time of the interview, and I knew that many Indian gay men felt marriageable until their late 30s. Therefore, in response, I gave him Udit's (Indian, b.1993) example, who, too, had the calculations of marriageable age in his mind. He was 26 at the time of the interview and had said, "People get married by the age of 35 or 36. I think [my parents] will try to force me to get married for another ten to twelve years." When I asked Udit, what might happen after that, he had said that they might stop persuading him to marry. In response to this example, Hemant said, "Not essentially in my family. Yeah, my family rules are little different."

According to Hemant, his relatives had persistently been inquiring his mother about his marriage as long as he was in the phase of his marriageable age. Because of these inquiries, she had been pressuring Hemant to get married. This behavior shows that Hemant's mom retained her heteronormative expectations as long as he was marriageable. Hence, she showed rejection to her son in his marriageable phase.

There were exceptions, too, however, to the above trend. In table 2, Rahul, Rajiv, and Todd are coded in the intersection of their marriageable phase and their parents' reduced heteronormativity. We read in Rahul's biography, for example, that his promises of not marrying anyone in the US and returning back to India after completing studies, which he had made to his parents and had fulfilled, worked toward weakening his parents' heteronormative expectations of seeing him married to a woman. Rahul's parents did not persuade him to marry a woman in his marriageable phase as much as moms of Udit and Hemant did. Rahul was the youngest among his siblings and had an age gap of around 15 years from his older brother and older sister. His



older brother and older sister had met their filial duties of marriage and giving grandchildren to Rahul's parents. Hence, they did not have strong filial expectations from Rahul which, too, helped in reducing their heteronormativity and accepting him when he was marriageable.

#### **4.5.5 | Gay men in their mid-lives | Parents' later lives**

Table 2 shows that John, Sudip, and Sudheer felt rejected by their parents in their mid-life phase when their parents had largely retained their heteronormative expectations. Likewise, John, Manish, and Sudheer are cross tabbed at their parents' later lives and their retention of heteronormativity. They, too, felt rejected by their parents in their lives. Sudheer's biography, for example, explained both intersections because his mid-life and his father's later life overlapped each other. We read that he experienced diminished experience in his mid-life as he was forced to live with his father after his older brother went to Canada, thereby foregoing his privacy. Sudheer had been perceiving his father accepting since he permitted Sudheer to live alone in their second family apartment as long as Sudheer's older brother, and his family, were living with his father. However, the key moment of his brother's move to Canada with his family changed the family dynamics. Sudheer's father had entered an empty nest period through this key moment because his grandchildren, too, had moved to Canada, his regret of Sudheer, for not marrying and meeting his filial duties, therefore intensified. This regret shows an intensification of heteronormative remorse for Sudheer which reduced acceptance for Sudheer in this phase of his life.

Table 2 shows that Adrian, Anirban, Avery, Kirtan, and Purab, in contrast, stand at the intersection of their parents' later lives and their reduced heteronormative expectations. They all experienced a stronger acceptance in their parents' later lives. Their collective experience shows that when their parents found themselves more vulnerable, and saw diseases and death more

closely, in their later lives, their outlook generally mellowed toward various issues, including their sons' sexuality, which they had been contending with in their younger age. A more inclusive understanding of life also helped them in overcoming their heterosexist outlook. Hence, they were able to show more accepting behaviors to their sons than they could show in their mid-lives. For example, Avery (American, b.1991) had made a passing reference in the beginning of our conversation that his mom had not been worrying about other people's reactions to his sexuality as much as she had been doing in the past. As our talk unfolded, I asked him what brought that change. He replied,

We're getting older, honestly. I don't know [my mom's] actual age. Let me do with that, but I think as you have more life experiences, and I think she just—both her parents died recently. I think that's just shifted her whole mindset on a lot of things too. I think she's just more willing to live. I see that in both of my parents actually, that they're both much more willing to actually live their own lives by how they want to live as opposed to doing what they think they should do, which for my dad was working. And that's it. Then for my mom was putting on this image for the rest of the world to see and being the perfect wife and mother and whatever.

So, I think that on top of her dad dying like two years after that—her dad was also super healthy. Then when my grandma started going downhill with Alzheimer's, he'd take care of her. And that took a lot out of him too. So, I think just seeing how quickly both of them deteriorated and died woke her up in a way that was like, "Okay. That could happen to me. I need to start living my life for how I want to live it." It's a slow process with her, but I can see it happening.

I probed Avery by asking whether his parents, and his mom especially, accepted him more enthusiastically due to seeing diseases, death, and the vulnerability of the older age in her later life. Avery replied,

Yeah. I think she's still not as willing to talk about [my sexuality]. But now, she doesn't try to change the subject when I bring it up. When I used to bring up anything gay, she would just act like I didn't say anything and talk about something else. Now, she'll at least like— she won't talk a lot about it, but she'll just say a few things and that's it. So at least she's open to the fact of me -- she's willing to let me talk to her about it, I guess, whereas before she really wouldn't.

Avery's words show that his mom did not become super accepting at her later life. However, Avery still felt more accepted by her as her show of heteronormative behaviors had reduced in comparison to how she did in her mid-life.

Gay men's experiences of parental acceptance in their mid-lives, or in their parents' later lives, cumulatively show that gay men's experience of acceptance can become stronger when parents' heteronormative attitudes subside due to reasons like a more inclusive outlook toward life. In contrast, acceptance may diminish in this life stage if parents show a heteronormative remorse to their gay son for not meeting his filial duties. In both scenarios, how heteronormative parents became in their later lives determined how accepting they were in that stage of their lives to their gay sons.

#### **4.6 | Embracing a homonormative outlook**

Gay men's experiences also show that parents, who approved homonormative ways of living in various time contexts, often showed stronger acceptance to their gay sons.

##### **4.6.1 | Leaving parental home**

The key moment of gay men's leaving their parental home was often followed by parental acceptance when parents approved their son's homonormative life by accepting his significant other. In table 2, Adrian, Bob, Jeevan, and Matias are at the intersection of the key moment of moving out of the parental home and their parents' approval of homonormativity. They all experienced stronger acceptance from their parents following this key moment.

Adrian, Bob, and Matias, especially, became freer to pursue a romantic relationship after leaving their parents' home. When their relationship stabilized, they introduced their partners to their parents. Family holidays like Thanksgiving and Christmas gave them opportunities to visit their parents, with their partner or spouse, and feel accepted by spending time together as a family. For example, we read in Adrian's biography how his mother embraced a homonormative outlook, after he moved out of home, by starting to ask about his partners. When Adrian's relationship with stabilized, he brought Jim home on Christmas and felt accepted when his mom brought a Christmas gift for Jim as well.

In table 2, Purab (Indian, b.1982) is at the intersection of this key moment and his parents' non-approval of homonormativity. Therefore, this key moment neither diminished nor increased parental acceptance for him. Purab's story gives another perspective to this key moment, in contrast to how American gay men generally described to me, narrating that leaving their parents' home gave them a combination of personal freedom and holiday visits with their partners to their parents. It did not work for Purab that way. When I asked him how his leaving home changed his relationship with his parents, he replied,

I'm no longer in the joint family system because I was wanting to get out from there. So, I did get out, and after I came out, I think after a year and a half or so, I always cited the reason for – the fact that my workplace is really far so I had to really move out. So I did

move out and my parents also were kind of shuffling between my brother and my place so whenever there is a tu-tu main-main [verbal infightings] there or like the “saas-bahu serial” [family dramas involving mother-in-law and daughter-in-law] there, they come here, and when they feel like they’re missing their grandkids they go there for some time. But I think for the last seven, eight months they’ve been staying with me only because they really didn’t feel like going there. But it’s kind of like my place in the sense that it’s my place, but it’s kind of to an extent like, even my dad also does a little bit here and there, so he also does have some say but not completely though... It’s kind of my place because I pay the rent and all, but he also has some financial – I won’t say decision, but he also kind of chips in like for food and all of that. But I kind of take care of majority of the things.

Purab said that he had left his parents’ home to live in the same city of Mumbai. His parents, however, used his moving out as an opportunity to make Purab’s home as their second home. When I asked Purab if this move helped his parents in accepting him, he said,

It’s complicated. I think until my boyfriend was coming in, they were fine with [my sexuality] because I was leading my life my way and meeting people and all of that. Ever since my boyfriend started coming in, they were like “ah, we don’t need another person coming in here,” and they at times have voiced out their concern with me saying that “it’s okay with whatever you’re doing (the work that I’m doing for the LGBT community and all of that), but we hope you’re not kind of taking this relationship sort of thing very seriously.” And I don’t talk about it a lot because I think me and my partner’s pictures were out in the newspaper, I think as part of our story and ever since section 377 kind of got scraped, there were stories that were written on us and all of that while we got featured. So, my father was like a little upset about it...But yeah, he was “like why are you doing all of this, this is not something that

is really required, and you don't have to talk about it. You know, whatever you want to do, do, but don't let the society or the community know.”

Purab's quote shows that his parents' making his home as their second home was also marked by their controlling his life. They approved Purab's LGBT advocacy, though reluctantly, but they did not accept his partner. Purab's story shows that his moving out did not make his parents homonormative. They did not accept Purab's partner. Purab did not feel accepted after his move because this key moment did not change his parents' attitudes much toward his sexuality. Hence, this key moment worked toward neither waxing nor waning parental acceptance for him. Therefore, he is coded in the tri-normativity/contextuality matrix in table 2 with a no-fill background.

#### **4.6.2 | Dating or committing to a significant other**

Purab's example showed that his parents did not accept his partner. The key moment of entering the same sex relationship, therefore, worked toward diminishing Purab's perceptions of his parents' acceptance as he earlier thought that his parents accepted him. In table 2, Hemant, Jacob, Jagrit, John, Kirtan, Luis, Mahesh, Sudip, Ujjwal, and Zubin, stand with Purab at the intersection of the key moment of partnering with a significant other and their parents' not approaching their son's sexuality through a homonormative outlook. This key moment either waned parental acceptance for them or kept it unchanged based on how they understood parental acceptance. For example, when I asked John (American, b.1969), if a relationship would have mellowed his mother's attitudes toward him, he referred to his sister's wedding to respond to my question. He said,

I've watched the way she reacts to my sister's child and my sister being married and her whole situation. And I've seen a change in behavior even towards my sister since she got

married. And I think the fact that my sister got married made my mother very proud and again there was prestige associated with that and it made a difference. These are little things but I will also – this is probably getting a little bit off track but because this whole social thing is so important to my family when my sister was married there was a six page story about it in the [x - name of a prominent national daily].

John had seen the way his mother had joyfully reacted to his sister's wedding. John also said that when his sister had married, a prominent national daily newspaper had published a six-page story about this wedding in its weekend section. This was a very proud moment for John's mother and grandmother. John further said,

They probably bought 20 copies of the paper, oh, look, here's our daughter, she got married. It's in the [x], it's this big thing. And here I am -- continuing to disappoint them and this would have really been right around the time that I was forty. So, my sister you know, would have been just confirming once and for all to my mother that I was going to really be the disappointment, and my sister who was getting married, "look how wonderful this is, it's even in the newspaper.

John's views about his mom shows that she valorized heteronormativity in the family so much that John's finding a significant other would make no change in her rejection for John. Hence, John is coded with a no-fill background at the intersection of his finding a significant other and his mom's non-approval of homonormativity.

Table 2 cross tabs Adrian, Bob, Daniel, Jarred, Ken, Luis, Matias, Paul, and Sharad across the key moment of finding a significant other and their parents' embracing a homonormative outlook. Except Sharad, all these men felt that bringing a partner into their lives helped in

achieving them stronger acceptance. For example, when I asked Bob (American, b.1991) if he thought that his parents became more accepting of him after he had a partner, he replied,

I think so. I think that helps because I think [a relationship] more or less helps normalize [one's sexuality] versus being single. I don't know, I just think it helps normalize the situation to be more similar to them. You know, people relate to what's similar to them and what's familiar to them. And it's having a family -- like that establishes a relationship -- is they can relate to that concept, I think.

Bob said that his relationship resulted in setting up a "family" with his significant other, which brought stability and (homo)normativity in his life. When his parents saw him living a stable life as a gay man, they became more accepting of his sexual identity.

Sharad's story is an outlier. His parents approved their son's homonormativity at the key moment of getting a partner, but that approval did not translate to acceptance as how Sharad wanted. I asked Sharad (Indian, b.1991) if he thought that having a partner would make his parents more accepting, to which he replied,

I don't know actually, as I told you that I had a two-year relationship, and they met that guy once. So, they told me that okay, bring him home, and then he came here, they had a talk and my father was like, "if you really love each other then we'll give you a different [apartment], you stay there, we won't interrupt your life but then at least have a stable relation. It [should not be] like that "okay, we're in relationship for six months, four years then tata, bye, bye, and then search for a new partner." My father doesn't want that, he was like, "okay, fine, you are gay, then find a good partner and stay with him."

[My partner] wanted to get married with a girl, and then he was pretty sure about it since [his parents wanted him to,] but then that was really -- So I said, "okay, fine, if you want to



get married then we have to stop here.” That was really very sad, that is life... There are very few guys who are out to their families to get the stable partner, that’s a very difficult thing... [Therefore, my parents] want me to get married [to a woman] because of the security of life, social security of mine.

Sharad’s father meeting his partner at home, approving their relationship, and even offering an apartment to the couple for living together shows that he indeed approved his son’s homonormative way of living as a gay man. However, Sharad’s answering “I don’t know” to my question shows that he was not sure if he should consider his father accepting at this key moment. The bone of contention here, is that, homonormativity in the Indian context means *permanence* of the gay relationship, as the words of Sharad’s father suggested. As I had mentioned in Rahul’s case as well, traditional Hindu marriages socially enforce the permanence of the marital bond. Hence, Sharad’s father’s expectation of finding a permanent relationship has alignment with Rahul’s parents’ similar expectations. This criterion of homonormativity was not comforting for Sharad because he was not confident of finding a male significant other for a relationship that would be as impeccable as a heterosexual marital bond would have been for him. Sharad had a partner for two years, which in his mind, was an achievement. His father’s reluctance to accept serial monogamy in his view of homonormativity, however, did little to wax Sharad’s perception of his father’s acceptance at the key moment of his finding a partner.

Adrian’s story, too, in one of the upcoming sections will show a similar dynamic. According to this dynamic, when parental understanding of homonormativity involves permanence in gay relationships, but gay men’s experiencing their sexuality involves serial monogamy, parents’ approval of their son’s homonormative way of living may not bolster gay men’s perceptions of parental acceptance.

The experiences of Adrian, Bob, Daniel, Jarred, Ken, Luis, Matias, Paul, Hemant, Jacob, Jagrit, John, Kirtan, Luis, Mahesh, Purab, Sharad, Sudip, Ujjwal, and Zubin, cumulatively, showed that when gay men's sexuality started involving a partner, their parents' approval of a homonormative way of living often, but not always, made gay men feel accepted. In contrast, parents' disapproval of homonormativity at the key moment of finding a partner diminished gay men's perceptions of acceptance or maintained their perceptions of parental rejection.

#### **4.6.3 | Marriage or commitment ceremony**

Eight American men, whom I talked with, had married when same-sex marriages became available to them, or had called a commitment ceremony with their partners when marrying them was not possible. This key moment occurred in the lives of Carl, David, Derek, Gary, Edwin, Paul, Stephen, and Wayne, and it changed their experiences of parental acceptance. In table 2, all of them, except Gary and Wayne, stand at the intersection of this key moment and their parents' approval of homonormativity. Gary and Wayne are the intersection of this key moment and their parents' non-approval of the homonormativity which involved same-sex marriage.

Among those who felt a stronger acceptance after this key moment, Derek's (American, b.1966) example is particularly interesting. His mom had denounced his sexuality when he was an adolescent. He said,

[My mom] certainly believed that, you know, a man who lies with another man is an abomination, should be put to death. So, that was very, very difficult for us for a while... She was born in the 40's, so she was growing up in the 60's as a young person. And for her, you know, gay people were terrifying and that they were abused and lonely and frightened and had terrible scary lives and would never find love. And, you know had to hang out in gay bars and its sketchy sets.

Derek's mom followed a Pentecostal church which believed that homosexuality was a sin. In the quote above, Derek vividly explained how, as a person from the silent generation, she thought that gay men were perverts. Derek continued speaking,

But, [when I was] around 19, 20, we decided to very slowly, you know, try to get to know each other's perspectives again. I was dating at that time. I have dated someone consistently through my life. And, in my 30's, I had a commitment ceremony with my partner, and she came to it. And there were – I mean we had all our friends, all my work friends, all my straight friends, all our gay friends.

When I asked Derek how his mom felt in his ceremonial union, Derek replied,

[My mom said,] "I saw men and men dancing together. I saw women and women, I saw men and women. All I saw was love." And she went back to her church and said, "I'm not going to listen to it anymore. I'm not going to listen to this part. I don't care what you say. I'm not judging him. It's all about love and I'm done with this part." You know, and if she sets her mind to something, she sets her mind to it. So, I think that that was the *big tipping point* and I think we grew and learned over time. You know, she would asked things like "who's the girl?" "Okay, mom. Never with a girl." (emphasis added)

Derek considered his commitment ceremony a "tipping point" that drastically changed his mother's views on being gay and grew her acceptance of him much stronger. This happened because his mother approved homonormativity by accepting that two men, too, could marry each other.

Gary and Wayne's stories were different, however. Their parents were fine with their son's relationship with a man but not with the marriage between the two. For example, I had interviewed Gary (American, b.1963) in the Fall of 2012. He had married his husband in the Fall

of 2011. Gary had personally visited his father and his stepmother to invite them. Gary's father knew Gary's partner, and he liked him as well. However, he refused to attend Gary's wedding. Recounting that experience, Gary was gasping, and I could sense his dismay through his speech in broken sentences. He said,

Well my father told me that—I was getting married to my partner last Fall and five days before wedding which was held in Hill Country and our family and friends were coming—my dad told me that—We have been very close, he knows my partner, he likes my partner, we visit all the time. I visit him and my stepmother, and they visit us and all that. And he told me that he would not be coming to the wedding because it was going to be too hard, and it would be too difficult for him, and we had a big argument, and we have not spoken since. There were a lot of things, but that is basically what happened as I think he is okay with me being gay and he loves me, but the idea of me standing up there with my partner and seeing us exchanging vows with each other—even as much as he loves my partner and all that, or as much as he professes to love him. He did not want to do that, so neither one of my parents came and that was the end of September and I have not spoken to them since.

Gary's father refused to attend Gary's wedding because he felt very uncomfortable with the idea of a marriage between two men. Gary continued,

Until the Fall of last year, I had an incredible relationship with my dad, we visited them up to two times a year. They came to visit us. They loved my partner. We used to always talk to our friends and tell them we were visiting my parents—it was like hanging out with friends, we had such a good time, we used to barbecue. We did all these great things together and my partner used to—when he would tell his friends that we were going to spend weekend with his in-laws or what have you, everybody will go, “oh God, are you kidding?” Right now, it is

different, they are wonderful, but the big part of the problem that I had with him is just I felt like we were being diseased, and it shocked me. If there was a certain limit, I only go this far, so that to me is not a transparent, open and honest relationship.

The above quote suggests that Gary's wedding, too, was a "tipping point" in his parent's acceptance, but in the opposite direction to how it was for Derek. This wedding was a key moment that strongly diminished Gary's perception of his father's acceptance of him. This happened because his father had refused to approve homonormativity that involved same-sex marriage.

The key moment of same-sex wedding or commitment ceremony applied exclusively to Americans among all gay men that I talked with. This moment made perceptions of parental acceptance stronger for those men whose parents approved homonormativity by accepting their same-sex marriages. They attended their son's wedding and affirmed him. However, not all parents were comfortable with the idea of this kind of a homonormative marriage. While they accepted their son's partner, they had a very heteronormative view of marriage whereby they rejected their gay sons at the key moment of their marriage.

#### **4.6.4 | Becoming a father**

Gay men have often felt accepted when their parents approved their homonormative way of fathering a child with a significant other. In table 2, Caldaron, Keith, Matias, Stephen, and Todd stand at the intersection of the key moment of becoming a father and their parents' approving homonormativity. Caldaron and Matias had adopted a child with their significant others, and their parents had enthusiastically accepted these new arrivals in their families. We read in Caldaron's biography how becoming a father was a key moment for him in parental acceptance, and how enthusiastically his parents accepted that two men, too, could become fathers together. Stephen did not become a father, but he anticipated his parents to accept his child if he became

one. Keith and Todd did not want to become fathers but anticipated a stronger parental acceptance to their relationships if they did.

Eshan, John, Sharad, and Sudip are cross tabbed at the intersection of the key moment of becoming a father and their parents' non-approval of homonormativity. None of these men became parents but they felt that their parents would be enthusiastic to get a grandchild from them. However, they will not accept their partners as co-parents. For example, when I asked Eshan (Indian, b.1989) whether his adopting a child would be a problem for his parents, he replied,

Eshan: No, not at all. I don't think [my raising a child] will be an issue there, the acceptance of the partner would be a challenge...If I decide to have a kid with that partner, I don't think acceptance of the kid would be a challenge, the acceptance of raising that kid with a man would be a challenge.

Apoorva: Tell me what makes you feel so?

Eshan: I actually don't have an answer for that question. Sorry, I don't – Yeah, they would be okay accepting the child, I mean for the reason because [the child would have] my name attached to [her or him]. But, they would have a problem of raising the child with a same-sex partner, but as long as that guy is not in the picture in family trips or family occasions, they would be okay with accepting the child.

Apoorva: That's interesting. You said, "as long as the guy is not in the picture." So, what do you mean by that?

Eshan: So, they have not accepted the same-sex marriage concept. So, they would not accept me having a relationship with a guy, but they've accepted me

[as a gay man who will not marry a woman]. So, taking that into consideration, yeah, because they will not accept my partner in the family, that's what I meant by "as long as the guy is not in the picture." Since they will not accept the guy, [co-parenting] will be a problem; the problem won't be with having the kid.

The single parenthood retains the heteronormative nature of the family because it mutes the sexual identity of the parent. The above conversation with Eshan shows that his parents would not warm up to the homonormative approach of same-sex co-parenting. Because his parents would reject his partner irrespective of whether he became a father, the occurrence of key moment, according to what Eshan shared, would have no effect on his experience of parental acceptance.

The experiences of Caldaron and Matias, and the anticipations of Keith, Stephen, Todd, John, Eshan, Sharad, and Sudip, show that many parents would like their gay son to become a father. However, this key moment will likely make gay men's perceptions of parental acceptance stronger if their parents approved the homonormative way of fathering a child, i.e., accepting their son's male significant other as the co-father of the child.

#### **4.6.5 | Gay men in marriageable phase (mid-20s and 30s)**

Gay men in their 20s and 30s—who have completed their college education and have started earning—often find themselves in the zone of "marriageable age". In table 2, we see Adrian, Rahul and Sharad at the intersection of their marriageable phase and their parents' approval of homonormativity. In their accounts discussed thus far, we've read that this approval still did not make these men's perceptions of parental acceptance stronger in their marriageable phase because their parents did not accept their sons' short-term relationships. Their idea of

homonormativity required permanence in marital relationships. Adrian, Rahul, and Sharad could not get permanent partners and thus, did not meet their parents' homonormative expectations. In contrast, parents of Caldaron, Derek, and Matias accepted them in their marriageable phase. These men had found permanent partners or husbands, whom their parents joyfully accepted. Table 2 also shows Eshan, Udit, and Mahesh standing at the intersection of their marriageable phase and their parents' non-approval of homonormativity. Their parents had accepted that their son will not marry a woman, but they had not welcomed the idea of their son's relationship with a man either. Hence, these men experienced diminished acceptance in this stage of their lives. For example, when I asked Eshan (Indian, b.1989) if his parents were still hoping that he would relinquish his sexuality and marry a woman, he said,

I don't know right now because things have boiled down. They've not talked to me about marriage or the last time I spoke to them—I just spoke to my mother, [and] not to my father but I spoke to my mother, I mean, two to three months back, and she was still expecting me to get married [to a woman] at some point in time, maybe not now, maybe in five or six years. But I cleared in that conversation that it's not going to happen. I again explained them I am happy, I am at [the] peak [of my career] right, now and I can never ask for anything more. And also gave them a heads up like I'm in relationship with someone, I might get married to that guy. And she never expected that, she was very frank in saying that "*we're okay about you not getting married but we're not okay accepting a man in the family.* People will laugh at us if they come to know." Yeah, so I don't know, at this point in time what they feel but that was the last conversation we had with my mother.

(emphasis added)



The above quote from Eshan shows that his mother was battling with her heteronormative expectations from Eshan. The emphasis in that quote, however, shows that she had made her mind to not approve homonormativity. This made Eshan felt rejected as a gay man in his marriageable phase.

The experiences of Adrian, Caldaron, Derek, Eshan, Mahesh, Matias, Rahul, Udit, and Sharad show that parents who did not approve homonormativity were not perceived accepting by their gay sons in their marriageable phase, especially when they had a partner to introduce to their parents. However, parents' becoming homonormative was not the exclusive precondition for accepting gay men. Some homonormative parents whom I understood through their gay sons often required that their sons pursued a permanent same-sex relationship. When this criterion was met, parents joyfully accepted their son's partners. However, they showed reluctance to accept their sons' short-term partners which was where their acceptance diminished.

#### **4.6.6 | Gay men in their mid-lives (40s and 50s)**

In their mid-lives, gay men generally have more stable, and financially self-sufficient, careers than they had in their 20s and 30s. As we learnt from Hemant and Udit, men in this phase of their lives faced least pressures of heterosexual marriage. They find most of their peers married and busy in raising their adolescent children in this phase of their lives. In table 2, Mahesh and Rahul are coded at the intersection of this life stage and their parents' approval of homonormativity. Rahul had continued to receive diminished acceptance from his parents as he never met his parents' homonormative requirement of a permanent relationship.

From what Wayne (American, b.1992) said, I found that his parents had a different homonormative requirement from that of Adrian, Rahul, and Sharad. Wayne's parents wanted Wayne and his significant other to become co-fathers. Wayne and his significant other had no

intentions to fulfill their wish. Wayne was quite young at the time of the interview, and he still had time to reconsider his decision. I asked Wayne if he thought his parents would feel disappointed in the future if he stayed firm on his decision. He replied,

Yeah, I mean I think if we ended up not having a kid, my parents would be disappointed. I think they have like a pretty large extended family on both sides, and I think my parents have a vision of their future—it's like people coming over and the house being like a gathering place for family where my grandparents were—and having a lot of cousins and kids running around is I think a dream is for them, and my sister only had one or two kids and then my brother and I [both gay] didn't have any kids. I think that would feel disappointing and sad to them because it's not fully aligned with what they had hopes for.

I probed him to ask whether his not becoming a parent would diminish his parents' acceptance for him and his husband, to which he replied,

It's such a good question. I think some of that would be like time will tell because as we get older, and they get older, and our lives shape up in certain ways, we're going to get to a point where like having kids probably isn't like doable for us, if we don't pull that trigger, so to speak. And I don't know how I guess they'll relate to us getting older and [our becoming parents] not being an element of our relationship, and at this point like they can still visit us and see us where we're at and get in our lives in the way that is now, but I think my parents are like pretty more deeply involved in my sister's life now than they are in my brother's life and my life because she's pregnant, and so I think in that way for sure there's not going to be an element that is something that they need to be around for like to take care of the kid or something like that.

Wayne's response shows that he anticipates a weaker acceptance from his parents in his mid-life because he was not likely to meet his parents' homonormative expectation of becoming a father.

Mahesh (Indian, b.1990), on the other hand, was 29 at the time of the interview and sounded more hopeful about his 40s. He said,

In maybe ten or eleven more years, I would say I assume I would be with a man. I might get settled down. It might be different from how my parents react now. My parents would stop searching for a bride as they no longer will get the kind of match they want. They'd be more worried about me settling down. I'd probably go through a same-sex wedding then. When I will go through the wedding it'll be like everyone in my family, extended family, will be invited.

Mahesh believed that his parents will approve homonormativity when he will reach 40. He hoped that his parents will accept his marriage with a man in that phase of his life which will make his perceptions of parental acceptance stronger.

Mahesh, Rahul, and Wayne's stories cumulatively tell that adopting a homonormative outlook by parents does not serve as the passport for parental acceptance in gay men's mid-lives. Gay men must meet their parents' homonormative expectations (whether that may be of "permanence" in the relationship or co-fathering a child) as well to feel accepted by them in this phase of their lives.

#### **4.6.7 | Parents' later lives (60+)**

Table 2 shows that Ben, Colin, David, Luis, Matias, and Paul saw their parents' approval of homonormativity in their later lives. They all felt accepted in this phase of their parents' lives. For Ben, Colin, and David, their parents' later lives were "empty nest period" as well when all their children had grown up and had become busy with their own lives. Their parents often felt

lonelier in their older age. At this time, Ben, Colin, and David, who were not married traditionally, whether single or partnered, had made themselves more available to take care of their parents financially and emotionally than their heterosexual siblings, if they had any, did. Their availability, care, and support to their parents helped in making parental acceptance stronger. For example, Colin's (American, b.1984) mother had entered an empty nest period after her husband had died. Both her sons were settled in their career and family. Colin had set up a household with his husband, and his older brother was busy in his domestic life with his wife and children. So, Colin's mother went back to her home country Philippines to live with her extended family. I asked Colin if his father's death and his mother's move to the Philippines brought any changes in his relationship with his mother. He replied,

Yeah, obviously, I'm a lot more worried about her now, a lot more concerned about her well-being and that she's safe and what is she going to do when her health starts failing? I have always known growing up that I would always be the one that's going to take care of my mom. It wasn't out of any kind of like, "Oh, thou shall because you're the youngest," or anything like that. No, I really love my mom. I would do anything for her.

What sucks about what happened, my dad being so young, when he died and even after that they were divorced, it's like, well, my dad would send my mom money from his retirement. But now that he's passed away, my mom doesn't have any income right now, so I am providing some financial stability to her at the moment. Since she lives on the other side of the world, it's very hard, obviously, to know what's going on. When I went to the Philippines to visit her, I set up her Facebook account. I made sure she had access to the Internet. She's a strong woman. I worried more about my dad than I did my mom after the divorce. I wasn't worried about my mom at all. I was worried more about my dad.

Colin's words clarify that he provided care, money, and other kinds of support to his mom in her later life. I asked if his mom accepted him more strongly at this phase of her life. He replied,

Oh, yeah, I definitely think so...So she's often like, "Oh, did you learn how to cook yet? Are you taking care of your husband? Are you making sure that he's getting his stuff?" So, she's just very like from her culture, those gender stereotypes and gender norms, she is definitely asking me why I'm not doing those things as if I was like her daughter, if that makes sense.

When me and Ted, our domestic partnership auto-converted to marriage, so we had basically a wedding reception. I went to the Philippines to visit my mom for the first time in years.

They have this traditional Filipino kind of like dress shirt. So, I got those and that's what me and my husband wore for our reception. We had a drag queen as our M.C. who did our vows, and she was Filipino.

The quote shows that in her later life, Colin's mother approved homonormativity and accepted Colin's partner like her son-in-law.

Table 2 shows that Kirtan and Purab, in contrast, felt rejected by their parents who had not adopted a homonormative outlook in their later lives. For example, when I asked Kirtan (Indian, b.1986) how his parents would react if he brought a partner home, he replied,

If I bring anyone then they will be like, first question they will ask, "how will you guys stay together? What will the society say? Where will you stay? Will you be staying with us? Or will you live with him in his place, will you both move out and staying somewhere else? How will you sustain financially? They bother less for my privacy and more towards the expenses.

In response, I asked, "their expenses or your expenses?" The following conversation ensued:

Kirtan: My expenses. Obviously, it will affect their expenses also because I give money at home—10,000 rupees. That will stop because I will spend money on my own house. Then they're saying like "if you set up your own house and your expenses will be high, you have to spend everything over there," it will be this and that and how will you manage, how will you do your own food and this and that. I mean they're least bothered about the sexual thing and privacy, they're more interested into "how you will manage your other things, expenses, food, traveling, maintenance?" Beyond this also there is a life, right?

Apoorva: Do you feel your parents will accept you if you live with your partner in your parents' house with them?

Kirtan: No, they will not. Because the first question will be like, "if anyone ask us who is this second guy then what should we answer?" Because they're more bothered of the society and other people and the relatives and all because none of my relatives are aware [that I am gay]. [My parents] are least bothered about their child when it comes to things in a society. "What should we say in the society if anyone asks? What would we say about this guy? If you say he's your brother then after two or three months or after six months people will again ask, 'why this cousin is staying at your place? And every time we'd have to lie to them,'" and everything .

In the above conversation, I explored every possibility that could think of which could have made Kirtan's parents accept his future partner, but I did not find any. Kirtan's story shows that he felt that his parents' later lives carried rejection for him as they continued to remain unwilling to adopt a homonormative outlook in their later lives.

#### 4.7 | Following racial normativity

American gay men gave compelling evidence to show that parental acceptance required that they experienced their sexuality by following racial normativity during the key moment of selecting their partners. Table 2 shows that Edward, Colin, Gary, Keith, Luis, Manuel, Matias, Miles, Nelson, Paul, Sean, and Todd had followed this normativity while selecting their partners. They all had selected a partner of their own, or a lighter, race. Except Matias and Nelson, who felt that their partners' race brought no change in their parents' acceptance or rejection for them, rest of the men felt stronger parental acceptance after this key moment. For example, When I asked Keith (American, White, b.1970) if he thought that a partner of the same race or ethnicity would command stronger acceptance from his parents, he referred to his partner Jimmy and said,

Yeah. I mean *Jimmy is White*, so – but he came from a very different, very rural and poor background. I think – you know it's funny when I dated women when I was in high school and early in college, my parents never liked the girlfriends that I had and they made suggestions that perhaps someone was dating me because, you know, I was, you know, financial – was going to be financially successful because I was, you know, studying law or was planning to go to a law school. But they never made any suggestions like that with Jimmy. I am sure they probably might have thought those things, but I don't – they certainly weren't going to talk about it now. And, I think if any – any concerns or feelings that they had like that, you know it hasn't been expressed to me.

But, given how they reacted to prior people that I dated, it could be that they felt that, but you know I guess – you know *he is White*, so that maybe makes it easier. He isn't well-educated in terms of years of school. You know, he went to high school and then he went to trade school for massage therapy and that is, you know, and my mom was very much into pushing

education. She had two master's degrees and so, I think that that probably -- she would have if she could pick somebody for me, it would have been somebody who is another lawyer or a doctor with lots of degrees. (emphasis added)

Keith's honest and insightful quote shows that his mom overlooked his partner Jimmy's rural upbringing and poor educational and financial background for his White racial identity.

Although education and finances of his earlier partners were important considerations for her, they did not matter much to her for Jimmy, because as Keith said, "Jimmy is White."

In contrast, gay men of color such as Colin, Matias, and Nelson who had partners from White or lighter races hardly felt that their partner's race waned parental acceptance for them. Colin's (American, Filipino-White, b.1984) mom, who is Filipino woman, in fact, liked Colin's White husband Ted. Colin said, "I will say she is always like, 'Oh, you need to treat him good.' She starts criticizing me of how I need to make sure to treat him good." When I asked him how she felt about two men living together, he replied,

I'm sure she would never ask us the juicy details of what goes on, but I think what's funny, how she tells me to treat Ted, I can definitely tell that it's from a heteronormative perspective because I think she views me as being like her in the relationship where she was the woman...So she's often like, "Oh, did you learn how to cook yet? Are you taking care of your husband? Are you making sure that he's getting his stuff?"...She is definitely asking me why I'm not doing those things as if I was like her daughter, if that makes sense...So, Ted, right now, is in college. He's finishing his bachelor's degree. I didn't know how to cook, so I've learned how to cook because that helps him out.

According to Colin, his mother not only whole-heartedly accepted his White husband but also expected him to be subservient to him in their relationship, like how she was to her White



husband. She had built those expectations in her mind despite knowing that Colin, with a master's degree in engineering and employment in a Fortune 100 airplane manufacturing company, was far more educated and professionally successful than his husband was who was finishing his college degree at the time of the interview.

The other gay men of color, Nelson and Matias, too, had partners of the same or lighter race. They did not experience much acceptance for their partners, but they thought that their race did not have much to do with that rejection. For example, when I asked Nelson (American, Black, b.1963) if his parents liked his partner, the below conversation followed:

Nelson:                   They never expressed that they did not like him. But they did express -- I did bring someone home, but they did express that they did not like this person in particular, not the fact that I brought someone home, but it was the person that they did not like.

Apoorva:                Why was that?

Nelson:                   I don't want to make my family seem so shallow, but it was Christmas dinner. I invited him at Christmas dinner with my family. This is kind of funny. He showed up at the house with shorts and flip-flops and my mother just said, "How do you go to someone's house like that on Christmas day that you've never met before?" It is like they asked me "Where did you meet him?"

He drank too much while he was there, and it was kind of a disaster. It was just him in particular but it was never, "Don't ever bring anyone home." It was just like, wow, that's the character.

*Interviewer:*           *Was he Black?*

*Nelson:* *Mexican. Yes, but that was not the reason.*

*Interviewer:* How did you feel about your parents' reactions?

*Nelson:* Well, I was initially surprised. My parents didn't follow a dress code for Christmas, and I wasn't sure why they applied one on my date. And I really didn't know that my date's wearing of casual clothing would offend my parents, otherwise I would have advised him to dress differently.

*Nelson:* Do you think that your parents did not welcome him because they were uncomfortable seeing you with a man?

*Respondent:* I don't know, I don't know. (emphasis added)

My conversation with Nelson clarified that his parents did not accept his partner, but his race, according to Nelson, was not the issue. This conversation also suggests that his parents were unlikely to accept any male partner irrespective of his race. Hence, in table 2, Nelson is coded with no-filled background in the key moment of finding a partner while he was following the racial normativity.

In table 2, Charles (American, White, b.1977) stands at the intersection of committing to a significant other and his not following racial normativity in that time context. When I asked Charles how he understood parental acceptance, he replied,

I guess parental acceptance in general is we all can be in the same room together and we all can dine at the same table and we can do family events together without it being a topic that keeps coming out, then inducing a fight or something like that.

In response, I referenced other gay men who had included the acceptance of their partner in their definition as well. I asked him if he, too, would include his partner's acceptance in his definition of acceptance. He replied,

Yes, I do. It's interesting you bring that up because the partner who I was with for 13 years, [my parents] really didn't fully -- they were respectful to him. And I would say they met my earlier definition of accepting him. There was no fights or challenges or anything.

But I definitely didn't feel like he was welcomed into the family with the same bigger and open arms and love as my brother's girlfriends and later wives were welcomed into our family. My oldest brother is ten years older. And my middle brother is seven years older. So, I had the benefit of watching how my parents and how the family reacted to them coupling up and bringing home of their partner and with immediately open arms and, "Let's look at baby pictures. We're so glad you guys got together."

And in large part, because my ex had visa issues and that we have to move to Canada, in some way, he was regarded with some disdain for having -- they blamed him and treated him differently in part because he wasn't a US citizen. And my mother kept communicating that she'd really, really wish I would move back, and she misses me and wish I still lived nearby, and this is such a terrible thing.

To some extent, I felt like my parents wanted to not sabotage the relationship but weren't quite in full support of it in part because he didn't have the same rights as everyone else. So, we couldn't just live together in the same region with my parents and come to family events together and so forth.

Based on what Charles said, I hypothesized that entering a same-sex relationship made parental acceptance weaker for him. I asked if he agreed with my hypothesis. He replied,

Yeah, I would. And I think it traces back to some sort of *prejudice* with – well, to some extent, *I'll throw in interracial*. I'll say maybe I think of it around that that he wasn't exactly like me, that he wasn't born and raised in America. I guess I don't know. *The color of his skin mattered so much*. It's the fact that he was so *different* in terms of -- it's not like he went to my high school or he went to a similar high school or he was raised in a similar type of family. They just saw all of that as *extra burden* that I would have to deal with.

And I often think that had we been allowed to live together in the home that I had in Washington DC, my parents would have been more accepting of him and therefore more accepting of me. But yeah, I think them disapproving of -- I don't want to say disapproving, but their lack of support for that relationship translated to a lesser regard of me.

It's funny. It's almost that *they accept me more when I'm single than when I'm together with somebody*. I'm seeing somebody right now. And I almost hesitate to tell them about him because he was *born in Asia*. He came over when he was a teenager. He's in his 30s now. But still, there are some differences. There's somewhat of an *accent*, not a native English speaker per se. So, I anticipate there's going to be some extensive eye rolling and, “Oh, why can't you just -- why do you have to make it so hard for yourself by adding these *extra complications*, stuff that's odd?” (emphases added)

This honest and frank quote from Charles shows he has had the history of partnering with men of color. He also felt that because of his partners' color, his parents accepted him more as a single gay man than as a partnered one. Charles is very direct in attributing his parental rejection to the race of his ex- and current partners, both foreign-born men of color. His story shows that getting a partner was a key moment that diminished parental acceptance for him as he had not followed racial normativity.

## 4.8 | Conclusion

The biographies and the thematic analyses of key moments and life stages show that gay men experienced stronger parental acceptance along their life courses, generally, if they followed the racial normativity, or their parents approved homonormativity or forewent their heteronormative expectations, while traversing key moments and life stages.

Likewise, these men experienced diminished parental acceptance, generally, when they flouted their parents' homonormative expectations; or when they disregarded racial normativity in experiencing their sexuality; or when their parents remained staunchly heteronormative, as they traversed these time contexts.

This chapter showed that the strengthening and diminishing of parental acceptance along key stages and life stages neither happens automatically nor occurs in similar ways for all gay men and their parents. The contextuality in parental acceptance depends on how well gay men's parents approved homonormativity and relinquished their heteronormative expectations during these key moments and life stages. The contextuality for American gay men also depended on how well they followed the racial normativity while selecting their partners.

In all fairness, this chapter is guilty of embracing American exclusionism by valorizing homonormativity as the more exclusive way for contextualizing parental acceptance of gay men. The next chapter will show that this approach does not apply to all gay men, especially Indian, and their parents. Forces other than homonormativity and heteronormativity may, instead, be more relevant in understanding how this contextuality occurs in the Indian scenario. The main focus of the next chapter, though, is on showing that parental acceptance can be contextual across spaces of familial interactions, as well.

#### 4. PARENTAL ACCEPTANCE ACROSS FAMILIAL SETTINGS

Parental acceptance may wax and wane across spatial contexts as well. These contexts are spaces that involve a variety of people who influence interactions between gay men and their parents. Extant research shows that holiday trips, activities that gay men do with their partners, and the church provide spatial contexts where gay men have experienced parental behaviors toward them differently from how they would experience in other contexts. Some of these contexts require that heteronorms are followed in them more strictly than in others. Therefore, in them, parental attitudes toward gay men may become more exclusionary than in other contexts where heteronorms are less strictly enforced. For example, parents may be more accepting of their gay son showing physical affection to his significant other at home than during family outings where parents may feel uncomfortable with the heterosexist gaze from onlookers on the public display of affection between their son his significant other (Trussell et al., 2015). Likewise, fathers may be more affirmative to their gay son and his significant other when they are involved in traditional male pursuits like doing the yardwork or watching football than when they are engaged in queer pursuits, such as watching or participating in the drag shows (Jadwin-Cakmak, et. al, 2015).

Christian parents may not be as affirmative to their gay son' sexuality in their church as they would be at home, like we saw in Kenneth's case. Hickey and Grafsky (2017) observe that these parents may experience a hard time reconciling their conservative religious beliefs with a positive gay identity. They may not fully understand how their son could identify both as gay and a worthy Christian. When they compartmentalize these two identities in two different physical spaces, they affirm an exclusive gay identity to their son at home and an exclusive Christian identity to him at church. These demarcations can increase parental acceptance for Christian gay men at home but decrease it in church and other religious contexts.

The extant literature on spatial contextuality gives a somewhat descriptive account of parental acceptance, though. It suggests that parents become more rejecting in familial settings that are more heteronormative in nature. Likewise, they become more accepting in less heteronormative spatial contexts. I contend that we need a more developed thesis than this one to understand the conditions under which parents show behaviors of acceptance or rejection in spatial contexts. For example, will *all* Christian parents show behaviors of parental rejection in their orthodox churches like how Hicky and Grafsky (2017) and Kenneth suggest? If not, why? Will *all* parents show reduced acceptance to their gay children and their partners in family outings, as Trussel et al. (2015) suggest? If not, why?

The sociological, and a more analytical, research question, then, is: *under what conditions gay men experience contextual parental acceptance across settings of familial interaction?* The part 1 of this chapter answers this question. The thesis unravels these conditions by examining human agency and the idiosyncratic nature of spatial contexts to give a more nuanced, and a more general, understanding of contextuality in parental acceptance across spaces.

The part 2 of this chapter remedies the regret expressed in the conclusion of the last chapter. I had mentioned that the last chapter was guilty of promoting the American exclusionism by valorizing homonormativity to conceptualize parental acceptance. This part shows that in Indian national culture specifically, there is another dimension to this puzzle. To give a trailer to what part 2 argues, let me take you back to how Rahul (Indian, b.1964) had defined parental acceptance. He had said, “[parental acceptance] is the acceptance of your child’s *life choices*.” What life choices was Rahul talking about? The choice of finding a male partner, getting married to him, and fathering a child with him? Is that how *all* gay men would like to experience their sexuality? The last chapter was guilty of giving a more exclusive “yes” as the answer to that question. This chapter remedies that fallacy by answering “no” to that question and arguing that

contextual parental acceptance *cannot* exclusively be understood through the forces of homonormativity. Not all gay men embrace homonormativity to experience their sexuality. Gay men, who do not want to experience their sexuality through homonormativity, therefore harbor different expectations from their parents. They may not perceive their parents accepting even if they embrace a homonormative outlook. The part two of this chapter accounts for the spatially contextual parental acceptance for these gay men.

## **PART 1**

The extant literature, described in the introduction of this chapter, shows that parental acceptance weakens in spatial contexts that require stricter enforcement of heteronorms and therefore, are more gay-unfriendly. My interviews show that *one*, parents who resist heteronormativity in conservative spatial contexts give an impression of stronger acceptance to their gay children than given by those parents who align with the heteronormativity of these contexts. *Two*, a spatial context, which is generally understood as more conservative, may not impose heteronormativity on all parents to the same extent. The same context may be more heteronormative for some parents and less heteronormative for others. Unsurprisingly, the former group of parents can show more accepting behaviors to their gay sons in that context than the latter group of parents would. And *three*, gay men and their parents may experience more heteronormativity in a spatial context in some instances and less in others. In light of these three arguments, it may not be correct to assume that spatial contexts generally understood as more heteronormative, such as church and extended familial settings, will always diminish parental acceptance for gay men.

### **4.1 | Confronting versus conceding to heteronormativity**

**Sean (American, b.1958) and Nelson (American, b.1963)**



Sean works as a data integrity manager in Harwood Heights, IL. When I asked him how he understood parental acceptance, he said,

They treat Jay just like a son-in-law. He got the same birthday cards, the same \$10 as all my other brothers-in-law and sisters-in-law got. He's invited to every family get together. He shares all of the holidays with our family and I with him, his family. He's – my parents met his parents many times. Not a lot, but several times. *Yeah, he's just treated like one of the family.* (emphasis added)

Sean felt accepted by his parents because they treated his husband Jay like their son-in-law. He experienced this acceptance especially at home when they celebrated holidays and birthdays with a family. More conversations revealed that this acceptance was contextual in nature. In a later part, he said,

I think my mother never wanted to talk about [my sexuality and my husband] with her relatives or her bridge club ladies. I mean because I have a cousin who is gay, and I don't think his mother and my mother ever talked about it.

Clearly, the bridge club and the relatives constituted spatial contexts where Sean's mom did not treat Jay like one of the family. To broaden this context of rejection, I probed, "And, what about her church community? Did she feel comfortable introducing your husband as her son-in-law at her church?" Sean responded, "No, I don't think so. No." When I asked why, he replied,

Tradition, Catholic! I mean technically if you're gay, you're not supposed to be a Catholic, I suppose. But I still go to church and receive communion. I think [my parents] felt uncomfortable talking about it. They accepted us, but yet they weren't going to be a PFLAG parent.

In fact, I know so because on my dad's funeral nine years ago, (laughs) Jay and I were walking down the aisle after mass with the family, and I remember one of her bridge lady friends—her eyes got about as big as they could get—kind of shocked to see me holding hands with a man, so she probably figured it out at that point.

Sean's quote shows that his criterion of acceptance to have his husband treated like a family did not quite meet in his mom's church community.

I would like to contrast Sean's experience in church with that of Nelson's. Nelson works as a senior pastor in a progressive Christian denomination in San Diego, CA. Nelson grew up in San Diego, CA, but he attended a graduate school in Washington DC where he spent most of his 20s and 30s. When I asked Nelson how he understood acceptance, he immediately responded,

Well, I understand it well. Given the history of religion in the role of my family, my family never told me I was going to go to hell, or they never told me I need to pray and ask God to change me. None of that went on in our house. I was just always reminded that no matter what, I was their son, and they loved me unconditionally.

I followed up by asking, "Basically, the religious dogma did not come on the way. So, is that what makes you feel accepted?" And he responded, "Yes." Nelson felt fortunate that despite coming from a religious family and the prevalent homophobia in Black community, his parents were more accepting than how he thought most other Black parents were. Nelson was not wrong. John (American, b.1969), the other Black gay man whom I interviewed, was rejected by his parents, and especially by his father, precisely because of their religious views. Nelson gave an example to show how his mom accepted him at her church. He said,

Well, I think within my community, I can remember—I was on for break, spring break I think it was, and I think that well, I can remember this, it was some homophobic statement that the

minister made. I can remember walking out of the door and my mother telling the minister, “When you make statements like that, you know there are people in this church that have gay children.” She was kind of -- that stands out to me.

The church that Nelson’s mother attended had a heteronormative environment just like the church of Sean’s mom had. However, Nelson’s mom challenging her church’s heteronormative environment made Nelson feel accepted, whereas Sean’s mom’s conceding to her church’s heteronormative environment made Sean feel rejected. The comparison of parental acceptance for Sean and Nelson in church contexts yields the following proposition:

*P1: Parents who challenge the heteronormative environment in a spatial context may be perceived as more accepting by their gay sons than are those who concede to the heteronormative environment in the same spatial context.*

#### **4.2 | Spatial contexts more heteronormative for some parents than for others**

##### **Keith (American, b.1970) and Martin (American, b.1988)**

Keith works as an attorney at Watertown, MA. He showed a similar understanding of parental acceptance to how Sean did when I asked him his definition of acceptance. He said,

I think [my parents] treat – they treat me and Jamie like members of the family. They, you know, they buy – bought him Christmas presents, they would send birthday cards to him, they would send birthday cards to his parents. They, you know, would always, would include him in things they – you know we would sleep in the same bedroom when we were in their house. You know think he – they just treated us like, you know, like a member of the family.

Keith understood parental acceptance through his husband’s acceptance as a member of the family, especially on birthdays and while spending time together at home. This acceptance

showed contextuality when Keith unraveled how his father treated him and Jamie while spending time with friends.

I think [my father] accepted me and my husband as well – but, you know, when he would introduce us to one of his friends, he would say, “Oh, this is Keith and his *friend*, Jamie.” And then, you know, I would say, “Actually, he’s my *husband*.” I would really try to impress upon my dad that I wasn’t going to allow him to, you know, define us that way. But, you know, I never gotten up with my dad about it. I just would correct him when he would say things like, “oh, this is Keith and his friend, Jamie.” ...It doesn’t hurt my feelings in any way, it’s just I find it may be annoying. And, also you know it makes me think I guess – I don’t think he should care what other people think about the relationship that his kid has.

(emphasis added)

Keith felt frustrated with his dad for not acknowledging to his friends that Jamie was Keith’s husband. Keith further added,

So, I guess I’d say I understand my dad has some hang-ups that he has to deal with around our or my sexuality, but it doesn’t affect our relationship. I still call him every week and we talk and he calls me and I visit him and he visits me and ...you know when we go down to visit my father, he lives in a condominium development in Florida and he has lots of friends there and all of the friends know us. We’ve all gone out to dinner with my dad’s friends and when my mom was alive, her friends too... I think that we would both feel like it’s pretty strong [relationship] and that it’s very positive. [But], the fact that he – he’s Catholic and he gets a little hang-up on what the neighbors might think, you know that’s his problem.

Keith’s experience shows that although his father accepted him by treating Jamie as a member of the family at home, this acceptance waned in the circle of his friends and neighbors.

However, not all parents diminished their acceptance in the spatial contexts of their neighborhood. For example, Martin and I had the following conversation on parental acceptance:

Apoorva: So, tell me how do you understand [parental] acceptance?

Martin: In many different ways, I think one way is definitely like a positive note on the subject. So, if they, something like my dad told me a few months ago—he has a new gay friend and that he’s really sweet and he loves people all the same and that he tried to take in a young man that he knew and talked to him as his kids were gay and so he – so like positive words like that are very accepting.

Apoorva: So, were those positive words about you being gay or somebody else being gay?

Martin: The story he is using is about his action with other people, but he talks about me and my sister in his dialogues with them and how much he loves us as his gay children.

Apoorva: Can you give me an example?

Martin: Like he said that both his kids – I remember he told the “little boy” that he has two gay kids and he loves them the same and he’s really proud of us. (*quotation added*)

Apoorva: So, who he was telling this to?

Martin: Like a neighbor who is gay, a young man.

Apoorva: Okay. So, what I understand is that you felt accepted when your father acknowledged your sexual identity to your neighbor.

Martin: Yes.

The above conversation shows that Martin felt accepted when his father affirmed his sexuality in the spatial context of his neighborhood. The “little boy” whom Martin was referring to was not the only gay person in Martin’s father’s neighborhood. At another point in the interview, he said,

Well, I remember when my dad met somebody—a woman who spoke to me—he said that she was very good looking, and one day she ended up telling him that she was lesbian. And when she told him, he took the opportunity to tell her about me and my sister being gay as well. So, I think it [became] like an open door for him to talk about us.

The commonality between both neighborhood contexts where Martin felt accepted by his father was that both had lesbian or gay people in them. Hence, these contexts were more gay-affirming, and therefore, less heteronormative for Martin’s father. So, he positively acknowledged and affirm Martin’s sexuality in them to meet Martin’s criterion of acceptance.

The comparison of the stories of Keith and Martin show that the context of neighborhood cannot be universally classified as staunchly heteronormative. For Keith’s father, it indeed was, but not for Martin’s father. Hence, Martin’s father accepted him in his neighborhood, but Keith’s father did not. This yields the second proposition on spatial contextuality:

*P2: When a spatial context is less heteronormative for some parents than for others, the former can more strongly accept their gay son, than the latter can, in that spatial context.*

### 4.3 | Varieties in a spatial context for the family

#### David (American, b.1982)

Families of gay men can experience a spatial context in a variety of ways, especially if that context involves a broad range of people. A spatial context can be more heteronormative, with more gay-exclusive people in them, and less heteronormative, with more gay-affirmative people in them. Hence, gay men may experience different kinds of contextual acceptances in a spatial context. The experiences of several men like Charles, David, Edwin, and Eshan show that their parents met their criteria of acceptance in the contexts of some, but not all, relatives. David, for example, works as an attorney at Washington DC. He showed an understanding of parental acceptance similar to how Keith showed—in terms of acknowledging his sexuality and his husband—when I asked him his definition of acceptance. He said,

When I say [my mom] accepts, I mean she accepts me in her own way and enough of a way that she doesn't try to hide my sexuality from *anybody*. It's not like she – she invites me to everything. She invites people over. My husband is never uninvited. He is there. Everybody knows. Our pictures of our marriage were on [X – a social media platform]. It was very clear that we got married. She was there. She was at my wedding. (emphasis added)

More conversations with David showed that his claim about his mom's acknowledgement of his sexuality and his husband to "everybody" was far-fetched. When I asked him how his mom acknowledged his sexuality to her relatives, he responded,

Because Chasebook<sup>4</sup> is pretty—it's from here to all my relatives in Mexico. If a relative doesn't already know [my sexuality], it's because, one, they're not on Chasebook and, two, it's

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<sup>4</sup> The name of the social media platform that David referred to has been pseudonymed.

probably because they're probably too old to be on Chasebook. Then the third thing is that everybody around them thinks they're too old to even discuss those issues, so they just don't even bother.

[My mom] doesn't try to [hide my sexuality to my relatives.] In very limited circumstances in which she won't address those issues. And those are particularly around older Mexican people...They're in their 70s, 80s where they do not really address those issues. So, if they say something like, "Oh, is [David] married?" she'd be like, "No," or "I don't know." Now, she wouldn't say, "no," but she probably would say, "Oh no, he's just busy with work."...Given their age, she probably doesn't sit there and try to explain it.

David's response shows that his mom met his criterion of acceptance, i.e., acknowledging his sexuality and his husband, more strongly amid her younger relatives than the older ones.

Although both spatial contexts are that of her extended family, the former, comprising of younger people, is less heteronormative than the latter, comprising of older people. Hence, David's mom's acceptance for him, too, was stronger in the less heteronormative context of younger relatives than in the more heteronormative context of older relatives.

Based on David's story, I propose:

*P3: When a spatial context works in the lives of gay men and their parents in different versions whereby some are more heteronormative than others, parental acceptance flags in the more heteronormative versions and deepens in the less heteronormative ones.*

David's experience also foregrounds an interesting development of the recent decades which applies more to millennial gay men and more techno savvy older gay men. The development I am talking about is the use of the social media. Social media offers a platform to the extended family, as well as to friends, to know gay men's sexuality without them having to come out



officially to them. These days, gay men simply must post their romantic pictures with their significant others, and link the two profiles, to publicly announce that they are gay and are in a relationship. Extended family members that give a “like” to these postings or write affirmative comments below can be construed as ones who accept these men in contrast to those who show non-acceptance by not giving any reactions to those posts or show rejection by unfollowing these gay men. Hence, social media, too, can be useful tool for parsing out more heteronormative social contexts of friends and family from the less heteronormative ones.

Based on the influence of social media on David’s contextual acceptance in his extended family, I propose:

*P4:* The social media acts as a filter in the social lives of gay men that distinguishes more heteronormative spatial contexts of friends and family from the less heteronormative ones.

## **PART 2**

Let us recall from the last chapter how Adrian, Rahul, and Sharad understood parental acceptance. The trio understood acceptance as their partners’ acceptance by their parents. The parents of these men did not meet this criterion, not because they did not approve homonormativity but, because these men did not meet their parents’ criterion of homonormativity. For these parents, homonormativity meant permanence in the same-sex relationship. Rahul and Sharad had realized that finding a “permanent” partner was not possible for them. They wanted to follow the life course of serial monogamy, like American gay men that I talked with often did, but their parents did not approve this way of experiencing homosexuality. This is where Rahul’s definition of parental acceptance becomes relevant when he had said, “[parental acceptance] is the acceptance of your child’s *life choices*.” Adrian, Rahul, and Sharad

experienced the conflict between their wanting acceptance for the “life choice” of serial monogamy and their parents’ wanting the “life choice” of permanent relationship for them.

A few Indian gay men expanded the canvas of “life choice.” They show that a third life choice, too, is possible besides the homonormative life choices of serial monogamy or permanent relationships. This is the *queer* life choice. In this dissertation, queerness means gay men’s practicing more promiscuous sexual life by enjoying casual sexual encounters or “hook-ups” with new men, or with more regular partners called “friends with benefits,” without committing to a relationship with any of these sex partners. Queer gay men, as defined in this study, may have multiple sexual partners at the same time. Arguably, their lives involve more sexual freedom and sexual choices than committed gay men enjoy. In current times, numerous electronic hook up or dating platforms are available where gay, as well as heterosexual, men can meet up with each other solely for sexual encounters (Dasgupta, 2016). It would be wrong to assume, however, that queerness has evolved only recently. Every time period of the history has had its own technology. When internet was not available, gay, as well as heterosexual, men often looked for sex partners in physical spaces like public parks, movie halls, bathhouses, and public toilets, collectively known as “cruising spots” (Bérubé, 2003; Seabrook, 1999).

Below, I discuss the biographies of two Indian men whose criterion of parental acceptance involved queerness.

#### **4.4 | Bento (Indian, b.1991)**

Bento works as a tour manager and lives in Vasai, a suburb near Mumbai. He belongs to a Catholic family and has an Indo-Portuguese ancestry which he traces from the historical times of Portuguese colonization of several smaller regions of India, including Vasai. I purposefully pseudonymed him Bento which is a Portuguese word meaning “blessed.” Bento’s story showed

that he truly was a blessed gay man whose mom and dad, took his coming out on the stride and immediately accepted him—an experience that gay men whom I talked with rarely had.

When I asked Bento how he understood parental acceptance, he said,

I'll tell you how I understand acceptance. First of all, the phase, what I was going through, [my mom started] supporting me in an *emotional* way. She started knowing me better...And it was coming from her emotion... (emphasis added)

In response, I parroted his answer by asking, “So basically, emotional support is what you consider acceptance?” Bento counter-questioned me,

Don't you think that the emotional support is what we want when we come out? I mean other things are not important that time. The emotional support and someone is – you are getting that feeling that someone is there who will *understand* you. That was more important.

For Bento, his mom's “understanding” him was her way of showing acceptance. Therefore, my task was to examine whether his mom's understanding of him as a gay man was contextual in nature. I asked him, “Have you felt that your mom has been emotionally supportive to you at all times, like in all situations and contexts?” Bento responded, “I'll tell you she's a very practical woman. She's been supportive for many things. But if something is not going practically, then she criticizes as well.” When I asked him to give an example, he recalled,

Okay. So, this thing, I'll tell you a recent example even if it's been two years before, not very recent. See, I was coming out from this [break up]. I told my mom that, “Mom, you know what? I think I'm not going to fall into a relationship again or I'm not willing to love anyone else or I'm not going to search for anyone for my life.” And she asked, “Why is that?” And I said, “Based on my past experience, I'm going to do this.” And she said, “It's nonsense.” She said, “It's not practical to do so.”

Bento had had several failures in striking committed relationship with men. He had decided that he did not want to pursue the path of committed relationship anymore. However, Bento's mom showed a lack of understanding of the view which he had developed through his experiences. Instead of asking his feelings and showing curiosity about how he might live the life of a single gay man, she simply dismissed that idea. Therefore, although Bento observed his mom's emotional support in accepting his sexual identity after he came out to her, he felt that this support was lacking when he wanted her to accept *how* he wanted to live his life as a gay man. Bento would have understood if his mom's lack of understanding his view manifested exclusively as a reaction to his saying that he did not want to pursue a homonormative gay life. However, she alluded to her homonormative expectations in other instances as well. On several occasions, Bento felt that his mom imposed her homonormativity on him by persuading him to find a partner. Recalling one example, he said,

Sometimes I do feel awkward because whenever, when I go for shopping or something like that, my mom is like, "Look at that boy. Is he handsome? Why don't you try?" and all that thing. That makes me feel awkward. She's just too much sometimes...[Her searching of men for me is] pretty surprising to me always... I don't want that. I mean I really don't want to get married [to a man]. I tell her, "Please don't do the matchmaking for me." But yeah, when she says that, "You know that guy? Why don't you check for him if he's gay and all." That's surprising.

Another context where Bento felt rejected as a gay man was when he lacked the privacy at home to bring men for intimacy. Here is my conversation with him,

Apoorva: Is your mom fine with your bringing guys at home?

Bento: No, no. I don't do that. I used to do that when I was a teenager. After I started working, I never did that. But yeah. I assume there is a time when [my mom is] not around. She's gone for a walk or go out. Then I would bring guys at home and do "my thing." But yeah. I mean I don't do that now.

Apoorva: Because you have a separate bedroom, how do you feel about bringing guys to your room when she is at home?

Bento: I mean bringing a guy and doing "stuff" at house, I mean I'm not comfortable because of my mom. I mean, even though I do have a separate bedroom, still, this is her house. So, I mean, I'm really uncomfortable doing "it" at her house when she's there.

Interviewer: But as you said, your mom is okay with your bringing guys at home because that's what she said in the conversation.

Respondent: Yeah. Yeah, that's what she was saying today. She was just pulling my leg that way. I can't take her for granted. I mean, yeah. I mean it's okay --

The above conversation shows that as a queer gay man, Bento needed privacy at home to meet his sexual needs. However, he felt that his mom disapproved his experiencing of intimacy with men without being in a committed relationship with them. He felt that he was living in her house, and his sexual fulfillments were under her control. Although he had a separate bedroom for himself, he would have to wait for his mom to leave home to call men and enjoy intimacy.

These conversations show that Bento felt that his mom did not accept him as a queer gay man who was uncommitted to a monogamous relationship. Places like the shopping mall served as homonormative contexts where Bento's mom tried to match him with other guys which Bento perceived as a disregard to his sexuality. Bento's story shows that the contextual showing of

homonormative attitudes by parents may not translate to acceptance when their gay sons are more inclined to experience the queer way of living.

#### **4.5 | Rajiv (Indian, b.1981)**

Rajiv works in a managerial position in Mumbai. When I asked Rajiv how he understood his mother's acceptance for him, he said, "She knows how I want to lead my life, and she is understanding enough to be supportive when it's needed and yeah, that's about it." Rajiv's understanding of parental acceptance was similar to how Rahul understood it as the way of accepting life choices. My interview with Rajiv, then, focused on examining whether his mom's understanding and support, for how he wanted to live his life, was absolute or contextual. When I asked if he felt at any point that his mom's understanding and support for him differed from how he wanted them to be, he replied, "let me find out an example, there are so many of them." Here is the conversation that ensued:

Apoorva: Give me as many examples as you can.

Rajiv: So it's more to do like I was dating someone and she was – I used to meet the person every Saturday and Sunday weekends, so she started prodding, she used to wake me, "why don't you go and meet him, why don't you go and meet him." That was very different than earlier because earlier she was like trying to understand what is happening and everything and then she was like totally prodding into it that today is Saturday, he has not woken up. "Go have your breakfast with him and then come back and tell me how it was." Yeah, that was something different. I didn't expect that.

Apoorva: And why do you feel that she should not prod into [your meeting with the person you were seeing]?

Rajiv: Because at that point of time, she's being a typical mom. She could have just told me about me having an appointment and being late and waking me up, and that was about it. [She should have allowed me to take] my take on it. But then this [happened] just after she got involved in Sweekar—the parents' group and everything, when she wanted me to go out and meet more [gay men] and yeah, she started asking me like “how was it? How was the meeting with this person or that person?”

Apoorva: Is she worried about your singlehood?

Rajiv: That makes her worried over time, that is for sure. I think she would be worried, and she'll keep telling me to get settled down with a person. But then that is something that will always be there unless I settle down with somebody.

Apoorva: Can you give me an example when you felt that that worry was a center part in your conversation or your interaction?

Rajiv: So in her latest meeting that she went to for the parents she was telling me about some parents who had single gay – so in the last parents group meeting that she went to she saw a couple of parents, she met a couple of parents who had single gay kids and she was like “okay, why don't we let our kids meet and let them see how it works” So. she was trying to be a matchmaker basically to introduce me to [gay men] because that was her way of telling me that go, date, find someone.

Apoorva: How did you feel about your mom doing all that?

Rajiv: I felt intruded, and I told her to not do it, but then I understand that that question of me settling down will always be with her. So, I understood that part where she was coming from.

Interviewer: So, what made you feel intruded?

Respondent: For the fact that I don't believe in the whole concept of an arranged relationship for that matter, I mean at least from parents. Friends introducing to others is what I have experienced so far but parents introducing me to somebody is a bit irritating, something different. It hasn't happened to me earlier, perhaps that was the reason that I felt stupid.

The above conversation yields several interesting dynamics. One, it challenges the view from the last chapter that parents who embrace a homonormative outlook at the key moment of their sons' getting a partner make gay men feel accepted. This did not happen in Rajiv's case. For Rajiv, his mom's understanding of him as a gay man construed acceptance. Rajiv felt that his mom's understanding of him diminished after he started dating a man. Rajiv's mom's making "fuss" about his going and meeting him on Saturday mornings made Rajiv feel that she did not understand him. Therefore, per Rajiv's definition of acceptance, his mom's acceptance for him diminished at the key moment of his finding a date despite her championing of homonormativity.

Rajiv also mentioned the parents' group Sweekar (meaning acceptance) where he had taken his mom to meet parents of other gay men. This group of Indian parents of lesbians and gay men is similar to, but not same as, PFLAG in the US. True to its name, this group was a network of Indian parents who had joined together to learn how to accept their lesbian and gay children. Rajiv's quote shows how these parent groups in India can serve as matchmaking sites and become spatial contexts for imposing homonormativity on gay men which can be stifling for Rajiv and others who prefer to experience their sexuality through queerness. For Rajiv, Sweekar served as a spatial context of parental rejection for him that diminished his mom's understanding of how he wanted to live his life as a gay man.



The above conversation shows that like Bento, Rajiv, too, had felt disregarded as a queer gay man when his mother started matching him with other gay men, some of whom Rajiv had never known, at Sweekar. Rajiv felt perturbed that these gatherings often became a matchmaking site for his mother, a practice which he found “intrusive” because like Bento, he, too did not want to pursue a committed same-sex relationship. In addition, it was also embarrassing for him to be force partnered with a man chosen by his mom whom he did not know.

By now, Rajiv convinced me how committed his mom was to homonormativity. I also wanted to explore Rajiv’s mom’s views on queerness. Therefore, I drifted our conversation to ask whether his mom had concerns for his health due to his having sex with multiple men:

Apoorva: Has [your mom] ever wondered about your health conditions or the perceived health risks of having sex with multiple men?

Rajiv: There have been lot of questions around that because I get myself tested every three months and I run the whole *battery of tests*. So, she is a scientist, so she knows what tests those are, and she used to ask me like “okay, why are you getting them done?” And then I had to explain, and then initially she was a bit concerned, “okay, why are you indulging with many partners? You could have just been with one.” And then I had to explain her *my side of the story*, and that point of time, I was not dating and then why these tests were necessary etc, etc. So, she did have a lot of those questions, but now she’s totally aligned to the fact that we need to - because I’m on PrEP, so she now knows that I need to get my tests done every three months.

Apoorva: Can you tell me what do you mean by “my side of the story?” What side of your story do you have to share with your mom?

Rajiv: ...So that is what she had those questions about that okay, “why multiple partners? Why not just one single person? What do you want to do next?” So, when I started dating [somebody], she was like “okay now that is fine, but why are you still on PrEP,” because that’s what scares her. I got that battery of tests in every three months, so those are kind of questions which I had to explain. *So those are the things associated with my sexuality as in I’m on PrEP, I have multiple partners etc, etc.*

Apoorva: And how did your mom feel about your having multiple partners?

Rajiv: She doesn’t like it at all. But then she’s like okay, at that point of time she was fine being with them emotionally, physically she was a bit uncertain, so that was something I had to explain to her.

Apoorva: Does she ask you to have a single partner or be in a committed relationship?

Rajiv: She does.

In the above conversation, the term “battery of tests” refers to the cluster of tests for several sexually transmitted infections (STIs) like Chlamydia, Gonorrhea, Genital Herpes, HPV, HIV, and Syphilis, collectively known as “male STI testing.”<sup>5</sup> Rajiv used to get these tests done on him every three months because having multiple sex partners put his sexual behavior into the high risk category<sup>6</sup>. For Rajiv, these health measures were a part of his experiencing queer gay sexuality which did not receive much support and understanding from his mother.

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<sup>5</sup> Details can be found at University of South Florida’s STI Information website <https://www.usf.edu/student-affairs/student-health-services/services/sti-information/>; accessed on 6/25/2020.

<sup>6</sup> More information can be found at the Government of British Columbia Healthlink website <https://www.healthlinkbc.ca/health-topics/Tw9064>; accessed on 6/25/2020.

Based on the queer sexuality experiences of Bento and Rajiv, and their moms' attitudes toward those experiences, I propose,

*P5: Gay men who experience their sexuality through queerness would find their parents rejecting in spatial contexts where they impose homonormative rules on these men.*

#### **4.6 | Conclusion**

This chapter accomplishes two tasks. One, it offers an analytic account of how parental acceptance can flag and deepen across spatial contexts. In contrast to literature's suggestion that parental acceptance would weaken in spaces like church and family outings, the analyses of gay men's interviews explicates three conditions under which acceptance may wane, as well as wax, in these settings. First, gay men's perceptions of parental acceptance can wane in heteronormative settings where parents succumb to the heteronorms imposed on them, in contrast to when they resist these norms, constituting an action that deepens perceptions of parental acceptance in gay men's minds. Two, a spatial context may work as less heteronormative for some, and more heteronormative for other, parents. Parents in heteronormatively less intense context can show more accepting behaviors than their counterparts would in heteronormatively more intense ones. And three, spatial contexts that involve broader range of people can have more, as well as less, heteronormative "sub-contexts." Parental acceptance may wax in less heteronormative, and wane in more heteronormative, contexts.

Two, this chapter unravels the world of queer gay men who, out of choice or circumstances, prefer to have multiple sex partners than committing to a monogamous relationship. Gay men's understanding of parental acceptance as the acceptance of their life choices shows that parents'

aligning with homonormativity in spatial contexts can be construed by their gay sons as rejection if they are queer.

The next, and the concluding, chapter provides answers to the three research questions raised in the introductory chapter. It also describes the macro-sociological contribution of this work, responds to the criticism of the analyses done for this study, and gives recommendations to gay men and their parents on parental acceptance.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The macro sociological contribution of this study lies in its inductive theorizing that the normative forces acting on families are neither absolute nor unvarying in nature. They rather act through time and spatial contexts. Families are acted upon by some, or a combination of, normative forces at the key moments and stages in their life courses (time contexts) and in settings of familial interactions (spatial contexts). This dissertation underlined the dynamics of three normative forces, *heteronormativity*, *homonormativity*, and *racial normativity*, in familial lives. Gay men included in this study show that each of these forces acted in some, and not all, contexts. Racial normativity, for example, did not play a significant role in parental acceptance of American gay men until they found a partner. Likewise, parents often did not become homonormative as long as their gay sons were marriageable. With regards to spatial contexts, for example, the forces of heteronormativity often did not act on parents in their homes as much as they acted in church and extended familial settings.

At the area level, this dissertation contributes to the literature on familial acceptance of sexual minorities by arguing that this acceptance may not be achieved as a one-time outcome.

Acceptance is more likely a contextual phenomenon. It may wax and wane in patterned ways along time contexts and across spatial contexts. Although this study's empirical focus is exclusively on gay men, its findings are useful for studying other sexual minorities as well.

Lesbians, gay men, and bisexual people have often been studied together in the studies of parental acceptance (e.g., Bebes et al., 2015; Carastathis et al., 2017; Chrisler, 2017; Elizur & Mintzer, 2001, 2003), and the findings on one sexual minority group have often applied to other sexual minority groups. For example, a recent study (Ghosh, 2020) showed that the contingency of parental acceptance on parents' access to resources such as counseling, therapy, supportive networks, and PFLAG groups, applied to lesbians as well as gay men. Hence, the argument of

contextuality in parental acceptance would be useful for studies on lesbians, bisexuals, transgender, intersex, asexual, gray ace, and pansexual people as well. This contextuality may apply to other biological familial relationships, such as with siblings and grandparents, as well. These relationships, too, may change along time, and across, spatial contexts and hence can change familial acceptance for gay men and other sexual minority people.

Based on the findings of this dissertation, I would like to modify the extant definition of parental acceptance which “consists of a parent or parents' continued affirmation and expressions of warmth and affection toward their gay child after the child has informed them of their sexual identity” (Ghosh, 2020; cf. Bebes, et al., 2015; Freedman, 2008). I would like to replace “continued” with “contextual” in the above definition.

Practically, this study makes its reader more critical to families' claims that they have *fully* accepted their gay men. The analyses in this dissertation help its reader to draft a battery of questions to ask gay men or their parents to examine whether this acceptance, which they claim to be full, was contextual. They may ask an “accepting” parent these two sets of questions, for example: How do you show acceptance to your gay son? Did you show these behaviors when he was younger and lived with you at your home? If no, did you start showing them after he left home? Did you show these behaviors when he was at the phase when his heterosexual male peers married women? If no, did you start showing them when he reached his mid-life? Similar to these two sets of questions, the reader can frame a dozen of other question sets to unravel the contextuality in parental acceptance of gay men in their social networks through day-to-day conversations.

## **5.1 | India versus the US**

Below is the first research question from the introductory chapter:

*Does parental acceptance of gay men wax and wane in patterned ways? If yes, how might these patterns differ for gay men in India vis-à-vis their counterparts living in the US?*

Gay men included in this study show that parental acceptance indeed waxes and wanes in patterned ways along the key moments, life stages, and across settings of familial interactions. In order to understand the variations in these patterns for Indian versus American families, we need to revisit, in light of the study findings, the dominant social norms around family and sexuality in these two countries. These norms often determine parents' propensity to relinquish their heteronormative expectations and/ or embrace a homonormative outlook in the time and spatial contexts to accept their gay sons.

### **5.1.1 | Social norms in India vis-a-vis in the US**

This study views that India and the US have distinctive social norms which condition parents' ability to accept their gay children. In India, the norm of heteronormative filial duties and, in the US, Christian norms, have often played significant roles in contextualizing parental acceptance.

In India, the norm of heterosexual marriage and becoming a parent to raise a nuclear family, is of paramount importance. Parental acceptance of Indian gay men has often been contextualized around this norm. Parents who resisted this heteronormative social norm in time and spatial contexts were able to show stronger acceptance to their gay son in these contexts.

However, while relinquishing their expectations to see their son married to a women, Indian parents often did not embrace a homonormative outlook. Most Indian parents that I learnt about felt ashamed by the idea of their son's serious relationship or marriage with a man. They felt that they would have to face the ridicule from their extended families and neighbors if their son took those steps. I found few Indian parents who acknowledged their son and his significant other to

their families and neighbors through their actual relationship and by not by referring to them as “friends.”

Some Indian parents who accepted their gay son preferred that they become a single father, and not a co-father with their male significant other. Most Indian gay men that I talked with had neither thought much about fathering a child with a male partner nor had they thought much about how their parents would feel about this homonormative nuclear family. The Indian experience shows that foregoing heteronormativity has not necessarily made Indian parents homonormative.

Indian parents, who persuaded their sons to find a male significant other, however, did become homonormative. However, their homonormative persuasions often did the work of making them look rejecting to their gay sons. These gay men found their persuading parents as people who lacked the understanding of gay life and wanted to control their lives. These feelings bolstered their perceptions of parental rejection.

For American families, Christian norms were often of paramount importance. The findings concur with the scholarly views (e.g. Hicky and Grafsky, 2017) that American parents’ homophobia and reticence toward homosexuality are often shaped by their Biblical views. Parents have often believed through their Christian upbringing that male homosexuality is sinful and that gay men will eventually go to hell. For American parents, the journey to acceptance has often involved overcoming or resisting these religious heteronormative views.

Several American parents showed contextual acceptance whereby they affirmed and supported their son’s sexuality exclusively in those contexts that were not marked by Christianity or which did not involve orthodox Christian people. A few American parents resisted heteronormativity in their church to support their gay sons, which was perceived as acceptance by these gay men.



It is noteworthy, however, that in the US, Christianity has modernized in the last three decades, and several gay-affirming denominations like the Metropolitan Community Church and the United Church of Christ are now flourishing (Ghosh, 2020). A few gay men that I talked with had their parents affiliated to more liberal and progressive Christian denominations. As a result, they were far more able to affirm and support their gay son in their church than their counterparts from orthodox Christianity could.

### *Homonormativity in partner selection*

This study also reveals that the dominant social norms which apply to heterosexual relationships can translate to gay relationships as well. In the United States, racial segregation in selecting partners and suitors is well documented (Char, 1977; Portedield, 1978; Watts and Henriksen Jr, 1999; Qian, 2005; Skylar, Pak, and Eltiti, 2016; Maldonado, 2017). Inter-racial couples have often encountered opposition from their families (Char, 1977; Portedield, 1978; Maldonado, 2017). The American stories covered in this study show the prevalence of racial superiority in general, and of White superiority in specific, in the American gay and familial culture. The professionally successful middle-class American gay men included in this study often had White or racially more privileged partners. Some of them explicitly acknowledged that the racial privilege of their partners, and not their educational and career backgrounds, was more helpful in getting acceptance from their parents. Like Charles did, gay men with lesser racially privileged partners may attribute their contextual parental rejection to their partner's racial background. The experiences of American gay men in this study, cumulatively, show that significant others from more privileged racial backgrounds can command stronger contextual parental acceptance than commanded by those from less privileged ones.

In India, the social norm of compulsory marriage has led some parents, mostly mothers among them, to embrace a homonormative outlook. Though fewer in number, they have persuaded their gay sons, whether they liked it or not, to “settle down” in life by finding a man to start a committed relationship and a marital-like household with. A few gay men construed parental embracement of homonormative outlook as the show of acceptance to them. Some of these men, however, pursued serial monogamy instead of meeting their parents’ criterion of “permanence” in the relationship—an expectation which had homonormatively translated from how heterosexual marital relationships ought to be carried out in Indian families. Because of this conflict between what parents expected and what their gay sons did, not all Indian parents who embraced a homonormative outlook showed stronger acceptance in the key moment of their son’s finding a partner or in their son’s early career and mid-life stages. These parents knew that these relationships would not last long. Hence, they were reluctant to accept them.

Bento and Rajiv added more complexity to these dynamics by representing men who preferred a queer, and not the homonormative way, of experiencing their sexuality. These men were not much inclined to pursue committed relationships with men whereas their mothers wanted otherwise. Hence, homonormativity became a source of parental rejection for them in their marriageable phase.

The experiences of Indian queer gay men, therefore, make an invaluable contribution to the canvas of parental acceptance, which in the American scenario, is laced more with homonormativity. Gay men may feel suffocated by homonormatively oriented parents if they wanted to embrace a queer gay life. That homonormativity becoming a source of parental rejection is more endemic to the experiences of Indian gay men in this study.

These trends show that parents have often aligned with a homonormative, instead of the queer, understanding of sexuality when accepting their gay son. I did not find a single parent in my study who accepted their son's queer ways of experiencing his sexuality in any time or spatial context. This finding contributes to the ongoing debate on how organizations and communities of LGBTQ people practice homonormativity versus queerness in their actions (e.g., Ward, 2008; Patti and Giuffre, 2011; Ghosh, 2015). This study observes that families are often cast in the traditional mould—they are more able to accept gay sexualities when they are homonormative, i.e., when they align with the logics of heteronormativity prescribed by these families' national cultures.

## **5.2 | Gay men across generations cohorts**

The second question in the introductory chapter was:

*Does parental acceptance of gay men wax and wane in patterned ways? If yes, how might these patterns differ across different generations of gay men?*

Table 3 is an abridged version of table 2 which shows gay men's contextual parental acceptance along their life courses, cross-tabbed by their nationality and generational cohorts. The three rows represent contextual parental acceptance resulting from 1) parents' approval of homonormativity, 2) parents' relinquishing their heteronormative expectations, and 3) gay men's following racial normativity while experiencing their sexuality, in one-or-more time contexts.

### **5.2.1 | Embracing homonormative outlook**

Table 3 shows that for American parents, embracing a homonormative outlook to contextually accept their gay sons has been more common among millennials, followed by generation Xers and baby boomers. These men often felt accepted on one, or a combination, of the key moments of entering a same-sex relationship, marrying their significant others, and fathering a child with

their significant others. The table also shows that the approval of homonormativity by parents of American baby boomers, and the resulting acceptance, was closely tied with these men's selection of White significant others.

**Table 3: Contextual parental acceptance, by nationality and generational cohorts**

		American			Indian		
		<i>Baby boomers</i>	<i>Generation Xers</i>	<i>Millennials</i>	<i>Baby boomers</i>	<i>Generation Xers</i>	<i>Millennials</i>
Contextual parental acceptance resulting from	parents' approving homonormativity	Ben, Gary, Keith, Manuel, Sean	Caldaron, Carl, Daniel, Derek, Matias, Luis, Paul, Todd	Adrian, Bob, Colin, David, Edwin, Jarred, Ken, Miles, Stephen	Sudheer		Jeevan, Mahesh
	relinquishing heteronormative expectations		Charles, Daniel, Paul	Adrian, Avery, Colin, Stephen,	Rahul, Sudheer	Anirban	Deepak, Kirtan, Mahesh, Purab, Sayan, Udit, Ujjwal
	gay men's following racial normativity	Gary, Keith, Manuel, Sean	Luis, Matias, Paul, Todd	Colin, Miles			

Embracing a homonormative outlook as a source of contextual parental acceptance was rarer among Indian men. Sudheer, Jeevan, and Mahesh fitted this criterion. I recall that parents of Rahul and Sharad, too, had approved homonormativity by agreeing to accept their sons' male significant others *if* those relationships stood their test of permanence. These men did not meet that criterion and hence, their short-term partners were not accepted by their parents. Rajiv and Bento, too, are worth mentioning here. Their mothers had enthusiastically embraced a homonormative outlook which, on the contrary, made these queer gay men feel rejected because their mothers were not ready to accept their "life choice" of engaging with multiple sex partners.

*This study shows that parents' embracement of homonormative outlook as a source of contextual parental acceptance is a more millennial, as well as a more American, phenomenon.*

### **5.2.2 | Foregoing heteronormative expectations**

This set of gay men felt accepted by their parents who relinquished or reduced their heteronormative expectations but did not approve the homonormative way of living as gay, over various time contexts in their life courses. Several Indian millennials, like Deepak, Kirtan, Mahesh, Purab, Sayan, Udit, and Ujjwal felt accepted in their marriageable phase because their parents had shed their expectations of getting them married to women. A comparison with their older counterparts shows that relatively few older men, like Sudheer, Rahul and Anirban, were fortunate to have parents that did not force them into a traditional marriage.

*Hence, this study also shows that Indian parents' accepting their gay sons in their marriageable phase applies more to millennials than to their older counterparts.*

### **5.2.3 | Racial normativity**

The translation of following the racial normativity to parental acceptance was pervasive across all generations of American gay men. A slightly larger number comes from the baby boomer and generation X cohorts than from millennials. It might be possible that this translation is less salient for millennials than it was for older generations. It is a question for further research.

## **5.3 | A response to the criticism of the analytical approach**

The purpose of the inductive theorizing of contextual parental acceptance was to give a compact, but conceptually rigorous, takeaway to its readers. The framework of tri-normativity and contextuality produced in this dissertation is dense and incisive in nature which readers can remember and ruminate on when examining parental acceptance in their own lives.

A few interpretative scholars have labeled this positivist framework as "mechanistic" and have criticized it for putting people into boxes. A reviewer of this study wrote:

I don't find the argument, that whether a life transition led to greater or lesser acceptance depended on how the parents and sons related to [heteronormativity,] homonormativity, and white [superiority], very compelling. I found it much more believable and interesting when [the analyses] stuck closer to what these men said; for example, when one described moving out of his parents' home as allowing his parents to see him as a separate person, and when another said that his distance from his parents made it impossible for them to see him in real relationships in a way, he believed, that would have made them more accepting. Those dynamics are super interesting and important.

I find that that language—of reducing or increasing biases—runs counter to, and undermines the subtlety of, [the] analysis. The strength of [this study's] analysis is that it is lodged in men's real relationships with real parents—with all the contradictory, complex character that our real relationships have. [T]hese men's relationships with their parents [cannot be understood] by having their parents fill out a multiple-choice survey of their opinions about homosexuality—that's precisely the point. But that's what a framework focused on factors that increase or decrease biases points to. So, I would urge...strongly [that]... that line of questioning and that theoretical framework [is dropped].

[Are there] instances where people *said* that their parents accepted them and then alluded to the fact that their acceptance was actually contextual? That might be worth discussing.

(emphasis added)

I understand and agree with the reviewer's objection of my using the phrase "reducing heteronormative bias" in the earlier version of this dissertation. I understand that the claim of

parents “reducing their bias” is somewhat far-fetched for a study that did not directly examine these parents. However, the interviews make amply clear that in several contexts, parents reduced or relinquished their heteronormative expectations from their gay sons which were associated with these men’s feelings of acceptance. Hence, I have replaced the phrase “reducing heteronormative biases” to “relinquishing or reducing heteronormative expectations” and its variants for parents.

The answer to the last question posed by the reviewer is “yes.” I asked my respondents in the beginning how they understood acceptance. I identified a few succinct criteria, got these criteria approved by them, and then walked them through various time and spatial contexts in the rest of the interview. At the end, I shared my observations of contextuality by drawing to their attention that what they construed as full acceptance was, in fact, contextual, per their own experiences. To prove my point to them, I re-spelt their criteria of acceptance at the end of the interview and showed how those criteria were met in some, but not in all, contexts. Most of them agreed with my analysis but some denied the contextuality in their experiences of parental acceptance. I do have a litany of narratives where gay men felt surprised but agreed with my view. These narratives will be excellent for basing the analyses in the Weberian *verstehen* or interpretative approach of analyzing social facts through the eyes of the respondents. However, what would I do with the narratives of gay men who denied the contextuality in parental acceptance without giving any logical reasons for rejecting the compelling evidence which I gave from their own experiences? As a researcher, I cannot shrug their valuable experiences under the carpet because they disagreed with my analysis. Therefore, in order to account for all gay men, and not just those who agreed with my thesis of contextuality, a positivist way of analysis where I, and not they, examined their experiences, as objectively as possible, was essential.

I respect the reviewer's view, and I understand their urge to redo my analyses from an interpretative approach based on how gay men, and not I, see their experiences of parental acceptance. The positivist approach used to analyze the interviews runs counter to the interpretative one, and I respectfully agree to the difference in our views.

In contrast to how the interpretative paradigm views it, the positivist paradigm would see this framework as a sturdy matrix. Given its encompassing nature, this matrix is unlikely to collapse by the richness and complexity of the experiences of other gay men from the qualifying population for this study. This comparative framework undertakes the ambitious work of qualitatively explaining the experiences of parental acceptance of nearly 70 gay men from three consecutive generations and two very different national cultures. The matrix of contextuality and tri-normativity, therefore, offers a sturdy scaffolding that neatly arranges, and has place for, the experiences of all gay men interviewed for this study. This study also makes a methodological contribution by showing that the use of qualitative data is not limited simply to storytelling. Qualitative data, too, can yield positivist analyses.

The framework of tri-normativity and contextuality offers a compact matrix to incisively understand how contexts shape and reshape gay men's experiences of parental acceptance. I will consider this framework successful if it can make families sensitive to their heteronormative, homonormative, and racial biases, and help them understand how their expectations arising out of these biases can skew their behaviors to parental rejection in some contexts.

Having said that, I must also admit that my natural inclination has generally been to produce an interpretative style of sociological analysis. I wrote the two substantive chapters of this dissertation at the time of the COVID-19 crisis. It is plausible that my mind was affected by the exhausting socio-political climate of that time, and hence it produced a more positivist analysis



where I, and not my respondents, took the control of their narratives. The second chapter on how gay men understood parental acceptance was written during the easier time of Fall 2019. That chapter, in my view, has a more interpretative analysis. Therefore, I believe that the analyses for this study, too, have a time-contextual element attached to them. These analyses could have been more interpretative in nature if they were done at an easier time period. I admit this contextuality in this work, and I regret my creative differences with interpretative scholars caused by this. I am grateful to my reviewer for writing their criticism of my tri-normativity/ contextuality matrix. Their comments offer valuable insights from the interpretative perspective which I can use in my graduate seminar courses in the future to conduct a positivist versus interpretative debate among my students as a way of critically reflecting on the theoretical paradigm which this analysis alludes to.

#### **5.4 | Finally, a few pieces of advice...**

Drawing on my interviews and my own understanding of gay men's experiences as a gay man born and raised in India, and as a transnational American scholar on sexualities, I would like to end this concluding chapter by offering some advice to families of gay men.

##### **5.4.1 | Advice for parents**

###### *Your son's key moments*

More likely than not, and irrespective of how your relationship has been with your gay son, he harbors a strong urge to include you in all important moments of his life where he experiences his sexual identity as his social identity. Entering a committed relationship, marrying his significant other, and becoming a father, are a few examples of these moments. If he invites you to be a part of any of these key moments, accept his invitation without blinking your eyes. I understand your discomfort and awkwardness of seeing several things in those key moments that

you are not used to seeing. Seeing your son wearing tuxedos and kissing a man in front of hundred others can be very discomfiting. I realize that you did not raise him to see this day. I also understand the thoughts that might be going on in your mind in those settings. Arguably, no parent wants their child to be gay. Although I am gay, I, too, would like my child to be heterosexual. Therefore, I have deepest admiration for parents who not only attended their gay sons' weddings or commitment ceremonies but also rose and spoke affirmatively on those occasions. I understand how difficult that doing must have been.

Just be there if you think that you cannot contribute more to your son's key moment than by your silent presence. Your mere presence can make a lot of difference to your son. I've heard gay men feeling like being on the paradise when their parents participated in welcoming their partners, attending their marriages, and adopting a child with their significant others. In contrast, I also have heard them experiencing the hell in their minds when their parents refused to be a part of the social experiences of their sexuality, for example, by refusing to attend their wedding. You might be underestimating the joy you can give him by participating in his social experiences of being gay, as well as his grief by not participating in them.

### *Matchmaking*

Your gay son may feel intruded and embarrassed if you match him with other gay, or presumably gay, men, irrespective of whether your son knows them or not. More likely than not, your awareness of your son's socio-sexual dynamics with these men is bounded. For you, matchmaking may be a show of your "enthusiastic" acceptance to your son, but your son may perceive these actions as your way of rejecting him, if he does not want your intervention in pairing him romantically with a man. If you believe that matchmaking would help him, ask him. If he is undecided, tell him your views and wait until he asks you to intervene in his socio-sexual

life. If he says “no,” please accept that as no. He probably has a reason for saying no. Feel free to ask him if he prefers to experience his sexuality as a single gay man. He may or may not tell you his true feelings. In any case, he will perceive you as a more accepting parent if you give him a compassionate, and not an argumentative, hearing to whatever he can share with you.

### *Accepting queerness*

Through this study, I learnt about several parents who embraced a homonormative outlook to accept their gay sons. Some of them wanted permanence in their gay son’s relationship with their male significant other. Others accepted shorter-term significant others and their sons’ experiencing their sexuality through serial monogamy. However, I found no parent who accepted their gay sons’ queer way of living as a gay man. No parent approved that their gay son experienced his sexuality through having sex with multiple men without getting into a committed relationship with any of them. This is unsurprising, but sad, in my view.

The experiences of gay men showed that they embraced queerness when pursuing homonormative relationships was a very remote possibility for them. This remote possibility may arise because of several reasons, one of which is cultural. Experiences of many gay men shows that it can be incredibly hard for them to find a permanent relationship. In the US, separation and divorce are very common, and in India, gay men experience immense parental, familial, and peer pressures to marry a woman. Because of the lack of social support, it can be incredibly difficult for gay men, both in the US and in India, to be in relationships that are as “permanent” or long-term as heterosexual marriages generally are. Hence, it is not uncommon for gay men to live a queer life wherein they engage with multiple sex partners without committing into a monogamous relationship with any of them. I don’t believe I am in a position

to advise you to accept your gay son's queer ways of experiencing his sexuality, if he does, but I hope this perspective makes you more sensitive towards queer gay men.

#### **5.4.2 | Advice for gay men**

##### *Coming out*

Your parents may be smarter than how you think they are. When coming out to them, you may feel that you would give them a news. This study finds that most parents, especially those of millennials, already had a subliminal awareness of their gay son's sexuality. Your coming out may completely flip your relationship with your parents, however. If your parent preferred that you stayed closeted to them, you may discover that coming out would take away the support from you which you had from them as a closeted gay man, at least temporarily. In contrast, if your parent indeed wanted you to share this part of your life by coming out to them, you may find a sudden positive shift in their behaviors toward you. In any case, your coming out to your parents is a key moment for your family. Do not underestimate its importance. More likely than not, it will have a significant impact on your relationship with your parents. Gay men who came out to their parents have often experienced drastic positive or negative shifts to their relationship with their parents.

Therefore, be ready to be surprised by your coming out encounter, but do not put the cart before the horse. Do not anticipate the outcome and plan accordingly. Caldaron regretted doing that. He came out to his parents and then immediately left home to move into another city, per his plan. In retrospect, he felt that doing that was his mistake. He gave two shocks to his parents at the same time which delayed their acceptance to him by several years. Coming out, indeed, is a very anxiety-laden and perplexing process. In families where parents control, and have the upper hand over, their children, it can be daunting. The stories that I gathered show that taking the "right

approach” for coming out is not the key. The key to acceptance is to remain in continuous engagement with your parents after coming out to them.

### *Make your own decisions*

Make your own decisions, instead of following the conventions laid by the literature and the media. This study shows that the conventions on what gay men should do to achieve parental acceptance are culture-specific, and not universal, in their implications. For example, some gay men, mostly millennial White Americans, have achieved parental acceptance by leaving their parental home. Some gay men, however, have delayed getting acceptance by taking that route. Some have achieved acceptance more effectively through proximity with their parents than through distancing from them. Others felt that neither distancing nor proximity had any effect on their experiences of parental acceptance. Clearly, the “one size fits all” approach does not work for all gay men. *Being gay is not a culture in itself.* Therefore, examine your own cultural upbringing and your own relationship with your parents to decide what steps would likely make parental acceptance stronger for you, if deepening this acceptance is your goal.

### *Parental acceptance as a function of time*

I hope that this study makes amply clear that parents do not make decisions to accept or reject their gay children. Their behaviors emerge through the interaction of the context and the normative forces. How well these behaviors met your criteria of acceptance, constitute your perceptions of their acceptance or rejection for you. Acceptance, therefore, is a very complex socio-cognitive process that works through too many variables, one of which is the time, and time is under nobody’s control. Several gay men whom I talked with found their parents more rejecting towards them when they were in the marriageable phase. However, after overcoming the social pressures of getting married in that phase, they found their mid-life to be easier for

pursuing their lives as gay—a phase that often commanded stronger parental acceptance. Therefore, when dealing with time contexts, standing firm on your ground and protecting yourself, instead, might work better than resisting and fighting with parents whose behaviors emanate from the social forces of heteronormativity and time contexts.

I hope this study is useful for scholars and families alike. Contextuality and normativity are the keys to understanding parental acceptance of gay men. That is what gay men and their parents are saying collectively.

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## GLOSSARY

<b>Contexts</b>	Places to account for the settings where gay men interact with their parents, as well as time periods (key moments and life stages) in the life course that evolve their relationship with their parents.
<b>Contextuality</b>	the argument that parental acceptance is contingent on the time and spatial contexts of familial interaction.
<b>Gay men</b>	cisgender, urban, middle-class men who feel sexually and emotionally attracted to men, identify as “gay” or “queer,” are out to their parents, and have never married a woman. Several gay men included in this study were critical of the “gay” identity because of its stress on homonormativity and its White origins. Hence, they preferred to identify as “queer.”
<b>Generational cohorts</b>	baby boomers are those born between 1946 to 1964, generation Xers are born between 1965 to 1980, and millennials are born between 1981 and 1997.
<b>Heteronormativity</b>	the assumption that heterosexuality is the default, preferred, and “normal” state for people because of the belief that they fall into one or other category of a strict gender binary.
<b>Heteronormativity, familial</b>	the heteronormative rules of marrying a person of the other sex, set up a household with them, and procreate to raise a nuclear family.
<b>Heteronormativity, religious</b>	the assumption derived from orthodox Christianity and Biblical interpretations that heterosexuality is the default, preferred, and “normal” form of sexuality.
<b>Homonormativity</b>	enforcement of heteronormative ideals and constructs onto gay men’s ways of experiencing their sexuality.

<b>Key moment</b>	a one-time episode or event occurring in the family of a gay men which subsequently makes parental acceptance either stronger or diminished for him.
<b>Life choice</b>	gay men's choice to experience their sexuality through permanent (long-term) relationship, serial monogamy of shorter-term relationships, friends with benefits, or hook-ups with new men.
<b>Life stages</b>	phases in the lives of gay men and their parents: early adulthood (early 20s), early career / marriageable phase (mid-20s to 30s), mid-lives (40s and 50s), and the later life (60+).
<b>Marriageable phase</b>	the phase in life when heteronormativity prescribes that people marry someone of the other sex. Most Indian, and fewer American, gay men interviewed for this study believed that they were in the marriageable phase from their mid-20s to 30s.
<b>National culture</b>	the set of shared and widely accepted norms, behaviors, beliefs, and customs that exist within the population of a sovereign nation
<b>Parental acceptance</b>	criteria used by gay men to define parental acceptance. Parental acceptance was most popularly understood by gay men as acknowledging their sexuality in spatial contexts, accepting their life choices, and accepting their partners like a son-in-law or family, by parents.
<b>Parental acceptance, stronger</b>	parents' meeting of one or more criteria, in a time or spatial context, used by gay men for defining parental acceptance.
<b>Parental acceptance, deepens or waxes</b>	see <i>Parental acceptance, stronger</i>



<b>Parental acceptance, diminishes, flags, or wanes</b>	see <i>Parental acceptance, weaker</i>
<b>Parental acceptance, weaker</b>	parents' <i>not</i> meeting of one or more criteria, in a time or spatial context, used by a gay men for defining parental acceptance.
<b>Parental support</b>	parents' being civil and respectful to their gay children and their partners while knowing, or presuming, that they are gay.
<b>Queer gay men</b>	gay men who, out of choice or compulsion, prefer having multiple sex partners over having one committed significant other. Arguably, they enjoy more sexual freedom and sexual choices than enjoyed by monogamously committed gay men.
<b>Queerness</b>	gay men's choice of living a more promiscuous sexual life through casual sexual encounters with new men or "hook ups," or with a more regular partners called "friends with benefits."
<b>Racial normativity</b>	aligning with the norm of the racial superiority that gives unearned social and economic privileges to people identified with lighter races or having a lighter skin color than to those identified with darker races or having a darker skin color
<b>Settings of familial interactions/ Spatial contexts</b>	spaces that involve a variety of people who influence gay men's interactions with their parents
<b>White Superiority</b>	the racial bias resulting in a natural preference for White over people of color in forming relationships. This bias may assign superior qualities (like being clever, honest, smart, and hardworking) to White-identified people, and attributes inferior characteristics (like being stupid, untrustworthy, and lazy) to people of color.

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## METHODOLOGICAL APPENDIX

**Table 1: Demographic details of study participants**

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Year of Interview</i>	<i>Year of birth (based on age at the time of interview)</i>	<i>Country of Residence</i>	<i>Self-Identified Occupation</i>	<i>Location of Residence</i>	<i>Racial/ Social Identification</i>
Abhishek	2013	1975	India	LGBTQ activist	Mumbai, MH	Hindu/ Punjabi
Adrian	2019	1982	U.S.	Cancer Epidemiologist	Denver, CO	White
Anirban	2019	1973	India	Media consultant and high school teacher	Pune, MH	Hindu/ Bengali
Avery	2019	1991	U.S.	Engineer	Dallas, TX	White
Ben	2019	1964	U.S.	Manager	Detroit, MI	White
Bento	2019	1991	India	Tour Manager	Vasai, MH	Catholic/ Indo-Portuguese
Bob	2019	1991	U.S.	Analyst	Albert Lea, MN	White
Caldaron	2019	1972	U.S.	Human Resources-Recruiting	Austin, TX	Mexican
Carl	2019	1965	U.S.	Semiconductor production specialist	Dallas, TX	White
Charles	2013	1975	U.S.	Manager at a media corporation	New York, NY	White
Charles	2019	1977	U.S.	Engineer	Denver, CO	White
Chris	2019	1982	U.S.	Learning Professional	Chicago, IL	White
Colin	2019	1984	U.S.	Senior Business	Lynnwood, WA	White/ Filipino

				Operations Specialist		
Daniel	2019	1976	U.S.	Public Utility Rate Analyst	Jackson, MS	Mexican-White
David	2019	1982	U.S.	Attorney	Washington DC	Mexican
Deepak	2013	1991	India	Filmmaker/ LGBTQ activist	Mumbai, MH	Hindu/ Punjabi
Derek	2019	1966	U.S.	IT specialist	Racine, WI	White
Edwin	2019	1986	U.S.	Data Specialist [Finance]	Jacksonville, FL	White
Eshan	2019	1989	India	Marketing professional	Mumbai, MH	Hindu/Brahmin
Gary	2013	1964	U.S.	Accounting Manager	Houston, TX	White
Gilbert	2013	1955	India	Fashion Designer/ LGBTQ Activist	Bangalore, KA	Anglo-Indian Working class
Harish	2013	1984	India	Human Resource Manager	Bangalore, KA	Brahmin middle class
Harry	2019	1959	U.S.	Musician	San Diego, CA	White
Hemant	2019	1984	India	Researcher, Bio Sciences	New Mumbai, MH	Hindu/Bengali/Brahmin
Jacob	2019	1965	U.S.	HR Consultant	Denver, CO	White
Jagrit	2019	1989	India	Math teacher	Mumbai, MH	Muslim/Bengali
Jarred	2019	1994	U.S.	Engineer	Fort Lauderdale, FL	Hispanic/Latino

Jeevan	2019	1991	India	Digital marketing professional	Thane, MH	Hindu Brahmin/ Bengali
John	2019	1969	U.S.	Industrial Design Director, Head of Marketing	Bingham Farms, MI	Black
Kartik	2019	1993	India	Self-employed/ Stockbroker	Kolkata, WB	Hindu/ Telugu/ Brahmin
Keith	2019	1970	U.S.	Attorney	Watertown, MA	White
Ken	2019	1984	U.S.	Occupational Health and Safety Specialist	Seattle, WA	White- Japanese
Kenneth	2013	1957	U.S.	Lawyer	Princeton, NJ	White
Kirtan	2019	1986	India	Travel Agent for Airlines	Mumbai, MH	Hindu Brahmin/Maha rashtrian
Lary	2013	1974	U.S.	Manager at a telecommunications corporation	Wichita, KS	White
Lester	2019	1980	U.S.	Lawyer	Chicago, IL	White
Luis	2019	1978	U.S.	Registered Nurse	Fairfield, CA	Mexican
Mahesh	2019	1990	India	Marketer	Austin, TX (originally from Delhi-NCR)	Hindu Kshatriya
Manish	2013	1965	India	Lecturer	Mumbai, MH	Brahmin middle class
Manoj	2013	1970	India	Airlines crew	Delhi-NCR	Upper caste middle class
Manuel	2019	1963	U.S.	Management Consultant	Los Angeles, CA	White (English and Italian)

Martin	2019	1988	U.S.	College instructor	Long Beach, CA	Latino/ Middle-Eastern
Matías	2019	1979	U.S.	Admin Assistant	Jacksonville, FL	Hispanic/ Latino
Mayank	2019	1993	India	Graduate student	Mankato, MN	Hindu
Miles	2019	1991	U.S.	Senior Management Consultant	Phoenix, AZ	White
Nelson	2019	1963	U.S.	Pastor	San Diego, CA	Black
Paul	2013	1970	U.S.	Manager at a Health Insurance Corporation	Indianapolis, IN	White
Paul	2019	1965	U.S.	IT Professional	Austin, MN	White
Purab	2019	1982	India	Engineer	Bangalore, KA	Hindu/ Tamil/ Vishwakarma
Rahul	2019	1964	India	Management Consultant	Mumbai, MH	
Rajiv	2019	1981	India	Senior Manager	Mumbai, MH	Buddhist/ Uttar Pradesh
Rohit	2013	1959	India	Filmmaker/ LGBTQ activist	Mumbai, MH	Brahmin middle class
Russ	2019	1958	U.S.	Professor	Orange, CA	White
Sayan	2019	1993	India	Customer Service Representative	Kolkata, WB	Hindu/Bengali
Sean	2019	1958	U.S.	Data Integrity Manager	Harwood Heights, IL	White
Sharad	2019	1991	India	Engineer at a government agency	Mumbai, MH	Hindu/ Maharashtrian
Sripad	2019	1991	India	Business Analyst	Stockholm, Sweden (originally)	Hindu/ Keralite

					from Mumbai, MH)	
Stephen	2019	1987	U.S.	Project Manager	Portland, OR	White
Steven	2013	1966	U.S.	Lawyer	San Diego, CA	White
Sudheer	2019	1961	India	Management, LGBTQ organization	Mumbai, MH	Hindu/ Punjabi
Sudip	2019	1991	India	Film Programmer	Mumbai, MH	Hindu/ Bengali/ Kayastha
Suyash	2019	1995	India	Recruiter/ HR	Pune, MH	Hindu/ Punjabi
Thomas	2013	1970	U.S.	Supply chain manager at a retail store	Pleasanton, CA	Multiracial
Tim	2013	1969	U.S.	Manager at a pharmaceutical corporation	New York City, NY	White
Todd	2019	1975	U.S.	ERP Engineer	San Francisco, CA	White/ Filipino
Udit	2019	1993	India	Chartered Accountant	Mumbai, MH	SBNR/ Sindhi
Ujjwal	2019	1990	India	Management teacher	Mumbai, MH	Jain/ Kutchi
Wayne	2019	1992	U.S.	Psychotherapis t	Atlanta, GA	White
William	2019	1976	U.S.	Risk manager in banking	San Diego, CA	White
Zubin	2019	1997	India	Event Coordinator	Chennai, TN	Muslim/ Tamil

## **I. Call for recruiting study participants**

*Department of Sociology, University of California, Irvine*

*Lead Researcher: Apoorva Ghosh (PhD Candidate in Sociology)*

*Lead Researcher Email: [apoorva.ghosh@uci.edu](mailto:apoorva.ghosh@uci.edu)*

*Faculty Sponsor: Francesca Polletta, Professor of Sociology*

*[\*\*text for LGBTQ listservs]*

### Action Requested: Seeking Participants for a Study on Gay Men's Relationship with their Parents

My name is Apoorva Ghosh, and I am a PhD candidate in Sociology at the University of California, Irvine. I got your email address from <source>. I will be grateful if you can consider sending the following message regarding my PhD dissertation study to your network to help me recruit gay men for my research interviews. If you do not wish to receive any more emails from me regarding this study, please let me know. I will respectfully remove your contact information from my distribution list. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me at [apoorva.ghosh@uci.edu](mailto:apoorva.ghosh@uci.edu). Thank you.

Sincerely,

Apoorva Ghosh

### Seeking Participants: Study on Gay Men's Relationship with their Parents<sup>7</sup>

1. Are you at least 18 years old?
2. Do you self-identify as a gay man?
3. Do you live in the US or India?
4. Did you have at least one parent aware that you are gay?
5. Have you ever married a woman?

If your answer is “yes” on the criteria 1-4 and “no” to the criterion 5, I invite you to participate in my interview-based PhD dissertation study on gay men's relationship with their parents. As a first step, I am seeking your consent for taking a 5-minute survey. This survey is my tool for recruiting interviewees.

Please go to the link [https://ucisocsci.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_ewYxRlnurfMkU6N](https://ucisocsci.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_ewYxRlnurfMkU6N), and you will be asked for your consent to take the survey. After reading the details about my study, you will have the option of either taking the survey or refusing to take it.

The conclusions of the study will be shared with interview respondents when published, and any help will be acknowledged with names upon request. If you have any questions, feel free to email me at [apoorva.ghosh@uci.edu](mailto:apoorva.ghosh@uci.edu). I understand that you are extremely busy, therefore thank you in advance for your help.

Sincerely,

Apoorva Ghosh

PhD Candidate, University of California - Irvine

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<sup>7</sup> This text was also used for posting on social media communities of gay men.

## II. Initial survey for background information

*Department of Sociology, University of California, Irvine*

*Lead Researcher: Apoorva Ghosh (PhD Candidate in Sociology)*

*Lead Researcher email: apoorva.ghosh@uci.edu*

*Faculty Sponsor: Francesca Polletta, Professor of Sociology*

1. Are you at least 18 years old?
2. Do you self-identify as a gay man?
3. Do you live in the US or India?
4. Did you have at least one parent aware that you are gay?
5. Have you ever married a woman?

If your answer is “yes” on the criteria 1-4 and “no” to the criterion 5, I invite you to participate in my interview-based study on gay men's relationship with their parents. As a first step, I am seeking your consent for taking a survey that would take up to 5 minutes of your time. This survey is my tool for recruiting interviewees. This survey has been reviewed by the Institutional Review Board of the University of California, Irvine for the ethical treatment of the respondents. Your answers will be held in the strictest confidence and will not be associated with you individually. Your de-identified responses will be kept private and will be used for academic analyses and recruiting you for the interview if you are willing to be interviewed. At any time during the survey, you may leave without completing the survey.

While the results of this research may not benefit you directly, the principal objectives and potential results of this research may shed more light on how gay men have grown up with their sexual orientation in their families, and how those contexts have affected a positive gay identity formation. The conclusions of the study will be shared with interview respondents when published, and any help in doing the interviews will be acknowledged with names upon request. There are no direct costs, and you will not be paid to be in this study.

Take as long as you like before you make a decision. I will be happy to answer any question you have about this study. If you have further questions about this study or if you have a research-related problem, you may contact me, Apoorva Ghosh, apoorva.ghosh@UCI.edu.

**If you give your consent to participate in this survey, please click the button “I agree” below and take the survey.**

After completing the survey, you may request a copy of the interview procedures I will follow with the respondents selected.

Please email me at apoorva.ghosh@uci.edu if you have any questions. I understand that you are extremely busy, therefore thank you in advance for your help.

- I agree, take me to the survey
- Sorry, I cannot this survey at this time. I wish you good luck with your project.

[Survey begins](#)

1. How old are you?

- Below 18 years
- 18 - 30 years
- 31 - 40 years
- 41 - 50 years
- 51 - 60 years
- 61 - 70 years
- Above 70 years

2. How do you identify yourself?

- A gay man
  - A lesbian woman
  - A bisexual woman
  - A bisexual man
  - A straight/ heterosexual man
  - A straight/ heterosexual woman
  - An intersexed person
  - A transgender person
  - Other (please write)
- 

3. Did any of your parents know that you are gay or that you felt same-sex attractions?

- Yes
- No
- I don't know
- This question does not apply to me

4. Was there any time when you had limited or no contact with your parents?

- Yes



- No
- Not sure

5. Have you ever married a person of the opposite gender?

- Yes
  - No
  - Other (please comment)
- 

6. In which country do you live?

- India
- The US
- Other

6a. [For the US respondents] How do you racially/ethnically identify yourself? (check as many boxes as apply)

- White
- Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish
- Black or African-American
- Asian
- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Middle Eastern or North African
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- Some other race or ethnicity \_\_\_\_\_

7. How long have you been living in your country of residence?

- Less than one year
- 1 - 5 years
- 6 - 10 years
- 11 - 15 years

- 16 - 20 years
- 21 - 25 years
- 26 - 30 years
- More than 30 years

8. Please identify your profession or occupational category (e.g., human resource manager, lawyer, engineer, doctor, pastor, professor, lecturer, graduate student, etc.). If you have retired, please write your profession before retirement.

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9. Would you like to be interviewed about your relationship with your parents? It will take not more than 90 minutes. The procedures of this interview have been reviewed by the Institutional Review Board of the University of California, Irvine for the ethical treatment of the respondents. Your answers will be held in the strictest confidence and will not be identified with you individually. Your de-identified responses will be kept private and will be used solely for academic purposes.

I hope that you participate in this interview. I can send you an informed consent form that details the procedures of this interview and asks for your consent to be interviewed. Would you like to receive that form?

- Yes
- No

10. If you chose "yes" above, please provide your contact details below that I can use to contact you. Thank you!

If you chose "no" above, please write "I do not want to be contacted further" or a similar text in the text boxes below. Thank you!

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Email address: \_\_\_\_\_

11. You have reached the end of this survey. I will contact you for interview if you fulfilled all criteria listed on the cover page of this survey. If you have any questions regarding your participation or this study, feel free to contact me at [apoorva.ghosh@uci.edu](mailto:apoorva.ghosh@uci.edu). You may also write your feedback below anonymously. Thank you very much for your time.

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Survey Ends

### III. Interview guide

#### Review of the Study Information sheet

1. How old are you?
2. Where do you live currently?
3. Tell me about your relationship with your parents.
4. In the survey, you say that at least one of your parents know that you are gay. What makes you feel that they have this information?

#### Coming Out

1. Did you ever come out to your parents?
  - (a) <if yes>
    - I. Tell me about your coming out experience.
    - II. What was your parents' reaction to your coming out?
    - III. Do you think your parents already knew that you were gay before you came out to them?  
If yes, do you feel that your coming out encounter changed the way they looked at you as a gay man?
    - IV. Then what happened? Did their attitude toward you change after your coming out?
    - V. What do you feel about those reactions and occurrences?
    - VI. Did your siblings help you in your coming out process? What do you feel about their involvement?
  - (b) <if no>
    - I. May I know why?
    - II. How do you feel your parents would have reacted if you came out to them?
    - III. How do your parents feel about you as a gay man?
    - IV. How do you feel about your parents for seeing you in that way?

#### Parental Acceptance

1. Based on your experiences, would you say that your parents accept you as a gay man?  
(highlight acceptance or rejection based on their "yes" or "no")
  - a. If yes, how do you understand acceptance?  
If no, how do you understand rejection?
  - b. *Have you always felt that way?*
  - c. *Have you felt this acceptance as a one-time decision or as a process that evolves over time?*  
*Or, have you felt this rejection as a one-time decision or as a process whereby parental attitudes vary over time?*
2. Other than the scenarios we talked about, were there other times when your parents' looking at you as a gay man was different from the expected lines?
3. Anything that you would like to share about your parents' attitudes toward your sexuality that we have not talked about?
4. Would you mind sharing your social identifications (racial/ethnic/religious/caste-based identifications)?

#### Snowball Sampling

1. One last question - can you help me in recruiting gay men for my study <similar to current participant's demographics, e.g., age group or country of residence>?