How do epistemic claims function within face-work in coming-out conversations between parents and gay men?

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Abstract

Coming-out conversations between gay men and their parents are emotionally charged disclosures that often involve navigating identity threats and relational risks. Research has often addressed face-work, epistemics, and coming-out as separate phenomena, but how they intersect has received limited attention. This study addresses that gap by examining how epistemic claims function as part of face-work during familial coming-out interactions. Specifically, it investigates how different types of epistemic claims are used to manage or act as face-threatening acts. A qualitative, observational design was used to analyse nine naturally occurring YouTube videos of coming-out conversations. Data were examined using an adapted Iterative Micro-Identity Content Analysis (IMICA), grounded in Goffman's (1967) face-work theory and Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness framework. Three key patterns emerged: First, most conversations addressed tensions around when parents were told and why, reflecting issues of epistemic withholding. Second, parents often claimed prior knowledge of their son's identity. Third, expressions of disapproval or discomfort were frequently paired with references to societal or religious knowledge. These findings show that epistemic claims are central to both challenging and protecting face during disclosure. The study advances understanding of identity and family communication by positioning epistemics as a key mechanism in relational negotiation.

Keywords: Coming-out conversations, Epistemic claims, Face-work, Face-threatening acts, IMICA (Iterative Micro-Identity Content Analysis)

How do epistemic claims function within face-work in coming-out conversations between parents and gay men?

At the basis of everyday life are conversations with others. Through these conversations, knowledge can be shared, but this exchange extends beyond simple transmission. Within families, how personal knowledge is shared and managed can shape relationship dynamics (Duck, 1995; Hall & Scharp, 2021). Disclosures, the sharing of previously unknown information (Derlega & Chaikin, 1977), are central in this process, carrying substantial emotional and relational consequences (Roded & Raviv, 2017; Schrodt & Afifi, 2018). One significant example is coming out to a parent, which not only reveals deeply personal knowledge but also involves navigating emotional risk and relational tension (Savin-Williams et al., 1998; Tyler, 2015).

To understand how such disclosures shape relationships, this study draws on Goffman's (1967) concept of *face-work:* the management of one's public image, *face*, to maintain social harmony. Face-work involves strategies to protect one's own and others' faces in potentially threatening interactions, managing how everyone is seen during conversation. Within this framework, *epistemic claims*, assertions of knowledge or ignorance (Heritage, 2012), are considered as key tools individuals use to challenge or protect face, especially in sensitive conversations like coming out. The question this research thus aims to answer is: How do epistemic claims function within face-work in coming-out conversations between parents and gay men?

Relationships and Knowledge

Familial relationships are shaped by how family members share and manage knowledge about one another. Duck (1995) argues that relationships are "talked into being," meaning that what people come to know about each other, and how this knowledge is communicated, plays a crucial role in the development of the relationship. Within families,

sharing personal stories and information contributes to identity formation and helps define the overall family dynamic (Hall & Scharp, 2021). However, not all knowledge is openly shared. The management of information, through secrecy, deception, and self-disclosure, is a fundamental part of how relationships are initiated, maintained, and even ended (Hall & Scharp, 2021). Disclosures, then, are one way of managing this information, and they can carry emotional and relational weight.

Disclosures within family settings are often more difficult because families function as emotionally interconnected systems where members' thoughts, feelings, and behaviours are deeply interdependent (Bowen, 1978). When a child shares a secret with a parent, it can strain their relationship by creating tension between the child's need for independence and the family's desire to stay connected (Roded & Raviv, 2017). Similarly, revealing sensitive or difficult information can increase anxiety and stress among family members, which can weaken emotional bonds and reduce feelings of closeness (Schrodt & Afifi, 2018). This illustrates that disclosure dynamics in families are complex, as intimate knowledge is essential for maintaining strong and healthy relationships (Schrodt & Afifi, 2018). In sum, managing knowledge and information is vital to the development and maintenance of familial relationships. Disclosures, then, are not merely acts of transferring information, but strategic forms of knowledge management with emotional and relational consequences.

Coming-out disclosures

One particularly complex and impactful form of disclosure is a coming-out conversation. These moments are shaped by personal dynamics as well as stigma and discrimination that LGBTQ adolescents often face, increasing their risk for mental health challenges (McConnell et al., 2016; Mustanski et al., 2016). During coming-out disclosures, queer individuals often encounter overt discrimination, intentional invalidation, or microaggressions. A common example is when someone responds with denial or scepticism,

such as by saying, *"No, you're not, you've always complimented women,"* undermining the speaker's sexual identity (Pecoraro, 2019). Within families, coming out can even reshape relationships in profound ways. According to Tyler (2015), disclosures prompt families to renegotiate their shared story and adjust their relational dynamics. Parental reactions may vary from shock to acceptance, but can also lead to negative outcomes such as social rejection or even the adolescent being expelled from the family home (Adams, 2011; Oswald, 2000; Savin-Williams, 1998). Such responses can profoundly impact both the well-being and identity development of the person coming out (D'amico et al., 2015). As a result, individuals may carefully manage the words they use, how they deliver them, and the way they position themselves within the interaction.

To navigate the emotional and relational stakes within coming-out conversations, individuals often make strategic choices during the interaction. Some rehearse their message or adjust their tone, pacing, and wording (Lannutti, 2022), while others opt for explicit disclosure, clearly stating their identity based on their emotional readiness and relational goals (Li, 2022). Alternatively, some might use less definitive labels or transitional identities, like bisexual or unsure, to gauge the other person's reaction and soften potential disapproval (Robertson, 2016). Additionally, queer individuals may employ avoidance, downplaying, hedging, resisting labels, or presenting themselves as 'ordinary' to reduce risk and protect themselves (Jones, 2018). Ultimately, coming out is a pivotal moment that can reshape both personal identity and relationships, requiring carefully employed strategies to manage its emotional and relational challenges.

Face-Work

The process of carefully managing your social or relational image and the emotional stakes within a coming-out disclosure can be understood through Goffman's framework of *face*. Goffman (1967) defines *face* as the positive social value a person claims in a given

encounter. Brown and Levinson (1987) further distinguish between *positive face*, the desire for approval and inclusion, and *negative face*, the desire for autonomy and freedom from imposition, in their politeness theory. Coming-out conversations are filled with moments that can be a threat to both; these threats are known as *face-threatening acts* (*FTAs*). Within coming-out conversations, these may take the form of denial or scepticism, as seen above by Pecoraro (2019). Other examples can include invalidating the speaker's identity, for instance, responding with *"Are you sure?"*. In any interaction, face-threatening acts (FTAs) are behaviours or statements that challenge a person's social identity, autonomy, or acceptance (Brown and Levinson 1987).

To navigate such risks, individuals engage in strategic choices (Jones, 2018; Lannutti, 2022; Li, 2022; Robertson, 2016), also to be defined as *face-work*: the interactional labour of preventing, mitigating, or repairing face threats (Romo et al., 2022). Within families, face-work is uniquely complex, involving both personal identity and shared relational roles. McBride (2017) found that individuals perform roles like "mother" or "son" based on familial expectations, with face-work maintaining these dynamics. Coming-out disclosures disrupt these performances, threatening both parties' face, making face-work crucial not only for self-presentation but also for preserving the parent–child relationship.

This study distinguishes between two types of face-work: preventive and corrective. *Preventive face-work* occurs before a threat and, using topic shifts, disclaimers, or hedging to reduce the risk of threatening one's face. For instance, hedging might sound like, *"I think… maybe… I might be into guys,"* while a disclaimer could be, *"I knew you'd be cool about it."* (Romo et al., 2022). *Corrective face-work*, on the other hand, occurs after a face threat. It involves repairing/restoring strategies such as humour, apologies, justifications, or emotional appeals. A parent might justify disapproval, a face-threatening act, by saying, *"It's not that I don't accept it, but according to the Bible, it's wrong,"* appealing to religious beliefs to soften

the impact (Romo et al., 2022). Ultimately, face-work provides a valuable framework for understanding how gay individuals navigate the emotional risks and relational challenges of coming out, especially within the family.

Epistemic Claims within Face-Work

Epistemic statements, assertions of knowledge or ignorance (Heritage, 2012), play a crucial, yet underexplored role in managing face during coming-out conversations. Recent research highlights their importance in identity-sensitive interactions. For example, Sierra (2022) showed how speakers use epistemic stances to protect their face as genuine by for example referencing specific NYC neighbourhoods to present themselves as "real" New Yorkers. Such claims can also threaten others' faces, as when someone's experience is dismissed with *"That doesn't count,"* undermining their authenticity. Whitmer and Jordan (2023) similarly explored how epistemic claims shape interactions in contexts of belief, where non-believers respond to face threats by defending their epistemic authority. In both cases, epistemic claims serve as a means of negotiating face, either by aligning or creating tension between participants.

Epistemic claims are, in this study, speculated to be linked to face-threatening acts and the strategies used to navigate them. For example, saying *"I am gay"* may be a face-threatening act, as it introduces potentially destabilising information and risks rejection or loss of approval by exposing personal and identity-defining knowledge. A parent might, in turn, engage in preventive face-work with an epistemic disclaimer claim like *"I already knew, but I didn't want to pressure you",* which acknowledges prior awareness and thus minimises the threat to both the son's and their relational face. All in all, this study fills a theoretical gap by showing how epistemic claims function as face threats and repairs, offering a valuable lens for understanding how individuals manage relational dynamics when coming out.

The current study

This study investigates how epistemic claims function within face-work in coming-out conversations between parents and gay men, analysing nine real-life videos. Drawing on Goffman's (1967) and Brown and Levinson's (1987) concepts of face-work, alongside Romo et al.'s (2022) ideas on face-threatening acts and corrective and preventive face-work, it examines how both parties manage self-presentation and mitigate threats to face during this emotionally charged disclosure. Rather than viewing these conversations as solely vulnerable or mutually understanding moments, this study views them as strategic performances, where individuals may focus more on managing their self-image than on the other's emotions.

While previous research has examined face-work, epistemic claims, and coming-out separately (Heritage et al., 2012; Pecoraro, 2019; Savin-Williams et al., 1998), little attention has been given to how these elements interact. This study addresses that gap by showing how epistemic claims operate as tools for navigating face threats during coming-out, interactions where identity, knowledge, and emotion are tightly intertwined. Understanding this intersection provides insight into how people manage potentially disruptive disclosures, contributing to research on identity, communication, and family relationships. The study expects that epistemic claims are closely tied to face-threatening acts, particularly for parents, who may respond with preventive or corrective face-work to defend their parental role or image.

Methods

Participants and Data

Participants in this study consisted of the sons and parents in the YouTube videos. The data is archival, thus limiting the availability of personal information on the participants. The only information is what can be inferred from the videos. As these are coming-out videos, we deduced that our participants are homosexual males. The participants' ages seem somewhere around adolescence or young adulthood. Furthermore, it is likely that English is the native

language of our participants, as this is the language that they spoke with their parents during the videos.

This study used a qualitative research approach with an observational and dyadic design to examine the interactions between a gay son and his parent. Data consisted of nine coming out videos of gay sons to their parents, which were collected from the online video platform YouTube (www.youtube.com). The selected videos were published between 2012 and 2019 and have an average duration of 10,57 minutes (**Table 1**). The sample was cut down from 30 to 9 videos by removing videos with poor audio quality and by selecting videos according to the following criteria: the interaction must last longer than 4 minutes, the coming out moment should be preceded by 30 seconds of footage, and the child is only coming out to one parent, and not both, either in person or on the phone. All videos feature conversations between a gay son and a parent, with six featuring mother-son interactions and three showing father-son interactions. Among the mother-son interactions, five took place in person and one occurred on the phone. For the father-son interactions, two were phone calls and one was conducted in person (**Table 1**). In terms of parents' awareness of recording, two videos showed parents who appeared to show awareness, yet they were unaware of the recording's objective. While most videos offered clear visual quality, two presented limitations: one had reduced visibility due to poor lighting (Ryan), and another showed only a partial view of the son (Rodrigo). As these were published on a public domain, and are archival in nature, no consent needs to be acquired from the publishers/participants of the video to use these videos in our research. A legal consultant deemed this to be the case according to fair use under copyright law, provided that imposed limitations were adhered to.

Table 1

Overview of the conversations and participants

Nr.[i]	Name	Parent	Conversation style	Aware	Date uploaded	Length (min)	Pre-CO[ii] (min)	Found by
2	Taylor	Father	Over the phone	No	11 Nov, 2014	16:39	05:01	Ole Gmelin
3	Jamaal	Father	Over the phone	No	6 Nov, 2012	06:32	03:17	Ole Gmelin
4	Drew	Father	In real life	No	11 Oct, 2014	13:58	00:38	Ole Gmelin
5	Daniel	Mother	In real life	No	23 Feb, 2012	08:36	02:20	Bachelor students
6	Ryan	Mother	In real life	No	24 oct, 2013	11:26	02:11	Bachelor students
7	Daniel K	Mother	Over the phone	No	23 May, 2012	11:53	02:11	Ole Gmelin
8	Rodrigo	Mother	In real life	Yes	26 Aug, 2019	13:03	03:43	Ole Gmelin
9	Adam	Mother	In real life	Yes	21 oct, 2013	09:12	00:35	Bachelor students
10	Mya	Mother	In real life	No	2 March, 2014	07:41	00:16	Ole Gmelin

[i] Number of conversation and video
[ii] Time passed before the coming out moment

Data Collection and Transcription

Data collection, processing and transcription were done by the lead researcher Ole Gmelin and a different group of bachelor thesis students. The video data was collected and edited by the gay sons, rather than by researchers; therefore, some of the data may be missing due to the editing. The videos were downloaded to simplify the transcription, processing, and handling of the data, and stored on a secure cloud storage platform to ensure their protection/for optimal protection.

Following the video selection, the interactions were transcribed following the transcription notation method developed by Gmelin & Kunnen (2021). The data was transcribed verbatim using the transcription program InqScribe, meaning the data are not corrected for linguistic errors to maintain natural speech. To preserve the richness of context, utterances such as prolonged intonations, length of pauses, overlaps, and interruptions were

transcribed following the coding scheme shown in **Table 2** (Gmelin & Kunnen, 2021). Time-stamps were added at every turn transition, including interruptions. Inaudible fragment parts were marked as such, as well.

Table 2

Transcription Notations

Punctuation marks	Description
[0:00:00]	A timestamp indicating a turn transition
-	Quick alteration of sentence, unusual short pause
,	Brief pause
?	Pitch rises at the end of the sentence.
(.),(..),(…)	Pauses of respectively less than .5s, 1s, 1.5s
(2.)	Length of pause in seconds
wo(h)rd	Laughter in intonation
wo:rd, wo::rd	Prolonged pronunciation of phenomes, respectively 1s, 2s
[word]	Uncertain transcription due to inaudibility
word<	Speech interruption, immediate turn transition
<word	Speech interruption, followed by a turn transition
word<word>	Speech interruption, overlapping talk, followed by a turn transition
word<word	Speech interruption, not followed by a turn transition
<word>	Speech interruption, no turn transition

Note. This table is an adaptation from Gmelin & Kunnen (2021).

Analytical Procedure

This study explored how epistemic claims function as face-work in coming-out conversations between gay men and their parents. The data was analysed using an adapted

version of Iterative Micro-Identity Content Analysis (IMICA; Gmelin & Kunnen, 2021). IMICA's social constructivist view of identity, as formed through interactional and discursive processes (Korobov, 2015), aligns with Goffman's (1967) concept of face which underpins this research. Both perspectives emphasise talk as a means of negotiating identity and face in real time.

The analysis proceeded in four deductive stages, drawing from existing frameworks on epistemics, face-work, and identity management. In the first stage, I familiarised myself with the data and transcripts through repeated viewing of each video. In the second stage, the data were segmented into codable units, defined in this research at the turn level, each speaker's turn at talk, marked by a shift in the conversational floor (Gmelin et al., 2023). (Gmelin et al., 2023). This level of analysis enabled the identification of *epistemic claims*, this research's unit of analysis, referring to a speaker's assertion of knowledge or ignorance (Heritage, 2012). In this study, only those made about the son's sexuality, after the moment of disclosure, were examined. Claims made before coming out or unrelated to the topic were excluded. Each epistemic claim was then categorised by type, knowledge or ignorance, and tone, direct or indirect. Direct claims expressed certainty (e.g., *"I knew for years"*), while indirect ones conveyed hesitation or uncertainty (e.g., *"I think I have known"*). Questions that seek epistemic information (e.g., *"Did you know?"*) were also identified and classified similarly.

In the third stage, each codable unit that contained an epistemic claim was revisited to determine whether it also included, or functioned as, a *face-threatening act (FTA)* or *face-work (FW).* Drawing on Goffman's (1967) concept of face and Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, FTAs are defined as statements that threaten the speaker's or hearer's positive or negative face. Face-work strategies were divided into preventive or corrective, based on Goffman (1967), Jones (2018) and Romo et al. (2022). Preventive face-work aimed

to avoid potential threats and includes hedging (softening statements), disclaimers (statements to reduce offence), and topic shifts that redirect conversations. Corrective face-work occurred after a threat and involves justifications that explain or defend actions, emotional appeals expressing care, humour to ease tension, and apologies.

Lastly, codable units were grouped thematically based on recurring discursive patterns. While coding was deductive, the thematic grouping was interpretive, highlighting how speakers used epistemic claims to manage face, navigate relationships, and negotiate emotional and relational risks. For example, a direct ignorance claim made by the parent, such as *"it's not that expected"* (FTA), may be immediately followed by a disclaimer (e.g., *"It's not a bad thing"*) or a topic shift, illustrating how epistemic claims are used to manage self-image and face.

Trustworthiness

To ensure credibility, I searched for disconfirming cases, looking for instances where my interpretations might have been contradicted (e.g., where epistemic claims did not co-occur with face-threatening acts or face-work). If no such cases arise, it strengthens my interpretation. I also applied the "Next Turn Proof Procedure" (Sacks et al., 1974), which involved examining whether the participants' responses supported my interpretation of the preceding utterances. For example, interpreting *"Were you ever going to tell me?"* as face-threatening was reinforced by the son's nervous and hesitant reply, *"Uhh, well, you know, I never really..."*. Reflexivity was also crucial, prompting me to reflect on how my positionality could shape the analysis. Engaging in peer discussions encouraged me to revisit and refine interpretations, such as considering alternative tones or intentions. This process enhanced the transparency and reliability of my research, ensuring that different perspectives are considered in the interpretation.

Results

General Findings

Across the nine coming-out conversations analysed, epistemic claims frequently co-occurred with both face-threatening acts (FTAs) and face-work strategies. Rather than appearing in isolation, knowledge and ignorance statements were deeply embedded in moments of relational tension, negotiation, and repair. As shown in **Table 3**, the most frequent combination regarding face-threatening acts was epistemic questions with FTAs (Q-EK + FTA, 50 instances total). Questions like *"Are you sure?"* served both to seek knowledge and challenge the speaker's face. Epistemic knowledge claims combined with FTAs (E-K + FTA, 49 instances total), such as "*I do know that being gay is not what I would like for you.",* were also common and typically used by parents. Though often used to assert familiarity or pre-existing knowledge, they could also express disapproval or undermine the child's agency. Epistemic ignorance claims paired with FTAs (E-I + FTA, 11 instances total) were used by both parties, though more frequently by sons to express vulnerability or uncertainty (e.g., *"I didn't know what to expect"*).

Table 3

Overview of epistemic claims in combination with FTAs

Nr.[i]	Name	E-QK + FTA	E-QI + FTA	E-K + FTA	E-I + FTA
2	Taylor	4	0	3	1
3	Jamaal	2	0	3	1
4	Drew	5	0	8	1
5	Daniel	5	2	5	0
6	Ryan	12	0	3	2
7	Daniel K	7	0	6	1
8	Rodrigo	6	0	9	1
9	Adam	8	0	5	2

10	Mya	1	0	7	2

[i] Number of conversation and video

For preventative face-work, hedging, or language that signals uncertainty (e.g., *"uhmm," "I think"*), was commonly used alongside FTAs to soften their impact. While topic shifts also occurred, they were generally not tied to epistemic claims and instead served to steer the conversation away from emotionally charged moments. As detailed in **Table 4**, the most common preventative strategy paired together with epistemic knowledge claims was disclaimers (E-K + FW-P-D, 60 total). Parents typically used these immediately after an FTA to mitigate its potential threat (e.g., *"You know what's funny, I'm not surprised,"*) while sons more often used them beforehand (e.g., "*But I mean, I knew you'd be cool*"). Disclaimers also appeared with epistemic ignorance claims, though less frequently (E-I + FW-P-D, 10 total), usually in statements like *"I mean, I didn't think about it that much"*, which were most often employed by sons, again, to avoid potential rejection (**Table 4**).

For corrective face-work, justifications paired with epistemic claims were most common (E-K + FW-C-J, 34 total), helping speakers defend prior statements after a face-threatening moment. For example, a parent used a statement like *"Because I think I've known"* to soften a surprised or disapproving reaction (**Table 4**). As seen in **Table 4,** justifications were also paired with epistemic ignorance claims (E-I + FW-C-J, 16 total), mostly used by sons. Including statements like *"I don't know, I just never liked kinda got to it"* is often used to explain delays in coming out, deflect responsibility, or manage potential disappointment. Emotional appeals combined with epistemic knowledge (E-K + FW-C-EA, 19 total) were mostly used by parents to affirm love and support, for example, *"You know I want you to be happy."* (**Table 4**). Other face-work strategies also shaped the conversation, though appearing less frequently and typically unrelated to epistemic claims. Humour appeared occasionally as a tension-reducing device but was generally unconnected to

epistemic expressions. Apologies, used only by sons, also stood apart from epistemic discourse and were primarily aimed at managing relational expectations.

Table 4

Overview of epistemic claims in combination with face-work

Nr.[i]	Name	E-K + FW-P-D	E-I + FW-P-D	E-K + FW-C-J	E-I + FW-C-J	E-K + FW-C-EA
2	Taylor	4	0	1	5	0
3	Jamaal	5	0	0	0	0
4	Drew	12	3	9	2	3
5	Daniel	9	1	8	1	1
6	Ryan	6	2	2	1	6
7	Daniel K	1	2	4	2	5
8	Rodrigo	10	0	3	2	0
9	Adam	10	2	2	2	3
10	Mya	3	0	5	1	1

[i] Number of conversation and video

Timing, Exclusivity, and Withholding

Across the nine coming-out conversations, one of the most emotionally charged and interactionally complex patterns concerns the timing and sequencing of the disclosure. Parents and sons regularly orient to questions of who knew what, when, and why now, in other words, to perceived epistemic withholding. This pattern emerges as a prominent site of face-negotiation, where epistemic claims and questions function both as face-threatening acts (FTAs) and as face-work strategies aimed at managing relational vulnerability. While the details vary across conversations, a representative example can be seen in Daniel's conversation with his mother (**Table 5**, red lines). While many conversations include questions like *"Have you told anyone else?"*, these are notably absent here.

In Daniel's conversation, his mother's question, *"Ar - Are you afraid to say it? (..) Were you?"***,** works as a face-threatening act (FTA) because it implies that Daniel knowingly withheld his identity out of fear, subtly challenging his honesty and openness. This links to epistemic timing by framing the disclosure as delayed and in need of explanation, highlighting the tension between what was known, when it was shared, and why it was withheld. Daniel's response, a disclaimer: *"I knew you wouldn't have a problem"* and two justifications, *"No::o I don't know why:y"* and *"I don't know what was wrong",* aim to minimize this threat and preserve both his own and his mother's face. The disclaimer affirms the son's belief in his mother's acceptance, while the justifications shift responsibility away from him by highlighting emotional difficulty, thereby preserving both their faces and maintaining relational harmony. The mother's later follow-up, *"Is this what's been the rift between us for five, six years?"*, directly links the delayed disclosure to relationship strain, increasing the face-threat by suggesting that Daniel's withholding has caused emotional distance or a breakdown in trust. Daniel gently hedges with *"Not six years"* and reframes the threat by saying, *"I just recently realised,"* presenting the delay as unintentional and a matter of his self-knowledge rather than deliberately secretive. The mother presses again on the timing, asking, *"You just recently realised? So you're not one of those who knew at thirteen?"*, despite Daniel's earlier answer. This repeating face-threat is met with a *"N:o,"* reinforcing his previous statement.

Parents' Prior Knowledge

A clear and recurring pattern in the conversations involved parents expressing prior knowledge or suspicion of their son's sexual identity before the explicit disclosure. This often framed the disclosure as anticipated rather than unexpected or disruptive, thus functioning as a face-work strategy that softened potential face-threatening impacts of the revelation. Parents often claimed prior knowledge or intuition, using disclaimers, which allowed them to

manage face, portraying themselves as attentive, supportive, and emotionally competent, qualities associated with being a 'good parent'. Sons sometimes asked or pre-emptively acknowledged such knowledge, implicitly seeking reassurance and reducing uncertainty, though a negative response could be face-threatening and create tension. In several cases, parental responses shift over the course of the interaction, from initial surprise to retrospective claims of knowledge, a clear example of dynamic face-work aimed at reinforcing relational continuity in response to their child's emotional cues. While this progression is not evident in Daniel's conversation, it still provides a clear example of the broader pattern of parental prior knowledge (**Table 5**, green lines).

Daniel opens the disclosure with the disclaimer, *"I know you probably already know,"* pre-emptively acknowledging his mother's probable knowledge and reducing the shock of his announcement. This statement functions as preventive face-work: by conceding the mother's prior knowledge, Daniel lessens the risk of surprise or rejection and positions the disclosure as confirming rather than confronting existing understanding. The mother reciprocates this stance through her epistemic claim, *"Because I think I have known,"* which functions as a disclaimer and is carefully framed with hedging language ("I think") to soften the claim and avoid an overly authoritative or presumptive position. Further, the mother generalises this prior knowledge into a shared cultural epistemic claim: *"you know I think parents always kinda know."* This statement shifts from a personal claim to a normalised social expectation, which works as a form of justification. By framing parental prior knowledge as typical, the mother reduces the emotional weight of the disclosure as something exceptional or disruptive, thereby facilitating relational continuity and mutual understanding. This collective epistemic positioning also provides reassurance to Daniel, suggesting his experience fits within a broader, recognisable pattern, which can ease anxiety and uncertainty.

Invoking external knowledge

A third recurring pattern across the conversations involved parents referencing societal or religious knowledge when addressing concerns, fears, or discomfort related to the son's sexual identity. These epistemic claims often functioned as disclaimers or justifications, shifting the focus from individual opinion to broader social norms. This move diffused potential face-threats by externalising the source of tension, shifting attention away from the parent–child relationship and onto broader social forces like stigma, prejudice, morals or religious beliefs. In doing so, speakers used external knowledge as face-work strategies, allowing them to express potentially disapproving stances while mitigating interpersonal conflict. This pattern is quite prominent in Daniel's conversation with his mother (see **Table 5**, blue lines).

In Daniel's conversation, we observe a clear instance of this discursive move when the mother says, *"I think I question whether the problem is in you and my fear (...) for YOU is that there is prejudice in the world."* Though framed as concern for her son, the utterance performs multiple face-saving moves. Reframing the potential 'problem' not as located within Daniel or her own beliefs, but within the world at large, allowing her to appear supportive while expressing worry. The generalised phrasing presents the concern as objective, rooted in shared societal knowledge rather than personal bias, allowing her to express disapproval indirectly, not of Daniel's identity, but of the risks and stigmas attached, mitigating face-threats to both parties. Later, the mother reiterates this position with increasing emphasis: *"You have to be careful (.) because there is prejudice in the world."*, shifting from concern to declarative authority. This frames her as a protective, knowledgeable parent while subtly reinforcing normative expectations. Rather than engage Daniel's emotions directly, she maintains a hierarchical epistemic stance, preserving both her own and his face. Finally, she elaborates this position further, saying, *"There is still a lot of prejudist people in the world,"* to justify why gay people "feel they have to come out and announce it."

The word “still” acknowledges social progress but emphasises ongoing risks. This frames her discomfort with public identity expressions (e.g., “I’m not big proposal of ‘oh let’s advertise our sexuality’”) as protective realism rather than homophobia. By doing so, she defends her moral stance while avoiding a direct threat to her son’s face and sexual identity.

Table 5

Overview of Key Patterns (Transcript COI_COV_5_DANIEL)

Son: **I know you probably already know** but (.) I wanted to make it official (.) (chuckles).

Mother: You know what? I am so proud you. (..) You know why I’m so proud of you?

Son: Why?

Mother: **Because I think I have known**. (.) I’ve asked you and I know you’ve told me no. (..) And I’ve seen some things on YouTube and I’m just letting you <

Son: < Oka:y well (looking at his phone again) >

Mother: > That YouTuber (.) yeah YouTube I guess it was (.) and I’m I’m, uhm, (clicks tongue) I’ve just been waiting for you to say something and I think that’s why I said too couple weeks ago “Daniel I need you to find courage to be who you are” remem <

Son: < I got tha::t.

Mother: You did? (…) And that’s OKAY with me! I love you. (…) **Ar - Are you afraid to say it? (..) Were you <**

Son: < **No::o I don't know why:y** (.) like **I knew you wouldn't have a problem with it** that's why I'm like (..) **I don't know what was wrong** <

Mother: < Of course I don't have a problem! < (chuckles) > I - **I think I question whether the problem is in you and my fear (..) for YOU is that there is prejudice in the world** < (coughs) > you know that.

Son: (Mumbles while staring at his phone) I don't care.

Mother: Well I know but **you have to be careful (.) because there is prejudice in the world.** (..) You have to be careful like we all have to be careful and safe. (..) You know that's how I'm (..) that's not what I'm saying (...) but you know that I'm okay with that. (..) For sure! so what made you - **is this what's been the rift between us for five six years?**

Son: (Chuckles) **Not six years** <

Mother: > At least four years < No I just recently > since you went to school <

Son: > **I just recently realised.**

Mother: **You just recently realised? So you're not one of those when you're thirteen you knew?**

Son: **N:o <**

Mother: < You didn't know when you were thirteen?

Son: When you asked me in the car if you can help me with school (..) I wasn't sure either so.

Mother: I don't even remember when that was. I know I've asked you a couple of times. I was just trying to give you an out if you were because (..) you're you know the (stutters) **you know I think parents always kinda know.** (..) You know it's - it's okay with me but but you need to be in - you know I'm not big proposal < (coughs) > of "oh let's advertise our sexuality" (..) but when people are gay because of the (.) prejudice in the world and the bigotry and all the horrible things (.) that, you know the stigma, (.) which is now you're lucky now it's not so bad but there is still that's why I say **there is still a lot of prejudist people in the world (.)** because of tha::t (.) you know I think people who are gay feel they have to come out and announce it! I mean I don't announce I'm heterosexual.

Note. Claims related to the pattern *Timing*, *Exclusivity*, and *Withholding* are colored **red**. Claims concerning the pattern *Parent's Prior Knowledge* are colored **green**, while those about *Invoking External Knowledge* are colored **blue**.

Discussion

Coming out to a parent is often a high-stakes moment involving the negotiation of knowledge, family relations and well-being (Adams, 2011; D'Amico et al., 2015; Oswald, 2000; Tyler, 2015). This study examined how epistemic claims, assertions of knowledge or ignorance (Heritage, 2012), functioned within face-work during these conversations. It asked: *How do epistemic claims function within face-work in coming-out conversations between parents and gay men?* Drawing on frameworks by Goffman (1967), Brown and Levinson (1987), and Romo et al. (2022), the analysis focused on nine naturally occurring video-

recorded disclosures. Using conversation analysis and an adapted Iterative Micro-Identity Content Analysis (IMICA; Gmelin & Kunnen, 2021), the study showed how knowledge claims were used to manage the emotional and relational risks of coming out. The findings reveal that epistemic claims are closely tied to face-threatening acts and face-work strategies, offering new insight into how knowledge and identity are co-negotiated in these pivotal moments.

Findings

Previous research (e.g., Pecoraro, 2019; Tyler, 2015) highlights that (coming-out) disclosures are often unpredictable and emotional. Building on this, the current study shows how parents use prior knowledge claims regarding their son's sexual identity to manage these challenges. As Romo et al. (2022) explained, face-work involves strategies to avoid threats to face, and these claims can thus be understood as such. By suggesting they "already knew," parents position themselves as emotionally attuned and knowledgeable, reframing the disclosure as a confirmation rather than a revelation and reducing its disruptive effect on their own and the relational face. These claims ranged from indirect (e.g., *"I think I've known for some time"*) to direct (e.g., *"It's no surprise, really"*) and often became more direct as the conversation progressed. Our findings thus offer empirical support for Savin-Williams' (1998) grief-stage model of coming-out disclosures and extend it by showing that prior knowledge claims follow a similar trajectory: Shifting from denial to acceptance through progressively more direct assertions of knowledge.

As Romo et al. (2022) note, corrective face-work strategies are used to repair face after a face-threatening act (FTA). Consistent with this, the data showed that parents often invoked societal or religious knowledge in their corrective face-work to justify negative reactions. For example, statements like *"According to the Bible, it's wrong"* enabled parents to externalise responsibility for their disapproval and discomfort. Besides serving as face-

work, these statements also operated as subtle FTAs that signalled disapproval. This finding extends Pecoraro's (2019) analysis of microaggressions, subtle and often unintentional remarks conveying underlying rejection, by showing how such comments are frequently grounded in religious or societal knowledge.

Lastly, the study's most significant finding concerns the relationship between the timing and sequencing of the disclosure and FTA's and face-work. The coming out conversations often centred on *epistemic withholding*, with mostly parents orienting to and emphasising this topic. Parental questions like *"Were you ever going to tell me?"* or *"Have you told anyone else?"* acted as face-threatening moves, challenging the son's face, the parent's face and their relational face. In response, sons frequently offered disclaimers and expressed emotional difficulty, framing the delay as protective rather than deceptive. These findings align with Hall & Scharp's (2021) and Roded & Raviv's (2017), who note that managing disclosures within families can disrupt intimacy and challenge relational expectations. However, our results extend this by showing that the timing and sequencing of knowledge can be one of the disruptive factors in disclosures. Furthermore, our results show that knowledge itself becomes a strategic resource in face-work: Within the conversation, epistemic claims about who knew what and when are actively crafted and negotiated. These epistemic claims are not merely statements of fact but tools used to manage the disclosure process, mitigate face-threats, and maintain trust and relational belonging.

Theoretical Implication

This study contributes to and expands face-work theory by integrating epistemics, claims to knowledge, lack of knowledge, or presumed knowledge, as central mechanisms in how face is negotiated during coming-out disclosures. Foundational work by Goffman (1967) and Brown and Levinson (1987) established that face is maintained through strategies and that face-threatening acts (FTAs) risk disrupting the social image. However, these

frameworks treat epistemic expressions as contextual background rather than as integral to the face dynamics themselves. This study shows that epistemic claims are not merely supportive tools, but often constitute face-threatening acts themselves. Similarly, such claims often serve as the primary material of face-work. In doing so, this study builds on the framework proposed by Romo et al. (2022), who distinguished between preventive and corrective face-work, and extends it by identifying epistemic disclaimers, justifications, and emotional appeals as distinct sub-strategies of face-work that have previously received limited theoretical attention.

This study also contributes to epistemic research by extending work from Sierra (2022) and Whitmer and Jordan (2023), who showed that epistemic stances play a key role in constructing authenticity and defending epistemic authority in identity- and belief-sensitive contexts. While their focus was primarily on how individuals position themselves as credible or legitimate knowers, this study shows that epistemic claims are also used to negotiate relational roles disrupted by coming out, such as what it means to be a “good” parent or an “authentic” son. This builds on McBride (2017), who argued that family roles are sustained through face-work. This study reveals that coming-out conversations can threaten these roles and that epistemic claims are central in this process, not just for managing your image, but also for preserving and reshaping the familial relationship.

Furthermore, the findings refine and extend research on both the strategic management of coming-out disclosures and their impact on family relationships. Prior studies have shown that individuals carefully plan and adapt their disclosures, adjusting tone, timing, or identity labels, and using strategies like hedging, avoidance, or transitional identities to reduce the risk of rejection (Lannutti, 2022; Li, 2022; Robertson, 2016; Jones, 2018). This study complements that work by highlighting assertions of knowledge or ignorance as another key strategy for managing coming-out disclosures. It also extends Tyler’s (2015) idea

that disclosures lead families to renegotiate their shared story. This study shows how epistemic claims like *"I always knew"* actively shape that process by helping family members manage emotions, signal acceptance or resistance, and co-construct their changing relationship.

Strengths and Limitations

This study had multiple strengths. One strength of this study lies in its access to a sensitive, often hard-to-capture phenomenon. Coming-out conversations are typically private, emotionally charged, and fleeting, which makes them difficult to study systematically. By using publicly posted YouTube videos, this research gains access to real data on a phenomenon that is rarely available for close, sequential analysis. This allows for the examination of how disclosure and identity negotiation unfold in interaction, rather than relying solely on retrospective accounts. A second strength is the use of real-time, naturally occurring interactional data. Unlike interviews or surveys, which rely on participants' reflections and reconstructions, this method enables close analysis of how epistemic claims are produced and responded to in the moment. This turn-by-turn perspective allows for a more detailed understanding of the relational and affective functions of knowledge claims in context.

However, the study also has limitations. One limitation is the public nature of the data, which introduces potential performance effects. While most parents were unaware they were being filmed, the sons chose to record and share these moments online, which likely influenced how they presented the conversation. This creates a sample of coming-out experiences that were seen as acceptable or meaningful enough to post, potentially skewing toward supportive or emotionally resonant reactions. Still, a few less positive or ambivalent responses were included, offering some variation. Overall, these videos reflect a particular type of coming-out story, but also reveal which responses are culturally recognised as worth

sharing. Second, the researcher's limited qualitative experience may have affected how interactional patterns, like epistemic claims and face-work, were interpreted, possibly overlooking alternative meanings. To mitigate this, the Next Turn Proof Procedure was used to ensure participants' responses supported these interpretations, grounding the analysis in the interaction itself. While this strengthens the study's validity, the interpretive nature limits generalizability. Reflexivity and peer review further helped reduce potential assumptions and promote a balanced understanding of sensitive content. Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights into how epistemic claims shape identity and relationships during coming out.

Future Research

This study offers initial insights into how epistemic claims function within face-work during coming-out conversations between gay sons and their parents. However, several important questions remain. Future research could explore a variety of different disclosure contexts beyond this study's focus. These include examining disclosures across a wider range of relationships, such as siblings, grandparents, or friends, where relational dynamics and face-work strategies may differ, potentially affecting how epistemic claims are used and interpreted. Besides this, future work should incorporate more diverse populations since the current study focused on Western, English-speaking gay male disclosures. This could for example include a wider variety of queer identities, as well as looking at families from non-Western cultural contexts. Such diversity would help reveal how cultural and social norms influence the negotiation of knowledge, identity, and face during disclosure. Lastly, disclosures beyond sexual identity, such as revealing mental health struggles, chronic illness, or other stigmatised information, may involve similar face-work mechanisms. Exploring these could reveal whether epistemic claims serve comparable relational functions across different types of sensitive disclosures.

Within the specific context of examining face-work and epistemic claims within sexual identity disclosure, longitudinal studies would be valuable to understand how face-work and epistemic positioning develop over time, especially when initial disclosures are met with ambivalence or resistance. Follow-up interactions could reveal how families renegotiate knowledge, manage face-threats, and reconstruct relationships in the aftermath of coming out. However, conducting longitudinal research within disclosure interactions poses significant ethical and practical challenges. Coming-out moments cannot be orchestrated in controlled settings, nor can they be authentically replicated in laboratory environments. As a result, researchers must rely on publicly available data, which limits the ability to collect follow-up conversations or trace how relationships evolve after the initial disclosure. One promising method to gain longitudinal insight after coming-out conversations is through post-conversation playback interviews, as done by Kerrick and Thorne (2014 where participants reflect on recorded interactions and disclose evolving identity negotiations. However, since research in this area has to rely on publicly available data, contacting participants for follow-up interviews can be challenging, limiting this approach's feasibility.

Conclusion

This study reveals that epistemic claims, assertions about knowledge or ignorance, are central to the face-work in coming-out conversations between gay sons and their parents. Parents frequently use "already knowing" claims to reframe disclosures as confirmations, reducing emotional and relational disruption. References to societal and religious knowledge serve as face-work to justify parents' reactions, but also act as subtle face-threatening acts expressing disapproval. The timing and sequencing of knowledge disclosure shape relational dynamics, with parental questions about when information was shared functioning as face-threatening moves that sons respond to with disclaimers and emotional framing. By integrating epistemics more fully into face-work theory, this study extends previous research

on these topics by showing that epistemic claims are not just background context but active tools in negotiating identity and family roles. It also highlights how knowledge claims contribute to managing emotions and reshaping family narratives during disclosure, adding nuance to existing models of coming-out processes.

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