An ecological or systems approach to human development recognizes that individuals exist within, are influenced by, and interact with multiple intersecting contexts, including their families, friends, neighborhoods, communities, and workplaces, as well as broader societal institutions and ideologies (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Whitechurch & Constantine, 1993). Such interactions shift throughout the life cycle, as people develop, establish relationships, and create families and communities. This approach is particularly useful in the study of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals, whose lives, relationships, and families are increasingly visible in society (Savin-Williams, 2008). LGB individuals are increasingly recognized as members of numerous systems, including the health care system, the legal system, organizations and workplaces, schools, families, communities, and neighborhoods. By extension, LGB individuals necessarily impact and are impacted by these systems (e.g., they may experience stigmatization and stress as a function of their devalued status; Meyer, 2003). Thus, attention to LGB people’s experiences and interactions within these varied contexts is warranted.

This chapter will discuss research on various aspects of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) people’s experiences. Special attention will be paid to the situational and contextual forces that impact LGB persons’ experiences as they move through the life course, particularly those that may pose challenges for sexual minorities and their families. Topically, this chapter will begin with a discussion of LGB people’s “coming out” experiences, as well as their experiences forming and maintaining intimate relationships, with attention to the barriers they face in doing so (e.g., lack of recognition and stigma). Next, the multiple barriers that LGB people face in becoming parents will be discussed (e.g., challenges in accessing fertility treatments; discrimination in
the adoption process) with attention to the resourcefulness that they display in the face of such barriers. Research on LGB parents and their children will be also be highlighted, with a focus on the stressors that LGB-parent families experience in relation to three major overlapping contexts: their families of origin, schools, and the legal system. Finally, a discussion of the implications of this research, along with suggestions for teachers, therapists, social workers, health care providers, and other professionals with regard to supporting LGB-parent families, will conclude the chapter.

### Coming Out and Being Out

The process of “coming out” is one that is unique to the life experience and life cycle of sexual minorities. According to Cass’s (1979) stage model (perhaps the most widely known framework for understanding the coming out process), individuals move from a state of questioning and confusion (“Could I be gay?”) to acceptance and tolerance of one’s nonheterosexual identity (“I am gay, and I will be okay”) to pride and synthesis of their LGB identity (“This is a part of who I am and I need to let people know who I am”). Thus, the coming out process is conceptualized as one that is relatively linear and proceeds according to a series of predefined and continuous stages. Contemporary scholars, however, have suggested that coming out is an ongoing process that is not necessarily linear, but is often marked by contradiction and change and both pride and shame (e.g., Dindia, 1998). Furthermore, scholars have increasingly argued for a conceptual distinction between individual sexual identity and group membership identity (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996); that is, a woman may come to terms with her same-sex erotic feelings and intimacy (and may ultimately identify as a lesbian) without identifying with or becoming active within the lesbian community. Consequently, the failure to disclose one’s sexual orientation in diverse contexts should not necessarily be interpreted as implying an incomplete sexual identity (Tomlinson & Fassinger, 2003).

Scholars have also increasingly emphasized the importance of considering the varied situational and contextual forces that impact individual decisions to come out. In deciding whether to disclose their sexual orientation, LGB people must consider their immediate social contexts and potential threats associated with disclosure (e.g., verbal or physical harassment, social humiliation and rejection, loss of housing or employment), how well they know the individual at hand, and the ease of concealment. Broader contextual factors, such as characteristics of one’s family, friendship network, workplace environment, and community, will also influence the coming out process. Individuals from highly religious and/or politically conservative families, for example, may be particularly fearful of rejection and social alienation (Boon & Miller, 1999) and may resist or delay coming out to family members. Social class and occupation may also impact the degree to which individuals are “out” in