Perceived Family Relationships Associated with Coming Out of Mormon Male Homosexuals

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PERCEIVED FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS ASSOCIATED WITH
COMING OUT OF MORMON MALE HOMOSEXUALS

by

Brad Benson

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

Family Life/Family and Human Development

Approved:

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY
Logan, Utah

2001
ABSTRACT

Perceived Family Relationships Associated with
Coming Out of Mormon Male Homosexuals

by

Brad Benson, Doctorate of Philosophy

Utah State University, 2001

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Department: Family and Human Development

This study is one of the first to include data from both male homosexuals and their family members to investigate disclosure of sexual orientation. Being homosexual in U.S. society can be particularly traumatic for males because strong pressures oppose the violation of masculine gender norms. Being homosexual and Mormon has unique complications. Reactions from the Mormon community toward individuals of homosexual orientation is defined by prevailing attitudes toward homosexuality, which are largely based on existing theories of etiology, attribution of etiology, and the religious and cultural beliefs extant in the community. The role of family relationships in the coming out process for Mormon male homosexuals contributed important information towards understanding their development.
As a particular example of families facing homosexuality, this qualitative study explored family characteristics reported by a sample of male homosexuals who were raised in Mormon families. Relying on reports from both homosexual males and their family members, these data inform how the coming out process is influenced by, and influences, family relationships, and expand knowledge about how family relations and culture influence development.

Findings showed that attitudes prevalent within family, church, and community influenced Mormon male homosexuals' decisions to come out. Religious influences on Mormon homosexuals and their family members had an inhibitory effect on the disclosure of sexual orientation and subsequent support and communication within family relationships. Expectations of negative response increased silence among Mormon male homosexuals about their sexual orientation and resulted in alienation from both church and family.

Mormon male homosexuals most wanted their family members to accept them and withhold judgment. They hoped for increased dialogue and understanding. Parents were typically distressed by the disclosure, with fathers having a stronger reaction than mothers. Relationships were strained in terms of family contact and communication. Family members who made efforts to gain information and understand the homosexual son were perceived as more supportive. Implications of how families and Church leaders can insulate the homosexual son from adverse social response and provide needed support are discussed.
DEDICATION

When I began this study my ambition was to further understanding in the Mormon community about the experiences and needs of Mormon Church members who are homosexual, and their families. And, in doing so, to bring increased peace and support to families who face a monumental challenge emotionally and spiritually, one that tears at the core of their lives: religious belief and the family unit. Sharing vital information about their private lives has not been easy for most. Doing so has opened a door of opportunity for recasting perceptions, answering complex questions, and altering individual and collective behaviors. The experience has been rich. My heart has been touched and permanently changed as a result of listening to their stories. It is has been my intention to extend hope to study participants (and the thousands of others). I must confess, however, that it is they who have given me hope, by their courage and compassion, and their commitment to the things they hold most sacred. This work is dedicated to them.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research project has been extensive. It would not have been possible for me to complete the study without the help of many people. I would first like to thank my supervisory committee. I deliberated over the selection of committee members and have felt rewarded. Each has brought expertise that has been critical to my research. In particular, I want to thank my major professor, Brent Miller, for having confidence in me to pursue my own research idea. I am very grateful for the time and mentoring he has provided to me throughout my doctoral education and dissertation project. I have always been able to count on his help in every aspect of my educational work. He has provided me exceptional guidance and support.

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Brad Benson
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Statement of Problem

Families and family researchers can no longer remain in denial about homosexuality and the needs of homosexual individuals in society. Once a taboo subject in America, homosexuality is now a topic of relatively open--and oftentimes heated--debate (Burr, 1993). The past 20 years have brought issues of sexual orientation to the forefront largely as a result of the national AIDS crisis. Sociopolitical gay and lesbian groups have organized to fight for public recognition, human services, and civil rights. Even while struggles for acceptance are being fought in the political arena, antithetical groups are working to push gays back into the proverbial closet. Teenagers attempting to establish support organizations on school campuses, and gays going public with their sexual orientation in the military, are met with strong opposition. This opposition encourages a subliminal policy of “don’t ask, don’t tell.” The Mormon community provides a dramatic example of how homosexual individuals are encouraged to suppress their sexual orientation.

Professional experience in clinical settings has acutely increased this researcher’s awareness of particular difficulties faced by Mormon homosexuals. Within this population, a strong contradiction exists between an individual’s homosexual feelings and religious mandates against involvement in homosexual relationships. This conflict often leads to greater feelings of intolerance in devout
relationships. This conflict often leads to greater feelings of intolerance in devout Mormon families. Evidence exists that suicide, addictive behaviors, and other destructive strategies for coping are elevated among homosexual individuals (Boxer & Cohler, 1989; Rotheram-Borus, Rosario, Rossem, Reid, & Gillis, 1995), especially among those who lack emotional support from their families (Boxer, Cook, & Herdt, 1991; Hershberger & D’Augelli, 1995). These problems may be even more common among Mormon homosexuals due to the particular psychological pressures imposed upon them. Strong cultural pressures encourage them not only to keep their sexual orientation hidden, but also to feel guilty and ashamed for having homosexual attractions.

Emphasis on marriage and family is especially strong in Mormon culture. Consequently, it is not uncommon among Mormon homosexuals to encounter males who are married—frequently they are fathers—and concurrently involved in sexual relationships with other males. In such cases, the wife is often unaware of her husband’s homosexual orientation or behavior. From a clinical sample of this researcher, one homosexual male informed his spouse of his homosexual orientation less than a year before he died of AIDS, illustrating how secrecy about one’s sexual orientation heightens risk to other family members. Marriages that experience a husband’s coming out often end in divorce, an event of significant emotional and religious consequence to spouses and children. Thus, conflict between the need for protection from societal rejection and the need for support creates a socioemotional paradox for Mormon male homosexuals and those who interact most closely with them.
During the past decade, Mormon Church policies have been directed toward greater assistance for homosexual members (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1992). Still, intolerance and misunderstanding continue to be the overriding normative response. Attitudes are strongly influenced by Mormon belief, which holds that homosexual attraction is unnatural, is learned, and results largely from choice. While Mormon leaders have refrained from taking a clear stand on etiology, homosexual behavior is unquestionably condemned in official Church policy as "serious sin," while even homosexual attraction (thoughts and feelings) "should be resisted and redirected" (Oaks, 1995, p. 9).

Thus, the Mormon cultural environment poses even greater challenges to development for homosexual individuals than is found generally in society. Not only are the usual social rejections present, but religious doctrine places those who are homosexual in an irreconcilable position. This is because heterosexual marriage is required for attaining the highest after-life blessings, homosexual behavior is viewed as sinful, yet changeable, and homosexuality is believed to result in the ultimate downfall of individuals and societies. Most devout Mormon Church members have such strong ties to their religious beliefs that it would be extremely hard to break them, even when they pose a direct personal conflict.

Rationale

Social stigma associated with homosexuality in Western society has contributed to avoidance of research about homosexual development in family
contexts. In particular, family research has been criticized for its wide neglect of homosexuality in family studies (Allen & Demo, 1995), and there is scant research contributing to understanding the effects of coming out on family relationships (Ben-Ari, 1995). Yet, family researchers have emphasized the importance of understanding how homosexuality impacts the family (Allen & Demo, 1995; Savin-Williams & Dube, 1998; Williamson, 1998). Williamson (1998) has pointed to disclosure of sexual orientation as a “complex family event” that brings into question assumptions regarding a family member’s capacity to cope. In light of the fact that many studies have focused on individuals who are homosexual or their family members, few, if any, have included members within the same family. Savin-Williams and Dube (1998) emphasized the need to understand ways that “parents and children experienced the same disclosure process” (p. 10).

An additional weakness associated with existing research on parents of homosexuals is sample recruitment, which almost always occurs with parents involved in support groups. Because most families of homosexuals are not involved in organized support groups, data from these samples create difficulties in generalizing responses to what are likely more typical parent-child relationships (Savin-Williams & Dube, 1998). As a result of this problem, studies that investigate homosexuality directly within a family context are timely.

Because the objective of this study is to gain understanding of how family relationships influence, and are influenced by, coming out among males who grow up homosexual in Mormon families, this study contributes knowledge about
an underresearched area. As a primary form of social organization for most individuals, especially in the first decades of life, family relationships often predict long-term quality of life. Sexual identity is shaped by family and cultural influences and "is basic to understanding human behavior" (Green, 1987, p. 6).

Thus, another goal of the study was to gain increased understanding of how homosexuals perceive family relationships to influence their disclosure process.

Considerable research has investigated the coming out process for gay individuals (Cramer & Roach, 1988; Savin-Williams, 1989a, 1989b). Far less emphasis has been directed to the impact of sexual-orientation disclosure on family relationships (Ben-Ari, 1995). Studies have exposed risks associated with lack of family support for individuals of homosexual orientation (Anderson, 1994; Vincke & Bolton, 1994). This issue has particular relevance for Mormon families because increased understanding for the son's homosexual feelings would be less expected in the Mormon religious context.

A third contribution of this study is facilitation of support for Mormon homosexuals. Beliefs of the Mormon religion define homosexual thought and behavior as sinful. At the same time, members of the Mormon faith, including homosexuals, are characteristically devout. Consequently, Mormons of homosexual orientation are prohibited from the pursuit of same-sex intimate relationships that allow expression of deeply felt needs. One Mormon homosexual put it this way: "I am a Mormon, from a long line of Mormons, yet, I am also a homosexual. I have come to realize that I cannot cease being either. Thus, happiness depends upon my ability to reconcile these two facets of my
nature" (Lach, 1989, p. 34). Under conditions of strong religious sanctions against homosexuality, not only is family support for the homosexual son more unlikely, but it may be even more crucial. This study sought to identify information that potentially could be useful in encouraging such family support.

Lastly, given the conflict between homosexual orientation and doctrine in many religions, there are additional implications of this study. Increased knowledge has the potential to foster religious understanding, tolerance, and support while reducing stigma, persecution, and discrimination that results from ignorance (Ballard, 1995; Bruce, Pilgrim, & Spivey, 1994; Steitz & Munn, 1993). In addition, leaders of the Mormon Church might be particularly interested in increasing their understanding of family connections to homosexuality in Mormon homes. The possibility exists that data from this study could be shared with the religious leadership in the Church, thereby influencing policies toward homosexual members, including the encouragement of greater emotional support to them.

As congregational leaders, Mormon bishops are most likely to be involved in counseling homosexual members. This is important because Mormonism involves a lay clergy, leaving the counseling approach open to individual interpretation rather than tied more closely to official Church policy, and implies a potential influence on attitudes that could be either positive or negative. For example, local bishops have a range of procedures available to them for disciplining homosexuals such as probation, disfellowship, and excommunication, sanctions that may discourage individuals from disclosing. If
attitudes and policies are to be influenced to benefit Mormon homosexuals and their families, family relationships and experiences of these individuals must also be more clearly understood by Church leaders.

A final note regarding the importance of this study relates to ethnographic research. As a group, Mormons are quite conservative and similar in their attitudes and lifestyles. In spite of the fact that the Mormon religion is now ranked seventh in size among U.S. Christian churches and has the fastest growth rate amongst the largest churches (National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA, 1998), the amount of information about the cultural aspects of this group is relatively limited. This is especially true when it comes to points of behavior that are considered in the private realm such as sexual development. This study provides cultural information on a significant societal group.

To summarize, the rationale for this study was three-fold. First, to contribute to the research literature on homosexuality in family contexts. Second, to describe family relationships and their reciprocal influences with coming out among Mormon male homosexuals. Third, to explore social support alternatives for assisting those of homosexual orientation who are in conflict with their families and religious beliefs.

Objectives, Research Questions, and Limitations of the Study

The objective for carrying out this study was to seek understanding of experiences that affect family disclosure among males who grow up homosexual in Mormon families. The primary research question addressed was, "how do
male homosexuals in the Mormon culture characterize their family relationships?”

This study has addressed the primary research question by answering three specific questions:

1. In what ways do Mormon male homosexuals perceive family relationships as facilitating or interfering with their decision to disclose their sexual orientation?

2. How does coming out affect family relationships?

3. How can understanding and intimacy be enhanced between Mormon homosexuals and their families to increase perceived satisfaction in these relationships?

At least in U.S. culture, it has become more common to categorize those attracted to same-sex individuals as “gay” rather than “homosexual.” There is a tendency in the literature to equate different forms of homosexual expression by assuming a universal definition. This kind of reductionism combines homosexual constructs that can, in fact, vary considerably (Crapo, 1995; Gregersen, 1983; Savin-Williams, 1990). While Herdt (1992) suggested emphasizing “gay” rather than “homosexual” identity in developmental research, this also is an oversimplification. Nicolosi (1991) has pointed out that “there is a certain group of homosexual men who do not seek fulfillment through coming out into a gay identity...[and] the word ‘homosexual’ names an aspect of such a man’s psychological condition. But he is not ‘gay.’ Gay describes a contemporary sociopolitical identity and lifestyle that such a man does not claim” (p. 3).

Nicolosi distinguished such individuals as nongay homosexuals. Distinction
between "gay" and "homosexual" is important in this study because, despite acknowledgment in official Mormon policy of the existence of homosexual members, it would be considered wrong for an orthodox member of the Church to aspire to or adopt a sociopolitical identity of being "gay."

Extrapolation of findings from this study might assist in understanding homosexuals in comparable contexts such as those in conservative communities and religious groups, thereby making a broader contribution to the knowledge base. The study was limited to male homosexuality because characteristics of female lesbian development are different in important ways from homosexual development of males and, consequently, might have posed different research challenges (Feinberg & Bakeman, 1994; Gonsiorek & Rudolph, 1991).

This study has, in no way, intended to discriminate against any group. Research on homosexual populations comes with the responsibility to acknowledge each individual's self-definition and to respect the basic human right of sexual orientation (Crapo, 1992). While it is understood that interpretive methods introduce a potential bias, findings have been based upon a respectful rendering of data from informants.

Definition of Terms

Homosexual: An individual who feels erotic attraction towards members of the same sex, characterized by predominance of homoerotic sexual fantasies (Phillips, 1993).

Same-Sex Attraction: Homoerotic sexual orientation.
Gay: A homosexual who identifies and affiliates with gay subculture (Hogan & Hudson, 1998).

Homophobia: Attitudes representing prejudice, revulsion, and discrimination towards nonheterosexuals (Luchetta, 1999).

Coming Out: The meaning of the term “coming out” has expanded over time. It is now often used to represent a process of public identification with gay society. For the purposes of the present study, “coming out” refers to disclosure.

LDS (Mormon) family: A family affiliated with Mormon religious beliefs and practices, or “active,” during the period when the son grew up.

Active: A Church status representing members who participate in prescribed spiritual activities.

Priesthood: Authority officially conferred upon worthy male Church members to officiate and preside in leadership service and religious ordinances.

Home Teaching: A priesthood service at the congregational level where two priesthood holders attend to the temporal and spiritual needs of assigned Church members.

Bishop: Lay clergyman who administers the affairs of the local congregation, or “ward.”

Ward: A neighborhood division of Church members consisting of a single congregation.

Stake: A regional grouping of multiple wards administered by a stake president.

General Authority: An administrative leader in the Church at the executive level.
In particular, the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve Apostles.

Evergreen: A support group for assisting Mormon homosexuals to maintain faithfulness to the teachings and policies of the LDS Church, but not sponsored by the LDS Church.

Disciples: An online support group for assisting Mormon homosexuals to maintain faithfulness to the teachings and policies of the LDS Church, but not sponsored by the LDS Church.

Friends and Family: An LDS Church sponsored support group for helping family members, Church leaders, and others understand same-sex attraction and receive counsel on how to help homosexual Church members.
In spite of greater media, research, and policy exposure in recent years, homosexuality continues to be a sensitive social issue (Strand, 1998). Nowhere is this felt more strongly than by those individuals who are stigmatized. Yet, research has been slow to address homosexual questions generally and remains scant in the area of family relationships (Savin-Williams, 1998). Most of the understanding has come from anecdotal accounts, rather than systematic research. Allen and Demo (1995) encouraged the contribution of research that will provide greater understanding of the subjective experiences of homosexual individuals within family contexts. They pointed out that one consequence of the lack of research on homosexuality and the family is perpetuation of heterosexism and homophobia. Such attitudes contribute to the fear homosexuals experience about disclosing their sexual orientation. Discussion of research regarding several important developmental questions will help clarify issues salient to coming out in the family: etiology, attribution, identity, and the coming out process.

**Etiology**

The cause of homosexual orientation remains undetermined in spite of numerous investigations. While no single environmental factor invariably has been associated with all cases of homosexual orientation, many studies have

Biological theories to explain sexual orientation have been most popular during recent decades (Ellis & Ames, 1987; LeVay, 1995; Money, 1984). While evidence has mounted in support of biological explanations, many such studies are problematic due to methodological contamination and premature conclusions (Byne, 1995; McGuire, 1995). The nature/nurture question need not be dichotomized. Contemporary views of development emphasize interactive effects from multiple influences in the biological and environmental domains (Ford & Lerner, 1992); both are likely to play important and interactive roles in the development of sexual orientation. A more important question to consider may be how attributions of etiology influence social response to individuals of homosexual orientation. Absence of definitive knowledge about the origins of sexual orientation fosters personal interpretation that, conceivably, can be strongly influenced by religious doctrine.
Attribution

Attribution theory holds that one's information and beliefs form causal perceptions and, subsequently, influence expectations, affect, and behaviors (Harvey & Weary, 1984). Causal attribution has been linked to the degree of investment an individual has in a situational outcome (Harvey & Weary, 1984; Worthington & Atkinson, 1993) as well as to one's religious orientation (Shortz & Worthington, 1994). Research has shown that biological attributions for causality of sexual orientation lead to attitudes reflecting greater tolerance for homosexual individuals, while homophobia tends to be associated with the belief that homosexuality is chosen (Ernulf, Innala, & Whitam, 1989). Because statements of Mormon Church leaders emphasize that homosexuality is learned through reinforced behavior, attribution theories predict that Mormon families would be likely to adopt predominantly homophobic attitudes.

Identity

The family and community provide critical contexts for the process of identity formation. Mormon families, particularly those who are devout, are different in several important ways from many other families. Because the family is the most important social institution in Mormon theology, Church programs and policies are constructed for the purpose of bolstering family unity (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1995); homosexuality is viewed in opposition to
the accepted family construct (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1992). Furthermore, the overlap between religious and daily life in Mormon communities reflects a high degree of social control, suggesting that self-concept and sense of identity for most Mormons are constructed largely within the parameters of their religious and family environments (Cox & Gallois, 1996). This presents complications for the homosexual son during identity formation if that identity is contingent not only upon how persons view themselves, but also on individuals' perceptions of how they are judged by others (Erikson, 1968).

Identity formation among homosexuals has been conceptualized by some researchers as a unique process (Cass, 1979; Plummer, 1981; Troiden, 1988). Homosexual identity is inhibited among Mormons because Church doctrine unequivocally rules out such an identity. Importantly, identity construction appears to be an ongoing product of one's world view which is based in self-constructed, multi-context, life experiences (Berzonsky, 1990). Because family attitudes among Mormons are likely to mirror religious philosophies, homosexual sons may feel rejection by their families and acquire self-perceptions that they are flawed in important ways.

Coming Out: Significance of the Process

Sexual orientation is a very personal issue that, while taken for granted by the great majority of heterosexual individuals, can be a traumatic part of development for homosexuals. This is especially true when sexual orientation remains hidden (Savin-Williams, 1990). Like several other minority groups
throughout history, homosexuals have faced strong discrimination. Social sanctions have been imposed in an attempt to control the occurrence of homosexual behavior (Mondimore, 1996; Schneider, 1997). One important difference between homosexuals and many other persecuted human groups is that sexual orientation is easier to hide than externally visible characteristics.

Based on public reaction to homosexuality, the same stigma that creates distress over recognizing homosexual attractions prevents a child from seeking needed support through disclosure (Savin-Williams, 1998). The usual expectation of family support from which children derive security is often not in place for homosexuals (Savin-Williams, 1998). The experience of not being able to communicate fears, confusion, and conflict that often accompany recognition of such feelings can result in high mental and emotional distress (Dohaney, 1996; Gonsiorek, 1988; Rotheram & Fernandez, 1995).

The degree to which families face emotional crisis over a homosexual child is contingent upon existing family variables, making outcomes “complex” and “not fully predictable” (Williamson, 1998). A strong deterrent to self-acceptance and coming out for homosexual individuals is internalized homophobia (Lock, 1998; Meyer & Dean, 1998). This is an attribution of shame and loathing for one’s self which parallels the social stigma attached to homosexuality. Among adult homosexual males, the perception and expectation of negative response from others has been found to be more influential in the decision to hide their sexual orientation than actual response (Ross & Rosser, 1996). Internalized homophobia is characterized, in part, by concerns over the
moral and religious unacceptability of being homosexual. Such internal conflicts can have devastating effects.

Distress associated with sexual orientation appears to contribute to a higher incidence of suicide among homosexual than heterosexual adolescents (Hershberger, Pilkington, & D’Augelli, 1997; Safren & Heimberg, 1999), in part, due to a lack of social support from important relationships (Hecht, 1998). Questionnaire data from 108 males in gay support organizations revealed a higher association between homosexuality and suicide attempts among gay youths than observed in the population generally (Schneider, Farberow, & Kruks, 1989). Most attempts to end one’s life were reported in conjunction with not having come out about one’s sexual orientation; there appeared to be a high level of distress related to either not having come out, or perceiving rejection about one’s sexual orientation while in the process of coming out.

In general, findings support the idea that self-esteem among homosexual persons is related to quality of family relationships. Intuition suggests that sexual orientation concerns need to be confided in one’s closest relationships, and research supports this notion. In one study of gay youths between 14 and 23 years of age, Savin-Williams (1989a) found that self-esteem for gay males was related to disclosure to mothers and satisfying but infrequent relationships with fathers. In that study, self-esteem among gay sons in rural settings was best predicted by mothers who knew of their sexual orientation, while self-esteem was better predicted by relationship satisfaction with both parents among professional and small town males. This finding suggests that homosexual males’
relationships with rural fathers may be different from fathers in other settings.

Based on the same sample, comfort with sexual orientation was evaluated in the context of relationships to parents (Savin-Williams, 1989b). Gay males with the highest self-esteem were those who felt comfortable about their sexual orientation, largely predicted by parents’ acceptance of their sexual orientation when parents were perceived as important. It appears that level of comfort about one’s sexual orientation is tied to perceived relationships with family members and, particularly, to whether the family environment is characterized by acceptance and support. Research also suggests that the likelihood of a child coming out to the family is context specific (Harry, 1993), and the timing of this disclosure relates to the existing social climate (Lynch, 1987). In relation to the present study, the social climate of Mormon culture would be expected to discourage homosexuals from coming out to their families.

Coming Out: The Family Context

The impact of a traditional family environment (measured by values about marriage, children, and religion) on male homosexuals appears to be related to expectations of family disapproval (Cramer & Roach, 1988; Newman & Muzzonigro, 1993). In fact, individuals who are more conservative and fundamental in their values have consistently been found to hold more negative views of homosexuals (Gould, 1998; Heaven & Oxman, 1999; Herek, 1996). Openly homosexual individuals commonly perceive rejection by institutionalized religion (Clark, Brown, & Hochstein, 1989). These perceptions are particularly
important in light of findings that expectation of negative response increases internalized homophobia among male homosexuals (Rosenberg, 1979; Ross & Rosser, 1996).

It follows that the coming out process is also highly dependent on family relationship characteristics (Holtzen, Kenny, & Mahalik, 1995). D’Augelli, Hershberger, and Pilkington (1998) suggested that the decision to come out to family depends upon how comfortable individuals are with their sexual orientation as well as expectations of tolerance and acceptance from the family member. In a clinical study, using data from homosexual sons and their parents, Myers (1982) described motivations for gay males electing to tell parents of their sexual orientation. Psychological strain from living a double life, becoming more comfortable and open with one’s sexual orientation as a consequence of involvement in psychotherapy or other programs of support, forming a romantic union with a lover, association with the gay rights movement, or venting anger were listed as possible motivations for disclosure to parents. Homosexual sons often make decisions to disclose their sexual orientation to parents to seek closeness when the need for family support overrides the need for protection they derive from maintaining secrecy (Ben-Ari, 1995).

In another study, the majority of respondents reported feeling different from other boys during school-age years prior to coming out, and experiencing confusion when they first realized they were homosexual (Newman & Muzzonigro, 1993). About half of the respondents did not feel guilt or shame in connection with these realizations. However, presence of traditional family
values predicted stronger feelings of difference among them than when traditional values were not reported, suggesting that negative self-perceptions are acquired through exposure to attitudes expressed in these traditional homes. Traditional families were observed to be less accepting of homosexuality, and males from traditional homes who had disclosed to their families perceived more disapproval from them.

Data about the timing of disclosure for homosexual males who come out show a trend towards earlier ages. While 60% of respondents came out to parents by their mid- to late twenties 10 to 15 years ago (Cramer & Roach, 1988), evidence points toward the early twenties for completing disclosure among a majority of contemporary youth (D'Augelli et al., 1998; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 1999). In a related study about homosexual youth (ages 15-21), D'Augelli et al. (1998) found that approximately 80% of males had disclosed to family by the age of 21. On average, first disclosures occurred at age 16, followed by disclosure to parent(s) one year later. A friend was chosen for the first disclosure in 77% of cases compared to 9% of first disclosures to mothers and 3.5% to a sibling.

Most studies have reported that relationships were typically strained between homosexual children and their parents initially. Cramer and Roach (1988) found, however, that family relations eventually improved and sometimes even exceeded the quality of relationships existing prior to disclosure. One fifth of homosexuals who had come out to parents reported immediate improvement in the parent-child relationship. Neither homosexual children nor their parents
reported any difference in quality of relationships resulting from how discovery of sexual orientation was made, suggesting a somewhat universal process of adjustment. Disclosed sons were not always accurate in their prediction of parent response. Still, nondisclosing sons perceived their parents as being more homophobic than sons who had disclosed, and these perceptions were important in directing both expectations and consequent disclosure decisions.

Attachment relationship to parents and cognitive patterns indicative of depression were measured in a sample of 113 male and female adult homosexuals (Holtzen et al., 1995). The parental attachment questionnaire (PAQ; Kenny, 1987) was distributed through gay and lesbian and parent support organizations. Following Bowlby’s (1969) attachment theory, successful life adjustment was viewed as contingent upon children perceiving parents as a secure base. Most of the respondents had disclosed their sexual orientation to parents by their mid-twenties. Disclosure was found to relate to a secure attachment relationship with parents. Corroborating prior research findings that relationships improve over time, security of attachment was related to the amount of time elapsed since disclosure. Additionally, individuals securely attached to their parents were less likely to exhibit negative cognitions.

Homosexuals often first disclose to someone other than a family member, while family disclosure typically occurs to siblings before parents and mothers before fathers (Savin-Williams, 1998). One individual (Wittke, 1992) came out to siblings, as a way of “testing the water,” several years before telling his mother. Disclosure resulted in relationship tensions in the family followed by his reentry
into “the closet.” The author reported telling his sister what he believed she wanted to hear—that he had lost interest in homosexuality—with the intention to make her happy. He claimed that everything went well with family relationships once he completed his disclosure to his sister even though, subsequently, the topic was never discussed with her again. The same theme was evident in his relief when, following disclosure, people did not overtly reject him. His mother coped better than other family members with a later disclosure, and attributed this to wisdom acquired from aging. Perception, timing, and expectation can affect disclosure outcomes.

The only qualitative study on family relationships found in the literature involved 32 gays and lesbians and 27 parents who were not from the same families (Ben-Ari, 1995). In that study, relationships within families after coming out were investigated. The author described an atmosphere of secrecy during the predisclosure phase when coming to terms with one’s sexual identity conflicted with fear of discovery by others. Relationships were characterized by distance and alienation. Eventual disclosure showed that motives which facilitated disclosure also appeared to facilitate sharing and closeness in these relationships (Ben-Ari, 1995).

Parents sometimes report having suspicions about their child’s sexual orientation during the same time the child is contemplating whether to come out to them (Ben-Ari, 1995). Fear permeates both children’s thoughts of disclosure and parents’ suspicions about homosexuality in their child; not surprisingly, parents tend to mirror the secrecy of the child. Most parents do not look forward
to the disclosure either. As one mother stated, "I started to mourn long before he 'came out' to me" (Ben-Ari, 1995, p. 312). However, motivations for coming out to parents often encourage intimacy in family relationships. For example, when parents perceive the disclosure as an intimate communication, they appear better able to adjust to learning their child is homosexual.

One mother's experience of coming to terms with her son's homosexuality revealed a process of grief involving different stages (Dew, 1994). At the point of disclosure her feeling was initially one of shock, followed by denial, self-blame, a sense of loss that coincided with acceptance, and eventual stabilization. Robinson, Walter, and Skeen (1989) similarly found that, following discovery of their child's sexual orientation, parents of homosexual children typically progressed through a five-stage grief process like the one described by Kübler-Ross (1969). They surveyed 402 parents from support organizations for family and friends of gay and lesbian individuals. Nearly all parents reported initial negative reactions upon learning of their child's sexual orientation. Most parents reported beliefs that their child's homosexual orientation was genetic, a common outcome of participation in parent support groups. While parents expressed fear about the threat of AIDS to their homosexual child, they were generally accepting of the child. Beliefs that homosexual orientation is biologically based tend to decrease negative attitudes towards homosexuals (Oldham & Kasser, 1999).

It appears that parents benefit from affiliation with support organizations. In case studies presented by Myers (1982), all parents had a difficult time adjusting to learning their son was homosexual. Parents often had fears about
their son's sexuality and subsequently tended to avoid any discussion of it. Reactions of parents usually included grieving over lost expectations they held for their sons, anger and rejection, and feelings of failure related to their parental role. However, some parents were better able to come to terms with issues of sexual orientation through therapeutic support. Involvement in PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) support groups has also enabled many parents to better cope with a child's homosexuality. Myers (1982) pointed out that parents can have a strong influence on whether their sons come out to them by the attitudes displayed and words spoken in the home.

A study by Holtzen and Agresti (1990) assessed 55 parents on attitudes toward homosexuality and response to their child's disclosure. Attitudes assessed were homophobia, sex-roles, and self-esteem. Characteristics associated with homophobic attitudes among parents were traditional sex-role stereotypes, lower self-esteem, and less time since discovering their child was homosexual. No age differences existed between homophobic and nonhomophobic parents. There were also no differences in amount of contact between the parent and child.

Given that middle class families are more likely to become involved in support groups, such families tend to be overrepresented in homosexuality research. This anomaly makes generalization of findings even more difficult. While middle class families reflect higher education, relatively more liberal views, and financial affluence, families belonging to lower social classes would likely adhere to more traditional social norms.
Issues and dynamics of families in this study are distinctive because of their religious and cultural background. Compared to many other types of family crisis, homosexuality faces strong religious opposition. As a highly emotionally charged family dilemma, a preference may prevail in the Mormon population to avoid rather than address homosexuality. Given these restrictions on communication, not only is there absence of public information about such families, but even private understandings may be more difficult.

It is possible that qualities previously identified in research on family relationships may also be common to this study. For example, traits typically measured in positive family relationships are empathy and unconditionality (Barrett-Lennard, 1986); perceived family health (Hovestadt, Anderson, Piercy, Cochran, & Fine, 1985); family functioning (Lee et al., 1997); parental acceptance/rejection (Rohner, 1984); and parent/child intimacy (Walker & Thompson, 1983). To what extent these traits facilitate disclosure by homosexual children in Mormon and other religiously affiliated families remains unknown.

Phillips (1993) explored religious reconciliation among Mormon male homosexuals. While his interviews of 71 homosexual males did not focus on family relationships, he noted the challenge an individual faces when coming out to families in the Mormon religious culture. Of specific relevance, he found that most Mormon male homosexuals did not tell parents of their sexual orientation.
The Mormon religion places strong emphasis on nuclear family ties which are believed to extend beyond death for faithful Church members. Thus, having a homosexual child can be especially devastating to Mormon parents who believe their families will be eternally affected and their homosexual child will forfeit rewards in the afterlife. Furthermore, the Mormon value of proper teaching of children by parents in the home places strong feelings of responsibility for child outcomes on many parents (Miller, 1993). Such religious beliefs would be expected to place additional strain upon relationships between homosexuals and their family members.

Emphasis on the difficulty of coming out in a Mormon family can also be found in personal accounts from male homosexuals in the community gathered through clinical interviews by the researcher of the present study. A common regret of males who decided to come out to parents was the perceived lack of interest and response from parents. The hope these individuals had in disclosing was that honesty in communication with parents would be reciprocated. Desired communication about their sexual orientation concerns, as well as social and emotional support, were often answered with increased distance in family relationships. As suggested earlier, Mormon families might be expected to show greater resistance to acknowledging and discussing homosexual issues because of perceived religious condemnation.

The researcher's experience from clinical interviews with homosexual clients in the Mormon community revealed disclosure patterns. Often, those who had not come out to parents were afraid to do so. The most common reason
was fear of parents’ reactions. Another obstacle to disclosure for these individuals was guilt about adding to parents’ emotional distress or wanting to protect their parents from painful emotions. Among those who did disclose to parents, evidence supported other findings of initial family relationship tension. However, following disclosure, it is perhaps more common among Mormon families for relationships to remain locked in an emotional stalemate.

A Mormon father’s story about his homosexual son who died of AIDS illustrates barriers that can prevent reconciliation in these relationships (Schow, 1995). Following disclosure of his sexual orientation to his parents, this son felt alienated from the family because he perceived their inability to accept him. A quote from the son’s journal captures this grief: “I feel sad about my inability to communicate, or their inability to understand, what it really means to be gay.... I am beginning to despair that they will [n]ever understand” (Schow, 1995, p. 61). The father described a period of turmoil for him and his wife in coming to terms with their son’s homosexuality: “The distances that separated us during those four years were in some ways a metaphor for the distance in our relationship...not surprisingly since our resistance was unmistakable” (p. 77). This example points out how parents can often experience psychological conflicts parallel to their child’s in coming to terms with his/her homosexual orientation.

Additional understanding of relationship dynamics among homosexual children and parents comes from clinical cases of parents who seek therapy. Among the researcher’s clinical sample, it was almost universally true of Mormon parents initially to want their homosexual child to adopt a heterosexual
orientation. Parents wanted to know how they could help their child give up the condemned gay lifestyle and be reconciled in the Church. Mormon parents' inner struggles to confront these realities were apparent. They typically experienced a great deal of anxiety over perceived responsibility for their homosexual child's spiritual rewards in the afterlife. Challenges exist for both children and parents who live in the context of these strong religious beliefs.

Summary

The preceding discussion describes challenges that exist for many families with homosexual sons where homophobic attitudes and stigmatization are prevalent. Mormon and other conservative religious families likely face even more sensitive relationship issues (Williamson, 1998). Most of the studies cited do not relate specifically to Mormon families because data are lacking from this population. They do, however, describe relationship dynamics of disclosure in families generally.

Family environments in the Mormon community can be expected to involve greater stress largely because of religious mandates against homosexuality. Based on high religiosity and traditional attitudes in Mormon families, and existing data from Mormon homosexuals (Phillips, 1993), it appears that Mormon homosexuals may be especially hesitant to disclose their sexual orientation to parents. Cultural beliefs create the setting for many pressures impinging on the Mormon family. Growing up homosexual in families and societies that condemn alternative sexual orientation places enormous pressure
on individuals to hide their sexual identity. Maintaining secrecy in family relationships certainly interferes with the process of forming a stable identity.

Homosexual sons and daughters appear to negotiate the risk of coming out as a trade-off between fear of rejection and the need for support. When homosexuals come out to their parents and feel supported, they are better able to accept themselves and their sexual identities. It also appears that when attitudes incorporate an etiological orientation that homosexual attractions are not chosen, parents are better able to provide the needed acceptance and support to their homosexual child.

As with children, parents need support in coming to terms with the often difficult process of accepting their child's homosexuality. Facing this reality can represent a significant loss to Mormon and other parents in terms of progeny, religious rewards, and community status. While initial tensions usually occur in parent-child relations, communication between parents and homosexual children shows the potential to create greater intimacy following disclosure than existed previously.

It is important to note that respondents in the studies reviewed were not randomly chosen. This is a common difficulty in conducting research on homosexuality. Because of the stigma associated with adoption of a public identity, researchers must rely upon participation of homosexuals who are willing to volunteer. Other biases may also arise from this nonrandom sample selection. Most homosexuals studied are recruited through gay organizations and bars. Demographic descriptions indicate that respondents generally come from a
White, educated, middle-class population. Parents participating in research are often affiliated with an organized parent support group, and thus, have received education and emotional support.

Because needed social support is provided through close emotional relationships, a critical challenge facing male homosexuals in most Mormon families is access to the necessary family support that enhances family and individual developmental outcomes, including perceived well-being and identity formation. Homosexual orientation of a child appears to perpetuate lack of communication, parent anguish, and distance and alienation in family relationships. Nevertheless, an optimistic outlook is warranted. Evidence points to the likelihood of increased family intimacy and improved relationships when families can overcome the barriers that interfere with honest communication. Thus, greater tensions and distance might be expected in family relationships where attitudes are more traditional and where disclosure has been more recent, compared to increased intimacy in those families that hold less traditional attitudes and where there has been more time for families to adjust to the knowledge of a child’s homosexual orientation.

An additional risk factor pertains to homosexual individuals in many Mormon or other strongly religious families. Mormon families are likely to reflect attitudes about homosexuality that perpetuate stigma, blame, fear of disclosure, identity confusion, perceptions of disapproval, and internalized homophobia. Even when these families prioritize supportive relationships, acceptance of the child’s sexual orientation within the parameters of Mormon religious belief is
difficult to reconcile.

No studies have been conducted that focus specifically on understanding how male homosexuals in Mormon families perceive their family relationships. Qualitative interview studies also are rare, and in no studies reviewed were interviews conducted with both homosexual sons and siblings or parents in the same families. This study helps to fill in these gaps. Increased understanding about family relationships of Mormon male homosexuals potentially helps individuals in the Mormon community, as well as homosexuals from the broader population, better cope with issues of sexual orientation and sexual identity. Additionally, it may help families strengthen relationships through enhancing cohesiveness and support.

Information about homosexual development in devout Mormon homes will make a unique contribution to the field because it derives from a relatively homogeneous population. Findings from prior studies on the role of family relationships in the development of sexual orientation have been contradictory (Bell et al., 1981; Bieber & Bieber, 1979; Van den Aardweg, 1984). Two reasons for this are that many homosexual individuals remain private regarding their sexual orientation and those who have been more open often belong to biased samples, for example, activists, clinical samples, transsexuals, and homosexuals embedded in “heterosexual” populations (Fisher, 1989). In most Mormon families there exists a high degree of similarity due to the influence of the religious teachings. Because of religious sanctions, Mormon homosexuals are less inclined to pursue openly gay lifestyles, creating a homosexual sample
which is often separate from the larger gay community.

In summary, this research will use qualitative interviews with Mormon male homosexuals and other family members to characterize perceived family relationships. This will be done by addressing three primary questions: (1) In what ways are family relationships perceived as facilitating or interfering with the decision to disclose sexual orientation? (2) How does coming out affect subsequent family relationships? (3) How can understanding and intimacy be enhanced between Mormon homosexuals and their families to increase satisfaction in those relationships?
Qualitative methods were used to address the three research questions of this study. A qualitative approach was most appropriate because sensitive questions in the realm of human sexuality were explored for which previous findings are incomplete. According to Lancy (1993), “The qualitative paradigm is ideal for phenomena that are patently complex and about which little is known with certainty” (p. 9). Further, the richness of “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) and “concept density” (Strauss & Corbin, 1994) for characterizing human behavior is generally lost by a purely quantitative approach. “Qualitative research provides valuable descriptions of the social and cultural contexts of sexual experience and the meaning of those experiences for individuals” (Di Mauro, 1995, p. 38).

Lincoln and Guba (1994) have argued in favor of qualitative research largely because it focuses on contextual information, insights from study informants, and specific relevance of findings. These are essential elements for questions in this study. An understanding of personal experience can only be known through the meaning attributed to it by “insiders.” This is consistent with a symbolic interactionist theoretical framework, in which reality is based on the subjective interpretation of individual “actors” in the context of their social groups (Blumer, 1966; Cooley, 1956; Mead, 1956). Conducting qualitative interviews
with homosexual men and their family members was the most sensitive way of addressing the research questions about how family relationships influence, and are affected by, disclosure of sexual orientation.

The present study also incorporated triangulation of methods and data, a procedure considered essential by experts in qualitative methods (Denzin, 1989; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Lancy, 1993). First, the combination of grounded theory and ethnography, two "distinct, yet complementary" methods, elicit information about social processes and the meaning of social experiences (Morse, 1994). Grounded theory strives to uncover concepts and relationships between concepts; ethnography involves cultural descriptions (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). This study incorporates unstructured and semi-structured interviewing, field notes, and a journal consisting of personal reactions and observations of the researcher. Triangulation was also accomplished through integration of multiple sources, detailed responses, and having data verified by selected respondents following interview transcription.

Collateral data from family members add a dimension to the study that has not been common in previous research, and gives voice to perspectives that are "significantly relevant to the emerging theory" (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p. 280). Personal clinical experience of the researcher working with Mormon homosexuals generated a link to study participants. This fact, in combination with homogeneity, and strong emphasis placed on family, made the Mormon community ideal for this study. Family background information gathered was degree of religious activity and socioeconomic variables of income, education,
family size, and place of residence. This demographic information was collected in a short questionnaire (Appendix A).

Population and Sample

The population studied was Mormon male homosexuals living in the Wasatch region of Northern Utah and Southern Idaho, and their family members. Two individuals actually grew up in states outside of Utah but were residing in Utah at the time they were interviewed. Because homosexuals make up a hidden population, a convenience sample was obtained as described under “Recruitment Procedures.”

Creswell (1998) recommends between 20 and 30 qualitative interview respondents to achieve sufficient detail in theory construction. Participants were (a) primary informants: Mormon male homosexuals who have come out to at least one family member ($n = 15$), (b) secondary informants: corresponding family members whom they identified ($n = 15$), and (c) primary informants who are Mormon male homosexuals not yet having disclosed their sexual orientation to their families ($n = 10$). Because the study was based on Mormon adult males who were self-identified as homosexual or gay, participants were relied on directly to identify their sexual orientation and religious affiliation.

While interviews with 25 primary respondents were planned (15 Mormon male homosexuals who had disclosed to family, 10 Mormon male homosexuals who had not disclosed to family), the actual number of interviews completed was 30 (18 disclosed and 12 nondisclosed). During the interview procedure two
individuals in the nondisclosed group were found to have come from families who were not active in the Church and, therefore, did not qualify for the study. Among the disclosed group, there were two individuals recruited for pilot interviews without family member participation. These interviews were included in study results. Corresponding family members from 16 families, primarily parents, were interviewed. In two cases, both parents were interviewed separately. In sum, the interview sample included a total of 48 interviews, of which, 46 were included in the analysis. Those included consist of 18 disclosed Mormon male homosexuals, family members from 16 families (13 mothers, 8 fathers, and three sisters), and 10 nondisclosed Mormon male homosexuals.

Table 1 shows demographic characteristics of the sample. Homosexual participants were all White males. Ages ranged from 18 to 47 in the disclosed group and 19 to 43 in the nondisclosed group, with a nearly even spread (Mean = 30, Median = 30, Modes = 23, 38 [3]). Two male homosexuals were currently married and two were divorced. Thirty-six percent grew up in suburbs, 43% in towns, and 21% in rural areas in families ranging in size from 4 to 11 (mean = 7, median = 6, mode = 6). Family annual income was between $36,000 and $75,000 for 60% of the sample (less than $36,000 = 36%; greater than $75,000 = 14%). Current income level was $55,000 or less for 93% of the sample and 71% had incomes below $36,000. All had finished high school except one individual currently in his senior year, and 90% had attended some college, graduated from college, or completed an advanced degree. Fathers' level of education was somewhat higher than mothers' based on post high school
### Table 1

**Sample Demographics**

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education (fathers = 75%; mothers = 72%), and advanced degrees (fathers = 25%; mothers = 3.6%). Compared to mothers' and fathers' religious activity status while growing up (mothers = 100% moderately active to active; fathers = 79% moderately active to active), only 29% of male homosexual respondents who were active in the LDS Church growing up still reported being moderately active or active (71% = somewhat active or inactive).

Recruitment Procedures

Recruitment for the study was primarily based on a snowball referral procedure as a way to increase variability in the sample (Berg, 1995). In most cases, access to interviewing family members relied on referrals from male homosexual informants. Primary informants, those who had disclosed to someone in their family, were asked to approach a family member, preferably parents, to be interviewed. Two male informants were uncomfortable asking parents to participate and approached sisters instead. To confirm their participation, all study volunteers were contacted by the researcher within the week they were identified.
Participants were initially recruited through four support groups, three for male homosexuals, and one for families, friends, and Church leaders. Because the population in Northern Utah is largely comprised of Mormons, support groups for homosexuals also had a high percentage of Mormon males. Evergreen, the University Lesbian and Gay Alliance, Disciples, and LDS Friends and Family were approached to recruit the desired sample. Of the 28 Mormon male homosexuals recruited, 8 were located through these support groups. The remainder were found through snowball referral and word of mouth. In two cases, parents were recruited prior to the homosexual son.

Initial contact with support groups was for the purpose of requesting permission to recruit and presenting background for the study. An informational sketch of the study was distributed to potential participants with an explanation of the anticipated time commitment involved (Appendix B). While the importance of the study was emphasized, no pressure was placed on individuals to participate in the study.

The decision to participate in the study was not an easy one for many, and family members were particularly hesitant. Given the sensitive nature of this study and the reservations felt, the response was remarkable in that all families who were originally approached eventually agreed to be interviewed. In several cases, considerable time was involved in making the decision. In three families, parents who initially decided not to participate later changed their minds. One parent declined after having agreed to be interviewed, but a sister agreed to participate in her place. Of parents asked, two mothers and four fathers refused
participation, including only one family refusal. Questions about the study from prospective informants were addressed prior to participation.

Protection of Human Subjects

Procedures were followed to protect human subjects while also preserving the quality of the data. Prior to participation in the study, subjects were informed of the procedures to be followed in the research. All subjects were identified by code only. Human subjects agreement contracts were established verbally and by using codes instead of names to protect participants from inadvertent identification (Appendix C). Procedures for conducting this research were approved by the Institutional Review Board at Utah State University. Verbal consent was also obtained prior to taping (Appendix D). Interview tapes were transcribed verbatim by the researcher and an assistant. Within 6 months of transcription, these tapes, identified by code only, were destroyed in order to protect subjects against voice identification. All records have been stored in a locked file.

Measurement

This study relied on verbal accounts to characterize family experiences. Open-ended interviewing is the most effective approach for describing complex behavior without imposing limitations on the inquiry (Fontana & Frey, 1994). Interviewing captures detail from the informant's point of view. It is "a paramount part of sociology because interviewing is interaction and sociology is the study of
interaction" (Fontana & Frey, 1994, p. 361). This research followed Morse's (1994) suggestion to allow enough interviewing to begin with a broad structure, followed by more specific (semi-structured) questions. Doing so reduces interviewer interference, while still focusing on particular events, and specifying processes and people (Whyte, 1984).

Respondents were encouraged to express issues and experiences they perceived to be most relevant to their family relationships and the coming out process. Emerging themes were identified that were common among informant's family experiences. "Themes," referred to here, are attributes of relationships, perceptions, emotions, and behaviors. An inherent strength of qualitative inquiry is ongoing data analysis that can lead to refinement of interview questions.

"Ethnography is engaged in the continual process of analyzing and verifying data while collecting it" (Di Mauro, 1995, p. 38). Thus, follow-up questions were developed during the course of individual interviews and the research process to add depth to information collected about family experiences. The bulk of the interview data for this study was collected in a single interview. Still, there were many cases that required follow-up contact for filling in details or making clarifications. Questions focused on interpersonal relationships between male homosexuals and family members over time, following the philosophy that development cannot be completely understood without a specific focus on individual process and change (Gottlieb, 1992).

Priority was placed upon an open format of interviewing in that participants were encouraged to talk about issues they perceived as most significant,
avoiding elicitation of predetermined responses. Nevertheless, probes were relied upon when needed (Appendix E). The primary questions asked of homosexuals and family members were: “What can you tell me about your experience coming out to your family?” and “What can you tell me about your experience when [Son] disclosed his sexual orientation?”

Some individuals responded openly and easily to these questions. Others relied more heavily on probes. Probes were used to obtain clarification of the responses initially provided, as well as to obtain new information that deepened understanding of family relationship qualities relating to those time periods prior to, during, and following the disclosure event. Probes centered on: (1) what qualities define relationships in the family; (2) the process of sexual orientation disclosure to family; (3) family traits believed to facilitate or inhibit disclosure; (4) desired, expected, and actual family response; and (5) family reconciliation of sexual orientation with religious beliefs.

Data Collection

Interview sessions with each participant were scheduled as close as possible to the time of recruitment. Interviews were conducted in participants' homes or at a location they chose for their comfort and convenience. The data gathering process was divided into two phases: initial unstructured questions; and semi-structured questions that identified greater detail and embellished specific themes arising from initial interview data. Two participants were allowed the option to write their responses to interview questions as narratives because it
was more convenient or comfortable for them to communicate through writing than to respond verbally.

Interviews were tape recorded for all subjects who were interviewed face to face in order to establish and maintain accuracy of the data collected. Length of interviews ranged from one hour to two and one half hours for initial interviews, and 30 minutes or less for follow-up questions. Follow-up questions were often addressed by telephone or online via electronic mail. In addition to audiotaped interviews, reliability of data was enhanced through preservation of raw data in the form of field notes and a field journal (Kirk & Miller, 1986). Selected participants were also asked to read selected sections of transcripts and interview summaries for purposes of enhancing validity of the data (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). A pilot study relied on responses from seven individuals (one nondisclosed and three disclosed Mormon male homosexuals, and parents from one family) as a means of identifying and resolving problems in construction of the interview (Miller, 1986).

Analysis

Procedures for analyzing the qualitative data followed a design of content analysis recommended by experts in the field of qualitative research (Huberman & Miles, 1994; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Units of data were examined while asking questions of what, when, where, who, how, and why (Strauss & Corbin, 1990)? The objective in qualitative analysis is to identify responses that are common among interviews and to uncover themes salient to
the personal perceptions of the participants. This approach facilitated the discovery of relationships in the data within the context of personal meaning.

Qualitative data from this study were most clearly represented in categorical format, with cells filled by text, rather than numbers (Huberman & Miles, 1994). Matrix analyses, both domain and taxonomic, allowed for the emergence of predominant themes from interview data (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Spradley, 1979). This involved sorting, analyzing, and cross-referencing interview responses by units (sentences and paragraphs) within and between respondents, in a hierarchical pattern for the purpose of linking related information. Domain analyses emphasize semantic relationships by category (type, function, temporality, etc.) whereas taxonomies order and focus semantic relationships within these domains from general to specific.

This procedure, the grouping of similar phenomena present in the data, is referred to by Strauss and Corbin (1990) as open coding. More specific categorization based on questions the researcher wishes to explore, such as those associated with context, action/interaction, and consequences, is differentiated as axial coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Theory construction in this study was contingent upon integration of emerging themes from data categories. Although formulation of theory is largely inductive within a qualitative paradigm, maintaining a linkage of the data to theoretical concepts is viewed as an essential analytic component. The grounded theory approach relies upon comparison of research insights with the raw data itself (actual responses), as well as the existing knowledge base (Strauss & Corbin, 1994).
Because computerized data management programs are particularly effective for handling large amounts of raw data (Richards & Richards, 1994; Weitzman & Miles, 1995), QSR NUD*IST (Qualitative solutions and research, 1995) was used. This program allowed for the structuring of large amounts of data by coding units of analysis (words, sentences, or paragraphs) into categories, or "nodes," both vertically and horizontally. Vertical organization reflects the hierarchical categories containing unique units of data, while horizontal organization reflects cross-referencing of the same units between categories. Following transcription of interviews, responses were coded using this qualitative data analysis software for marking text, assigning codes and comments, and categorizing with other identically coded text. Sentences, as units of analysis, guide development of these categories by revealing themes embedded in participant responses. Using thematic and hierarchical strategies for ongoing data analysis facilitates the creation of additional categories and subcategories.

As coding proceeded, categories were expanded in number and specificity. Some of the data that were originally grouped together was later separated into more than one category, resulting in subcategories. Eventually, six primary text categories were created, with a total of 62 subcategories, comprised of 41 secondary level and 21 tertiary level subcategories (see Table 2). Categories of data, in combination with field notes, provided the substance for emerging themes in the final story of research participants. Additionally, interview data and themes were discussed with members of the research
Table 2

Data Categories Developed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Node</th>
<th>Data category/Subcategory</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>History:</td>
<td>Background developmental variables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1 2)</td>
<td>History/Personality:</td>
<td>Characteristics of personality growing up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1 3)</td>
<td>History/Relationships:</td>
<td>Relationship history</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1 3 1)</td>
<td>History/Relationships/Family:</td>
<td>Quality of family relationships growing up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1 3 2)</td>
<td>History/Relationships/Peers:</td>
<td>Quality of peer relationships growing up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1 4)</td>
<td>History/Sex:</td>
<td>Events related to sexual development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1 5)</td>
<td>History/Self-construction:</td>
<td>Thoughts and feelings about self and identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>Disclosure:</td>
<td>Events and circumstances related to the decision to come out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2 1)</td>
<td>Disclosure/Process:</td>
<td>Process of coming out to family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2 1 1)</td>
<td>Disclosure/Process/Facilitation:</td>
<td>Events and/or qualities facilitating disclosure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2 1 2)</td>
<td>Disclosure/Process/Inhibition:</td>
<td>Events and/or qualities that inhibit disclosure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2 1 3)</td>
<td>Disclosure/Process/Outcomes:</td>
<td>Changes brought about through disclosure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2 2)</td>
<td>Disclosure/Response:</td>
<td>Family response to disclosure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2 2 1)</td>
<td>Disclosure/Response/Expected:</td>
<td>Expected family response to disclosure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2 2 2)</td>
<td>Disclosure/Response/Desired:</td>
<td>Desired family response to disclosure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2 2 3)</td>
<td>Disclosure/Response/Actual:</td>
<td>Actual family response to disclosure</td>
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<td>(3)</td>
<td>Relationships:</td>
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<td>(3 1)</td>
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<td>Quality of family relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3 1 1)</td>
<td>Relationships/Family/Communication:</td>
<td>Quality of family communication</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Relationships/Family/Support:</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3 1 3)</td>
<td>Relationships/Family/Tension:</td>
<td>Tension or discomfort in family relating</td>
</tr>
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<td>(3 1 4)</td>
<td>Relationships/Family/Hopes:</td>
<td>Hopes for family relationships</td>
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<tr>
<td>(3 2)</td>
<td>Relationships/Others:</td>
<td>Quality of relationships with others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3 3)</td>
<td>Relationships/Son:</td>
<td>Quality of relationship with self</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

(table continues)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Node</th>
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<th>Definition</th>
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<td>Religion:</td>
<td>Religious influences on perceptions</td>
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<td>Religion/Influences:</td>
<td>Influences of religious beliefs on self-construction</td>
</tr>
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<td>Religious influences on son</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Religion/Influences/Family:</td>
<td>Religious influences on family members</td>
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<td>(4 2)</td>
<td>Religion/Reconciliation:</td>
<td>Reconciliation of religious beliefs with sexual orientation</td>
</tr>
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<td>Religion/Reconciliation/Son:</td>
<td>Son's reconciliation of religious beliefs with sexual orientation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4 2 2)</td>
<td>Religion/Reconciliation/Family:</td>
<td>Family's reconciliation of religious beliefs with son's sexual orientation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4 3)</td>
<td>Religion/Support needs:</td>
<td>Support needed from Church with homosexual issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4 3 1)</td>
<td>Religion/Support needs/Son:</td>
<td>Son's support needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4 3 2)</td>
<td>Religion/Support needs/Family:</td>
<td>Family's support needs</td>
</tr>
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<td>Attitudes:</td>
<td>Attitudes about homosexuality and homosexuals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5 1)</td>
<td>Attitudes/Homosexuality:</td>
<td>Perceived attitudes about homosexuals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5 1 1)</td>
<td>Attitudes/Homosexuality/Society:</td>
<td>Perceived societal attitudes about homosexuals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5 1 2)</td>
<td>Attitudes/Homosexuality/Family:</td>
<td>Perceived family attitudes about homosexuals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5 1 3)</td>
<td>Attitudes/Homosexuality/Church:</td>
<td>Perceived Church attitudes and/or polices towards homosexuals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5 2)</td>
<td>Attitudes/Definition:</td>
<td>Attitudes about the definition of “gay” vs “homosexual”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(6)</td>
<td>Intervention:</td>
<td>Intervention by professionals or other sources to provide support or influence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(6 1)</td>
<td>Intervention/Son:</td>
<td>Intervention for the son</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(6 2)</td>
<td>Intervention/Family:</td>
<td>Intervention for family members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(6 3)</td>
<td>Intervention/Initiation:</td>
<td>Who initiated intervention</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

committee and colleagues on an as-needed basis (Wolcott, 1990).
Time Frame

The total time period required to complete this study was approximately 24 months, January 1999 to January 2001. The project was subdivided into five phases: recruiting, interviewing, transcribing, analyzing, writing. Recruiting of subjects for interviewing initially required one month and then became overlapping with subsequent phases. Travel was required to reach a larger pool of subjects located in more populated areas. Initial interviews lasted between 90 and 150 minutes. Follow-up interviews were considerably shorter in duration. To a large extent, interviews, transcription, and analysis proceeded concurrently.
CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Respondents who provided data for this study were Mormon male homosexuals who had come out to at least one immediate family member, corresponding family members (usually one or both parents), and Mormon male homosexuals who had not made family disclosures. Personal and family characteristics are summarized in table form based on responses provided by participants (see Table 1). Because this research relied on reports from both disclosed and nondisclosed males who varied in their religious activity, some of whom considered themselves to be “gay” and some who did not, homosexual participants are identified by disclosure status, Church activity, and sexual identity. Homosexual participants are identified by three letter acronyms following quotes as Disclosed (D) or Nondisclosed (N); as religiously active (A) or not (N); and self-identified as Gay or not (N). Thus, a quote followed by (DAG) means that the respondent (or, in the case of family members quotes, the homosexual son) was Disclosed, Active, and Gay.

Results are reported in reference to the research questions outlined in this study. Three primary questions were explored: (1) In what ways are family relationships perceived as facilitating or interfering with the decision to disclose sexual orientation? (2) How does coming out affect subsequent family relationships? (3) How can understanding and intimacy be enhanced between Mormon homosexuals and their families to increase satisfaction in those
relationships? Corresponding sections: Family Disclosure Process; Disclosure Outcomes in the Family; and Needed and Desired Support summarize homosexual respondents’ and family members’ perspectives on the research questions.

Presentation of results in these three sections describes the process of family disclosure for 18 disclosed Mormon male homosexuals and their families, and 10 Mormon male homosexuals who had not yet come out to family members. A delicate balance exists in trying to accurately represent participants’ views while protecting their identities. Prior to conducting interviews, an agreement was made not to share information between homosexual male respondents and their family members. Therefore, it was not possible to juxtapose a son’s response with those of his parents or siblings. In cases where identities would be threatened by including participants’ personal information, it was decided to err on the side of protection rather than reporting details. An attempt has been made to include all significant findings in the discussion of results.

Family Disclosure Process

While growing up, all Mormon male homosexuals in this study lived a double life, passing as heterosexual members of the community. By displaying their “public face” they fulfilled expectations placed upon them by their religious affiliation. Privately, however, they struggled with the conflict of having unacceptable, yet very real, attractions to individuals of their same sex.
Recognition of homosexual attractions occurred at an early age for most, typically emerging between ages 5 and 11. Awareness associated with younger ages in this range was described by respondents as pronounced curiosity and fascination with individuals of their same sex, and perceptions of being different. A mother recalled that her son “was different [from] all the other boys, from the time he was 2 years old.” Social contexts of family, society, and church all reinforced Mormon male homosexuals’ perceptions of being different. A study respondent who had disclosed described how he formed this perception:

You’d hear it on the TV and you’d hear it in the news. And I heard all these terrible things.... I remember very clearly hearing a talk from one of the twelve apostles about homosexuality and how appalling that word was to me. And it made me physically ill. I remember hearing that talk and it making me physically ill to think I was that. (DAG)

Condemning messages from one’s own family particularly shaped negative self-perceptions and eliminated what is likely the most significant potential resource of support. This was expressed by a male who had not disclosed to family members at the time of the interview:

Sometimes my mother would say things about gay people, call them queer or fags, or talk about how vile and perverted they were. She has very strong sentiments about homosexuals. She was raised that they were somehow a perversion of nature. And so, for a long time, I tried very hard to deny that I was homosexual.... Part of the reason I think that I never actually would admit that I might have homosexual feelings is because I was always afraid that there was something wrong with it. The hardest part about growing up homosexual would be hiding it or pretending to be something else. (NNG)

In addition to negative attitudes towards homosexual persons prevalent in society, religious attitudes towards homosexuality in the Mormon community placed strong pressures on Mormon male homosexuals to conform to normative
heterosexual behavior, contributing to the private shame that, in addition to self-condemnation already present, accompanied the secret of their homosexual attractions. An example provided by a disclosed, active respondent illustrates the shaming process many experienced. During his adolescent years, he became increasingly aware that he did not fit social norms. He said:

I internalized a great deal of shame, an incredible amount of guilt.... I was going out on double dates and being more attracted to, more interested in, the other guy that was there, than the girls that we had taken. And I was just so confused. I felt very, very strange, and that added to the dark shame because it's like, "there must be something wrong with me." (DAN)

Religious teachings that condemn homosexuality also induced guilt based on perceptions of falling short of God's expectations. Both feelings, shame and guilt, seemed to play a central role in participants' decisions to keep their sexual orientation secret, and in the low sense of worth they commonly felt growing up. When asked directly whether he experienced feelings of guilt or shame, a disclosed participant who was no longer actively involved in the Mormon religion replied:

I know from what [family members] have been taught, and what I've been taught, it is something shameful.... [So], even though their reactions might not be bad, I know how they actually probably do feel about it. (DNG)

His statement revealed expectations of a negative reaction from family members, even if they do not verbalize their feelings. It was highly confusing for homosexual respondents, particularly during these early years, to understand themselves. Over the course of development, through childhood and adolescence, initial feelings of confusion and concern turned to a substantial amount of emotional turmoil for most participants. Consequently, those who
were interviewed generally described resistance, during their adolescent years, to any thoughts or feelings that they might be homosexual.

For some isolated incidents of sexual experimentation occurred, but this period was characterized more by efforts to block attractions from awareness and conscientious striving to become worthy for God to change them into heterosexuals. In either case, the direction was away from recognition or acceptance of the homosexual feelings. This state of conflict often continued for some time. A description of how Mormon homosexual participants struggled internally while avoiding the reality of their sexual attractions during adolescence was provided by a disclosed gay participant:

When I was a senior in high school, there were about eight times that I was involved...with men...in casual sexual circumstances. And I always thought that was just a phase I was going through. I was still planning on graduating and going on a mission, and coming back and getting married. (DNG)

Feeling abnormal, confused, and ashamed, homosexual boys in active Mormon families regarded their own sexual feelings as repulsive and sinful. It is not surprising that they experienced enormous fear of others finding them out. Even as young boys, respondents nearly always realized that revealing this information placed them in a risky situation. This was explained by a male homosexual who had not disclosed to family. In his words, “even though I hadn’t consciously thought about all the implications of it, I thought about it enough to know that I needed to keep it to myself.” (NAN)

Traits that influenced disclosure can best be understood by differentiating between formal and informal family disclosures. In this study, a formal disclosure
was defined as one where the male homosexual both planned and initiated
dialogue with a family member. By comparison, informal disclosures were
initiated by either the homosexual or by a family member, but were unplanned.
In other words, the disclosure arose either situationally during a conversation, or
through a confrontation by a family member. Each of these disclosure types can
be further differentiated by whether or not the disclosure was perceived to be
critical or noncritical at the time when it occurred.

In reference to 17 parent disclosures, half, or nine, were formal, time-
critical disclosures (FCD). Of those nine, four were faced with the pressure of an
immediate conflict related to marriage, mission commitments, or Church
disciplinary action, all significant events in the Mormon religion. Four other
individuals were experiencing a suicidal crisis. The remaining disclosure was an
emotional crisis in which it was necessary to reveal the information for the parent
to understand the situation. Just under half, or eight, of the disclosures were
represented as informal and time-critical (ICD). In six instances, the disclosure
was initiated by a family member who either suspected or discovered the son’s
sexual orientation. Two additional cases in this category were families where
members initiated disclosure but in the context of a suicide attempt. No
disclosures in this study could be classified as formal but not time-critical (FND).
There were also no homosexual respondents who described coming out to
parents informally and where the timing was not critical (IND). In terms of sibling
disclosures, the distribution was somewhat different (5 FCD; 10 FND; 1 ICD; 1
IND). One male had not disclosed to any siblings.
Most Mormon homosexuals perceived their parents and family members as holding the same condemnation for them they experienced in society and church for much of their lives. Given emotional constraints of this magnitude, the private information a homosexual respondent had about his sexual orientation nearly always remained hidden from family throughout adolescence. He kept his secret with no intention of family members or others ever finding out. During this time period, most family members were not directly conscious their son or brother was coping with homosexual feelings. Generally, it was later, looking back, that this became more clear to them. A mother commented that she could recognize this “as I look back on it now. I didn’t realize then. Maybe I was blinded to the signs. I just hadn’t come in contact with it.... [and] we didn’t pick up on it.”

Some respondents reported anticipation of a strongly negative reaction to their disclosure. Such expectations and fears were based on knowledge of cultural attitudes and coming out experiences of other homosexuals. A respondent who was “out” to his parents recollected:

There was a period when I had wondered about...coming out to my parents, and that was a hard thing.... Maybe I wasn’t ready to accept it or to tell them about it. There were horror stories I had heard [about others] that their parents had disowned them and it was terrible. You were risking losing your family. It was a hard thing, it was very traumatic, and it's almost like I had to put that out of my mind. (DNG)

Silence also occurred, in part, due to the expectation of a miracle from God. That is, if God removes the problem, no one ever has to know about it. It certainly did not warrant enduring the discomfort universally expected with
disclosure. This was expressed by the following respondent who had disclosed to some siblings but not to his parents:

I don’t think you would disclose something like that unless you were pretty confident of the reception. To me, it was something I was battling with, trying to overcome. As long as it was in that category, they never needed to know. I think it would have almost become violent. I knew enough of my dad not to. And it certainly wouldn’t have been productive. It would have made my life much more miserable than it was. (DAN)

Mormon belief emphasizes that blessings and assistance from God are contingent upon one’s faithfulness and diligence in keeping commandments. An excerpt from an interview with a disclosed male describes this belief:

I assumed that if I went on a mission, if I showed the Lord that I was the person that I thought He wanted me to be, that it would get easier for me. And there was even a time that I spent the entire night on my knees praying that I could just be normal. (DNG)

His mother remembered the emotional pain she felt seeing her son tormented over his sexual orientation. “I remember one of the saddest memories is him standing in the kitchen as a grown young man, crying. Saying, ‘I just want to be normal.’ And that was so sad to me.” (DNG)

As Mormon homosexuals observed the majority of their peers displaying increased interest in the opposite sex, they felt more out of place and increasingly confused. Identity challenges presented by their homoerotic attractions were based partly on a compounding awareness that integral longings were in contradiction to deeply rooted religious values. To abandon these values would bring a sense of extreme guilt and failure before God and family, yet to suppress the homosexual feelings and relationship needs brought about an emptiness that went unfilled. Psychological dissonance experienced by
homosexual participants became amplified during this period.

Unwanted feelings made it extremely difficult to prevent accompanying homosexual thoughts. Admission to themselves and others of perceived failures to remain faithful to their religious belief was extremely difficult for Mormon homosexuals. It created fears of disappointing family and others, and became a strong barrier to disclosure. Expectations of family members becoming upset, and subsequent relationship tension, played a determining role in the hesitation most Mormon homosexual males felt about coming out to their families. The following response came from an individual who had not disclosed:

It certainly wouldn’t make it closer, it would just make it more uncomfortable. Because then I would have to deal with knowing that they knew. And every time I would get together with them I would feel very self-conscious. (NAN)

In particular, there was a strong hesitation felt about sharing this information with parents. Parents, even more so than other family members, were viewed by respondents as ready to disapprove of and reject them for their homosexual feelings. A nondisclosed male described the discomfort he expected:

I would probably never hear from my dad again. It took six years after [disclosing my abuse] before he had a conversation with me besides “hello.”... [With] my mom, avoidance is her best technique. Just avoid it. She doesn’t want to deal with it. (NAN)

Parents were seen as arbiters of morality, whose values the son was very familiar with by the time he reached adulthood. Although isolation from family accompanied the resolution of secrecy, thereby eliminating the possibility of emotional support, this, apparently, was a price worth paying for protection from
expected judgment and rejection. As stated by a nondisclosed respondent, “I just don’t know that I want to put up with the discomfort that might lead to something better.” (NAN)

Among nondisclosed respondents, there was often a need to justify why they withheld important information from their families. Cognition that accompanied the decision whether or not to disclose to parents was revealed in the following admission by a nondisclosed gay male who maintained partial church activity. He said:

I don’t feel the need to have to tell them. I really don’t. I don’t feel that I’m hiding anything from them. It may be that as long as they know that I’m still going to church, in the back of my mother’s mind, maybe she still thinks that I’m not gay. I don’t know if that’s true or not. I have no idea. But I think that is a perception that a lot of people have, that as long as you’re going to church then you’re not gay. (NAG)

One individual described his emotional state when he finally did talk to his parents about his sexual orientation at age 23:

I mean to go home, to my house, and to have to face my parents knowing I was [a homosexual]... After I came out to them, I wanted to crawl in a corner and die. I can’t describe how awful and humiliating that was. Still to this day, I think about it and I just think that had to be the worst part of my life, right there. (DAG)

Among those who had not come out to family members, one difficulty appeared to be the initiation of dialogue with family members, rather than admission of their sexual orientation. Thoughts of bringing up the topic of their sexual orientation produced anxiety and strongly discouraged disclosure. In other words, if a family member were to approach them and inquire about their sexual orientation, this would seem easier. This was expressed directly by one
respondent when he said, “If any of my siblings called me tonight after this interview and said, ‘Are you gay?’ I would say, ‘Well, duh, yes.’ And they’d go, ‘Oh, okay, I knew that.’ ‘Well, okay, why did you ask?’” (NAG)

However, the same individual did not feel he could ever initiate the disclosure. At one point he speculated that “nobody has ever actually wanted to know, you know, all about me, and maybe it’s because they know and they just would prefer not to ask.” He then described emotional turbulence as rationale for his hesitation to approach his parents. “When [Friend] came out to his parents, his mother was bawling and said, ‘You’re doing this to hurt me.’ I do not want anybody screaming into hysterics on the telephone.” This factor may be part of a broader issue, family communication.

Participants from families where communication was not open had a harder time initiating disclosure and maintaining discussion following disclosure. This was apparent from a statement by a nondisclosed respondent:

It’s so unknown as to how they’ll react or what they’ll say or if they’ll say anything. [My father] is already very quiet so he couldn’t get much quieter. I guess I’m uncomfortable that then I’ll need to see how they’re doing with it and to be in their role and kind of question.... So, knowing I would need to do that in that setting is probably the most uncomfortable feeling. (NNG)

Among those who had disclosed, disruption of emotional equilibrium also played an important role in their initial hesitation to come out to parents:

It wasn’t a pleasant topic. It didn’t generate any happy thoughts for anybody. And I think that was one of the things that really made me believe that I shouldn’t talk to my parents about being homosexual. Because it was an unpleasant topic. And I knew it would be an issue that would make them upset. (DNG)
Several individuals expressed in the interview that an obstacle they felt to disclosure was the expectation that family members would not understand what it really means to be homosexual. They feared introducing a subject that conjures up images of sexual behavior in the minds of parents and siblings, images that are morally and religiously offensive to them. This anxiety was substantiated by the following statement from a nondisclosed male:

When you're talking sexuality with someone, they think, probably, of the sexual act. I mean, I don't think they think of hugging and caressing and kissing and holding hands, and goodbye and hello kisses. . . . I think that's maybe one of the reasons people have such a rough time with homosexuality, because they are thinking about the sexual act, instead of just the companionship that people need. (NAG)

When the homosexual perceived that family members were ignorant or in denial about his sexual orientation, there appeared to be a greater likelihood of maintaining the secret, again emphasizing the hesitation felt to disclose to them. If a situation arose making it likely that parents would find out, there was increased chance of a hasty disclosure based on panic. A few individuals believed their parents already sensed the truth about their sexual orientation when, in fact, parents reported otherwise in their interviews. A disclosed male reported:

I think my mom knew. I don't think many things surprise moms. Especially, you know, my mom is so connected with her children. Her children are everything to her, that is her whole life. And we have talked about other experiences that she has had, and so I think she had a pretty clear idea of what I was struggling with, and she may have been in somewhat of denial. (DNN)

Comparatively, his mother said, "I heard about it when we were back on our mission. Before that, I did not have a clue."
Another factor that complicated the disclosure process was parents displaying judgmental attitudes, reaffirming the son’s perception of their disapproval. Typically, Mormons view homosexual orientation as unnatural and immoral. A disclosed male described this situation:

I think my parents had a really good idea that I was [homosexual]...so they had given me little pamphlets that had been issued by the Church and...I would say they all basically condemned it. So it wasn’t something I really wanted to talk to them about because it just seemed like all the information I had been given up to that point told me that it was wrong. Not that it was wrong and people can still love you, only that it was wrong. (DNG)

The most important difference observed between Mormon male homosexuals who had disclosed to family members and those who had not was time. Anxiety about coming out by nondisclosed males paralleled expectations of family response expressed by the disclosed group. Given the strong hesitation disclosed participants also felt to reveal their sexual orientation to family, it is likely that many of those who remained undisclosed at the time of the interview will eventually come out. Religion was a primary variable affecting expectation of family outcomes, as explained by one nondisclosed male:

I don’t want to disappoint them, so just the hopes and expectations they have of me, and also the expectations the people in the Church have of me in general. Not just my parents. But if my whole, say the people I grew up with in my home ward, if they all knew the same thing, it would be very hard. (NAN)

The biggest reason why the undisclosed males remained hidden is that they also expected judgment, rejection, and conflict in their families. Dynamics of family communication, expected family response, and distrust inhibited disclosure. Consequently, the same respondent went on to describe how he maintained his
secret with his mother by feigning heterosexuality:

I think she believes me when I assure her about it if I just answer her very quickly and not talk about it really. To not bring up the subject and just, whenever I can, throw out comments about getting married and going with girls and stuff like that. I'll do that. And so she doesn’t really have a reason to deeply suspect. (NAN)

Keeping his sexual orientation secret to avoid conflict is not without a price, however:

It makes it really difficult for me to talk about my problems and weaknesses with my parents. Especially this one, having the homosexual feelings. Because it's something that I know that they really don't understand, just from hearing them talk about it,...knowing their feelings about that, it puts a lot of pressure on me to be perfect. I've had a lot of pressure to do that and it's started affecting me physically. I have a lot of anxiety problems, in terms of putting a lot of pressure on myself, and I don't have a lot of outlets. (NAN)

A different respondent, also nondisclosed, had other concerns about family
response that prevented him from disclosing. He described implicit family rules
about the type of subjects that were permissible to talk about. “It is like an
unspoken [rule].... I would expect that it would be like violating a code of silence
to bring it up.” (NAN) He continued with, “I have a sister...but she gossips a lot.
And I would hesitate because I wouldn’t know who it would go out to.” This worry
clearly contrasts with his experience disclosing to other homosexuals in a support
group:

That's when I really made some big changes, when I was able to talk to other people. I had always been afraid of talking to anyone else about this. And I was able to in a safe environment, and open up a lot, and share things that other people had experienced. (NAN)

Due to the inner turmoil of coming to terms with same-sex attractions, it
was not uncommon for Mormon male homosexuals to postpone acknowledgment
of their sexual orientation until their twenties after they had completed missionary
service for their Church. This was often a period of great disillusionment for
Mormon homosexuals because it seemed more likely by this time that God had
abandoned them. Hope of a miracle had begun to fade.

Some homosexuals who were active in the Church chose to live either in
celibacy or marriage, never intending to disclose their sexual orientation. For
others, suppressing relationship needs and personality attributes created
religious and interpersonal conflicts that, eventually, became too great to tolerate.
After years of concealment, internal emotional pressures needed to be released
to arrive at self-acceptance. This was often a time of deciding about whether to
continue activity in the Church, as explained by a disclosed male:

How can you live with yourself if you do believe in God? You can't.
Those two conflict so much and create so much pain that you have to
cover up that pain by saying, "Okay, then [the religion]'s not true." (DNG)

Events that contributed to coming out from secrecy included coming into
contact with another homosexual person or even someone who knew a
homosexual person, or from discovering more organized resources for
homosexuals, such as support groups, internet sites, and the media. A disclosed
participant explained that his initial coming out occurred "when I was on the
computer, just chatting with people. That's kind of funny because I think the
computer has a lot to do with people coming out these days, the internet and
stuff, because you can be who you want to be on the computer." (DNG)

A nondisclosed male described his experience after joining a support group:
One of the best things I could have done was breaking the secrecy, because there's this feeling of isolation where you feel like you are the only person in the world that deals with this thing. And you realize that you're not and that all the other people dealing with this are not what other elements of society would classify as perverts or whatever. I mean, a lot of them are nice guys that are no different from me. (NAN)

A need for emotional release was one factor that played an important role in finding someone to confide in. Choosing someone to disclose to involved extreme wariness. Based on expectations that parents and other family members would become emotionally distraught and upset when told about their sexual orientation, most males first confided in someone outside the immediate family. As closeted homosexuals became more aware that there were other homosexuals in their community, often dealing with the same religious dilemmas, it became easier for them to identify a confidante.

As discussed, such disclosures were primarily made with the purpose of ending isolation and seeking emotional support. Understanding of internal processes associated with disclosure of sexual orientation for a Mormon male homosexual can be found in the words of a disclosed male. He describes his experience coping with homosexual attractions and needing someone to understand. The first statement described the support he derived from his social group:

For many years, it was so liberating to live in that openness, at least between me and my friends. My friends very quickly became the people that lived in that lifestyle. So it was very, very comfortable. I didn't have to hide anything about me, at all. (DAN)

Yet, core religious values reemerged and took precedence. His next statement expresses conflicted feelings that persisted despite his strong need to belong.
and his current integration within a social support network. "I still just had this shame. It came from my knowledge that it's wrong. That it's wrong. That's where the shame came from, knowing that."

Data from this study show that most Mormon male homosexuals first disclosed to someone outside their immediate family during their teens; this was usually not a public disclosure and often involved another homosexual person, a friend or, sometimes, a bishop. In some cases, guilt compelled Mormon homosexuals to confess their sexual orientation to bishops. This required caution as described by a disclosed male, "I was not specific a lot of the time because I was trying to feel out the response." (DAN) In fact, among a minority of Mormon male homosexuals, the bishop was the first person approached for disclosure, but with mixed response. A disclosed participant described his intentions to confide in his bishop:

I never felt like I could talk to anybody about it. I had a friend when I was in junior high that was in my ward that was gay and he came out when I was in high school. And I can remember in priest's quorum that the bishop told everybody that he was gay. And that he must be feeling awful and miserable and went on and on about how awful he was because of this. So I didn't feel like I could say anything that anyone would even understand. (DNG)

Later, a sibling (usually a sister) is typically chosen as the first immediate family member with whom to test the waters. One male disclosed earlier than most other study participants. He told an older sister before his parents and shared the thought and emotion that accompanied his decision to come out to his family:

In the end, your family is pretty much the only ones you would hope that you could rely on. Your friends, sometimes they can flake out on you. Other people, they can flake out on you. But you would hope that your
family would always be there for you no matter what. Maybe that's part of the conditioning that we get growing up. That family comes first, family is important. (DNG)

Even then, a preliminary decision by the homosexual to disclose may go unfulfilled due to surmounting feelings of anxiety about a potentially negative reaction. This feeling was expressed by a disclosed male:

I was driving with my younger brother on a road trip and I really like him a lot but I had never told him about being homosexual. I figured he had already put two and two together but it seemed uncomfortable not to be able to have it out in the open. I had fully planned to talk to him but when it came time to do it, I started to imagine him feeling really uncomfortable about it and maybe not understanding. So I couldn’t bring myself to do it. (DNN)

The amount of time between the first disclosure event and the first dialogue with parents varied case by case but, when it did occur, the typical feeling of the son was one of necessity; it was becoming increasingly difficult to hide his sexual orientation.

When confronted with the risk of parents and family members discovering their sexual orientation, many respondents selected this point in time to make their disclosure, or, more accurately, confirm family members’ questions. Neither the pursuit nor expectation of emotional support played the primary role in the decision at this point for the majority of respondents in this study. This was often observed as a situation where the individual became more formally involved with the gay community. As one individual (DNG) recounted, “My younger brother was attending high school with me. And it really only took one day and the entire school knew.” A similar experience follows:
I was in the paper for the Matthew Sheppard thing, on the front page, and my cousin showed my aunt and...I think that my aunt told my parents. Then my dad wrote me, so I wrote back and confirmed for him that I was gay. (DNG)

Excluding disclosures during teenage years based on suicidal feelings or discovery (four males), parent disclosures did not occur until the mid to later twenties for 12 of 13 males who came out to parents. In many cases, disclosure would not have occurred until even later, if at all, without parents initiating dialogue. When sexual orientation was discovered or disclosed before the individual felt prepared, the consequences were frequently adverse for both the homosexual son and family members:

Oooh [shudders]. They found clippings, like from male models. They also found a pornographic magazine I was given sometime after I came out, like, maybe a year after I came out [to someone outside the family]. And so that's what really brought up the conversation is that they had evidence there, basically, on me. And we talked about it. They wanted me to see a counselor and it was really hard because they saw it, maybe, more as an affliction. (DNG)

My stake president told me I had to talk to my dad about it. To help encourage the repentance process so that I could go on a mission. And so I went and had to tell my dad when I was 19 that I had been sexually involved with another man, and he was, he had a hard time with that. And there was like a one or two week period at the time that my dad and I, after I told him, we talked about it a couple of times. But then he went for the next three years without saying anything at all. (DNG)

As a way of appraising family reactions, some homosexuals initially claimed they were bisexual. Comparatively, this not only felt less threatening to them but to family members as well. A parent explained her fear at the time her son modified his disclosure, no longer claiming he was only bisexual:

[I was] afraid of what he would choose and, ultimately, has chosen. You know, that he has definitely said he is not bisexual, he is homosexual.
That is what his opinion is of himself. His first comment was that he was bisexual. And that was kind of traumatic. [I was] afraid of what other people would think of him, of us, if he was going to tell anybody, or everybody. (DNG)

The need Mormon male homosexuals feel to have someone understand their conflicted feelings is underscored by an additional example. This respondent’s initial disclosure occurred outside the family in conjunction with beginning a homosexual relationship. The dissolution of that relationship two years later served as the catalyst for the first family disclosure.

When he left, I needed to talk to her. I needed to talk to my mom. You know, “[Partner] and I broke up.” I couldn’t say that, regardless of what I thought she knew. To call and say, “I am so distraught, my roommate has moved out,” just didn’t seem quite right, and quite honest [either]. And I started to say it that way but then I said, “Well, first of all, mom, you know I’m gay, right?” (DAN)

A different individual made a last-minute disclosure to his parents. His decision was “because [my wife’s] parents knew first and I was afraid that they’d tell my mom. So I knew I had just a matter of days. That was a ticking time bomb.” (DNG) Sometimes parents instigated disclosure by confronting their son when they had acquired enough evidence to confirm preexisting suspicions of homosexuality. “I got a call from my mom and she asked me what was going on. So, that’s when it came out.” (DNN)

While it seems clear that family disclosures, especially to parents, were not easy for the participants in this research, there are factors that stood out as influential. One such issue was the presence of a homosexual partner. Recognition of a significant same-sex relationship seemed to facilitate initiation of dialogue about sexual orientation both by male homosexuals and family
members. Not only was it nearly impossible to hide the presence of the partner, but it became important for the male homosexual to be able to share this defining aspect of his life with his family members. These ideas were brought out in two interviews. The first excerpt describes a parent's realization that a same-sex partner exists, leading, subsequently, to a confrontation:

I had just met [Partner].... I had known him for about three or four weeks, and I was going...[on] a trip I had planned for almost a year. And I started spending all of my time with him. And I almost called the trip off because of him. And then, I ended up coming home after five weeks, instead of three months, and he picked me up at the airport, and we moved in together. So, it was pretty obvious. There was a very strong relationship there. So, my mom just asked me one day. (DNG)

The second statement came from a nondisclosed male who was contemplating making disclosure to his parents:

It's funny. I've often thought...one of the things that might make that happen sooner or cause that to happen would be being in a relationship with someone. Because I have promised myself that if and when I fall in love with a man, and we're making a life together, I'm not going to hide who he is and what he means to me. (NNG)

By comparison, when the decision has been made to remain faithful to the religious teachings and policies of the LDS Church, some participants, in fact, did approach family members in hopes of receiving emotional support. Even within this group, however, parents were not typically the first persons confided in, as explained by one participant:

I talked to a couple of my friends about it and they were really supportive. So I decided to confront my mom and dad about it my senior year and tell them it wasn't a stage anymore. I knew this was how I felt and I didn't want to feel that way. So, I told them and they got me some therapy and the goal was to go on a mission because I always wanted to do that. (DNG)
Comfort and trust to disclose apparently increased towards family members when they were perceived to have had experiences leading to more diversity and less judgmental attitudes. This view was expressed by a participant who had not come out to his family but who speculated about which family member he might approach first. “It would probably be my older brother, just because he works with a very diverse population and he sees a lot of very interesting things.”

Of those 10 cases where the male homosexual initiated disclosure to parents or siblings, half were made to family members who, at some point in their lives, had been inactive in the LDS Church. One respondent compared his oldest sister (his first family disclosure) to his other sisters. She was the only sibling to have engaged in overt, rebellious behaviors and been inactive in the LDS Church.

I came out to my oldest sister first. Probably just because it seems like [she] and I have the most in common.... A lot of my other sisters, it seems like I can’t get into quite such deep conversations with them. And then I just felt like she would be the most understanding. (DNG)

Three disclosures were made to sisters believed to be more liberal in their views compared to other family members. “She was always the easiest person for me to talk to. We have always been really close that way, very open, and [she was] the least judgmental person. So, that was probably why I went to her.” (DAN)

The remaining two disclosures were considered necessary disclosures to parents and were done through a letter rather than by telephone or face-to-face.
Similarly, greater understanding was expected from others when they had previous exposure to homosexual or gay persons. A disclosed male described the person he first disclosed to as someone who “had a few gay friends growing up and I knew that already, so I think that made me feel comfortable talking to her about it because she had dealt with that before.” (DNG)

Several study participants referred to riding in a vehicle as either the setting where disclosure occurred or where they considered coming out to a family member. It appears that it is less threatening to talk with family members about emotionally volatile issues in a situation where there is limited eye contact and no escape. A father recalled:

When he told us and came out, like I said, we got a call to go to [City] about 11:30 at night and we traveled in a bad rainstorm and went and found [Son] and he'd been drinking. And we said, “get in the car.” And we took him and drove him around and said, talk to us. And he broke out in tears, you know, just exploded. He said, “I'm gay.” He expected me to slam on the brakes and throw him out in the rain, I'm sure. And he bawled, like I've never seen anybody bawl. He just emptied. (DAG)

For some, being married and having come out to their wife reduced the need to confide in other family members about their sexual orientation. Not only is sexual orientation easier to hide in this situation but support received from spouses is likely to lessen the urgency of a dreaded disclosure. Understandably, wives have a difficult time coping with the disclosure:

It was very hard on her. It was very difficult. I gave her a book to read, which was not the book to give her at that time, and I think she thought that I was just giving up. And it wasn't really my intention, but that was the only material I had. There was nothing else LDS that would give the other point of view. So she started going to the same therapist, and we started working things out. She prayed, and thought about it, and after we talked some more, she realized that I was willing to work through it, and so she
decided to stay. But we didn’t talk about it a lot for quite a while. (NAN)

Unfortunately, awareness of a wife’s emotional pain as she tried to cope with her husband’s sexual orientation, tended to push him back into secrecy:

Sometimes I’ve told her after I’ve been on a binge or whatever...but I almost find it’s easier for me to confide in guys that are friends from Evergreen because it brings such an emotional turmoil with her. The last time I talked to her about having had a problem, you know, I’ve been in Evergreen for a year and a half and she sort of understands this whole thing and I just thought it would be, “let me know if I can help” or whatever. But, instead, it was just weeping, wailing. “I’m too fat” and “I’m a horrible wife” and so I have a hard time. I have a hard time confiding in her because it causes her too much stress. (NAN)

This re-created feelings of guilt and shame within the homosexual husband, and left him, again, without the family support needed. As noted, if the wife reacted badly to disclosure, there was added risk that parents and siblings might not suspect a problem. Given that disclosure of sexual orientation among Mormon males was often initiated by family members, when they did not suspect their son’s or brother’s sexual orientation, disclosure was less likely to occur.

Family members experienced the disclosure process somewhat differently. There was usually a warning about the impending disclosure. Parents and family members often wondered if their son or brother might be homosexual. A sister described how siblings talked amongst themselves about their suspicions prior to any disclosures. However, even though suspicions were common, this type of dialogue was not. She said:

I had thought about it. I know we all had. I don’t know about my parents. I know I had talked with my sisters before and we thought, “I wonder if he is?” And just kind of speculating, but never, I don’t know, it’s not really something that you just come out and ask someone. So, we just kind of, “I don’t know, I don’t know. Unless he tells us, we’ll assume ‘no’.” (DNG)
Although these thoughts might not have been conscious, there were suspicions that something was different in the son’s psychosexual development and, because these thoughts were unwelcome and uncomfortable, they were usually pushed aside. Mormon parents typically had such a hard time accepting the fact that their son was homosexual that they often tried, just like their homosexual son, to deny it by rationalizing. This was true even of the parent who expressed the greatest amount of acceptance of her son’s sexual orientation, including support for him to choose whatever would bring him the greatest happiness. She explained:

There it was out in the open and, like I said, denial is a great thing. In your mind, you think, “maybe this, maybe that,” but I knew. In fact, we had talked about it, my husband and I, that the only people in the whole world who don’t date by the time they are 24 or 25, and [Son] had made the comment, “he had never kissed a girl.” No healthy adult male reaches the age of 25 without that kind of thing. We said before, “I’ll bet he is gay.” But until you hear the words, it doesn’t make it real. There is still something you keep in the back of your mind that “well, maybe.” (NAN)

Families frequently began to suspect the son’s sexual orientation based on behavioral clues. For example, nonidentification with same-sex peers, participation in activities typical of the opposite sex, absence of dating, discovery of atypical erotica, or an unusually close relationship with another male all brought up questions in the minds of some parents and other family members that prepared them for the eventual disclosure that their son or brother was homosexual. One father recollected:

He did not enjoy sports. He did not involve himself in Boy Scouts, which broke my heart because I was the scout leader. When he was in middle school, the boys just unmercifully picked on him, even some of the adults. And it finally came down to a point when, after about two months in middle
school, and he was being beat up every night after school by a gang of boys. And at that point we got involved, and I wondered why a group of boys would beat up my son who was a great kid. So these were some indications. I kind of knew that he was a little bit different clear back in grade school and sometimes it bothered me.... So, anyway, we've known, in a way we've known, and other people have said they've known, just by watching his actions. (DAG)

Only five families reported neither parent having suspicions of the son's sexual orientation. This sometimes led to a confrontation and, at other times, not. In a minority of situations, disclosure caught family members off guard. In nearly all cases, the disclosure was difficult to understand and accept.

Family disclosure occurred in a variety of ways. Ten male homosexuals (more than half) disclosed to siblings before parents. Of nine initial family disclosures to siblings, eight were made to sisters and one to a brother. In this group, two involved suicidal feelings, two were in response to an information leak, four occurred during the course of therapy, and the final situation arose from pressure to serve a Church mission. All disclosures to sisters were initiated by homosexual brothers.

Among 11 respondents who initiated family disclosure, only three selected one or both parents to disclose to first. In no cases was a father the first family member approached. In only one family were parents actually the first persons disclosed to, prior to friends, Church leaders, and other family members. In this case, parents initiated the disclosure in response to their son's suicidal behavior. However, in nine families the son did eventually approach parents to disclose his sexual orientation. Five were secondary family disclosures; siblings had previously been confided in. One individual disclosed by letter to parents and
siblings simultaneously. The remaining disclosure occurred over long-distance telephone in response to an emotional crisis.

In six families, parents were actually the ones to initiate disclosure by confronting their son about his sexual orientation. Two of those confrontations arose from a suicide attempt. In three of these six cases, parents, previously unknowing, approached their son based on uncovering information about his sexual orientation. The final case involved suspicions based on the presence of a same-sex partner.

In summary, interviews of Mormon male homosexuals described the disclosure event as difficult for all respondents. Initially, there was no intention of ever divulging the private shame of a homosexual orientation. Respondents internalized negative information about homosexuals from their family and social environments, resulting in self-directed shame and confusion over personal identity. Over time, they also felt increasingly torn between the need for relational fulfillment and devotion to God and church. Consequently, they became alienated from their families. Family members often suspected the son’s sexual orientation based on behavioral clues but tended to deny it. Many parents actually initiated the disclosure based on such clues.

When realization came, over time, that homoerotic attractions were not diminishing, emotional burdens intensified to the point where the decision was made to entrust their secret with someone. Confidantes selected were those believed to be trustworthy, nonjudgmental, and confidential. Due to fears of negative family response, nearly all disclosed respondents first told someone
outside their family and then, later, approached a sister. Mothers were almost always selected for the initial parent disclosure. Fathers were never approached first. In most cases, disclosure to parents occurred only when the situation was urgent, either in terms of high emotional conflict, or under perceived threat of parents finding out. At the same time, hopes of obtaining understanding and support were suppressed by the fear of a negative family response, primarily tension, judgment, and rejection.

All family disclosures accompanied increasing conflict between sexual identity and religious pressures. Half of the respondents who eventually came out to parents were experiencing depression to the point of suicide risk. This was attributed to the emotional turmoil resulting from internal conflict between religious belief and same-sex attractions, and the isolation created by keeping sexual orientation hidden. For five individuals, suicidal behaviors were the catalyst that initiated family disclosure, and, in three of those cases, it was the first disclosure event.

Disclosure Outcomes in the Family

Initial Family Response

Regardless of whether or not Mormon parents had any foreknowledge of their son's sexual orientation, they were rarely prepared to face it. When first confronted with the reality of the disclosure, parents most often described feelings of shock and anguish. In some cases, the revelation came as a complete surprise. The following dialogue was from an interview with parents of
a respondent who initiated disclosure to them:

Mother: I got a letter. And [Son], in the letter, told me, told us. And I had no idea up until that point. He had confided in our daughter and her husband. He had gone to a counselor. We found this out after the fact. And I'm in shock reading this letter. (DNG)

Father: Shock would probably be the [first reaction]; frustrated, disappointed, really, in a lot of ways, incredulous. Because we had watched him have normal, well, we thought normal, relationships with both sexes as he went through school.... [He] had a couple of relationships, just before he went on his mission, where one young lady thought she pretty well had him nailed for a future husband. So, to find out that he had a homosexual orientation that he claims he had for many years, just went against his behavioral pattern completely.

Another parent (DNN) described her initial feelings after finding out. "I'll tell you it was a heart breaker. It was a heart-breaker and it still is." Following disclosure, male homosexuals also experienced significant anxiety waiting for and facing family member reactions. A respondent who disclosed by letter related his feelings at that time:

The day that I thought they might receive it in the mail, I was ever so nervous, and I came home from work, like at three in the afternoon, and the phone rang and I was too scared to pick it up. Ten minutes later it rang again, and I was too scared to pick it up. That went on for about an hour. Finally, I picked it up and it was my dad on the phone. "Can we come talk to you?" "OK." "We'll be there in a few minutes." (DNG)

Shock was clearly the most common reaction for those who had no premonition of their son's sexual orientation. Even when parents did have information about their son's sexual orientation, the tendency was to not acknowledge these suspicions as true. The following remark from a sister explains her parents' avoidance of accepting or dealing with their son's disclosure:
My parents were kind of touchy about it and they wouldn’t have told me. Even though they knew I knew. But they just didn’t want to admit it and so their way was just to pretend like it was nothing. (DNG)

Parents also commonly felt responsible for what they saw as a devastating problem. Within their religious belief system, a large amount of responsibility is placed on parents for the spiritual outcomes of their children. A mother shared that, “I can remember, myself, hearing that someone had a son who was homosexual, and I looked at the parents and thought, ‘Wow, what’s wrong with them’?” A father described a similar feeling:

“Is it my fault?” And, in this case, I thought, “well, it probably was my fault,” and I still think that there probably were some things there, that maybe if I had been different towards [Son], or if he had been blessed with a different dad, he might have some different thoughts. And I wrestled with that for a long time. (DNG)

As might be expected, when caught off guard by the disclosure and less informed about homosexuality, parents had a more difficult time showing a supportive response. In a few cases, relationships were strained to the point of shutting down communication completely for some period of time. This was generally based on strong attitudes that oppose homosexuality. Parents are not unaffected by the same social and religious messages their sons are exposed to. A mother expressed a belief that is prevalent among many members of the LDS Church that “[homosexuals] are condemned to hell.... If you are a homosexual, you are cast to outer darkness basically.” (DNG) Another mother described attitudes she had heard about homosexuals:

One lady, whose son died of AIDS, told me that she was working on Temple Square and her closest friends just scattered. They just turned their backs on them.... She said that her bishop told her not to bring her
It is not surprising that parents resist acknowledgment of the situation.

For most Mormons the word "homosexuality" is synonymous with a sexual act. Parents nearly always had a difficult time distinguishing between homosexual feelings and homosexual behavior. Initial family response seemed to be founded largely on feelings of panic because family members were preoccupied with thoughts that their son might be in violation of religious standards, and feared public humiliation. These points were brought out by a mother:

In an LDS area, or in a predominantly judgmental, heterosexual community, it's very embarrassing, sometimes humiliating.... I would never talk about this. You know, your daughter got pregnant and she got married, well, be grateful, because it could be worse. And that's my opinion of it. It could be worse. You know, your child can get off of drugs. That seems to be more accepted than homosexuality is. (DNG)

The homosexual son's activity status in the Church was an important disclosure variable because there was a sense of increased well-being within Mormon families when homosexual sons and brothers were perceived as striving to remain faithful to religious teachings and values. It seemed to temper volatility in family member response. A disclosed male stated:

I was talking pretty openly with them right before I left for my mission, because I was so scared of the whole thing, especially being thrown in the MTC where it's all men, for the most part, and have a missionary companion, and I kept telling them I just felt inadequate and unworthy. They tried to tell me "You're fine, you haven't done anything wrong." (DNG)

However, even though involvement in homosexual behavior was most common
with Mormon males who were inactive in the Church, some Church-active males were also involved in homosexual behaviors. For parents, the most devastating consequences of facing their son’s sexual orientation, were feelings of fear and loss. They worried about religious ramifications, social stigma, health and safety risks, and their son’s long-term happiness. They felt the loss of personal expectations for their son in terms of family, career, and spiritual outcomes.

In this study, no mothers cut off contact with their homosexual sons as a result of disclosure alone. Typically, mothers and sisters were more sensitive in detecting emotional turmoil at the time of disclosure than were fathers or brothers. Consequently, they were also more tentative in their response, tempering their own distraught feelings so as not to bring additional pressure on their son or brother. Privately, however, they anguished, as expressed through one mother’s words:

&Claire;/n[Crying] When this came, it was a real bomb. And, of course, as far as Church standards, unless there is something that can be [done], and we’ll never know this until after the resurrection, unless there is some physical thing wrong, then we have lost a son. (DNG)

Compared to mothers, fathers held stronger negative attitudes about homosexuality, as found in the comment that “it isn’t natural. It just plumb can’t ever be right.” Homosexuality appeared to be a more difficult reality for them to accept. A mother describes her husband’s initial reaction. “My husband struggled in a different way than I did. He nearly lost it. Extreme anger at first. Then, ‘we’ll take our son somewhere to get this fixed’.” (DNG)
Nearly all homosexual sons felt their relationships with their fathers were strained following disclosure. Fathers characteristically disapproved more and responded more harshly to their sons’ disclosures than did mothers. Of those fathers who were interviewed, most had stricter views of what is appropriate conduct. When that conduct was violated, they expressed stronger condemnation of it. When asked what his initial reaction was after first learning of his son’s sexual orientation, one father replied:

That I would like to kill him. I was very angry. And there are still times when I’d like to take a two by four and whap him up the side of the head and say, “Look, let’s knock some sense into this head, because you’re so messed up you don’t know where you’re going.” (DNG)

Another father shared his reaction:

My first feelings were just damned mad. I guess if there is any one thing that is distasteful in my life, it would probably be that. I don’t understand it, never did, never tried to, until this time. And so, I was just really upset and my first thought was getting him away from me and the rest of the family as far as I possibly could. (DNG)

The strength of negative reaction from fathers often placed mothers in an emotional dilemma where they were torn between supporting their husband and their son:

Our marriage was really rocky because I told him “I will stand by my son. You are an adult, and if you tell me I have to choose between supporting my son, and living with you, you lose. You are the one that made the challenge, [so] you lose. If you can't love enough to accept him with his ups and downs, unconditionally, then I won't be here for you,” and it was a really difficult time. (DAN)

In some cases, after discovering a sons’ sexual orientation, mothers withheld information from their husbands due to anticipation of a negative reaction. This occurred in five families. Interestingly, in every case, the mother’s
prediction was correct. In these cases, mothers knew of their son’s sexual orientation for approximately one year before talking about it with their husbands:

After I had talked to [Son] I kept it to myself until the timing was right. I couldn’t wait to talk to [Husband] about it so I could lean on him for strength. But I couldn’t do that at the time. (DNG)

“Is it going to be between my son and my marriage?” We didn’t have any marital problems, but I didn’t know how serious it would be, and I was afraid, and I was really cautious about it. Until I knew more that I could help him with. Because if we had just, if he had just made that announcement to us, and we hadn’t known anybody we could talk to, or any kind of help, I really don’t know what would have happened. He might have told him, “I don’t ever want to see you again.” (DNG)

Attitudes born of social prejudice and stigma impacted on Mormon families in a traumatic way, and clearly played a role in their difficulty accepting the confession. More important, however, to Mormon families, was the conflict that arose from juxtaposing a son’s homosexuality with religious beliefs and doctrines of the Church. Because homosexual behavior is condemned by the LDS Church, it was difficult for Mormons to legitimize homosexual persons without altering their religious beliefs. Nearly all family members responded by taking a clear stand on the issues; they drew a line between homosexuality and their religious values. This stance was expressed through a mother’s words, “I’m supporting the causes I believe in and I don’t believe in this. Sorry if that offends you, but that’s how I feel.” In a different family, a father declared:

Right is right and wrong is wrong.... I do not go in for clouding the mind and putting on that it’s just another way of life. You are not going to get that statement in this house. It’s a sinful situation and it’s a tempting situation, and we feel sorry for that. I feel sorry for the man that’s addicted to tobacco or anything else. But first and foremost, don’t categorize this family as thinking that this is, “oh that’s a way of life.” No, that’s a sinful way of life. The law is not going to change. (DNN)
Homosexual sons were very much conscious of this perspective. A disclosed male made reference to it when describing his mother’s response toward him after coming out:

She thinks that if she were to give more support to me, she’d be abandoning the faith. I think she sees it as black and white. Either I support him, or I support the Church, I can’t do both.... She doesn’t think she can even really be involved in getting to know me and what I like to do, and what my aspirations are, because that would be betraying her religion. (DNG)

Another aspect of social stigma that families felt was the judgment, perceived and real, from members of their church and community. Consequently, most family members preferred to keep information about their homosexual son or brother private. Even though they rarely knew how far the knowledge had been dispersed, the expectation of negative reactions maintained pressure on them to stay closeted, much like the homosexual son prior to his disclosure. As one parent pointed out, “because I still feel this is so private, I cannot even go to my bishop.” On the one hand, they feared the information becoming public:

We don’t talk about it in public. We don’t discuss it. So it’s kind of quiet. But, we do that not so much anymore out of embarrassment. At first, it was embarrassment. We weren’t sure what people would say. Now, it’s more for protection in my mind. We don’t tell people or say things for his protection. (DAG)

On the other hand, they were afraid that people already knew, and they worried about a negative judgment:

I hate to admit it but I worry about it every day. I think a lot of our associates and neighbors know. Folks who always used to ask about my son and how he’s doing don’t ever mention him now. (DNG)
Some parents told their son the homosexual feelings were only a phase and that they would go away, assumptions that were likely based as much on religious and social orientation as on the difficulty of accepting an unwanted reality. In other words, because they believed homosexuality is unnatural and immoral, it did not seem logical to them that it would be a permanent condition.

A disclosed male said:

My mom, at that time, said, well, you've told me this before. But I thought you'd get over it.... I think that was when my mom decided that I wasn't going to get over it. And my dad...told me, "It's a choice that you're making and I hope you eventually choose to do the right thing." (DNG)

Although parents may have initially denied the reality of the situation, eventually, the issue no longer could be entirely ignored. "You just don't want to believe everything that you see. And there comes a time when you can't pretend any more." At this point, they tried to make sense of a difficult and confusing situation, or question, "why?," a complicated process for most. This religious struggle for one mother was captured in the following statement:

He's been involved in just all kinds of Church activities, seminary council, executive secretary to the bishop, went on a mission and did a fantastic job on his mission. He's encouraged other friends to join the Church. You know, he's just done everything. And the testimony of Jesus Christ when he went on his mission, I've never heard a person of that age that had any stronger, and still strong, feelings about his Father in Heaven and Jesus Christ. And so, of course, I guess [Husband] and I both kind of wondered. You know, you wonder. There are little signs and indications, so we weren't totally shocked. And yet, you're shocked. So I think right at first you think, "When he's done all of this, and he is the way he is, why?" Why has this happened? Why hasn't he been able to not be this way?" (DAG)

Subsequent to disclosure, family response was most strongly influenced by success in reconciling religious belief with the reality of homosexuality in their
lives. The majority of parents and other family members eventually came to a realization of their religious responsibility to “love the sinner, but not the sin.” During this time, families remained primarily focused on homosexuality as sin. This is evidenced in the following dialogue between a father and mother:

Father: Sin never was happiness, and sin never advances very far in life, professionally or otherwise. (DNN)

Mother: I have, from time to time, approached him and said the same thing that Dad has said about sin is never happiness and that sort of thing.

In cases involving attempted suicide, families were more careful in their responses. They were also more restricted from openly discussing personal attitudes. After his son’s release from the hospital following a suicide threat, one father revealed that even though he offered no verbal response to his son, “my initial feelings were, how could you be so stupid? And they haven’t changed much since. I mean, I don’t mention that to him, I never have. I don’t think that would help the situation.” Paradoxically, when there was too much pressure involved, these feelings sometimes resulted in communication closing down significantly between family members; no one wanted to shoulder the responsibility of someone else’s life. Even when a substantial amount of time had passed since the suicide crisis, memories could still be terrifying and be a threat that lingered on for family members. A sister expressed these sentiments:

The suicide stuff is a lot more strain than anything else. I mean that was hard when I had to talk to him on the phone and his voice was all slurred. And you don’t dare say anything wrong. You don’t dare. (DNG)

To summarize, parents often harbored suspicions about their son’s sexual orientation prior to disclosure, but were almost never prepared to hear it. Initial
reactions to disclosure were shock, panic, and anger. Parents felt crushed by the perceived blow to their religious values, social standing, and family expectations. When it came as a total surprise, parents reacted with more shock. Fathers, in particular, had a hard time with the information that their son was homosexual and were more likely to express anger.

Because homosexuality represents an enormous moral conflict to Mormon family members, they struggled coming to terms with the sexual orientation of their son or brother. Eventually, most tried to reach out to him as a way to continue having influence in his life and to maintain family ties, both of which are tied to fundamental religious values. The type of influence families exerted most was to draw him away from his homosexual feelings. Family communication and support had reciprocal effects on relationship quality and played important roles in how well male homosexuals and their family members coped with the situation. Because communication is a form of support in family relationships, some overlap exists in the following sections.

**Family Communication**

When Mormon male homosexuals finally disclosed to their families, it was generally accompanied by hopes of increasing both the amount and quality of communication, although these were rarely the primary motivations. Communication related to sexual orientation was considered especially important by male homosexual respondents. This hope was certainly based on a need for social and emotional support. Perhaps even more importantly, it was based on a
need for feedback about their standing in the eyes of family members, as a way to combat feelings of shame that had become internalized over much of their lives. What was often particularly disheartening was the discovery of little, if any, deeper communication with family members as a result of the disclosure.

LDS homosexual men and their families both described similar experiences with family communication following disclosure of sexual orientation. The two most common themes in the interviews were that families tended to continue a similar quality of communication as existed prior to the disclosure, and communication centered around nonhomosexual topics. In most families, communication difficulties existed following disclosure. While religious conflicts were a dominant factor in determining family dynamics, relationship history within the family usually pointed to a continuation or exaggeration of preexisting communication. In fact, characteristics of family communication and relating appeared to be consistent across time in most families, such that families who were most effective in coping with the homosexual information were those who coped most effectively with other emotional issues prior to disclosure.

Families who talked openly with one another before disclosure continued to do so, while those that were less open continued that pattern. A sister who reported no discussion about homosexuality in her family following disclosure was asked if she felt it would be helpful to be able to talk more about it:

No, not really, because my feeling is that it doesn't matter who or what, just be happy, and go on about your [life]. I don't talk about a lot of stuff, though. I mean we don't talk about everything like some families do. (DNG)
In a different family, there was a clear difference in perceptions of family communication between parents and son. These parents described relationships as strained after the disclosure was made. Prior to that time, however, they viewed communication as good:

The relationship is less personal, less integrated. But I think it was as tough on our daughter as it was on us...and it took her a couple of years before she could even talk to him. And our relationship, it used to be you could talk about anything. It was open, it was a lot happier level. Now, it's reserved. It's stultified. It just isn't quite the same. (DNG)

During the interview with their son, when asked to describe family communication while growing up, he provided a contrasting description:

We don't really talk about our feelings. And that's not a new thing since I came out. Growing up, because I think I felt I had something to hide, my deepest fears and my deepest personal issues were things that I didn't feel like I could share with anybody, not even my parents. So I can't really gauge how the family, everyone else, interacts with each other. [As for] me, personally, I didn't really ask about my parents' feelings and they didn't ask me about mine. (DNG)

Ironically, the relief many Mormon male homosexuals felt after disclosing their sexual orientation was short lived. It was usually replaced by a feeling of discomfort in relationships with family members, especially during the next year or two. Intimacy strain was manifest in the form of decreased communication and less time spent together. This was addressed in the following statement by a disclosed male:

I just don't feel comfortable. I feel on edge.... There's a tangible tension between everybody. I don't know if it's me going into the tension that they have or if it's me bringing the tension. I'd like to just talk and have it be okay. And not have all of the tension there and the frustration. I think they feel frustration because I'm not changing and I feel frustration because they're not changing or talking about it. (DNG)
A homosexual respondent stated that his father acted “very distant and didn’t have anything to say except for occasional insults.” (DNG) His way of coping with the perceived rejection from his father was to “walk away and ignore him.” His sister reported that when her brother was home for his first Christmas following disclosure “it was too stressful at that time for everybody” and that he “left early because of the tension.”

Homosexual respondents were not the only ones who felt strain in family relationships. Family members also described relationship tension. Explanations provided by parents and siblings for this tension were feelings of shock, confusion, disappointment, anger, and guilt related to the disclosure, but tension was also associated with not knowing how to respond. Family members had strong feelings about the moral wrongness of homosexuality. In addition to the social stigma shared with most others in society, Mormon families also perceived a strong religious condemnation that did not subside. One mother remembered the time after disclosure as “when we were all raw.” (DNG) But, even when referring to the present, she still explained that “I always have it right here on my shoulders.” Her husband mirrored her sentiments when he said, “Communications were not easy. They were difficult and they were strained.”

This applied not only to relationships with parents but also with siblings. Relationship tension was just as often unspoken as it was verbalized, as explained by one participant: “I noticed for the first year or so with my little sister, she was more leery to be around me.” In a similar example, a respondent referred to tension with parents:
When I first came out I could tell that she was tense, not quite the same. And now it's gotten better, except for when she asks how I'm doing. I can tell she's implying, "Do you have AIDS?" I can feel that. (DNG)

Discussion about homosexuality created conflicts in thought and feeling that was hard to tolerate on both sides, but especially for family members. This was the reason for the following statement by one father, "When we're talking, sometimes I think about the choice of words that I'm saying, the choice of subjects that we're going to [bring up]." (DNG) If it isn't talked about, perhaps it seems less real. A parent recalled, "I think straight out I didn't want to acknowledge it or hoped that it wasn't really true. It was not openly discussed either." A sister provided the following account of her discussion with siblings:

The first couple of days they would ask me, "Do you ever see him with people? Does he have a boyfriend?" They would ask me stuff like that. As far as us talking about it, we never really talked about it with my parents. But, like I said, they're still kind of in the whole denial, "we don't tell anybody, this isn't really happening," type of thing. (DNG)

Much of the anxiety clearly relates to the religious dilemma. One respondent explained, "There's some tension in the relationship whenever religion comes up." For most families this appears to be the primary source of strain, as evidenced in the following comment about Mormon beliefs on relational ties in the family after death: "It's just the conflict with the Church. Actually, I think with my whole family that's what it is. They're afraid that the family won't be together in the Celestial Kingdom."

Some respondents tried, unsuccessfully, to talk with family members about their sexual orientation. They were unable to establish communication that led to any resolution or perception of support. Lack of communication and
specific feedback from their families was experienced as both hurtful and frustrating to male homosexuals:

Everyone seems to be willing for me to tell them and listen to what I had to say, but it’s very hard when you’re the only one making the effort to communicate, when you feel the responsibility is on you to instigate and, even when you do, you don’t get any feedback. There’s not much comfort in that. It leaves you hanging. (DNN)

Sometimes family members were also met with frustration when they tried to reach out in communication. Beginning efforts were rarely successful. A father reflected on an early conversation:

I don’t know how I could have approached it differently. I tried to be very tactful, supportive, loving, nonjudgmental. At the same time, I guess it is judgmental when you regard same-sex attraction as a problem, and I regard it as a problem. Now I don’t remember exactly what I said, but basically that I was concerned. And, at that point, he didn’t respond much. We didn’t get a dialogue going. It was upsetting to him. (DNG)

Within most families, there was eventually some discussion with the son about homosexuality. The primary emphasis in early discussions seemed to be efforts to convince him he was in violation of Church policy and should become reconciled. This point was brought out in a particularly strong statement relayed by a respondent who had adopted a “gay” lifestyle:

I have a [family member] that e-mailed me and said that lesbians were lesbians because they didn’t like to wear dresses and didn’t fit social norms, that you don’t see people marching to use vibrators in the streets, and homosexuality was a choice...and she said I’ve got to tell you that you’re going to go to hell. (DNG)

A father described strong emotions on the part of both he and his homosexual son that led to strained communications:

He said to us not too long ago, “Are you just waiting for me to change?” And I said, “Exactly. There is no way in hell that I am going to accept you
as a gay man forever. Some day you are going to change." He said, "Well, I'm not." And I said, "Well, you are trying to prove that to me and that's your dilemma. In this world, or the next, you are going to change."

A father and mother (DNG) provided a description of their communication struggles with their son after he became more actively involved in the gay community:

Father: It's been extremely difficult. It's been a lot of conflicts. (DNG)

Interviewer: When you say conflicts, are you thinking more about conflicts within yourself?

Father: Yeah. Well, both. He'd want us to be interested in what he was doing, but there are some things we just didn't want to be interested in what he was doing.

Mother: Trying to understand why this happened. It seemed like for a little while it was going pretty good, and then [Son] felt like he was gay and like that was what he wanted to be. And all of this didn't feel like the right thing for us. For him.

In families where the homosexual son adopted a gay lifestyle, frequency and amount of family contact usually decreased, making communication even less frequent. There was a great deal of shock among family members that their son or brother could actually turn against religious beliefs. An example of this dynamic can be found in the following account provided by a sister:

When he came home, he was really open about it. As far as, like, around me and my other sisters, but not around my parents. So, my sisters, I know that, like, at night we'd be like, "Oh, I can't believe that's what he decided but it's his decision." And we all kind of felt that way. (DNG)

In some families where the son was openly gay, deterioration in communication was extensive and enduring. The largest source of stress in family relationships was related to conflicting expectations based on religious
values. Because Mormon religious belief and a gay lifestyle were largely unreconcilable, family contact typically diminished. Sometimes this was a way to reduce tension while, at other times, it actually increased relationship tension. A father recounted: "There was a period of three months when we didn't hear from him. He left.... It was pretty difficult for all of us and we didn't even know where he was for a while." (DNG) Communication between him and his son was cut off during the year after disclosure occurred.

The effect that a homosexual son's choices and behavior could have on Mormon families was demonstrated through this father's subsequent reflection, "I feel a lot better now that he claims his relationships with others are platonic. I feel better about that. When he had that active relationship, that made me extremely uncomfortable." A similar situation was described by a mother whose son was in a same-sex partnership:

It's a stand-off. He won't give. His father has now passed on and there is nothing changed. [Crying] He has come within the last year, he has come alone, a time or two here.... We still love him. But we have just not been willing to set this up as anything that is acceptable in our family. (DNG)

A disclosed male provided the following context for his perception of the breakdown in contact with family members:

My dad seemed fine with my moving until he found out my boyfriend was moving there with me. He said, "You can have a father or a boyfriend, but not both," and we didn't speak for about a year. I would even hang up if I called home to talk to my mother, but my dad answered. I don't know what got us speaking again, because we have never addressed that incident, nor the period of silence, since then. (DNG)

Some actively gay males consciously withheld information about their lives and their views from family members for the purpose of lessening conflict with
family members. In the words of one participant, "I think ignorance is bliss. I've hidden a lot of things I'm doing from my parents just to keep them happy." (DNG)

It was also not uncommon for family members to withhold their views, given the expectation of certain conflict over differences in personal and religious values about homosexuality. When interviewed separately, even mothers and fathers were more likely to express certain attitudes and feelings that differed from their spouses.

Regardless of family communication patterns, in almost all cases, issues surrounding homosexuality were avoided. One parent remarked, "Yes, we never really sat down and really had a good discussion, hardly any discussion [at all] about it, have we? With him?" (DNN) Another parent commented that:

When my kids were dating, they would come home and say, "we went here and we went there and we did this or that. And I know [Son], you know, has been out with men. I don't know what he does. And so I don't ask, "Oh what did you do last night and did you have a good time?" I think maybe that hurts his feelings that I'll ask somebody else what they did with their boyfriend or girlfriend, but I won't ask him. But it's not something I want to hear. (DNG)

Other parents described strained communication as a result of their son even bringing up the topic of sexual orientation. This type of reaction clearly related to misunderstandings about homosexuality, as well as their religious and social attitudes about it:

With [Son] its like, "This is who I am." You know, "I am a gay person." And I say, "Well what does that mean?" Because I'm a heterosexual, but I don't have to talk constantly about what I do with my husband in bed. (DNG)

He just feels more comfortable talking about it. We don't want to talk about it. I mean, we know, and we all understand it, and we have all watched
the shows and heard the social talk and that kind of thing, but you don't always want to wallow in it. I mean, I know it and I understand it, but I really would rather not discuss it with him. (DNG)

Especially when attitudes are strong about what is morally appropriate, the topic of homosexuality can become divisive in relationships between homosexuals and family members. Avoidance of conflict became a strong priority under these circumstances. One way to achieve this was to keep potentially volatile topics out of the dialogue, as explained by a disclosed male homosexual:

I have pulled away, and they have pulled away. You know, because when we would talk, [my sister] and I are both extremely opinionated.... It's hard when both people are trying to convince the other person of their point of view, and there is no winning, and so it is like you end up being in a real emotional discussion. (DNN)

Unfortunately, sometimes the end result of having tried to talk with family members about sexual orientation was tension. Even spending time together as a family often felt strained, as explained by one parent, "The thing I've noticed is that [Son] likes to come back home but when he is home he never stays very long. It's almost as if he feels uncomfortable."

Even when the homosexual son's conduct is in harmony with Church teachings and policies, family response was generally insufficient. The following excerpts came from disclosed males who were trying to remain congruent with their religious beliefs. Their statements demonstrated frustrations from not receiving needed understanding from family members. They said:

I think that a bit of an annoyance has grown. We talk about it less now, it's less of an issue. It's like, "Well, son, you seem to be dealing with it fine on your own. Unless there are any big problems then we just don't need to be a part of it." So if there is any negative point, I guess it's that even six months ago, there was a man that I was very interested in, and my
decision had already been made that that wasn't the direction that I was going to go in. But it doesn't mean that I didn't have feelings for this person. And it became extremely difficult for me because I was up against the brick wall again, pounding against the wall, thinking, "Okay, what are my options?" And it was very, very hard. (DAN)

When I talked to my father, it gave me the feeling that a primary concern of his was his image in the community. And I was hurt by that because I didn't feel a lot of support.... I suggested to him that it might be helpful if they would learn something about homosexuality first. I guess I was seeing that as a springboard for beginning to talk more openly about things. And I remember him saying that he already knew about it, and with a tone in his voice that made it sound as if the subject was dismissed, that was the end of the conversation. Anyway, I didn't say too much more after that, and he has never brought it up at all since that time, which was five or six years ago. (DNN)

In the majority of these cases, family members and homosexual sons were making efforts to stay connected with each other, despite fundamental disagreement on the issues. Over time, about half of the family members interviewed made some effort to understand the son's homosexuality, through reading, discussion, or professional consultation. Whether or not this led to any resolution of feelings depended most on whether they were able to reconcile religious belief with homosexuality, and on the quality of communication between them and the homosexual son. A mother expressed the relief and hope she felt after realizing a purpose in her son's sexual orientation; it occurred to her that he could still play an active role in the Church. She reframed the dilemma within a religious context:

I followed him out of the church, out to his car, and I said, "[Son], the gospel commandments are for you. You went out on a two-year mission and did a wonderful job. And you asked people to change their lives." I said, "I'm not asking you to change being homosexual, but I'm asking you to live the commandments. They apply to you as well as they do anyone else in the world." He can go to these young people and he can counsel
them, and he can teach them, and he can bear his testimony to them that God still loves them. And, to me, that is the reason [Son] is homosexual. (DAG)

For all study families there was some decrease in the amount of tension over time, although this lessening of tension occurred more in some families than others and, usually, more so with the mother than with the father. At the same time, in no cases did the tension disappear completely from family relationships. This, again, is likely due to the fact that active Mormon families who follow a literal interpretation are bound in their religious beliefs to repudiate homosexual behavior. It created ongoing tension that contributed to decreased contact between the male homosexual and family member(s).

It also contributed to less openness and honesty in dialogue among family members generally, and specifically about homosexual issues central to the son's experience. One father took the approach that the help his son needed was repentance. "I talked to him last Sunday and I said, 'We would like to bring all the powers to bear that we can to help you, but you have got to want to change'." This apparently explains why he then stated, "Since I became aware, he comes, but noticeably avoids me." This lack of openness between homosexual sons and their parents was probably due to parents' responses toward them. A sister pointed out that, "At first, I think my parents had a really negative attitude towards it. I don't think they were willing to try to see where he was coming from." (DNG)

The primary explanation for the decrease in tension is simply that, with the passage of time, family members became more accustomed to the reality of the
situation and acquired a level of tolerance in order to maintain family ties. They agreed to disagree and, subsequently, avoided the topic altogether. Increased knowledge sometimes translated into greater understanding towards the homosexual son. In some cases, Mormon religious beliefs even seemed to soften family members' attitudes.

Family Support

Although brief, the following statement by one male about his family relationships spoke universally for all disclosed respondents. "I feel like I'm a lot closer now." The elimination of the secret burden alone brought the perception of increased closeness. Regardless of the type of family response, most homosexual participants had no regrets about disclosing. It was a relief to have the information out rather than continuing with the emotional pressure. Frustration over the lack of desired family response was based on relationship conflicts and tensions, not the disclosure itself.

The pattern of changes that occurred in family relationships following disclosure was quite consistent. For most families the process followed a predictable sequence of events: disclosure; distress; discussion with the homosexual son about remaining religiously active; and conflict or support that was contingent on his decision. Homosexual respondents were divided about how much family support they perceived in regard to their sexual orientation. Those who prioritized religious commitments over same-sex relational needs perceived their families did, indeed, provide some level of support to them in their
challenges. Those who had abandoned religion in pursuit of a gay identity and same-sex relationship perceived family support to be lower.

Despite the fact that family support was critical to help with homosexual challenges, it often seemed to be missing in family relationships. Only a few parents were able to show a supportive stance toward their son from the outset. In most cases, there was an initial period of emotional upheaval. Understandably, feelings of this nature interfered with the quality of supportive family relationships. The specific friction that arose over religious conflicts appeared to be largely irreconcilable for most families.

As discussed, the intensity of emotional reaction was associated with how prepared family members were for the disclosure and how traditional they were in their attitudes. Family members' capability to extend support was significantly restricted by their own inability to accommodate the disclosure. Lack of tolerance was more likely when traditional attitudes were present. Such intolerance inhibited trust and communication in family relationships. The following dialogue came from a father and mother in a very traditional family:

Mother: [Son]'s guarded. (DNN)

Father: Yes, guarded. This guarded situation started a long time ago. With liberal tendencies in both [him] and his sister. She has since left that. But the liberality thing, that was the first that I noticed.... He justified all the liberal actions of people.

Contact between parents and son in this family had noticeably diminished. His expectation of being confronted about his sexual orientation discouraged any support seeking with his father. "My dad and I have been on opposite ends of
the spectrum. We don’t discuss the issue and, basically, I have no desire to discuss it with him.”

Following disclosure, family members often reported going through “a period of several months, not really knowing how to deal with this.” Sometimes, they sought help from Church leaders or professionals, or pursued research on their own with the purpose of understanding what they could do to help solve their son’s problem. These actions sometimes led to discussions with him about his experience and why he said he was homosexual. In other cases, family members showed very little response based on feelings of helplessness. They simply did not know what to do. “We have not understood it. We didn’t grow up with this sort of thing in our lives, and how to cope with it, and how to understand it. We don’t know. I don’t know.” (DNN)

Many family members tried to reach out to the homosexual son as a way of being supportive. This generally occurred from the perspective of influencing him to remain faithful to religious commitments and values. It does seem that support came more in the form of encouragement to remain faithful to religion, and less in understanding his experience being homosexual. However, from the perspective of family members, this was viewed as being supportive. For example, one father emphasized how important he felt it was to let his son know his personal view that homosexuality is morally wrong, but explained that his son was just not open to him. When the question was posed whether it would be important to have communication with his son based on aspects of his life, other than homosexuality, his response was, “Yeah, that would be good I think. I
mean, that may be the starting point to work into the other” (DNG), a response that prioritizes morality over the actual quality of the relationship.

Subsequent response appeared to be directly related to whether family members believed their son or brother was making efforts to prioritize religious commitments. This belief was based either on his specific actions, or hopes that family members have for him. When the homosexual was living his life in a manner that appeared to be consistent with religious values, family relations remained amicable, but not necessarily supportive. For example, one male reported that his parents responded to him in a very supportive way when he was attending a Church-affiliated support group for homosexuals, but that their support for him diminished when he decided to drop out of the group:

*When I told them I was homosexual they were really supportive because they wanted me to do therapy and I wanted to do therapy. But when I told them that I was going to go out and see what there was out there they were pretty upset.* (DNG)

In this study, no parents or family members totally rejected their homosexual son or brother. Most sons perceived their mothers to be the more supportive parent. Of those fathers who did come to terms with their son’s sexual orientation, they required a longer time period and removed themselves more completely from their son’s life than did mothers. However, in two families, fathers reacted no more strongly than their wives, and maybe less so. One son explained that it was primarily his father who tried hardest to develop an early dialogue:

*It’s hard to say whether it’s been harder for mom or dad because sometimes dad doesn’t, dads don’t show as much emotion as moms do.*
My dad's much more liberal than my mother though. They are beginning to be a little more curious. My father, when I first came out, would ask questions. "Does one play the female part and one play the male part? How does sex work?" And you know my mom would just become furious, "Don't ask those kind of questions." And my dad wanted to know. (DAG)

Even though the discussion content could have been more empathetic for the situation, there was clearly an effort made to communicate and understand.

Further, given the immediacy of this father's response, there appears to have been a conscious attempt by this father at the time to resist judging his son.

Looking back, his father realized:

It's been a real eye opener to me. I, myself, used to make jokes about gay people and have kind of a macho attitude. And I've had to rethink my priorities and this sort of thing. But it has given us a broader view and a more accepting view of other people. (DAG)

Differences with fathers were explained, in part, as a reflection of pre-existing distance in the father-son relationship. The majority of homosexual men interviewed indicated their relationship was unquestionably less close with their fathers. The following example came from a family where the son had decided to pursue a gay lifestyle:

I've always felt a little bit distant from my dad.... We don't really relate on a lot of levels. And he doesn't relate to this at all. He doesn't like to talk about it, so I just don't bring it up. (DNG)

One father, who had originally turned away from his son, started to recognize the effect of his negative communications on the relationship and made changes to reduce the distance he felt with his son. He said:

The other thing that I worry about sometimes is that it just seemed like, at first, I had to reiterate every time that I didn't like that he was doing that. And I felt like if I didn't do that, he would think that I have accepted it, and everything is all right. And, later, I felt like, "Geez, you just don't have to
Responses that homosexual males found most helpful were parents making an effort, to inquire about their feelings and understand their challenge. Expressions of understanding and acceptance from family members not contingent upon religious activity were perceived as most supportive:

I think she told my dad the next day. He came down to my room. I was sitting down there, doing homework, and he put his arm around me and he said that no matter what I decided to do, or how I decided to live my life, he would always love me. He would always be happy with me. I think that was one of the only times that he ever actually said that he loved me. (DNG)

Another example relates part of a conversation between a male homosexual and his sister, both of whom were active Church members:

She just sobbed for me. “I don’t know how you are going to do it. I don’t know what to tell you. I just love you and want you to be happy. I don’t know what choices this will lead to, but I am sure sorry. This is going to be a hard one.” (DAN)

The following account from a disclosed participant is informative of how a family response was perceived to be nonsupportive:

There was a year or two where my mother would say that I didn't know who I was. She thought that I was confused, that I was listening to someone else too much, that there was someone else in my life that was telling me certain things that I was believing, and so I was following them, and I wasn't thinking for myself..... She was always blaming it on someone or something else, and that was frustrating. And my dad, we were just distant. There was never any really definite time, or anything negative happen with him. There were different conversations that I had after the fact, and this was eight years ago, and he has told me since then that there was a period of time that he just didn't want to see me. He never vocalized it, but he told me a few years ago this, that it was really hard for him. (DNG)

His description also emphasized how unspoken feelings can affect the quality of
family relationships. Another disclosed male said:

They are always doing it from the perspective of their belief system. And so it's always a matter of, this doesn't fit in with their belief system. Basically their attempt is always "how can [Son] change so that he can be a part of this?" (DNN)

In situations where families avoided dealing with the homosexual issues but continued interaction with him, it was telling that the homosexual frequently considered this to be a supportive response. Given that the homosexual male typically had expectations of being rejected, he compromised by equating absence of rejection with support. Convincing himself that his family could not be expected to come to terms with his sexual orientation until they felt ready made it easier for one male respondent to avoid continuation of relationship tension and disappointment:

I've kind of changed my philosophy now and I figure it took me sixteen years to become comfortable with it, it's only fair that I give my parents the same sixteen years. When I first came out, I didn't give them that chance. I just kind of said, "This is who I am and you should love me still and respect me from day one." And I think that was too much to ask. (DNG)

It was very important to another respondent that his family not treat him any differently, that things go on the same in their relationships. He felt supported by their efforts to understand his perspective, while withholding judgment and maintaining hope. It gave him reassurance that family members felt confidence in his ability to handle the challenge of his sexual orientation. In comparing family members, he related what he perceived to be a primary difference between those he feels he can confide in and those he does not feel comfortable talking to about his sexual orientation:
What's the difference between [my grandfather's] understanding and my mother's, or my family's understanding? It's that they understand that this is where I am at in life right now. And he can't understand why I am like this...and I guess he is trying to understand from the point of view of how can his grandson be doing such awful, horrible things..... My grandfather doesn't like it, and he is disgusted by it. (DAN)

Several respondents described feeling more out of place in their families over time due to not fitting in with normative family roles and transitions. They watched siblings, particularly those younger than themselves, marrying and having children, beginning their own families. Not only did this create the sense of being left behind, but there were also issues of not relating to the same experiences, and disappointing parents who had different hopes and expectations for their son's life. One disclosed male told his mother:

I felt like I didn't belong in our family. That's when my brother had his baby and I was really feeling out of place, because there's just an order, you know. The older one should do everything first, and the younger one, my brother, is getting married and having a baby, and younger than I am. So I felt like I was out of place in the family now. (DNG)

Consequently, male homosexuals sometimes came to experience alienation from the family, hindering communication and further eroding perceptions of family support. Making efforts to keep in contact with them was interpreted as evidence by homosexual sons that they were still valued, that they occupied an important place in the family.

Some family members became involved in supporting the homosexual son or brother by educating themselves about the issues. A few participated in support groups or therapy. Families frequently made ongoing spiritual efforts on behalf of the homosexual. This always involved prayer. Some families also
fasted for him and/or placed his name on the prayer roll at the LDS temple. In the end, despite the fact that sexual orientation issues were avoided, most family members tried in some way to maintain contact with the male homosexual and show that the family loved him. The irony existed in their frequent inability to extend acceptance and understanding, the type of support that was probably needed most immediately.

The same religious orientation that incited some to lectures and reprimands, brought other parents and siblings to a realization that they had a responsibility to offer understanding and acceptance to the homosexual family member. A sister said:

At first it was, I want to help you get past this. I thought, “This is definitely wrong.” And then when we went to those meetings down there, we sort of all took the opinion that we love the gospel and we are so grateful that the Church is trying to face this and give us some direction because we needed direction. “What do we do about [Partner]? What do we do about [Son]? How do we love our brother and son but still hold on to our values and what is the core of who we are?” And they provided that direction for us, to just be Christlike. You love unconditionally. (DNG)

Some understanding of the process family members go through in adopting a change of perspective on what felt supportive to the homosexual son can be found in the following responses to the question, “How have you been able to change your approach?” A sister (DNG) answered, “[By realizing] I don’t want to lose him here on this earth because this may be the only time that I’ve got him.”

Mothers said:

It’s true that once you’ve been through something like this, or stuck in the middle, that you wish people could accept each other for who they are. It’s made me stop and think.... So, going through this, has hopefully made me less judgmental. (DNG)
I think there are a variety of reasons. One is time. One is knowledge. Understanding the situation. Learning that I can't change him, I can't step in and take over his life. The only person I have control over is me, and I also feel like love is the way the Lord would have us deal with all of our relationships.... I just think that I am not helping him by constantly preaching to him, by turning my back on him, by refusing to be a part of his life. I think he has suffered a lot, I think he is still suffering and I think he still will suffer, and I want him to know that he can count on me to support him in what challenges he has. I just think that it is a combination of all of those things. Plus, during the times when you are at odds with them, they draw away, and they are not being helped by driving them away. (DNG)

By way of summary, there was nearly always some degree of tension experienced in relationships between the homosexual son and his family members following the disclosure event. Parents and family members usually tried to reason with their son or brother in hopes of dissuading him from pursuit of a gay lifestyle. Families were more inclined to show support for him when they felt he was making decisions consistent with maintaining religious ties and commitments. When a homosexual respondent decided to pursue gay life and relationships, this was emotionally upsetting to family members, and there was a permanent tension established in family relationships. However, many respondents felt their families showed support to them in areas of their lives that lie outside homosexual concerns. Some family members were able to extend a loving and helping hand that was not conditional. Others had a harder time because they felt it would communicate approval. Even among individuals who subordinated their homosexual feelings, the amount of ongoing support from family members was quite low.
Part of the reason family members found it so difficult to show more support initially was that they were still dealing with their own conflicted emotions about the reality of the disclosure. Characteristics among family members that seemed important to the quality of relations between them and the homosexual were accurate information, traditionality of attitudes, social and religious status, preparedness for the disclosure, and the preexisting interactional style of the family. The finding that higher levels of family member education was associated with negative response is counterintuitive. Higher family income also related to a more negative family response. Less traditional attitudes and literal religious interpretation, lower social status, early clues to the son’s sexual orientation, and positive family relationships, all contributed to it being less difficult for family members’ to embrace disclosure of sexual orientation by their homosexual son or brother, and show more support. The most important variable in how family members responded appeared to be their religious beliefs, and life choices made by the homosexual son.

Needed and Desired Support

This section addresses types of support most desired by Mormon male homosexuals and their family members. Support both within the family and from the LDS Church are discussed. Prior to this discussion, it is important to depict the difficulty Mormon male homosexuals and their family members faced in reconciling religious belief with homosexuality, and how this dilemma created a barrier to accessing needed resources of support on both sides.
Reconciliation of Religious Belief

Reconciliation of religious beliefs with homosexuality seemed to be a near impossibility for most Mormon family members who participated in this study. Both family members and homosexual males were asked to what extent they had been able to reconcile. Homosexual males who responded to the question on reconciliation were in one of two groups. Either they distanced themselves from their religious beliefs (11 males) and became inactive in the Church, or they held on to their religious beliefs (14 males) and varied in their Church activity. Three individuals denounced their religious beliefs altogether. Of the 14 males who held to their beliefs, seven remained primarily active in the LDS Church, while three were partially active and four were inactive in the Church. Males from both groups lived with varying amounts of guilt, depending on individual perceptions of how much their behavior deviated from religious teachings. However, even among the most religiously devout group, none lived guilt free. This predicament was expressed by a disclosed respondent:

The fact of the matter is this, I'm gay and I believe the doctrine of the Church is true. They conflict with each other. But my opportunity is to find out where I fit between those two truths. Truths, as they are truths to me. I couldn't feel good about myself if I went back in the closet. I will never go back in the closet. Ever. I couldn't handle that. But I couldn't live with myself, at the same time, if I denied everything that I said I believe in. Because I still believe in it. That leaves a lot of unanswered questions. A lot. Enough to drive you insane. (DAG)

Because homosexual orientation is so diametrically opposed to the Mormon religious paradigm, simply having homosexual feelings subjects Mormon male homosexuals to religious condemnation, both externally and self-imposed.
Similarly, it was not surprising that active Mormon families were unable to achieve a state of peace about the homosexual family member. Church doctrine, as outlined by religious leaders, is unambiguous about the consequences of engaging in homosexual behavior. Even when they wanted to show support, parents were unsure whether it was okay for them to do so. A mother described this dilemma:

I want him to know how much I love him, but even that is a concern. By telling him that I love him does he think that I am totally accepting his life? I don't want him to think that, but I don't want to keep preaching to him either. So, what do I do?

Part of the difficulty some parents confronted trying to reconcile their son's sexual orientation with religion was based on their own feelings of guilt. They blamed themselves for failing as a parent. “I think even without him blaming, for me, it was like, ‘what did I do or what didn’t I do that I should have done?’ that probably still affects me.” (DNG)

Watching their son go through emotional anguish only magnified the feelings of guilt already present. As a way of assuaging guilt and emotional dissonance, Mormon family members held on to hopes that one day their homosexual son or brother would choose to follow the teachings of the Church. Frequently, there was hope that God would provide a solution to their dilemma so the family could be reunited in the afterlife:

(Heavy sigh) It's like I said at the beginning, I just hope he lives long enough to repent, to change his mind.... It's hard to reconcile.... I have just hung onto a lot of, you know, that this life is so insignificant, it is just a blink. We have got to keep our mind on the fact that it's the Lord's time table, which is [snaps fingers] versus eternity. (DNG)
There is no place in Mormon theology for homosexual Church members, a very sobering reality to male homosexuals in the Church. When asked if it was possible for him to resolve this religious dilemma, one nondisclosed male replied:

Not in this life. In the next life, maybe. But not here, no. No, here it's just frustrating. Because for a heterosexual, the plan of salvation works. It works very well. For a homosexual the plan of salvation just does not work for this 80 years that we're here. It may, in the next life, work very, very well. But not here it doesn't. I don't fit into that paradigm. (NAG)

Some parents were aware of the difficulty posed to their son when he felt separated from God. A father explained, "He lost some faith there, in God, because he felt like he could not change the fact that he was gay. And it was kind of like a God-given curse." (DAG) This father's own religious belief was challenged in coming to terms with his son's sexual orientation. He continued:

It was something we didn't really think about until our son came out of the closet. And you start thinking, "Is God a just God? Did he make my son this way to experiment?" I do not believe my son wants to be gay. (DAG)

In the great majority of situations, Mormon male homosexuals experienced debilitating emotions from prolonged efforts to reconcile religion with attractions perceived as impossible to alter. Mounting intolerance for feelings of guilt and anxiety compelled most Mormon male homosexuals to resolve the conflict. Out of necessity, these males sought respite from high emotional turmoil and perceived rejection by finding a road to self-acceptance. Oftentimes, this road diverged from that of their religion. A disclosed male said:

I just had to stop doing anything really religious. I quit praying. Occasionally I would feel that kind of pain or guilt that I should read the scriptures and I quit that. I quit going to church. I just cut all religion out of my life. (DNG)
It was easier for some Mormon homosexuals to distance themselves from their religion than to continue living without self-acceptance. Those who remained connected to their religious beliefs tended to be most emotionally traumatized. This point came out in a statement from a respondent who grew up with very strong religious convictions and eventually became suicidal:

I was really depressed when I came home from my mission and was going to counseling. So, a lot of times I wouldn’t go, but it’s not because I didn’t want to, I just couldn’t get out of bed.... I think I’ve just come to the realization that [my relationship with God] has got to be different. I’ve got to learn to see Him in a different way. Because I still believe in a lot of the principles I was taught in church, but I feel more today than I used to that God accepts me the way that I am. (DNG)

For most homosexuals who grew up in active Mormon families, these were not easy decisions to make. The Mormon religion plays a dominant social and spiritual role in the lives of devout Church members. The actual decision-making process to separate oneself from church activity was described as follows:

It does make me want to question my beliefs, because I think, “If these really are my beliefs and they are the truth, and if they are supposed to help me get through life and temptation, why isn’t it working for me, when I am trying for so long to do it, to follow the teachings and the practices of the Church? Why is it just getting harder and harder for me to do it? And how much more?” I am just kind of running out of motivation and energy to try to do it. It is becoming more infrequent for me to find sources of motivation for me to keep moving in the direction to try to overcome things, so that’s a hard spot for me to be in. Because I am desiring two things at the same time very strongly. (NAN)

I don’t know how I ended up gay.... I didn’t decide one day to be gay. But I am and there isn’t a lot I can do about it except to just accept who I am. So, as that realization came about within me, I needed to reconcile or do something with the fact that, as far as I understand it, homosexuality is looked down upon by the Mormon Church. It’s something that needs to be repented of and forsaken.... [But] I have strong feelings about the Mormon faith. I value many things that have come to me through the Mormon faith, many things about myself...so I needed to reconcile those.
And, eventually, I needed to choose. And I thought, "I have to live with myself every minute of the day." I came to the realization that I wasn’t going to naturally change or my feelings weren’t going to naturally evolve. I actually spent some time trying to make them change, force them to change. And, I’d say over a two-year period, I did try to delve into the spiritual side of the Mormon Church, to gain or muster the faith to make those feelings change or go away. That was probably the most uncomfortable two years of my life. And finally, it didn’t happen suddenly, it was more of an evolving thing, I came to realize that some things I like most about myself are so inseparably intertwined with my gayness that to pull out the gay part would kill those others. (NNG)

Individuals who were not as closely tied to their religion found the decision to be less complicated. For some males, it seemed liberating to resolve this dilemma:

It started me thinking, "Is the Church really true? And stuff like that.” I think if there is a greater being, I still feel like I’m a good person…. I just decided to accept that fact. If there is and He does frown upon it, then so be it. I’ll take responsibility for what I did. (DNG)

Some individuals had a hard time separating themselves from religious pressures while living within the dominant Utah Mormon culture and felt the need to move out of state before they came to terms with their sexual identity. One participant explained that his sexual identity became less important when the people he surrounded himself with did not place so much importance on it:

I think when I first moved to [City], I was thinking that was my entire identity. I had lost everything else about myself and now I was just a gay man. And through being exposed to people for whom it’s a nonissue, outside of Utah, I began to feel good about myself. (DNG)

Other arguments for giving up religious affiliations were the need for personal fulfillment through relationship needs perceived to be denied within the Mormon Church, and not wanting to live in a social environment that feels uncomfortable. It was important for some Mormon homosexuals to find fulfillment through intimate emotional and physical relationships. A disclosed male asked, “Are the
rest of us supposed to live like monks and be celibate for our entire lives, just because we don't like the same fruit?" (DNG) Another disclosed male talked about the importance of feeling a sense of belonging:

Part of the reason I’m not active now is because they don’t believe in me.... I like to go where I’m accepted.... You go where you feel comfortable, and it didn’t feel comfortable there because everybody is sort of staring at you. You’re the big pink triangle amongst all of these grey suits. And you just don’t fit in. And I didn’t feel comfortable with that. (DNG)

Some males who became inactive put Mormonism out of their lives while hanging on to a variation of their religion that did not create the same intensity of guilt. This came in the form of a different church or creating an individual religious experience. A disclosed respondent revealed:

I don’t think I’ve ever talked to my parents about this one, my personal belief. And that’s part of the reason I am really not active in the Church anymore. I think that’s because I’ve kind of found my own beliefs that I’m comfortable with. (DNG)

Some individuals left the Church privately but not publicly. In most cases, this was to protect the feelings of parents and family members. Not only would it be emotionally devastating to Mormon families to lose that hope for their homosexual son or brother, but they would also be exposed to the stigma that exists in the religious community towards individuals who are excommunicated:

It doesn’t bother me that my name is on the records of the Church, even though I don’t attend. The reason why I haven’t actually taken my name off the records is, in a sense, the way that my family would view it. I think that my mom, in particular, would think it was a slap in the face. (DNG)

For homosexuals who did not part with their religion, the resulting guilt often created enough stress that incongruent actions had to be blocked from
consciousness. Although the biggest challenge remained with those who violated Church teachings, even those who were more successful in maintaining faithfulness experienced a significant amount of distress. The next example came from a nondisclosed male who believed the teachings of the Church but, at the same time, was involved sexually with men:

My good friends make fun of me for what I do. They quit going to church and associating with the Church because they're gay. I was living a huge double life, one as a leader in this Mormon youth ward...and then go do some of the gay promiscuous activities at night. How was I able to do all that? I guess just compartmentalize everything, not let any of the things intermix. (NAG)

Another participant who was out to his family felt that being homosexual or gay can coexist with religion. In particular, he felt that Mormon homosexuals need not lose their affiliation with the Church:

Spirituality is a vital piece of the pie in looking at your life. I think so many gays and lesbians give that up. Or they do it because they're angry and they just never come back to it. It's too painful. Coming out isn't that. It's not being somebody who you're not. It's about being who you are. And if it happens to be that you're gay and you still want to believe in your religion...then more power to you. And I think there needs to be more gay and lesbian people who stand up for what they believe in. (DAG)

One disclosed respondent expressed the foundational role of religion in his life.

He found strength in following LDS Church teachings. Simultaneously, he was trying to end a same-sex relationship. His inability to sacrifice the relationship clearly brought torment:

My biggest hold in life is my religion and it's the only thing that gives me a direction...so I don't reconcile what I am doing, because I can't. It's wrong. I love this person very much, but I don't want to be with this person. (DAN)

Perhaps, what is actually being communicated, rather than wishing he was not
with this person, is that he wishes he didn't want to be with this person, a critical factor that would resolve his emotional dilemma.

For males who remained tied to the LDS Church, uncertainty created by lack of direct support or information from Church leaders seemed to be answered with personal faith. They adopted the perspective that God has a purpose in their trial and that He will change them into heterosexuals in the afterlife.

I believe that God made man and woman with the intent that they would get married. And I think in terms of any of those feelings that got mis-routed,...in terms of the long run, that it's my challenge.... All of the weaknesses and things like that will be things that we'll be able to overcome. (NAN)

It is especially interesting that, regardless of whether they remained affiliated with the Church or not, many Mormon male homosexuals were able to come to terms with their sexual orientation and begin to feel peace and acceptance within themselves through prayer. The following statement from a disclosed respondent shares his experience with prayer:

I remember praying really hard about it, because I felt really bad about it. I didn't want to have to go through it. I didn't want to have to tell anybody. And, at that point, I felt really guilty. But, to be honest, I left and, all of a sudden, I felt sure that this was what I was meant to be and this was who I was meant to be. And that the people that I came in contact with, their job was to learn from me and I was to learn from them. But I was not a bad person. (DNG)

One respondent compared his mother's perception to his own in reconciling sexual orientation and religious belief. He also relied on prayer to reach self-acceptance:

I think she has a lot of terror, a lot of fear that, on the other side, I won't be with them in the celestial kingdom. She's expressed that to me a lot and she cries whenever she says it. And I don't have that kind of terror.
don't feel like God is rejecting me or anything like that. I don't understand why not. I imagine God would let me know if I was totally off base. If I was doing something really horrible. (DNG)

Another participant compared his parents' approaches to reconciliation. In doing so, he revealed the effect of these two approaches on the quality of his relationships with them currently, and the amount of influence, potentially, each might have in his life:

I think she feels that...nobody can be perfect so just do the best that you can. But keep a close enough relationship to God that you can come the rest of the way in the afterlife. As far as my dad, when I first came out to him, he said, "I know this is a choice, I know you've made the wrong choice, God has said you made the wrong choice. I just hope you come around some day." And since then, we haven't talked about it. (DNG)

Of 28 homosexual males interviewed, all of whom grew up in active Mormon families, only three reported no longer having any interest in religion at the time they were interviewed. Religious teachings from their upbringing continued to be important to nearly all respondents, regardless of whether they were still active in the Mormon Church. By and large, it was important to these homosexual men to retain their religious values. The difficulty remained in their inability to achieve a resolution in regards to self-acceptance, relationship needs, and religious beliefs.

Family members who felt their son or brother did not choose his sexual orientation commonly adopted the position that God is merciful and would not hold the homosexual accountable for something he was unable to change in this life. A mother provided her insight on this:

[Crying] I have chosen to believe that if my son lives that lifestyle, God is merciful, and even though [Church doctrine] says it is a sin in the eyes of
God, He will have to choose to judge him by what He gave him, and if He
does not take that from him, then He will have to judge him as a merciful
God, by what he was given and what he did in the world as a human
being, not as a homosexual. (DAN)

At the same time, the mercy perspective introduced additional dilemmas. One
important question raised was that if the homosexual did not choose his sexual
orientation and is not able to change it, is it just to require him to fight against it,
knowing the immense emotional torment that certainly accompanies this?

Parents and siblings who became increasingly aware of the pain their
homosexual son or brother was required to bear also ached emotionally over the
possibility of him finding any happiness. A mother expressed her anguish:

  My heartache for [Son] is his devotion to God. I have told him if you can
be happy in the gay life, then you need to do that. Whatever will make
you happy. I have seen the turmoil he has gone through. At one time he
did try the gay lifestyle and he nearly died. He was so suicidal at that
time, with the different choices, that he nearly killed himself. I am sure
that had it gone on any more, it would have been his only out. Because
his mind was that he would rather kill himself and be chaste before the
Lord that way, and deal with that kind of condemnation...than to continue
with that kind of temptation. It was more than he could bear. (DAN)

A mother who expressed a particularly tolerant attitude, even though her son has
not remained active in the Church, explained reasons for the empathy and
support she felt:

  It's not fair to say that he is damned for being this way, because I don't
know what caused it. I know that it's not right, but that's all relative. I just
have a great deal of love for my children, and whatever choices he makes,
I will love him. And so I just want to be supportive of whatever he will be
comfortable with. (DNG)

Even for family members who were more liberal in their acceptance of
homosexual people in the Church, the reality of the circumstances could not
always be tuned out. This grief was expressed by a sibling when she said, “Some days it doesn’t bother me whatsoever. And then, other days, it just makes me sad. Because I know that’s not what I believe in.”

For parents who relied on literal interpretations of doctrine and, subsequently, found themselves unable to accept their son as homosexual, the situation appeared even more grave. One parent presented his rationale for showing zero tolerance for homosexuality:

I think that is one of the faults of the whole situation of men that’s in it, or women that’s in it. Justifying it. Sometimes in the name of the Church. “Well, the Church don’t look at it as they used to.” I haven’t seen that change...and I’ve heard no softening on interpretation of sexual sin. (DNN)

Another parent stated that “the only hope I have is if it is biological.” In other words, if there is choice involved then her son has violated the agency given him in his mortal life and will be held accountable in the afterlife.

Family members who expressed the greatest amount of tolerance for homosexuals were those who themselves had been through life experiences in which they needed tolerance and understanding from others and/or had been able to grasp a deeper understanding of the purpose of their religion than a focus on breaking of laws. They were able to operate from an orientation of love and compassion rather than judgment. They placed more emphasis on the internal qualities of individuals than on externals. Such family members were also more active in trying to help others, both inside and outside of the family, to adopt a more compassionate approach towards homosexual persons.
Just because their philosophy was different from that of other parents and family members should not suggest it was an easier challenge for them to face. Statements that follow detail the type of reasoning used by parents who were especially supportive in their approach towards their homosexual son, and working to influence attitudes of others:

I really believe that they don't consciously choose those feelings. I do believe that we can choose actions and our behavior, but I think we cannot judge these children for having those kind of feelings, and that we need to be able to love them, and we need to be able to give them some hope. Basically, it comes to understanding the challenge that they have. Your child is in pain and the pain that I feel is nothing compared to what he has been through, and is still going through." (DNG)

I have pointed out at different times, the fact that this child over here, “you sinned, you did this, you did this, did I ever not love you? You have done this and this, and this, have I ever not loved you?” And then, I'll be honest, there was a time in my life when I became addicted to drugs and ended up in treatment. I told my children the fact that, “you know I am a drug addict, do you love me less?” “No, we love you for who you are and how you treat us.” [Husband] is a recovering alcoholic. “Do you love your father less because you know that he is an alcoholic?” “No.” “Then how can you love your brother less because you know he is homosexual? We, at least, had choices. Your brother did not.” (DAN)

Support Desired Within Family

Four general types of desired family support were most frequently reported by Mormon male homosexuals: withholding of judgment; efforts made to understand homosexuality; open communication that includes sexual orientation; and inclusion in family structure and events. Regardless of whether the individual was disclosed or not, active or inactive LDS, gay or nongay, the type of family support most desired was the same for all respondents. Every male homosexual interviewed wanted acceptance from his family, not to be judged
based on a personal trait he experiences as an innate characteristic.

Because growing up in a society where homosexuals are ridiculed and condemned contributes to fear of disclosure and isolation from family support, there is a strong need to have family members respond in a loving and accepting way, to resist judgment and further condemnation. A statement by a disclosed respondent reinforces this idea:

My dad kind of, I just feel like he's not emotionally supportive right now. He hasn't asked once how I'm doing or how I'm feeling. It's more all focused on "why aren't you doing this?" or "this is no good, this is wrong," not "how do you feel?" (DNG)

Homosexual respondents desired compassion from their families. They wanted family members to make the investment to understand the difficulty of their experience and to show an empathetic response for emotional turmoil they have endured many years. Responses from two Mormon male homosexuals similar in their church affiliation, but different in sexual identities, follow. Both are active Mormon males, the first identified as gay, and the second, who did not see himself as gay:

[My parents] said, "You're our son and we love you." And that's been very nice to know that I have some kind of support. I wish other gays and lesbians could have the same experience I have [had]. Because I know many are turned away. And I think that's so ironic, with the way the Church teaches unconditional love and follow the Savior's teachings and His example, and then how quickly they can turn someone away. Especially their own son or their own daughter. And that is so disheartening. I think if it wasn't for my family and their support, I probably would have turned away from the Church completely. (DAG)

To show love and nonjudgment would be the two things I would ask for, and with that, first of all, nonjudgment. You never know what pain another person is going through.... Because of this experience, I am less judgmental, and I think that other people could extend the same
courtesy...and unconditional love. “Do the right thing or we won’t love you? Or we have to ostracize you?” What kind of message does that really send? (DAN)

While the same qualities, acceptance and nonjudgment, were specified foremost by both active and inactive Mormon male homosexuals, differences emerged between groups. These differences were more related to direction, than type, of family response. In other words, active Mormon males wanted their families to support them in remaining faithful to religious commitments, whereas inactive Mormon males wanted family support despite their choice to live outside Church standards. For both groups, family support meant standing by them through hardship and providing unconditional acceptance. Both groups expressed negative feelings about moral censure from parents and family members.

Secondary to understanding and acceptance from their families, “gay” Mormons most wanted family members to educate themselves about homosexuality and gay culture in a nonbiased way. Because social and, particularly, religious values are so strongly in opposition to homosexuals, family members struggled to understand. When asked if “they feel family members have been supportive,” one disclosed respondent described his disappointment in the lack of response perceived from parents and family members:

Yes and no. I mean, when it comes to the gay issue, definitely not.... It’s more what they haven’t done. They haven’t gone out of their way to educate themselves. They haven’t gone out of their way to ask me how I’m doing. I think they are afraid that if they ask me how I’m doing I will give them details about my sexual exploits or something. They assume I’m, I don’t know what they assume, actually, because they never talk about it. (DNG)
Another disclosed male felt his parents “raise the junk behind it more than they do the support.” He wanted his mother to “look at it as me being who I want to be and doing what I want to do, even though she doesn’t agree with it.” (DNG)

Family members typically found this difficult to do. Taking an interest in discussions about homosexual topics encouraged dialogue about issues that were often painful reminders, as expressed by one parent. “We agreed to disagree, and to just, almost like an unspoken, ‘we won’t go there.’ Because of the pain. For him and for us too.” Due to preexisting feelings of shame and rejection, it was very difficult for the homosexual male to ask for active interest, understanding, and dialogue on the part of family members. The feeling often prevailed amongst homosexual males that family members refused to put aside negative preconceptions. An inactive LDS, gay male suggested:

I think a lot of the misery comes from not feeling like your family really cares or dares confront the issue. I think there needs to be interest on the part of the family members, and especially the parents, in what’s going on in their child’s life, even if it’s something they have issues with. The only way to get over those issues is to talk about it. So, to show an interest in their child’s life. (DNG)

The same respondent continued with a comparison of family members whom he did and did not feel support from. He viewed his sister as making the investment to understand him when he said, “Support is different with different ones. My sister has been real supportive. She was going to come to a meeting and then wants to meet people, just to see what we do.” Whether or not it bothers her was not the real issue here. What this respondent was actually saying is that it does not feel like she is judging him. In fact, his sister did not like
it that he violated religious commandments but extended acceptance to him because she felt his personal value supercedes his behavior. He expressed that his father has remained biased rather than becoming informed:

My father says, “You could have a good life if you would change.” Yeah, well, that’s how I know he doesn’t know gay people because he’s assuming that because I’m gay I’m going to have a miserable life and everything else that comes with it. (DNG)

Communication was repeatedly emphasized as essential in supportive family relationships. There was a pervasive consensus that dialogue with family members on homosexual issues was needed. Two disclosed males described how they were affected by poor communication quality in their families:

I had a coworker start preaching hellfire and damnation to me because I’m gay.... That’s the first time in my life that I’ve had someone attack me directly, personally, someone who I considered my friend.... I didn’t have anywhere to go. It upset me a lot.... I thought I would be okay with people not liking me. And that was the first confrontation I had actually ever had [after coming out], and I couldn’t even talk to my family about it. (DNG)

In my family issues are generally not talked about. But because of this event and other events that have happened in our family in the last several years we’ve been forced to talk. We’ve been forced to do it. And our family is healthier because of it. I think if I had come out and said I’m gay and we never talked about it again, it would be awful. I think I would find myself alienated from my family. (DAG)

Clearly, communication was more effective when family members withheld personal judgment about sexual orientation, even though this was almost always difficult. One son explained, “People need an adult to talk to about it. And if all they are going to be told is you shouldn’t do that and it’s wrong, they are just going to quit talking to them.” (DNG) Even so, desire for communication seemed to hold regardless of the message conveyed. *Something* is better than *nothing*.
Negative feedback was not typically considered desirable, but it was interesting that one participant specifically stated his preference for honesty over skirting issues. "It's an interesting paradox. Because I don't want to hear bad things like that from their mouths, but I'd rather hear it from them than somebody else so that we could actually talk about it." (DNG)

After discovering his parents had suspected his homosexual orientation as he was growing up, one respondent made the point that he wished his parents had tried to talk with him sooner, when he was still a child. At the same time, he recognized the hesitation they would have felt addressing the issue:

The thing that made me very angry is that...they did nothing, as far as seeking help for me, or confronting the issue. It was just, if we don't ask and we don't confront it maybe it will go away. But at the same time, I was in that same frame of mind. Even though I wanted it, I felt that if I just ignored it, it would go away. (DAG)

When families were unable to get a dialogue going, sometimes communication was enhanced through therapy, as pointed out in the following statement:

I asked them to come to one family [therapy] session. It was very effective. It was a 2-hour session. They got a lot off of their chests that they didn't want to say to me directly. And I was able to say things directly to them with a mediator. (DAG)

Inclusion in family events and interaction was necessary for Mormon male homosexuals to feel emotional support and belonging. It appeared to depend not only on the sharing of family information and being invited to take part, but also on being treated equally with other family members. One male wanted his family "not to treat me any differently. I'm still the same person I've always been. I've withheld this piece of information from them but it doesn't change who I am."
Another individual expressed a similar sentiment. “I guess I just want the same from everyone. They don’t have to understand it. But just not to condemn me for it. Still seeing me as a person and not as a label.” (DNG) Being treated differently sent the message to the homosexual that he did not have an equal place in the family, as explained by one respondent, “Since I’ve come out, I’ve never once been asked to say the blessing on the food around the table. Not once in the last six years.” (DNG)

Mormon male homosexuals who were in relationships wanted inclusion of their same-sex partner in the family circle. The next statements came from disclosed respondents who were in committed relationships with partners more than a year. They talked about what was most important for them in terms of family support:

Probably just acceptance of my partner. It’s not something that I can just simply say, accept him. It’s something they have to feel and work out on their own. I’m not trying to press the issue but that’s what I would like is eventually for my mom to think of my partner and [me] as basically being married. (DNG)

What parents and other family members most wanted from the homosexual was maintaining his church and family ties. Religious commitments were the single most important issue raised. Family members hoped their son or brother would remain a part of the Mormon religion in whatever way was possible for him. Even though religious affiliation took precedence, it was also universally important to parents and siblings interviewed to hang on to family relationships.

It was difficult for family members to separate religion and family relationships. Mormons have very strong beliefs that family ties extend beyond
mortality and that one must be spiritually worthy at the termination of mortality to be granted this privilege. Given the eternal concept of family in the Mormon religion, facing discontinuance of the family line was profoundly disturbing for many family members. These thoughts created unconsolable distress. A father expressed this:

To live a gay lifestyle means that you've got to give up that whole family orientation and the idea of having children. The implication that has in the eternal scheme, that's probably been the roughest part of what we all had to deal with. Dealing with homosexuality on an intellectual or even a social level is not as difficult. But on a religious level for LDS families, I think it's extremely difficult. (DNG)

A mother shared her hopes:

Of course, I would love to have him say, "I do know that the Church is true, mom, and I want to live a life that will unite me with you in the eternities." As a mother I would like for him to be with me... I always have the hope that he can change and that at some point in time, he can acquire the desire to make the change. (DNG)

Based on such strong beliefs about family ties, emphasis placed by family members on maintaining a relationship with the homosexual reflected a hope that they might influence him to return to his religious commitments. The following interview dialogue with a sister illustrated this point:

Sister: Sometimes it's hard to ask him to spend time with us without [Partner] because we want to spend time with [Son] without [Partner]. We're just like, "How can we get [Son] away and be with him...?" (DNG)

Interviewer: Do you think the way you talk to him and relate to him changes when [Partner] is around?

Sister: We probably don't bring up, you know, obviously nothing religious is going to get brought up when [Partner] is here, but then maybe [Son] doesn't want anything religious brought up.

Such hopes provided a degree of resolution in this family. The sister's belief was
that a homosexual relationship is based on a worldly orientation and that it cannot bring the same fulfillment and happiness as a partnership that is congruent with religious belief.

Sometimes, Mormon parents with an actively gay son adopted the outlook that there was nothing they could want from him until he reconciled his lifestyle with religious expectations. They perceived a stalemate between them on the sexual orientation issue. When asked, "Is there anything you need from him at this time," the following responses were given:

I would like to have some open and frank discussion with him but right now his mind set is such that he would reject anything I said before I got it half out of my mouth. So, right now, no. To have him be able to, like I say, have a frank discussion with an open mind, I think, would be beneficial. But, like I said, I don't see that happening any time soon. (DNG)

I think that's a hard thing to think of because he believes that he's been that way his whole life and he has his reasons why. And so, I think...it's like an argument. Until you have all the facts believed upon the same way, you can't go any farther. (DNG)

Most of the family members interviewed wondered whether their homosexual son or brother was happy. This was especially true about those who were not active in the Church. The cause of this unhappiness was often attributed to homosexuality itself, a belief which could stem from several viewpoints. The biggest reason seemed to be the belief that violation of commandments can only bring unhappiness. Other important considerations, however, were the realization by family members that being homosexual presents inherent obstacles to happiness, such as social persecution and not having children.
Regardless of the reason, homosexuality was seen as a wedge that comes between the homosexual individual and his family, between his life choice and happiness. It came as no surprise, then, that the antidote to this unhappiness was thought to be religion. In other words, if the homosexual would suppress feelings and actions tied to his same-sex attractions and cling to family values founded on Church teachings, he would find happiness in this life and an eternal reward in the afterlife. A mother and father from different families talked about this:

I was just thinking, really the only thing I would want from him is for him to find some happiness, some real happiness. Not fleeting, up high as a kite and then bottoming out. To be more open. To talk to us. About everything. Not everything’s got to be gay oriented. To go back to when he was 12 or 13, when he talked to us, when he listened to us. (DNG)

[Family Member] had suggested that we all have a special fast day, maybe once a week, or at least at a given time. And then go to the temple. “Do you want us to make these efforts on your behalf?” That’s the closest [Son] has ever come to breaking, but he wouldn’t break. He wouldn’t break. And he didn’t want to talk any more. (DNN)

In the previous remarks, there seems to be a focus on what the family wants the homosexual son to do, instead of acknowledging what he feels he needs. A sense that the family was losing influence over the homosexual son or brother induced panic. The fear of losing contact was stated by a father:

He needs to have some stability. When he graduates, and is going to be going on to graduate school, who knows where...[and] it's going to be tough because we’re not going to be close enough where we can be that much of a support to him.... [so] it’s going to be tough on him, real tough. (DNG)

A barrier to family communication and interaction mentioned by one family member was when the homosexual adopted a victim role and tried to elicit
sympathy from the family because of his sexual orientation. This was experienced as a manipulation, leaving family members feeling uncomfortable.

I don't like it when he makes an issue of “feel sorry for me because I am gay.” That doesn't go with me.... He'll say he doesn't want to be treated differently, but sometimes I think he does. (DNG)

Given time, some families also wanted increased contact for greater opportunity to understand and show support. After being asked if family members have ever had a discussion together about her son's sexual orientation, one mother replied that they had not up to this point, but the idea of it seemed important and she intended to follow through on it. Both motivations for contact, family ties and understanding, came forward in the following interview dialogue with another family member.

Family Member: I don't think he needs to come out and be like, oh, last night I went to the movies with this guy and then we made out. But more of, you know, I'm still part of the family and I still care and that type of an openness. (DNG)

Interviewer: Do you think your family would want to know more about what's going on inside of him?

Family Member: Oh yeah. Yeah. Because then you'd have a little more background. I know it's hard for us to understand where he's coming from and what he feels. Because he hasn't really said, “It hurts so bad because of this and this.” He doesn't say anything like that.

Family members may need help recognizing and talking about nonsexual issues.

Support Desired Within Church

Because the majority of participants in this study had such an adverse experience growing up homosexual in the Mormon Church, they felt it was important both to stop the proliferation of negative attitudes and comments
displayed by Church members and leaders about homosexuals. Additionally, they felt Church leaders need to provide better support to homosexual Church members, especially at an early age. Many felt that more open dialogue would have played a constructive role in their own development, as expressed by the following two disclosed respondents:

It would be nice if they said when you're 11 or 12 you'll notice some changes. You'll find yourself having feelings you've never had. Some of you will have them towards women but some of you might have them towards men. (DNG)

I wonder if I was able to openly talk about all this growing up as a child, I don't know if I would be living this lifestyle or not.... So much of you is this feeling that something is wrong with me, like I have done something wrong, or like I was created wrong, and I am a freak, and this is the outside me, and this is the inside me, and this is like the hell that never goes away, and you never talk about it. (DNN)

Family members also felt that accurate information is needed from the Church that comes when the male homosexual is still young. A sister and a mother from different families talked about the frustration they felt because the Church readily provided condemnation but not very much constructive guidance, an unbalanced approach. One mother wished “there was some way that we could have identified it earlier and had more openness.” (DNG)

My feeling is that these kids know it at a young age and if they have a priesthood leader who can love them and work with them [it would help]. Otherwise, they struggle in division, by themselves. I personally feel that's why [Son] went to the [gay support group], is because he had no one here to turn to. If he had a good resource in the Church, [so] he would have felt that, “I can go talk to this person and they will love me.” (DNG)

One active participant confided in eight different ecclesiastical leaders (six bishops, one stake president, one mission president) without finding any helpful
counsel on dealing with sexual orientation. He felt the interactions were positive but assistance was lacking. He said, "I have yet to talk to a Church leader who knows very much at all, or who knows anything about what resources the Church offers for people who struggle with same-sex attraction." (NAN) Inaccurate counsel from Church leaders often resulted in additional trauma to Mormon male homosexuals who placed confidence in them as expressed by a nondisclosed, active Mormon male:

The thing I wish they would have told me was that it was going to be more of a long-lasting problem, and that I would need a lot more help than just, "read your scriptures and it will go away."... I told my mission president and...he [said], "Let me make you a promise. If you serve your mission faithfully and do well, and everything you are supposed to do, by the end of your mission, you will forget that you even had this problem in the first place."... In the long run, it just maybe put the blame on myself more when it didn’t work out. And then it makes me always think back that maybe I just didn’t do as well as I should have on my mission. (NAN)

Family members oftentimes also felt frustration and helplessness due to a lack of available help from ecclesiastical leaders. If they cannot get information and spiritual guidance from their bishops, where else in the Church can they go?

Calling my bishop wouldn’t have done any good.... He didn’t have a clue. Because I had talked to my bishop about [Brother]. You know, how do I react, what do I do? And I didn’t know if it was okay to accept him and love him. (DNG)

My son once tried to talk to his bishop about this problem when the bishop was trying to get him to go on a mission. The bishop just dismissed it and did not try to help him at all, when he was reaching out for help. That broke my heart. I do not place blame on the bishop. He was older and I’m sure he just didn’t know what to do. That was sad. My son had earlier gone inactive and was struggling with his feelings. He became active again hoping that would help him get rid of the feelings. It did not. (DNG)
One of the ways that information was perceived to be lacking was in the area of sexuality, in general. Lack of openness about sex within the Church complicated the challenge Mormon homosexuals faced coming to terms with their sexual orientation. It was often mentioned by homosexual participants that the Church does not provide enough information about sexuality, and that the information they do present is damaging to them. Part of the reason behind these feelings was that they were already experiencing a large amount of guilt about their sexuality and then internalized even more shame and guilt from what they came to recognize as misleading information. Communication from Church leaders about sexuality was often interpreted negatively. Statements from a disclosed and a nondisclosed participant reflect how sensitively a homosexual youth might interpret ecclesiastical teachings: “I thought that just admitting to having these feelings was grounds for excommunication.” (DNG)

I remember one of my first recollections was reading *The Miracle of Forgiveness*. It was one of the things my bishop required of me to go on a mission. I remember I got into the section where Kimball says that murder is here and homosexuality is right here [gestures]. Now, if I remember the Bible, it lists homosexuality with adultery. How come the adulterers are not on the edge of that cliff ready to be pushed over? (NNG)

Respondents generally felt characterizations of homosexuals within the Church are based on prejudice. Intolerance was perceived as affecting individual development, as well as responsiveness from family and Church members. Views were expressed on this by disclosed males. One recommended that, “I think the Church needs to say, “Do not push your child away.” (DNG) The other said, “Looking at the Church, I sometimes think that, “If you would just have more
compassion toward people, that love would help them through it.” (DAN)

An important factor leading to prejudicial attitudes was lack of understanding. Several males suggested that Church administrators could show more support to homosexual members by providing accurate information. One undisclosed male felt informing local leaders was necessary to effect attitude changes in members:

If they disseminated more helpful information to bishops and take presidents so they would know what resources were available. I think that would help. To me, the whole educational process is people understanding why this occurs and that what they can do helps get rid of the hate and fear and prejudices. A lot of it is understanding, I think, because you can get up in testimony meeting and talk about a problem you had with alcoholism and everybody would welcome you with open arms, but you couldn’t get up and say this in testimony meeting without people, you know, thinking totally horrible things about you. (NAN)

Regardless of their age or developmental life stage, Mormon male homosexuals felt the Church espouses attitudes of condemnation and intolerance towards homosexuals. This was experienced to be hostile and rejecting. Besides feeling misunderstood by Church leaders, Mormon male homosexuals generally felt that leaders were not willing to talk about it. Many hoped for a more active effort from ecclesiastical leaders to teach Church members tolerance for homosexual members. A disclosed male shared his view:

My suggestion for the leadership of the LDS Church from the prophet all the way down to the local bishops is to teach tolerance and the value of diversity. Yes, morally, they believe this is a sin. I can respect that. That’s their belief and I’m not going to go and tell them that they’re wrong, but the teachings of the gospel are teachings of love and respect and tolerance of those around you. Many times, they say if you have more faith, if you get another blessing, if you fast, if you get married, it will go away. Poor advice. And the Church is losing valuable people. Because young men and young women think if I’m gay there’s no place for me in
the Mormon Church. (DAG)

No respondents in this study believed the Church would actually change its policy to accept homosexual behavior or relationships. However, several felt that the Church needs to make a greater attempt to include homosexual and gay members. Universally, they wanted greater understanding and acceptance through church, as explained by two disclosed males:

I went from believing in it to completely not believing in it, and hating the Church, and now going back to saying, “Well, do I believe in it? If I believe in it, what do I believe myself? If the prophet says, don’t be gay, but I feel I am gay, how can I be honest with myself and be gay and still be in the Church?” And that really puts you on the spot.... Because I’m gay, I’m distancing myself from God. And that produces a lot of guilt and self-loathing. (DNG)

For a while, it seemed like they were going on a pretty good path. They finally said, “It’s not a choice but you just have to be celibate.” At least they were trying to justify their beliefs with homosexuality. And then conference came and President Hinckley threw it all out the window when he said “so-called gays and lesbians.” So, it diminished the whole group to people who just think [italics added] they’re gay. (DNG)

Another respondent described his experience trying to attend church after coming out. He had the perception of being judged by congregational members. During a time when he felt he was finally attempting to face his sexual orientation in a positive light, public response influenced him to distance himself from the Church. He said:

Right after I came out...I went to church the next Sunday, and, oh, the stares I got. It was like, really uncomfortable. And I’m sure I wouldn’t get those stares outside the Church. Maybe it’s because they knew me my entire life. And, all of a sudden, it was like they were, I felt like they were looking at me differently. I got those stares and it really made me uncomfortable. It made me never want to go back again. (DNG)
Nearly all family members interviewed were clearly opposed to homosexuality and strongly in support of Church leaders. In fact, it was important to them to defend their religious beliefs and their Church. Nevertheless, they still felt that attitudes towards homosexual members within the Church are founded on prejudice and lack compassion and understanding. Although not necessarily the official position of the Church, there was a prevalent perception of strong condemnation from Church leaders and members toward homosexuals. This was often quite agonizing for parents and other family members. A mother and father from different families emphasized this point:

For homosexuals, it tears to the core of who you are. If my daughter gets pregnant out of wedlock, you confess...you say “I’m sorry,” you don’t do it any more, but there comes a point in your life where sex will be okay within the bounds of marriage. It is all right, you can still love and still be loved. The homosexual person does not have that option. (DNG)

Why has the Church been so definitive in their approach to this when science has been so insecure in it and undefined about what causes it? Why has the Church made edicts and decrees against gays when these people, who are hopeless people.... In my estimation, they didn’t choose to be gay, they were just born. And yet, to come out and target the gays and say, “You’re gay and, therefore, we’re not going to allow you in our society.” They’ve been very strong on that. (DAG)

Following is dialogue between a mother and father on what they felt is confusion within the Church about sexual orientation and behavior. They attributed some of the confusion to failure on the part of Church leaders to communicate openly:

Mother: The distinction between the person and the act just really needs to be separated. So that if someone has those feelings and doesn’t understand them, that they would feel comfortable going to their bishop and talking about it without the fear that they would be excommunicated because they are so evil. (DNG)

Father: Well, I think a lot of people feel the same. And separating the
orientation from the behavior, letting them know that the orientation can be, for some people, quite natural, can be created in other people. But it isn't across the board the same thing for everyone...and that if you have that orientation, it doesn't make you an evil, bad person.

Family members saw ignorance and prejudice among Church leaders and members causing alienation of male homosexuals. This was particularly upsetting to them because they viewed such responses as contradictory to the most central teachings of their religion. They repeatedly emphasized that Church members need to love unconditionally and make a greater effort to respect the difficulty homosexual persons experience trying to live with a burden they have not chosen. A mother and sister from different families expressed their feelings:

The human being is still there. It does not affect their need to be loved by God. It does not affect their need to be loved by family. And I really think that they are in a class by themselves. I do not know how to help other than to educate and let them know you have to love the person, regardless of their sexual orientation. (DAN)

As soon as people hear homosexual, they think, “Oh my gosh, I’ve got to stay away from them.” And I think that people just need to get over that whole thing and to be brought up thinking that, well, it’s okay to be different, and just because you don’t believe that way, doesn’t make them a bad person whatsoever. (DNG)

Perhaps what was less commonly expressed was that they themselves are impacted by the same intolerance perceived from fellow Church members towards homosexuals. This was reflected in a mother’s comment, “When I was in the relief society presidency I thought, ‘If anybody knew what my family was going through right now, I would be released tomorrow.’” (DNG)

In fact, comments made by active Mormon parents and family members were most passionate in regard to the lack of support shown by members of their
Church. The idea was repeatedly shared that much of the torment they feel, and they have seen their son endure, is a consequence of negative response from leaders and Church members. The impact on family members, of insensitivity from Church leaders and fellow members, was articulated by mothers in the following remarks:

It seems like there's always somebody in some Sunday School class that has something to say. Whether it's about someone's sexual orientation, or a gay joke. This happened in a priesthood [meeting] that he went to. It wasn't the time or the place. (DNG)

The people in the Church are creating the pain. They are really creating more pain than they deserve. They have pain anyway, but they are creating a great deal more. And, we've done it ourselves. We've made comments. We've looked down, you know. It's amazing when the shoe is on the other foot. But it has been, in a way, a blessing to us because of our ability to see people differently and not be so narrow minded. (DAG)

Family members were unanimous in expressing that the Church leadership needs to do more to influence the attitudes and response of members in the Church. “Well, if they could change the hearts of the people.” (DNG) A sister commented:

Maybe we shouldn't have had to go to a support group to realize that it was okay to love our brother. The membership needs to know that we need to have a Christlike attitude. And we need to love them. We don't have to accept what they're doing because it's a sin, but just like any other sin, we have to love them because that's the only way we even have a prayer of helping them. (DNG)

Because parents frequently recognized early on in their son's life that he was becoming alienated from fellowship in the Church, they suggested more effort by Church leaders to integrate boys with disparate interests in social activities. “First of all, he did not fit in. That's because before coming out, he just
was not athletic, he didn’t have any interests similar to male friends.” (DAG)

And the thing that would irritate [Son] is he got to a certain point in, once you got past scouts and they stopped their camping and their merit badges and things like that.... But after that, all they wanted to do was play basketball. And [Son] didn’t want to play basketball. And the guys would harass him because he didn’t want to play basketball. Well, all the sudden, it became this distance. (DNG)

One mother pointed out that women and mothers have an important perspective on how families and Church leaders could approach homosexual youth, but that is being largely ignored:

It’s critical that they talk to women, not just the men. [Husband] and I perceive things from totally different perspectives. And when men sit in their priesthood meetings and never pick up a woman’s perspective, and they haven’t had to deal with it in their own home, they are trying to say, okay, how can we deal with this? [When] they only listen and get input from the male perspective, I think they’ll lose a lot that is promoted by a mother and woman’s perspective. (DNG)

Although their approach did not always match that of the homosexual son, family members wanted to find a way to help them. Not only do families need help to know how to respond to and support the homosexual son but, also in terms of their own personal dilemma facing homosexuality, they need understanding, tolerance, and resources of support. A mother and a father, from different families, responded to these needs:

[Families] need some help in understanding the situation. They need to be able to go to Church leaders...or have Church leaders refer them to counselors in the Church who understand the situation, who can help them to know that this was not something that their child chose. Parents and family members need to have some hope, and it's not enough to say, “Love one another as Jesus loves us,” it's not enough to say, “Keep the Commandments.” It’s just not enough. At times, I could call and say, “What do I do now? What do I do?” Because I had no idea. And for parents just to know that they’re safe in going somewhere to ask for help. And to help the rest of the membership to understand not to be
judgmental, which we hear all the time, but we don't know how to practice it. (DNG)

Well, I think this friends and family support group is a good idea. They probably need to have that going more broadly and make it more widely known that it's available. I think people deal with this issue for years before they ever hear of that. (DNG)

Because Church doctrine does not accept deviations from heterosexuality, and homosexuality is clearly considered wrong, reconciliation of religious belief with homosexuality was extremely challenging for study participants. Only a small minority of family members were successful in doing so and, even in these cases, there was not a complete resolution.

Mormon male homosexuals were, likewise, largely unable to find resolution to this religious dilemma. They were faced with deciding how to cope with the circumstances of their lives while still achieving some degree of self-acceptance. Without clear solutions, some separated themselves from their religious beliefs and church. Others remained active and continued living a double life. Being homosexual was most challenging for those who held to their religious beliefs because there was less support available within the Church.

Much of the difficulty families and homosexual sons face related to stigma and condemnation within their own religious community. Family members were torn between religious values and an unwanted reality. They felt obligated to adopt the LDS Church position on homosexuality. Some family members distanced themselves from their son based on religious beliefs. Others found comfort in beliefs they felt directed them to be accepting and supportive.
Homosexual respondents hoped for their families to become informed, to have open communication, and to include them in family activities. Parents and other family members placed priority on continued ties to church and family. They wanted the homosexual son to live his life in harmony with religious teachings. It was also implied that family members need understanding from homosexual sons for the trauma they experience facing the disclosure.

When asked what they felt would be helpful in the way of support from the Church, there was consensus among all participants. An overwhelming majority of male homosexuals and family members expressed that their single most important need was for Church leaders to show a caring and tolerant attitude and to encourage Church members to do the same. It is noteworthy that this response was identical to what male homosexuals most wanted from their families. Both male homosexuals and their families expressed a desire for increased response and support from LDS Church leaders. They felt that prevailing attitudes were based on prejudice and were destructive. Dialogue from Church leaders that is more open, occurs earlier, and shows compassion characterizes what families most needed.
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION

This study is one of the first to investigate homosexuals and family members from the same families. Studies that focus on homosexuality in Mormon families are also rare. Perceptions of how Mormon male homosexuals and their family members experienced the same disclosure event, and its impact on their relationships, has raised questions as well as provided new insights. Differences of perception between homosexuals and family members primarily were based on differences in personal experiences and values.

The study questions addressed in this discussion are (1) In what ways were family relationships perceived as facilitating or interfering with the decision to disclose sexual orientation? (2) How did coming out affect subsequent family relationships? (3) How could understanding and intimacy be enhanced between Mormon homosexuals and their families to increase satisfaction in those relationships? Following a discussion of the findings reported, limitations of the current study, future directions for research, and implications and recommendations of this study will be addressed.

Development of homosexual persons cannot be understood outside the context in which it is observed (D'Augelli, 1994). Any meaningful understanding of development among homosexuals generally must focus on the systems that comprise that context. Data about Mormon male homosexuals in this study are culturally influenced. As noted by Sameroff (1997):
The most basic principle to emerge in a general theory of development is that individuals can never be removed from their contexts. Whether the goal is understanding causal connections, predicting outcomes, or intervention, it will not be achieved by removing the individual from the conditions that regulate development. (p. 22)

Additionally, sociohistorical context is significant, both in terms of self-identification and disclosure. Therefore, respondent age is an important marker when interpreting these research findings.

Development at the individual level is dynamic, a product of multiple factors that are, themselves, dynamic forces (Bronfenbrenner, 1995). Those factors most salient in this process are individual biopsychological characteristics and environmental interactions (Bronfenbrenner, 1995). Both immediate interactions (significant human relationships shaped by belief systems, attitudes, and affiliations) and those that are more remote (historical period, biological and social transitions, and interdependency of family members' lives across generations) interface with individual characteristics to produce “progressively more complex reciprocal interactions” (Bronfenbrenner, 1995, p. 620). Thus, not only does sexual orientation substantially influence individual development at the biopsychological plane, but so, also, do reciprocal interactions with family, church, and society. Borrowing from Bronfenbrenner's (1986) family ecology paradigm, developmental models must focus simultaneously on impinging external systems with affiliated mechanisms, and effects of those forces on family process. An understanding about the developmental constraints that Mormon male homosexuals experience must be derived from this context.
A large majority of heterosexual adults consider it impossible to alter their sexual orientation. Conversely, the assumption seems to exist among many that expecting homosexual persons to become heterosexual is not asking too much; it is viewed as an entirely different question. This one-sided view is based on attitudes that homosexual attraction is unnatural and/or immoral. Prejudicial attitudes towards homosexuals persist despite prevailing opinions of most experts in the field that sexual orientation is an enduring trait, not amenable to change (Burr, 1996).

Subsequently, for heterosexuals in a heterosexual society, it is difficult to imagine negotiating childhood, adolescence, and adulthood in a climate of hostility directed to oneself, from multiple sources, based on sexual orientation, that is manifest as physical and verbal violence through persecution, threats, assault, jokes, ridicule, and condemnation (Garnets, Herek, & Levy, 1993). This is not a one-time incident or attack but a pervasive life experience. Such contextual influences on development can be profound (D'Augelli, 1998).

For homosexuals in a Mormon cultural context, the developmental complexity is compounded. While Mormon male homosexuals face challenges similar to many other homosexuals, an important difference, and, perhaps, the most influential contextual variable in their experience, is religion. Because religious culture is strong among faithful members of the Mormon Church, uniformity of values is high within their communities and families. How individuals come to access, explore, utilize, and conceptualize their environments is contingent upon overarching belief systems, including religious beliefs.
(Bronfenbrenner, 1993). For participants in this study, family and religious affiliation are essential, contextual influences. Family and religious variables exert influences both concomitant to and independent of the broader social milieu.

Like homosexual persons generally, Mormon male homosexuals also experience a minority status and social stigma based on a core personality trait. However, Mormon male homosexuals in this study also often experienced continuous condemnation originating in religious doctrine and the attitudes shaped by it. In a very real sense, attitudes define a social context (Lavine & Snyder, 2000). It follows that personal constructions of identity and security within one’s social environment are, in part, determined by attitudinal cues (Cox & Gallois, 1996; Marinoble, 1997).

Within such a context of negative attitudes, not only did homosexual respondents acquire self-abasing judgments, but also expectations of nonacceptance from family and others. This is in line with previous research showing that societal prejudice towards homosexuals promotes feelings of shame and internalized homophobia among homosexuals (Allen & Oleson, 1999; Ross & Rosser, 1996). Even more traumatic, for the religiously devout, is the belief that they are also condemned by God. A statement by a parent emphasized this point:

I think, in fact, that was the biggest concern that [Son] had. He asked the question, “Why? Why God? Why am I like this? I’ve done everything that the Church has asked, my parents have asked. I’ve been a model person. Why am I like this? Does God hate me, has he put me aside? Where do I stand in the realm of my association with God?” (DAG)
Among homosexual respondents in this study, the cumulative effect of negative social and religious responses created both negative self-perceptions and secrecy. Consequently, the outcome of religious influences on Mormon homosexuals and their families was nearly always to inhibit the disclosure, discussion, and reconciliation of sexual orientation. Even anticipation of attitudes not expressed by family and community members functioned to silence disclosure and dialogue. In many cases, awareness of an isolated negative account of another homosexual's disclosure had a powerful influence on the respondent's decision not to disclose himself. When homosexual individuals expected threat from support persons in their social context, there was substantial risk of not finding help when it was most needed, if at all.

Although simultaneously providing a shield from further assaults, resulting social isolation eroded opportunities for constructive affirmations from others. This makes particular sense when oriented within the context of identity formation, where internalized shame and a lack of externally attributed value is linked to self-construction (Berzonsky, 1990). Erikson's (1968) description of the substance and process of personal identity development seems particularly relevant to the experience of Mormon homosexuals in this study:

Identity formation employs a process of simultaneous reflection and observation, a process taking place on all levels of mental functioning, by which the individual judges himself in the light of what he perceives to be the way others judge him in comparison to themselves. (p. 22)

Self-identity emerges from experiences in which temporarily confused selves are successfully [or unsuccessfully] reintegrated in an ensemble of roles which secure social recognition. (p. 211)
Construction of personal identity is contingent upon organizing experiences within one's social environment. Potential threats to identity formation among Mormon male homosexuals include self-loathing and shame. These feelings not only perpetuated isolation from church and family, but also made it difficult to know others perceived as similar to themselves, who might otherwise have been a resource for belonging and support.

Given their religious climate, identifying oneself as homosexual was particularly challenging for Mormon males. By comparison to other homosexuals, the self-identification process among Mormon males appeared to be delayed. The time interval when Mormon male homosexuals remained silent about their sexual orientation, and without emotional support from their families, was quite prolonged—in most cases, 10 years or longer. Time between recognition and disclosure has been discussed by D'Augelli et al. (1998) as a profound contextual variable affecting identity and relationships.

Similar challenges might be expected among males within other religious groups. A study about Catholic male homosexuals also suggested that those who were more religious during their adolescent years had a more difficult experience coming out (Toman, 1997). An important deviation from the pattern with Mormon male homosexuals in this study, however, is the lack of difficulty Catholic homosexuals reported in achieving a positive gay adult identity, even though adolescent and adult religiosity were positively correlated. One possible explanation for this discrepant finding between religious groups is strength of social control. That is, violation of norms would be expected to meet greater
resistance within churches that hold the most severe punishments over their members for infractions (Heckathorn, 1990). Cochran and Beeghley (1991) found that as denominational proscriptiveness increased, attitudes condemning homosexuality were stronger. This finding can be applied to attitudes held within the Mormon religious community.

Enculturation from the Mormon community plays a substantial role in determining a personal sense of identity among Mormons. Mormon male homosexuals who grew up on track with other boys in the culture envisioned a future that characteristically includes priesthood service, dating, mission, marriage and family, and life within the religious community. Instead, young Mormon homosexual men were confronted with the reality of homosexual orientation and faced the question, “Who am I now?” This presented a peculiar challenge for many Mormon male homosexuals because the Church does not provide any overt validation of who they perceive themselves to be. They were left alone to establish a self-definition based on negative messages prevalent in the Church and community.

In this study, both male homosexuals and their family members were strongly influenced by Mormon religious doctrine and culture, including statements and actions of Church leaders. Consequently, Mormon male homosexuals experienced censure, both perceived and real, from Church leaders and from family members. Knowledge of religious prohibitions against homosexuality contributed substantially to the hesitation felt by Mormon males to reveal their homosexual feelings to family members. In fact, religious
condemnation appeared to be the primary influence inhibiting not only the disclosure process, but family communication after disclosure occurred. It both reduced the likelihood of direct disclosure to family members, and postponed the timing of disclosure.

Motivations underlying these decisions were based on strong emotions that simultaneously intensified the importance of disclosure and the fear of doing so. Mormon homosexuals were faced with an emotional paradox. They felt a need to distance themselves from the Church in order to establish an affirmative sense of self and, at the same time, a loss of self based on the dissolution of lifelong ties to the Mormon religion and culture. Family members faced their own paradox. The closer they aligned themselves with official Church views on homosexuality, the more difficulty they faced maintaining satisfactory relationships with their homosexual son or brother.

Cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) provides a conceptual understanding at the individual level for the experience of Mormon male homosexuals and family members dealing with conflicting values. It defines a state of discomfort resulting from beliefs, attitudes, or actions that are incongruent (Aronson, 1997). Homosexuals primarily experienced dissonance in relation to their conflicting religious values and sexual orientation. In some cases there were also conflicts experienced between homosexual behavior and religious belief. Family members were most commonly in conflict over accepting their homosexual son or brother while remaining congruent with their religious belief. Some, especially those who extended the greatest support, also faced the
dilemma of legitimizing homosexual orientation when it is clearly condemned by their Church.

Cognitive dissonance theory predicts that discomfort created by internal conflicts results in an attitude shift to resolve the state of conflict (Aronson, 1997). For some, a reduction of discomfort was achieved by lessening their religious beliefs or behaviors, reducing their dissonance, but, for most, there was either only partial, or no, resolution to the conflicts. Similarly, for family members, neither legitimation of homosexual orientation nor display of acceptance towards the homosexual son resulted in a lessening of religious belief or affiliation. Instead, a permanent state of dissonance was created. The theory may best describe male homosexuals who act upon their sexual orientation and then either repent and return to the Church, or denounce their religious beliefs altogether. At the same time, however, it was common for homosexual sons and family members to make some accommodation for homosexual orientation within their religious belief framework.

Cognitive dissonance theory also ties experienced dissonance to actions that are freely chosen. Dissonance due to conflict between sexual orientation and Mormon religious belief is an inherent condition, beyond individual regulation. Further, as reported, most homosexual respondents still held to a substantial portion of their belief system, regardless of lifestyle, making it difficult to ever achieve a satisfactory resolution to the internal conflict. Some participants felt same-sex attraction since early adolescence without actually engaging in any homosexual behavior until adulthood. Thus, these facets of the
theory are less useful in characterizing the primary issues participants described.

One important contribution of the theory is increased awareness that a perpetual state of dissonance could be expected to have adverse effects on Mormon homosexuals and family members who remain unresolved. However, placing responsibility on the individual to resolve the conflicts is not only unfair, but an oversimplification of the dilemma. From this point of view, cognitive dissonance theory lacks sufficient comprehensiveness to account for reciprocal influences of societal, religious, and family influences on the individual.

For male homosexuals in this study, disclosure of sexual orientation was in no way trivial. Realistically, a high probability exists that many Mormon males who grow up having homosexual feelings never come to a point of disclosure at all. Findings by Phillips (1993) that Mormon male homosexuals as a group are not likely to come out to their families are supported by data from this study, in which respondents indicated intentions to keep sexual orientation hidden as long as possible. Further, Mormon male homosexuals who are married may be less likely to come out, especially to siblings and parents, than those who are not married. When disclosure did occur, the specifics of how it happened varied from person to person, but the general process was similar.

For Mormon male homosexuals in this sample who disclosed, there was a pattern to the coming out process. The majority tried to hide their sexual orientation for as long as they could, with varying degrees of success. Some claimed to withhold their sexual orientation from parents to protect them from emotional pain. In reality, such justifications may relate even more to their own
desire to be protected from parents' reactions to the disclosure (Boon & Miller, 1999). Eventually, those who initiated family disclosure felt compelled to break their silence. They reached a point where they were no longer able, emotionally, to tolerate the secrecy and isolation. Unless found out, others seemed inclined to continue their secrecy with family members.

When it came to increased openness in communication with family members and others, the one quality identified as most important by all male homosexuals interviewed for this study was an accepting response. Conversely, what they most feared was judgment and rejection from family members. When they anticipated acceptance and emotional support from family members, Mormon male homosexuals were more likely to disclose their sexual orientation to them and, subsequently, to have continued dialogue. Given that a nonjudgmental perception of family members was considered essential to facilitate the disclosure process, it was significant that most participants in this study did not initially come out to parents, and about half did not formally approach parents at all.

Instead, parents first became cognizant of their son's sexual orientation through a third party or by recognition of clues such as absence of heterosexual dating and marriage relationships, and the presence of one or more intimate relationships with other males. Thus, parents, in most cases, already knew or suspected their son's sexual orientation. Based on larger samples, other researchers have reported a lower proportion of suspecting parents (Robinson et al., 1989). This may be an artifact of later disclosure age among Mormon
homosexuals; the longer they remain secret about their sexual orientation, the more likely parents are to find evidence of it.

Disclosure among Mormon male homosexuals usually began outside the immediate family and, later, carried over to family members, with parents typically being the last ones approached. The most likely figure chosen for the initial disclosure by homosexuals was a friend or acquaintance, another homosexual person, or, less commonly, a bishop or sibling. While this disclosure pattern was similar to that of other male homosexuals in the U.S. (Savin-Williams, 1998), Mormon homosexuals appeared to be less likely than others to come out to family at all. When disclosure occurred, it was at a later age, generally the mid- to late twenties. This was despite a trend towards increasing tolerance and earlier age of disclosure in society generally (Savin-Williams & Diamond, 1999). Evidence also exists that self-identification is occurring at earlier ages (Offer & Boxer, 1991).

In comparison to findings by D’Augelli et al. (1998) that most males had disclosed to family by age 21, with mothers most frequently being approached first, Mormon homosexuals in the present study not only disclosed considerably later but were more likely to come out to a sibling than a parent. This finding is consistent with Savin-Williams (1998). Only two individuals came out to family first; in one case to both parents and, in the other, to a sister. Both cases followed suicide attempts and disclosure was initiated by family members. All other first disclosures occurred outside the immediate family. Subsequent family disclosures that were initiated by the homosexual included six cases to a sibling
first (38%) and one first disclosure to parents (6%).

The fact that disclosure typically occurred later among Mormon male homosexuals, during the mid- to later twenties, has significance in the Mormon community because the majority of active Mormon males spend two years as a missionary for their church between ages 19 and 21. During their mission, the hope existed for many of these young men that their service to God would earn them the *divine* removal of homosexual attractions. They were generally disappointed when they completed their missions and returned home, because not only had their sexual feelings not diminished, but had actually increased in intensity.

Even though an increase in sexual impetus among celibate males at this age can be considered a normal occurrence, the problem lies in the conflict between seemingly natural feelings and religious values. This conflict is exacerbated because the next expected developmental task, from a religious and cultural standpoint, is heterosexual marriage. It seems more likely that self-identification, perceiving oneself as homosexual, begins to solidify at this point. This may explain why disclosure occurred later. Research has linked sexual identity development with coming out (Sophie, 1985/1986). Amount of time since self-identifying as homosexual may be more predictive of when disclosure occurs than is chronological age.

In one third of families in this study, parents were actually the ones to initiate disclosure of their son’s sexual orientation within the family. Although disclosure to parents was avoided, and initial disclosures to parents were rare, in
all but one family parents were eventually informed of their son's sexual orientation. Mothers were almost always the first parent confided in. In a few cases, feelings of urgency prompted disclosure to both parents simultaneously. In only one family where the son disclosed to parents before a sibling was it a face-to-face encounter.

In four of five families where the first family disclosure was to parents, the homosexual son was an oldest child. Being an oldest child would likely reduce confiding in siblings, because all brothers and sisters would be younger. When siblings were disclosed to first, it was nearly always an older sibling. Of respondents who had not disclosed to family members, and who were not an oldest child, nearly all imagined they would first confide in an older sibling, usually a sister.

Fathers were never disclosed to first. This finding is in line with previous research (D'Augelli et al., 1998). Homosexual respondents had a particularly difficult time talking to their fathers about this issue. This may be based on an awareness that males, in general, have more homophobic attitudes than females (Heaven & Oxman, 1999). When considering the type of responses a Mormon homosexual expects to receive from fathers, brothers, and Church leaders (who are primarily male), this can be significant. Given the relatively negative reaction of fathers compared to mothers following disclosure, hesitation felt by most homosexual sons to disclose to their fathers appears to have been justified (D'Augelli et al., 1998; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 1999).
Examination of sample demographics suggested that rural mothers had a harder time with the sexual orientation disclosure, where more traditional attitudes would be expected. These data also linked higher education and income for fathers to a negative response initially towards the homosexual family member. While these associations must be viewed with great caution given small sample size and nonrandom selection, it is conceivable that social status influences response through exposing higher status families to greater public embarrassment. It is also possible that the attitudes of educated fathers' run counter to expectation because their religious beliefs are stronger than social influences. A related and important consideration is the status of the family within the Church, which may be different from their socioeconomic status. No conclusions can be drawn without replication based on a larger sample size.

While most respondents expected a strong, if not harsh, reaction from parents when they came out to them, the actual response was more moderate, especially from mothers. This is consistent with other studies (Cramer & Roach, 1988; Holtzen et al., 1995). Some predictions of parent reactions made by homosexual sons were too strong but, in most cases, reactions were nearly always emotionally distressful.

Because most family members had suspected the existence of their son or brother's homosexual orientation, initial thoughts and reactions of parents were hard to determine. The most commonly reported immediate reactions were shock, fear, guilt, and anger, which related to receiving dissonant information. Similar reactions have been reported by other researchers (Ben-Ari, 1995;
Robinson et al., 1989). Feelings of grief and regret developed more over time for Mormon parents as the reality of the situation set in. The disclosure posed an immense threat to value-based assumptions, sense of well-being, and standing in the community, combined with loss of control over a profoundly changed family situation.

Some responses from family members were helpful while other responses were perceived as nonsupportive or even hostile by the homosexual son. For example, when family members withheld judgment and tried to listen, male homosexuals felt supported. Even though many family responses cannot be considered benign, family members apparently tried to do what they felt was best at the time, in a difficult situation.

In this study, mothers were more able to come to terms with their son’s sexual orientation than were fathers. They also showed significantly more emotional support towards the son, both initially and over time. Fathers had a much harder experience, partly due to more negative views about homosexuality typically held by males (Herek, 1998). Fathers’ difficulties in coming to terms with their sons’ sexual orientation is also evidenced by their underrepresentation in family interviews. Fathers were nearly always more hesitant in consenting to be interviewed. Fewer fathers were approached to participate in interviews, or willing to participate when asked, than were mothers.

Following years of negative self-appraisal and anticipated negative response from others, the desire for acceptance and support from family members is understandable. The homosexual son typically desired supportive
communication with family as a validation of the challenge he had faced; oftentimes, he was disappointed by the perceived lack of response. Both church-active and -inactive groups of homosexual males reported that there was not a lot of discussion with family members about their sexual orientation. This finding was backed up by family member reports. Most wanted greater efforts from parents and family members to understand their experience and to have more open family communication about it.

Almost all respondents indicated that family communication following disclosure was more strained initially (Cramer & Roach, 1988; Holtzen et al., 1995). It is not surprising that the coming out event caused family relations to become polarized. It was difficult for family members to accept information that is so antithetical to their basic values. With the passage of time, however, some families reverted to pre-disclosure communication patterns. Most felt an ongoing barrier to communication in the family that specifically related to the inability to reconcile feelings about the homosexual family member with religious belief.

Following disclosure, communication between male homosexuals and family members, and even between family members themselves, was best predicted by pre-existing patterns. This, however, was not always the case. In some situations, the coming out experience resulted in greater family cohesion and dialogue, a condition which did not exist prior to disclosure (Ben-Ari, 1995; Cramer & Roach, 1988). Ironically, in these cases religious belief seemed to be significant in facilitating changes in attitudes and increased communication between family members by encouraging acceptance of the homosexual son.
In other situations there seemed to be a permanent increase in tension. Ensuing relationship tension was not a pleasant experience for anyone, so discussions about sexual orientation were avoided. Similarly, other researchers have found underlying tensions in family relationships to diminish dialogue about sexual orientation (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993). Due to this type of dissonance, perhaps it is important to differentiate between content and emotion in family communication. When family members are accustomed to a content focus, and the homosexual son begins to withhold information, they may perceive communication to diminish. Similarly, when content is introduced that stirs up uncomfortable emotions, such discussions may be unwelcome. It was important for most families to continue some level of communication, yet neither parents nor children wanted to introduce subjects that might potentially lead to conflict. So, when it came to specific conversations about sexual orientation after disclosure occurred, both Mormon homosexuals and their family members reported that it just was not talked about very much.

To the homosexual son, this outcome was perceived as nonacceptance from family members and, typically, became a barrier to cohesion and satisfaction in family relationships. Perceptions of nonacceptance from family also underscored existing feelings of shame and alienation, creating more distance. It often led to resentment on the part of the son toward family members who they needed for emotional support. In nearly all cases, it also led to support seeking outside of family and Church resources. Research shows that the greatest source of support following disclosure has been found among nonfamily
When communication closed down due to tensions, estrangement occurred within family relationships. There is a distinct irony in this situation. After years of being unable to talk about his sexual orientation, the homosexual finally came to a point where he brought these issues up, but the family was unable to reciprocate. In most cases, denial of the situation was destructive in the long run. In the short term, however, denial sometimes served as a viable coping mechanism to ease internal dissonance. Homosexuals and family members who discussed the homosexual issues and worked towards open communication and greater understanding fared better, individually, and in family relationships overall, than those who avoided doing so. In this study, however, it was not the typical pattern observed for Mormon homosexual males and their family members.

Comparisons between disclosed and nondisclosed homosexuals interviewed in this study revealed that the primary difference in their decision to disclose to family was necessity. When circumstances arose where disclosure was unavoidable, Mormon homosexuals came out to family members. It was just as likely, however, for them to affirm their sexual orientation to family members who first confronted them. The finding that parents are the ones to approach their homosexual son has also been discussed by others (Boon & Miller, 1999). In a minority of cases, family disclosure was motivated by the desire for support. Regardless of how the disclosure was approached, it was accompanied by the expectation of conflict and judgment from family.
The postulation by D’Augelli et al. (1998), that nondisclosed homosexuals remain closeted as a protection from family victimization, was not supported by data from nondisclosed homosexuals in this study. Verbal abuse was rarely reported, and physical assault was reported by only one respondent who had disclosed. This attack came from a brother in a family with preexisting patterns of physical violence. A respondent who came out to siblings mentioned past worries of physical violence from his father as a deterrent to disclosure. At the time of the interview, he had still not disclosed to his parents.

A broader hypothesis by the same authors is that expectation of familial reaction, especially mothers, is at the heart of the decision to disclose. In fact, prediction of mothers’ responses is suggested as, potentially, the most critical variable explaining nondisclosure. In a study on disclosure dynamics, Boon and Miller (1999) identified trustworthiness in the mother/child relationship as a critical component in the move toward disclosure. The importance of the mother/son relationship finds partial support in data from the present study.

Given that mothers are nearly always the first parent confided in, quality of relationship and prediction of response would be expected to play a significant role in the disclosure decision. At the same time, nondisclosed Mormon homosexuals were mixed in their expectation of maternal response. About half said they would definitely tell mothers before fathers, and felt she would respond relatively positively. There is no question that expectations of mothers’ reactions have a powerful influence on the disclosure process. Still, sisters were most often selected for first family disclosures, both, in actuality, by disclosed Mormon
male homosexuals and, hypothetically, by nondisclosed males.

Important questions to ask may be “When is mother most important to disclosure?” and “how critical are mothers compared to sisters or other female family members to the disclosure process?” Perhaps this issue becomes most important when specifically placed within the context of disclosure to parents. That is, disclosure to parents is typically the most difficult family disclosure (Savin-Williams & Diamond, 1999). At the same time, homosexual sons and daughters feel unresolved until they have informed their parents (D'Augelli, 1991; Savin-Williams, 1996). Given this dilemma, disclosure to mothers is most likely to be perceived as less threatening than disclosure to fathers.

Perceptions of how likely mothers were to share disclosure information with fathers or others may also weigh into the decision. However, in this study, only one mother shared information with other family members. Neither was there much evidence from nondisclosed males of worry about mothers breaching confidentiality. Fathers were actually more inclined than mothers to talk publicly about their son's sexual orientation, possibly due to less sensitivity felt by fathers than by mothers about protecting their homosexual sons. Mothers’ sensitivity may well be one critical variable with disclosure.

Equally important to the disclosure process seemed to be quality of family communication. When open communication did not exist in the family, knowing how to approach parents was more difficult and access to feedback more limited, leaving the homosexual in a situation of either unresolved conflict or uncertainty about where family members stand on the issue of his sexual orientation.
However, many of these variables are overlapping. For example, quality of family relationships generally, including relationships with mothers, encompasses communication, confidentiality, and trust.

Furthermore, religious belief clearly played an inhibiting role in disclosing to any family members, suggesting that such beliefs likely impact expectations in the mother/son relationship. One study that identified quality of family relations as important to the disclosure process found that resources external to the family perceived as supportive still encouraged disclosure to parents (Waldner & Magruder, 1999). This finding could suggest that such disclosures occur more out of obligation than seeking emotional support. Additional research is required to clarify questions about how relationship characteristics influence disclosure.

Suicidal ideation also appeared to influence coming out for many Mormon male homosexuals. The finding by D’Augelli and Hershgerger (1993) that suicidality was more common among disclosed homosexual youth than among those who remained undisclosed is consistent with the current study. These authors speculated that suicide attempts related to the fact that disclosed youth had an earlier awareness of their sexual orientation and, consequently, were emotionally burdened by this for a longer period of time. They also pointed out that suicidality could be a catalyst for increased disclosure. Data from the current study support the latter perspective.

The finding that suicide risk is more elevated among disclosed homosexuals is consistent with reports from Mormon homosexuals. Half of the disclosed group reported being suicidal prior to disclosure, compared to
infrequent reports of suicidality in the nondisclosed group. However, differences in ages when sexual orientation was recognized were no different for disclosed versus nondisclosed participants. Among Mormon male homosexuals, early recognitions were more accurately represented as "feeling different" from other males. This finding has been widely documented by others (Hunter & Schaecher, 1987; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 1999). Sometimes early perceptions of difference included prominent attractions towards males.

What seems to be more critical is time between recognition and self-identification. Formal acknowledgment of sexual orientation did not typically occur until the twenties. Thus, emotional turmoil intensified more at this point in time. All adult males who had been suicidal were delayed in acknowledgment of their sexual orientation. The one nondisclosed male who had been suicidal also matched this criterion. Resistance to self-identify suggests the presence of perceived sanctions and absence of needed social support.

Following disclosure, only one individual continued to be suicidal. His feelings were attributed to the conflict between religious belief and sexual orientation, combined with a lack of perceived family support. Perhaps the critical timing variable in suicidality is not awareness but coming to the point of self-identification that one is homosexual, in combination with perceived needs and resources for support. Additional individual and social variables are likely to have an influence on suicidal behaviors as well (Rudd, Joiner, & Rajad, 1996).

After such a long period of shame and rejection, the newfound capability to embrace their sexual orientation following disclosure brought feelings of
liberation to most Mormon male homosexuals. This contrast provided welcomed relief and personal liberation. Despite continued struggle to find fulfillment and happiness as a homosexual or gay person, particularly for those who chose to remain active in the LDS Church, at the very least, these males began to feel some sense of personal value, as described by one respondent:

I have my ups and my downs, you know, as normal as everybody else, but it's nice to finally be stable. For so many years I hated myself. For so many years I absolutely hated looking in the mirror. I can look in the mirror, and I wish I had a little more hair and was a little skinnier and a little taller. I wish I had a little more money. You know, the same problems that every normal person has. But I am finally at peace with myself. For the first time in my life, I would say the last two years, I can finally be by myself and be okay...and that's a good feeling. (DAG)

Quality of family response seemed to be significant in this process. Some parents drew upon their religious beliefs as a way to increase tolerance and compassion for their son, while others used these same beliefs as justification to condemn. The cause of this contrast in approach was not entirely clear. However, those who showed the greatest amount of compassion and the least amount of judgment were family members who had confronted social discrimination in their own life experience, who had become personally acquainted with someone who is homosexual, and who derived a sense of hope from their religious belief.

Traits that seemed important to how family members responded to the disclosure include literalness of doctrinal interpretation (commonly referred to as “the letter vs. the spirit of the law”), social status and perceived social stigma, negative attitudes towards homosexuals, communication skills, accurate
information and previous exposure to homosexuals, personal experience with social discrimination, and preparedness for the disclosure. In general, family members who adapted more positively to the disclosure suspected the homosexual orientation, were acquainted with a homosexual person, and/or became more informed about homosexuality. They were also less literal in their religious orientation and less concerned about social stigma, and had better family communication.

Those who had the greatest difficulty adjusting appeared to have more literal religious interpretations, more negative attitudes about homosexuals, poorer communication, greater concern about public censure, and were caught off guard by the disclosure. These traits were not specifically measured but were extracted from interview responses.

Spending more time with a homosexual son or brother, and communicating more with him about his life experience dealing with a homosexual orientation, was related to increased tolerance and compassion among family members. When mothers adopted a supportive stance towards the homosexual son, they were usually instrumental in mitigating hostilities in other family members. Involvement in support groups appeared to benefit some family members by legitimizing homosexual orientation and increasing understanding about it. A majority of family members who tried to understand homosexuality stated they did not believe homosexual orientation to be a choice. Some believed it has a biological basis. Such attributions were associated with attitudes that a homosexual person should not be condemned for his sexual
orientation by society or church.

Some Mormon males who experienced homosexual attractions felt it was important to fulfill these longings both emotionally and sexually through a relationship with another male. To not do so seemed incompatible with their psychological make-up and well-being. For others, devotion to religious commitments was of primary importance, where violation of what they believed God expected of them brought greater emotional trauma than to sacrifice fulfillment of their homosexual needs. Both groups were making a choice about lifestyle that was based on personal values and self-determination.

Mormon homosexuals who chose obedience to religious teachings and policies were particularly at risk for alienation and despair because they remained in a dissonant, paradoxical state, with little support from Church leaders and members. A disclosed male explained:

I don’t know that it is really possible to resolve. The ideal solution would be if I could change my sexual orientation and then it wouldn’t be a problem. But the way it stands now is that I don’t know how I would go about doing that and I can’t imagine giving up my religious beliefs because they are very important to me and just not something that I would choose to live without. So, it’s a problem. It torments me every day. (DNN)

Living a celibate life was typically challenging for homosexual respondents due to the difficulty of fitting into a heterosexually oriented society, and ensuing feelings of alienation and loneliness. These circumstances diminished confidence to successfully maintain faithfulness to Church policies and religious beliefs, and contributed to abandoning religious ties by some participants. Independent of church activity status, nearly all homosexual respondents felt that they did not fit
well into the Mormon religious culture.

Currently there is no place for homosexuals within the Church except as cloaked or marginalized members. Without a place of belonging and support in the Church, refuge is sought from outside sources. The LDS Church might not change its established moral positions, but more can be done to include homosexual members within the religious community. Attempts within the Church to provide spiritual and social support have both touched the hearts of homosexual members and provided hope and enthusiasm. Examples of such efforts are California stakes that opened their doors to many homosexual Church members in extending unconditional support, sometimes with astounding results. A former bishop from a ward in one of those stakes spoke about his efforts to integrate homosexual members into the singles (unmarried young adults) ward:

There were some men in the ward struggling with what I was doing. So I spoke with the priesthood and we had one of the best meetings I've ever been in. It really tempered everybody. It was as helpful for the homosexual men as it was for the straight.... It's not an easy task and they struggle with it. When the straight men found out about their dedication to the Savior, real empathy occurred and a bridge was built. (Roberts, 1990, p. 16)

He continued with a tribute to the homosexual members' contributions and eventual acceptance into the ward:

They were caring home teachers. Then to have them come out gay! How could that be possible? The members finally got over that. And it's been a good example to the straight brethren that haven't been as caring of home teachers as they should be. (Roberts, 1990, p. 17)

Based on his experiences integrating homosexuals in the Church, he suggested:

Leaders would serve the Church well by saying to mothers and fathers: love your children regardless of what their problems are, and these are the
helps we can give to you to help you through any kind of a crisis with your child.... If he or she is homosexual these are the things you do. There has to be some answers to those things.... I know that love, unconditional love, goes a long way. (Roberts, 1990, p. 18)

Males in this study were well aware of the firm religious stance taken by the LDS Church and family members against homosexuality. This knowledge contributed substantially to their hesitation to talk with family members in the first place about their experience growing up homosexual. In other words, they perceived that family members would be unable to accept them precisely because of their adherence to Church policy. Family members tended towards interpretations of religious policy similar to those of Church leaders. They had a particular challenge in accepting the son's disclosure and legitimizing his experience. It went against their most cardinal values. The amount of emotional turmoil on both sides of the disclosure process could be considerable. Family members worried that showing acceptance for the homosexual communicated that they condone homosexuality. Given that families wanted the homosexual son or brother to hold on to religious ties, it is ironic that quality of family relationships often had a profound influence on whether this happened.

At a time when openness about sexual orientation is becoming more common for homosexuals generally in the U.S., among Mormon homosexuals it continues to be suppressed. In this study, without disclosure, family relationships were jeopardized. Yet, following disclosure, Mormon families were more limited in their capacity ever to reconcile the son's sexual orientation.
Given the conflict inherent in loyalty to counsel and doctrine from current Church leaders, and wanting to show support for their homosexual children, Mormon parents and family members inevitably found themselves faced with a choice between allegiance to church or son. The emotional trauma placed upon them by this dilemma was often immense. For active Mormon families, the choice almost invariably was to support the Church because this was perceived as tantamount to submission to God. It was not a price paid without cost, however. The homosexual son was left with feelings of rejection and abandonment from those most needed for support. Family members who remained steadfast in the Church's position often observed him facing profound emotional turmoil and alienation. The result was a great amount of emotional pain on both sides.

Regardless of how a homosexual male chose to live his life, most family members lived in hope that he would either maintain faithfulness or return to his religious commitments. Most homosexual men in this study continued to wish for greater acceptance and support from their families. The single most important message Mormon male homosexuals needed following disclosure was that they were still loved and accepted, that judgment would be withheld.

Limitations and Future Directions

Essential to the integrity of any research are validity and reliability of the data. Data collected for this study rely partially on retrospection. Recall reliability in retrospective studies has been questioned, and discussed, by others.
(D’Augelli, 1994; Rutter, Manghan, Pickles, & Simonoff, 1998). However, a substantial proportion of data collected for the present research was based on current perceptions. In this study, validity claims are strengthened by the fact that information reported by male homosexuals and their parents or siblings, representing the same event, was remarkably consistent across families. A clear limitation in this study was the necessity to preserve confidentiality of information reported by homosexual sons and that reported by their family members. It was not possible to pair responses without compromising privacy. However, separate accounts by homosexuals and their family members of the disclosure experience did not raise any serious threats to reliability.

Perceptual differences were based on divergent perspectives, inaccurate information, or censoring issues that were sensitive. Discovery of differences in perspectives were expected and, were one of the objectives for completing this study. Discrepancies in information can almost completely be explained by withholding or distorting of information in relationships between homosexuals and family members. In other words, sometimes individuals felt uncomfortable being too honest with each other and, consequently, filtered communication to avoid conflict. Although censoring appears to have been minimal, there were a few instances where either the homosexual or his family withheld important information. One benefit of interviewing both sides separately was uncovering missing pieces.

Qualitative research has been criticized for susceptibility to interviewer bias through leading questions and subjective interpretations. One advantage in
this study was that insights were more possible precisely because of the interviewer's familiarity with the population and culture. At the same time, familiarity may, in some instances, have led to assumptions about participants, or not detecting nuances in the data that might have been evident to someone more removed from the situation, or an "outsider." The clinical background of this researcher was a motivating factor in both selection of the research topic and applications of findings.

Although it is very difficult to eliminate bias from any research, some checks and balances have been employed in the current study. Triangulation helps to increase the validity of the data. Interviews from multiple sources were combined, followed by additional questions for clarification and greater depth, maintenance of field notes and a research journal, and a comparison of results with existing theory. At the conclusion of the interview, participants were asked if they felt their views had been represented and if there was any other information they wanted to add. All participants reported feeling their views had been expressed. One fifth of participants were also given portions of transcripts, along with the researcher's analysis of the response, to verify the intention of meaning in their words. In every case, participants verified the accuracy of interpretation. Finally, colleagues were consulted on data interpretation by sharing selected portions of transcripts along with their interpretations.

It was not possible to use random selection to obtain this sample because the population is not known. Therefore, participants for this study were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling. Consequently, sample demographics
showing preliminary trends must be viewed with extreme caution. Research results can only be assumed to represent the sample studied, namely, Mormon male homosexuals and family members who either volunteered or agreed to participate. It is possible that results reported in this study reflect characteristics of other populations, for example, other devout religious groups or those who volunteer for research. However, most of the present sample did not volunteer, but, instead, were identified by snowball procedures. Agreement oftentimes was obtained only after weighty, and sometimes extended, contemplation by potential participants. Findings in this study may represent a population that differs from homosexuals, generally, because many Mormon male homosexuals are less integrated into gay subculture.

Ideally, inferential research should be done with representative samples, an unlikely occurrence with a homosexual population. Further, some information provided for these interviews may be influenced by social desirability. Participants sometimes try to present themselves in a most favorable light. Even though this effect cannot always be detected, there was little evidence of it in this study.

Longitudinal studies are needed to understand family relationship and disclosure events as they occur over time (D’Augelli, 1994). The current study represents a very limited amount of longitudinal data in that follow-up questions were pursued with respondents over time. It also has potential for follow up with some participants. Research about sexual orientation and relationships among families within other religions, nonreligious families, as well as replication studies
are also important. Understanding of perceived family relationships of Mormon female homosexuals associated with disclosure of sexual orientation is also needed in a future study. To the extent possible, the problems discussed here should be corrected in future research on homosexual populations.

Implications and Recommendations

To the extent that findings from this study represent the population of Mormon families with homosexual sons and brothers, some preliminary conclusions can be drawn. In Mormon families, barriers to confronting sexual orientation must be lifted so that parents can feel free to address it with their son as early as possible. While parents will vary in how they address sexual orientation, a more accepting climate seems needed to facilitate further discussion and support within their own value system. This does not mean initiating discussion by telling the son his sexual orientation is wrong or that he is flawed. It does include listening, trying to understand the son's situation, and helping him feel positively about himself. Because the probability exists that others will reject him, extra effort is needed to provide assurance of family acceptance and support.

Parents who practice denial of their son's homosexual orientation are inhibiting family process as well as neglecting the needs of the son. Enough communication is needed to reach an accurate understanding of what their son is dealing with and how family members can provide appropriate support. Unless communication can be encouraged and messages of tolerance emphasized,
honesty between homosexuals and their family members will be compromised, reducing the quality of those relationships and the ability of the homosexual to obtain the support he needs from his family. It is important that this dynamic be understood.

A strong emphasis on morality is not perceived as helpful. In fact, when it is present, the door closes on family communication. Yet, often this seemed to be the initial message from both family members and from Church leaders. Condemning and judgmental response from family members and Church leaders was the biggest factor involved in Mormon male homosexuals distancing themselves from their family and Church. A family response that communicates interest and caring can have an enormous positive impact.

Some family member expectations for the homosexual were probably too high. What seemed obvious to family members in terms of morality and life decisions was completely not obvious to their homosexual son or brother. It is necessary to keep in mind the complexity of an experience that covers much of their lives and represents an existing barrier to current life satisfaction. At the same time, there were no homosexual respondents in this study who were unclear about the moral position of either family or church. Unconditional acceptance communicates love and support, not moral agreement.

Participants in this study expressed a desire to find support in the way of acceptance and understanding from both family and Church members. Perceived support of this type would apparently not only facilitate disclosure but also alleviate much of the private suffering borne by homosexual family
members. In other words, parents and other family members who reach and communicate with understanding open doors for continued dialogue and the pursuit of emotional support.

It is equally important that the homosexual son recognize the difficulty family members experience as a result of confronting something so unknown and personally devastating. While several respondents expressed the hope that their parents would try to take an objective view of homosexuality, instead of tacit acceptance of Church policies, none expected parents to give up their religious beliefs. Perhaps a formal acknowledgment of issues and challenges on both sides might facilitate an open dialogue without the threat of denouncing personal values.

Based on findings in this study, when parents suspect their son is homosexual and, at the same time, can withhold judgment and fear, it may ease the difficulty of disclosure when they initiate dialogue with him. However, what mothers and fathers come to recognize later may not have been apparent to them at a more critical juncture during their son’s development. Further, despite existing stereotypes about homosexuals in society, many homosexual individuals, in reality, do not reflect those stereotypes. So, even though parents and family members need to be prepared to intervene, they often cannot know of the situation unless the homosexual son discloses. Expecting parents to assume this level of responsibility is unrealistic and unfair. When family members can respond in a supportive way, disclosure is critical and conditions encouraging the disclosure process need to be fostered. Disclosure that is likely to result in
increased trauma should not be encouraged at that time, but support is still critical from other sources. Therapy can be helpful to families who struggle with coming to terms (LaSala, 2000).

Because a son or brother is an active member of the LDS Church does not mean he is not homosexual. This researcher has come into contact with a substantial number of Mormon male homosexuals who are active in their faith, but whose sexual orientation is not public. Active church status also does not mean the individual feels no need for support or that he is automatically happy. It was common for active Mormon homosexuals to describe the complication and disillusionment of trying to remain part of an organization where they feel barriers to integration and a sense of belonging. Members of the LDS Church can take a crucial part in helping those who struggle with homosexual attractions. The first step would be to stop sending messages of intolerance, rejection, and condemnation. This process may be impossible without leaders of the Church taking a more active role themselves in both example and direct communication.

Families who cope with homosexuality need support from Church leaders and Church members so the stigma is removed from them. It can easily be overlooked that, similar to their homosexual son or brother, family members experience difficulty coming to terms with this issue in the personal and public domain. A forum needs to be available for communication that is open and respectful, that seeks greater understanding on all sides. Families need to feel free to discuss, and be encouraged to discuss with their homosexual sons, the experience they have had growing up homosexual.
Pervasive in Mormon culture is the belief that homosexuality comes down to personal choice, a gross oversimplification of the situation. Family members and Church leaders also continue to refer to individuals who think or believe they are homosexuals, invalidating the reality of a life experience and further discouraging disclosure. These types of misunderstanding must be changed in order to facilitate reconciliation of relationships and religious belief among family and Church members.

The fact that nearly all homosexuals report being aware of their same-sex attractions from an early age suggests that this is the reality known for most of their lives (Savin-Williams & Diamond, 1999). Current evidence most strongly supports that it is a preexisting condition; it does not arise from a choice made during adolescence or young adulthood to become homosexual. It seems illogical to argue that someone would choose a path so fraught with hardship and misfortune, especially with a religious taboo about homosexuality as profound as exists in the LDS Church. The point at which choice clearly is introduced is when homosexuals decide whether or not to act upon same-sex attractions.

When homosexuals are pressured to change their sexual orientation, this reinforces that there is something wrong with them. It encourages them to feel negatively about themselves and constrains them to suppress their identities. From the standpoint of orientation only, current research also most strongly supports the idea that sexual orientation is not changeable (Burr, 1996). If this is true, placing expectations upon homosexuals to change their sexual orientation is unproductive and unethical, and only decreases the likelihood of their confiding in
family members and Church leaders. Self-acceptance and self-determination should be fostered regardless of sexual orientation.

When homosexuality is referred to as a temptation by Church leaders and members, the implication, again, is that it is purely a choice, to commit sin or be faithful. As discussed, sexual orientation has little to do with choice. Reducing it to such only amplifies feelings of shame among those who experience homosexual attractions and relegates them to a marginalized status in the Church. It also perpetuates ignorance among Church members. As is common to religion, when arguments are dichotomized as right or wrong, it removes the need to seek greater knowledge or understanding.

An additional threat in negative Church response is that statements by Church leaders often become equated with God’s will. The great majority of Mormon male homosexuals in this study wanted to maintain a relationship with God. This was compromised when they perceived rejection. At the same time, it is critical that sexual orientation not be swept under the rug. Homosexual members need to be accurately informed about the reality of what they are dealing with. Data from this study show that misleading information led to feelings of betrayal and despair. Increased hope came from feeling accepted and supported by family members and leaders. Conditions necessary for positive change and hope are tied to disclosure.

Perhaps the most immediate issue facing these men and their families is increased communication from the Church about sexual orientation that emphasizes for Church members the difference between attractions to those of
one’s same sex, which are not defined as sinful, and homosexual behavior, which is unequivocally considered to be moral transgression within Church policies (Oaks, 1995). Most family members did not differentiate well between homosexual attraction and behavior. It also continues to be widely misunderstood by Church members that Church policy does not distinguish between moral transgressions whether homosexual or heterosexual in nature. “There is a distinction between immoral thoughts and feelings and participating in either immoral heterosexual or homosexual behavior” (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1992). Yet, among many Church members and leaders alike, homosexual behavior is considered to be significantly more serious than heterosexual sin. This point was raised both by male homosexuals and family members. The official Church statement is not emphasized publicly.

More common are negative and condemning statements about homosexuality. In a recent address to the Church membership at the semi-annual Church conference, a high ranking leader stated:

Normal desires and attractions emerge in the teenage years.... These desires can be intensified, even perverted, by [wrong choices]. What would have only been a more or less normal passing phase in establishing gender identity can become implanted and leave you confused, even disturbed...convincing you that immoral, unnatural behavior is a fixed part of your nature. (Packer, 2000, p. 73)

While possibly not intended, the implied message for some listeners is that homosexual individuals are to be blamed for their sexual orientation. What is suggested is that homosexuals have lived unworthily and made sinful choices. Such messages can easily be internalized by Mormon homosexuals who place
resolute confidence in leaders, considered to be mouthpieces for God. When they hear such messages, youth just becoming aware of same-sex attractions are particularly susceptible to taking on guilt and shame about their sexual orientation.

In other words, growing up homosexual, at this time, has not yet been acknowledged by the Church in a way that removes blame, reduces feelings of guilt and shame, validates the reality and difficulty of being homosexual, nor facilitates the opportunity to reveal sensitive information to those who can be of support, specifically, family members and Church leaders. Disclosures prompted from such statements are very likely motivated by feelings of guilt. Unfortunately, communications like this continue to be interpreted by individuals, family members, ecclesiastical leaders, and other Church members as evidence that homosexual persons chose to be sinful.

The LDS Church is in a position to provide support to homosexual members and their families. There are no doctrines in the religion that encourage or condone persecution, judgment, or rejection of others. Conversely, teachings from Church leaders emphasize acceptance and love that is not conditional. Yet, many members, including some parents interviewed, feel justified in taking an adversarial role towards homosexuals. Unfortunately, they view this approach as appropriately synchronized with Church leaders and, ultimately, God. Statements from Church authorities suggest a different stance. "We should never give up on loved ones who now seem to be making many wrong choices. Instead of being judgmental about others, we should be
concerned about ourselves" (Oaks, 2000, p. 34). Still, it appears that most members do not perceive this counsel as pertaining to homosexuality.

Greater efforts are needed to communicate this to the membership of the LDS Church. Although official Church publications outline the importance of love and support from leaders, families, and other members towards homosexuals (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1992), these resources are often not readily available to the general Church membership, and specific application is rarely publicly addressed. Most families interviewed for this study were not aware of the guidelines from Church administrators for homosexual members and, usually, felt their ecclesiastical leaders also were uninformed. Responses from bishops and other Church leaders, who have access to Church guidelines, are strongly shaped by personal attitudes about homosexuals. It cannot be emphasized too strongly that the perceived need to hide one's sexual orientation must be reduced. This situation increases the risk of psychological trauma to Mormon male homosexuals and poses threats to the quality of their family relationships. At the least, there needs to be acknowledgment from Church leaders of developmental realities involving sexual orientation, and information about where Mormon homosexuals can turn for support resources within their family and Church.

If Church leaders were to recognize that homosexual orientation will exist among some individuals and reach out in a way that communicates compassion and understanding, this would likely increase the chance that Mormon homosexuals would confide in their Church leaders and ease the stress felt by
families who have a homosexual son. It would also send a message encouraging Church members to resist judgment and make a more concerted effort to provide emotional support to homosexuals and their families. With a more developed approach outlined by the LDS Church for assisting homosexual members (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1992), there is now more opportunity for homosexual youth to confide their sexual orientation to ecclesiastical leaders and receive support. The following words from a recent LDS Church president effectively convey a type of support that could be helpful within the Church, but it might require specific reference to homosexuals before Church members understand that this principle also applies to sexual orientation:

I invite all members of the Church to live with ever more attention to the life and example of the Lord Jesus Christ, especially the love and hope and compassion he displayed. I pray that we will treat each other with more kindness, more patience, more courtesy and forgiveness. To those who have transgressed or been offended, we say, come back. To those who are hurt or are struggling or afraid, we say, let us stand with you and dry your tears. Come back. (Hunter, 1994, p. 8)

This counsel appears to validate the approach taken by some of the California stakes to integrate homosexual members. Further efforts of this type could, potentially, be very constructive. Acceptance of homosexual members into wards will likely facilitate the needed change in attitudes. Those who know a homosexual person are more likely to show tolerance and less likely to hold homophobic attitudes (Kite & Whitley, 1994). Thus, increased familiarity with homosexual members would likely diminish the fear and prejudice that now exist within leaders and members alike, as expressed by one study participant:

A friend of mine participated on one of these Evergreen panels, and this
guy came up to him afterwards and said he didn't want to even go that night. He just thought, oh, this is disgusting, I can't even deal with this. And he showed up and, after listening to these guys talk, it just changed his opinion. It's like he realized what good guys they were and that it wasn't through any fault of their own that this was what they were struggling with and it just totally turned around his opinions. (NAN)

It is critical to the formation of identity and esteem for homosexually oriented individuals to receive acknowledgment of their experience and assurances of support instead of no response or reminders that they are flawed or inferior. Silence, to Mormon homosexuals, is most likely to be construed as rejection. When Church leaders are condemning or silent on the matter, families are not only left without direction, but are often paralyzed by the anticipated judgment from others in their religious community. They need desperately to be freed from this burden. One family member stated:

I think it's also important for people to realize that it's a hard thing to deal with. Before I found out about [Brother] I always thought, "Oh, why would people care. It doesn't matter, it's still their child, it's still their brother or sister." And it's not like that when you have to deal with it. So I think that's important too. [Crying] People need to learn that it's, in a way, it's like a grieving process. And I don't think people think about that. (DNG)

Access to social support becomes critical during these times, whether from Church leaders, fellow members, or professionals in the community.

Mormon male homosexuals and their family members need support in dealing with the ramifications of sexual orientation. In particular, official Church support would be essential for families facing issues of homosexuality. Returning to Bronfenbrenner's developmental ecology paradigm (1986; 1995), implications for family and Church intervention in the lives of Mormon male homosexuals are profound. According to Bronfenbrenner (1995), "proximal process has the
general effect of reducing or buffering against environmental differences in developmental outcome" (p. 624), and belief systems of significant others may be "especially important...as instigators and maintainers of reciprocal interaction with the developing person" (Bronfenbrenner, 1995, p. 638). Based on participants in this study, regardless of the quality of family relationships, religion appears to moderate the disclosure decision and outcome. Yet, family response plays a mediating role on coming out and subsequent effects of social condemnation. Stigma and ostracism of homosexuals in the Mormon community can and must be confronted, and replaced by tolerance, support, and integration.
CHAPTER VI
CONCLUSION

This qualitative study is one of the first to explore the experiences of Mormon male homosexuals and their family members in relation to the coming out process. When response is supportive, family disclosure can be a crucial step towards establishing self-acceptance and a positive identity among Mormon homosexuals. Growing up Mormon and homosexual exposed participants to hostile messages about innate feelings and created profound challenges to forming a positive identity. Yet, pressures from stigma and condemnation existing in the community silenced them from revealing their secret to parents and family members who might otherwise have provided insulation, comfort, and support. Social and religious intolerance pressured them into “passing” as heterosexuals. Consequently, self-identification and disclosure appeared to be delayed among homosexual participants.

When mounting distress became intolerable, relief was sought through disclosure outside the family due to fears of negative family response. Most frequently, disclosure occurred to someone outside the family first, and then to siblings before parents. Fathers were never disclosed to first. Most first family disclosures made to parents were initiated by the parent, illustrating the hesitation most Mormon male homosexuals felt to ever disclose. Mormon male homosexuals most wanted acceptance and understanding from their families and Church leaders. They wanted to maintain family ties and have increased
communication about their challenges. These hopes were disappointed when family members were unable to respond in a supportive way.

Because family disclosure was largely a product of discovery, it resulted in additional distress as parents and siblings were confronted with an unwanted reality, and needed support was largely withheld. Family members struggled with showing support to their son due to value-based conflicts with homosexuality. A determining variable in relationship intimacy was whether or not the homosexual son was faithful to Church standards of conduct. Findings show that family members' attitudes about homosexuals were strongly influenced by statements from LDS Church leaders, which are often negative.

Strained relationships in most families improved over time but rarely overcame the barrier of religious conflicts inherent in Mormon culture. Both male homosexuals and family members continued to struggle with a reconciliation paradox. The more family members held to religious perspectives, the less they were able to achieve satisfaction in family relationships. Yielding their religious position brought moral dissonance. Male homosexuals who distanced themselves from the LDS Church experienced increased strain in relationships with family members. Family members' greatest hopes were that he would maintain religious ties.

Expectations of family response mediated the disclosure decision, and actual response from family members shaped the perceived quality of relationships in the family following disclosure. When response from family members and Church leaders was favorable, it countered alienation in these
relationships. Influences from the Church have potential to foster tolerance and help families and Church members respond in a supportive way to homosexuals, thereby facilitating the coming out process and making emotional support available to them.

It was very difficult, and nearly impossible under current circumstances, for male homosexuals in this study to maintain integration within the Mormon community and, at the same time, experience personal fulfillment. They needed support from their families and Church. An important part of well-being is freedom to be and accept oneself, which is dependent upon opening oneself to others and receiving acceptance and support. It can be an immense challenge for homosexual Church members to remain in a social environment where they perceive pressure to hide a significant aspect of their personality, remain celibate, continuously experience self-directed guilt and shame, fit into a heterosexual paradigm when they are unable to relate to it, and live in fear of discovery, judgment, and ostracism by people who do not understand them.
REFERENCES


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Robinson, B. E., Walters, L. H., & Skeen, P. (1989). Response of parents to learning that their child is homosexual and concern over AIDS: A national


Safren, S. A., & Heimberg, R. G. (1999). Depression, hopelessness, suicidality,
and related factors in sexual minority and heterosexual adolescents.

*Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 67, 859-866.*


APPENDICES
Appendix A

Background Information

1. How many brothers and sisters did you grow up with? ______

2. What is your age? __________ years

3. What is the highest level of education you have finished?
   a. didn't finish high school
   b. graduated from high school
   c. vocational or trade school
   d. attended college but did not graduate
   e. graduated from college
   f. graduate or professional degree

4. What is the highest level of education completed by your mother?
   a. didn't finish high school
   b. graduated from high school
   c. vocational or trade school
   d. attended college but did not graduate
   e. graduated from college
   f. graduate or professional degree

5. What is the highest level of education completed by your father?
   a. didn't finish high school
   b. graduated from high school
   c. vocational or trade school
   d. attended college but did not graduate
   e. graduated from college
   f. graduate or professional degree

6. What income category was your family when you were growing up?
   a. Less than 15,000
   b. 15,000 to 35,000
   c. 36,000 to 55,000
   d. 56,000 to 75,000
   e. 76,000 to 100,000
   f. 100,000+

7. What was your approximate level of income during the past year?
   a. Less than 15,000
   b. 15,000 to 35,000
   c. 36,000 to 55,000
   d. 56,000 to 75,000
   e. 76,000 to 100,000
   f. 100,000+

8. What occupation did your mother/father have during most of your growing up years?

   Mother_________________________ Father_________________________

9. What is your current occupation? __________________________

10. Which of the following best describes the neighborhood your family lived in while you were growing up?

    a. City       b. Suburb      c. Town       d. Rural
11. How active was your mother in the LDS religion while you were growing up?
   a. Not Active  b. Somewhat Active  c. Moderately Active  d. Very Active

12. How active was your father in the LDS religion while you were growing up?
   a. Not Active  b. Somewhat Active  c. Moderately Active  d. Very Active

13. How active are you in the LDS religion at the present time?
   a. Not Active  b. Somewhat Active  c. Moderately Active  d. Very Active
Appendix B

Notice to Potential Research Volunteers

I am a doctoral student in The Department of Family and Human Development at Utah State University. I am doing research for my doctoral dissertation on a topic that I feel is very important to address in the community.

As the principal investigator of this study I am conducting research on family experiences of males of homosexual orientation in the Mormon community. In order to gain understanding of these family experiences, I would like to talk with a number of volunteers who are willing to participate in personal interviews. Where possible, I would also like to interview a member of your family of origin. This family member needs to be a parent or a sibling whom you would be willing to contact regarding participation in this study.

Involvement in the study will require sharing information about your family and life experiences in interviews that can be conducted at your home or another place that is convenient and comfortable for you. Interviews will require one or two sessions of about one to two hours each. All information that you provide will be kept completely confidential and will be stored in a locked file. You will be assigned a number so your identity will be concealed. You may have access to information provided by yourself upon request.

Please consider being involved in this research study. You may contact me at the listed address or phone number. If you would be willing to participate by being interviewed, please fill in your name and phone number below and return this form to me. Thank you for your willingness to participate.

_________________________  ________________________
Name                                      Phone Number

Brad Benson
Principal Investigator
PO Box 6001
N. Logan, UT 84341
(435) 755-2849
bgb@cc.usu.edu
Appendix C

Informed Consent

Introductory Statement
It is necessary to inform potential volunteers about the purpose of the study, the benefits and risks of participating in the study, and the procedures and methods that will be used in conducting the study. Participation is voluntary and each volunteer is free to withdraw from the research project at any time. An individual’s agreement to participate indicates that the principal investigator has answered all questions and that consent to participate in this investigation is voluntary.

Title of Project
Perceived Family Relationships Associated with Coming Out of Mormon Male Homosexuals.

Purpose of the Study
This research study is for the purpose of understanding experiences, especially family experiences, of males growing up homosexual in a Mormon setting.

Procedures to be Followed
Volunteers will be asked to describe personal life experiences that relate to the research questions. The study will be done by interviewing selected individuals.

Potential Risks and Measures taken to Minimize Risks
Possible risks of participation would be that disclosing personal information can sometimes be emotionally upsetting and occasionally traumatic. Homosexual identity could be disclosed, personal embarrassment might be experienced, and stress might be placed on family relations. It is also possible that participants might reveal names and information during an interview that were unintended.

In this study, verbal agreement to participate will be accepted due to the potential risk of having written names if there was a confidentiality breach. All information collected will be kept confidential. Each participant will be identified by a code only (names will not be used) and all information will be kept in a locked file. Any audiotaped interview responses will be erased within four months following transcription of data.
Benefit to Participants
Participation could be potentially beneficial for volunteers because it provides an opportunity to talk about personal issues they may not be free to talk about in many settings. Participants' viewpoints and feelings also will be represented to groups and individuals who may be in a position to benefit from increased knowledge and understanding about life circumstances for male homosexuals in the Mormon community.

Responsibility Regarding Risks to Participants
The researcher is Licensed in the State of Utah as a Clinical Social Worker and will suggest and make appropriate referrals for professional assistance when desired by participant.

Confidentiality
Confidential information will be treated privately to the extent provided by law. Participants' identities will be coded and will not be associated with any published results. Code numbers and identity records will be kept in a locked file of the Principal Investigator.

New Findings
Participants will be told of any significant new findings developed during the course of this study, and will be offered summary results.

Other Information
Additional questions about this study or participant rights, or if any problems arise, should be directed to Brad Benson, (sll3f@cc.usu.edu or 435-797-1544).

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand this Informed Consent agreement and are willing to participate in the study. Verbal agreement will be accepted as willingness to participate under the terms of this study when there is a concern that a breach of confidentiality might occur as a result of signing this form. A copy of this consent form will be given to you and one copy will be retained by the university.

Name of Participant__________________________

Signature of Participant__________________________ Date__________
(Interviewed and audiotaped)

Signature of P.I.__________________________ Date__________
Appendix D

Audiotaping Consent

I ___________________________ agree to participate in this interview research with Brad Benson, doctoral student, at Utah State University. I understand that interviews will be audiotaped to preserve the interview contents for the purpose of transcription. I understand that no identifying information such as my name will be attached to the tape and that tapes will not be released to anyone outside this research except as required by law. I also understand that audiotaped contents will be destroyed within four months following transcription of the interview.

I have had an opportunity to ask questions I may have and have received a satisfactory explanation of any language or information I did not fully understand. I agree to participate and to permit my voice to be audiotaped. If being interviewed in my home, I have the authority to invite the interviewer to enter and remain on the premises in order to conduct the audiotaping.

I understand that I may contact Brad Benson at (435) 797-1544 if I require any additional information about the study or have any questions.

Name

Signature Date

Interviewer Signature Date
Appendix E

Interview Protocol

[Initially, interviews will begin with a general question to allow the informant to guide the discussion. The following opener is adaptable to all three categories of informants]:

Being homosexual in a Mormon family can create dilemmas and challenges that affect a person’s life circumstances. One area that might pose problems is within family relationships. What I am hoping to understand is what kind of experience you have had in your family related to your sexual orientation and the religious setting you belong to or have grown up in. What can you tell me about your experience coming out to your family?
when [child/brother] told you about his homosexual orientation?
with this?

[Probes will then be used to encourage additional detail or to rely on for interview questions when the open format is less compatible for specific informants]:

PROBES:

1. Identify qualities that define relationships in your family.
   How long have you been LDS?
   Are you currently an active LDS member?
   When did you become inactive in the Church?
   Are your family members active members of the LDS Church?
   How active are they?
   How long have they been active LDS Church members?
   How would you characterize your relationship with your father? Mother? Siblings?
   How close do you feel to your father? Mother? Siblings?
   How much do you feel your father, mother, siblings care about you?
   How much do you feel you can count on your family for things?
   How would you describe communication between members of your family?
   How would you describe communication between you and family members?

2. Describe the process of sexual orientation disclosure to family.
   Have you come out to someone in your family or thought about it?
   Who is this person?
   How many people in your family have you come out to or thought about coming out to?
   When did you first disclose to a family member?
   When did you disclose to other family members?
   What were the circumstances of the initial disclosure (what led to your decision to come out)?
   When did you first think about talking to someone in your family about your sexual orientation and what helped you or stopped you from opening up about it?
   Has the family member you disclosed to shared information with anyone else? Whom?
3. Identify family traits believed to facilitate or inhibit disclosure.
   If you think about qualities or traits that make for good and enjoyable relationships with parents and family members, what comes to mind to you personally as being important? How do you see these characteristics you have mentioned for good family relationships as present or absent in your own family?

   How would you describe your feelings about yourself as a person? Are you happy? Do you feel positively about yourself?
   In what ways do you feel your experience in your family and your sexual orientation have affected your self-concept and level of happiness?

4. Describe desired, expected, and actual family response in disclosure.
   How did your family react to your coming out about your sexual orientation?
   How did you expect them to react?
   How did you hope they would react?
   Have family members you disclosed to been supportive to you since you came out?
   What do they do that you find to be supportive or not supportive?
   What do you want from family members in terms of support?

   How comfortable are you around family members now?
   How much family discussion has been opened up by your disclosure?
   Are you generally able to discuss emotionally related issues with family members?
   With whom?
   What would be an example of an emotional issue other than sexual orientation that you have discussed with a family member?
   How comfortable are your family members with your sexual orientation? Why?

5. Describe the family’s reconciliation of sexual orientation with their religious beliefs.
   Do you think any of your (other) family members suspect your sexual orientation?
   How do you think they feel about it?
   What is it like to keep your sexual orientation hidden in your family?

   What is your primary sexual release?
   If homosexual activity, how do you feel about it?
   Does it create guilt feelings for you?
   How do these feelings affect your family relationships or your feelings about yourself?

   How have you resolved your sexual orientation with your religious beliefs?
   How do you think your family has resolved this?
   How do they feel now?

   What is your current best explanation for the cause of homosexual feelings?
   What do you think is your parents’ explanation for what causes of homosexual feelings?

   Have you actively participated in therapy? Support groups?
   Have your parents actively participated in therapy or support groups?

   Thank you for your time in answering the interview questions. I would like to follow up on these questions at another time if that would be okay.
VITA

Brad Benson

Address: Department of FHD, Utah State University
Logan, Utah 84322-2905
Email: bgb@cc.usu.edu
Phone: (435) 797-1501

Education

<table>
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<tr>
<td>Utah State University</td>
<td>Ph.D. 2001</td>
<td>Family &amp; Human Development</td>
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<td>M.S.W. 1991</td>
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<td>Utah State University</td>
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Professional Licenses
- CSW State of Utah
- LCSW State of Utah
- LTM State of Utah

Professional Affiliations
- NCFR
- SRCD
- NASW

Professional Experience

Current
- Therapist for Child and Family Support Center
- Private Practice Psychotherapist
- Department Course Instructor, Utah State University
- Therapist for Intermountain Sexual Abuse Treatment Center
- Contract therapist for LDS Social Services

Educational Experience

1996-1999 Research assistant for Dr. Brent C. Miller on two projects: adolescent sexuality; and adoption.
1996-1999 Research assistant for Dr. Lori Roggman on one project: Early Headstart and fathering.
1996-1999 Teaching assistant for Debra Ascione in FHD 150, Human Growth and Development
1996-1997 Research assistant for Dr. Silvia Sörensen on a qualitative study: Preparation for future care among senior women.
1995 Teaching assistant for Dr. Ann Austin in FHD 380, Infancy
Honors and Awards

1995-1996 Presidential Fellowship

1997-1998 Research Assistant of the year, Utah State University, Dept. of Family and Human Development

1997-1998 Research Assistant of the year, Utah State University, College of Family Life

Publications


Presentations at Professional Meetings


