Maintaining commitment in long-lasting mixed-orientation relationships: Gay men married to straight women

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Maintaining commitment in long-lasting mixed-orientation relationships:

Gay men married to straight women

by

Kevin J. Zimmerman

A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Major: Human Development and Family Studies

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Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the couples who let me into their lives by being willing to talk with me, a stranger to them, about some of the most intimate and personal aspects of their lives. They gave a couple hours of their lives to contribute to this research, and I spent many days with their words as I transcribed, read, analyzed, interpreted, reported, and discussed their stories. Although each story is unique, I have learned a great deal about the nature of successful, long-lasting, mixed-orientation relationships, and I hope that the insights that I have gained and discuss herein can in some measure recompense my participants for their willing involvement in this study. I also dedicate this dissertation to mixed-orientation couples. May your closest relationships be filled with authenticity and love.
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I was once told that education is the process of becoming. I am greatly appreciative of the many others who have helped me to become. This includes my parents; who had made many sacrifices to provide me with quality education early in life; Steve Bensing and Jean Moore, who fostered my love of writing; Michael Kelly, who was one of the first to encourage me to pursue a PhD; the late Ralph Price, who, when I told him during our final conversation that I was pursuing a PhD, told me, “Do it!”; my co-major professors, Tim Griesdorn and Susan Stewart, for their support and helpful oversight of my dissertation research; my other committee members, Carolyn Cutrona, Clinton Gudmunson, and Anthony Santiago, for their support, kindness, and helpful feedback on earlier drafts of this dissertation; Amity Buxton, founder of the Straight Spouse Network, who endorsed this research; Melissa Curran, who generously shared with me a wealth of articles related to commitment; Megan Murphy and Warren Blumenfeld, who have both served as mentors and have helped me to embrace, honor, and celebrate diversity; Margaret Torrie, who has generously and freely imparted to me her deep understanding of life within the university and within the community; my classmates, who were valuable partners in learning course content and surviving the challenges of graduate school and who have become respected colleagues; and to my other friends and family members, who have cheered me on in my pursuit of my academic goals. I particularly want to thank my wife and three boys, who bring me more joy than they can ever know.
ABSTRACT

This qualitative study investigates the nature of commitment in long-lasting mixed-orientation relationships, in which a homosexual man is partnered with a heterosexual woman. Previous research into mixed-orientation relationships has generally not focused on which factors contribute to keeping the relationship together. The primary theoretical frameworks used in this study to understand long-lasting, mixed-orientation couples are social exchange theory and Johnson’s (1999) commitment model. Thirteen couples from the U.S. completed questionnaires and were interviewed about three main topics: (a) the history of their relationship, including the coming-out process, (b) strengths of the relationship, and (c) challenges to the relationship. The couples also offer advice to other mixed-orientation couples who wish to stay together. Transcripts were coded to illuminate how these mixed-orientation couples remain in committed relationships. Participant comments revealed that there are three essential characteristics of long-lasting, mixed-orientation relationships, which are (a) a high level of personal commitment, (b) open communication, and (c) adaptability.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This study seeks to explore commitment in long-lasting mixed-orientation relationships. The complex nature of sexual orientation means that there are many possible sexual orientations within committed, intimate relationships. However, for the purposes of this research, a mixed-orientation relationship refers to a male/female couple in which the male experiences “same-sex attractions or behavior, regardless of self-identification” (Diamond, 2007, p. 142); the nonheterosexuality of the male has been acknowledged between the couple for at least three years; and the couple is in a committed intimate relationship, legally recognized or not. (Reasons for these criteria are discussed in Chapter 3).

This study uses a phenomenological approach to explore the motivations and challenges for mixed-orientation couples to remain together. Participants of this study include a purposefully selected group of 13 couples, all of whom were legally married. Understanding commitment within mixed-orientation couples is a unique and significant contribution to the field of human development and family studies, and can prove useful to other individuals in mixed-orientation relationships, family scholars, family therapists, and family practitioners.

I begin this chapter with the background and context that frames the study. Following this is the statement of purpose and the research questions that guide this study. I then discuss my assumptions and my perspective as the researcher. I conclude with discussing the rationale and significance of the study.

Background and Context

In Kinsey’s (1948) report on interviews of over 5,300 white American men collected between 1938 and 1947, he rated them on a scale from 0, for those who had no experience or desire for sexual activity with their same sex, to 6, for those with no experience with or desire for sexual activity with those of the other sex. Kinsey has been criticized for overestimating the
homosexual population, and the percentage of gays and lesbians in the United States commonly
mentioned in popular culture largely reflect Kinsey’s 10% claim, although most reliable surveys
put the number closer to 2% to 5% (Martinez, Wald, & Craig, 2008). For example, a 2012
Gallup poll of 121,290 U.S. adults who were asked, “Do you, personally, identify as lesbian,
gay, bisexual, or transgender?” found that 3.4% identify as LGBT (Gates & Newport, 2012).
How many of these individuals marry? Janus & Janus (1993) report that approximately 20% of
gay men in the U.S. marry a woman at some point in their lives. Approximately 2 million U.S.
couples are or once were in a mixed-orientation marriage (Buxton, 2004). Kinsey found that
1.7% of high school graduates and 1.9% of college graduates who were male and married had a
rating of 3 or higher on the Kinsey scale. If these rates hold today, then given the 2010 census
data regarding the number of married couples (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010), 1.7% to 1.9% of
married men scoring 3 or higher on the Kinsey scale would translate to approximately 1.35 to
1.51 million married mixed-orientation couples in which the male is nonheterosexual in the U.S.
More recently, a 2006-2008 national survey of U.S. males aged 22-44 found that 3.5% of
currently married men had previous same-sex sexual experience, putting the national estimate of
married men in this age range with previous same-sex experience at just under 2.5 million
(Chandra, Mosher, & Copen, 2011).

Nonheterosexual men partner with women for a variety of reasons. Some men may be
unaware of their nonheterosexuality until later in life. Others partner with a woman for religious
reasons, family pressure, a desire for children, or out of genuine love for the woman (Bozett,
1982). After disclosure, many of these unions dissolve, but some do not. Approximately one-
sixth of couples remain together for three years or more, and most of these seem to be bisexual-
heterosexual couples (Buxton, 2001). Nonheterosexuals continue to enter into mixed-orientation
relationships with a straight partner even though overall societal and cultural attitudes toward homosexuality have become somewhat more accepting in certain segments of the larger society.

Mixed-orientation relationships have sometimes been portrayed as a curiosity in the media with such books as *Maurice* (Foster, 1971) or *On the Down Low: A Journey into the Lives of 'Straight' Black Men Who Sleep with Men* (King & Hunter, 2005), which was featured on the Oprah Winfrey Show. In cinema, there is *Making Love* (Adler, Sandler, Melnick, & Wilde, 1982), *Brokeback Mountain* (Pohlad, Ossana, Schamus, & Randall, 2005), and *On the Downlow* (Child, 2008), adapted from the book by the same name. Yet family researchers have been slow to systematically investigate mixed-orientation relationships. One possible reason for this is that such couples are largely invisible (Ben-Ari & Adler, 2010; Brownfain, 1985; Buxton, 2001; Kort, 2005). Many such married individuals may be reluctant to identify themselves as nonheterosexual due to fear of negative consequences (Buxton). Religious individuals, wishing to distinguish between homosexuality and same-sex attraction (SSA), may be particularly wary of labels and prefer to dis-identify with their same-sex attractions (Yarhouse, Pawlowski, & Tan, 2003). As social mores begin to accommodate nontraditional relationships, it is valuable for researchers, educators, and family practitioners to understand the forces that help shape and sustain commitment within mixed-orientation relationships.

**Statement of Purpose and Research Questions**

Previous research into mixed-orientation relationships has some considerable limitations. For example, of 29 articles that present research on mixed-orientation couples, only 9 obtain information from both partners in the relationship. Information in this study was obtained from both partners in the relationship in order to add to the extant literature base in this regard.

Second, theoretical and conceptual frameworks are given in only four of the 29 studies, including ambiguous loss (Hernandez & Wilson, 2007), attachment theory (Corley & Kort,
4

2006), cognitive consistency theory (Higgins, 2002), and essentialism (Malcolm, 2000). In this study, social exchange theory, a major theoretical perspective in family studies research, was used as the lens through which to interpret the data.

Third, as cultural attitudes regarding homosexuality continue to change, couples in more recently established mixed-orientation relationships may describe different reasons for entering into and remaining in mixed-orientation relationships than has been found in earlier research.

There are three main research questions that explore commitment in long-lasting mixed-orientation relationships: (a) How do participants describe their reasons for entering into a relationship with their partner? (b) How do participants describe the reasons they remain committed to their partner, including any benefits to maintaining their relationship? (c) How do participants describe the challenges, if any, to maintaining their relationships?

Responses to the second and third research questions are interpreted using social exchange theory and Johnson’s (1999) three-part model of commitment, which includes personal, moral, and structural components to relationship commitment.

Assumptions

Based on personal experience and existing literature, I assumed that most older participants entered into their relationships because of social expectations and/or their religious beliefs and that the nonheterosexuality of the male partner was not disclosed early in the relationship. Younger couples, on the other hand, are more likely to have discussed the male’s nonheterosexuality earlier in the relationship and possibly before marriage. These assumptions are based on the literature, in which older studies (Bozett, 1982; Ross, 1971) report nonheterosexual males marrying to escape homosexuality, whereas this reason is not cited in more recent studies, as well as growing cultural acceptance of nonheterosexuality in the U.S. (Andersen & Fetner, 2008; Avery et al., 2007), including the American Psychiatric Association’s
warning that reparative therapy to change one’s sexual orientation is dangerous at worst and ineffective at best (Buxton, 2001).

Second, it is assumed that couples will identify open communication as being the most helpful factor in remaining in their mixed-orientation relationship, regardless of age. This assumption is based on previous research (Buxton, 2001; Edser & Shea, 2002; Hays & Samuels, 1989; Matteson, 1985) indicating the necessity of open communication in such relationships. I assume that other factors vital to the maintenance of participants’ relationships include adaptability, particularly on the part of the straight partner, and feeling fulfilled with one’s partner and family life, also based on previous research (Bozett, 1982; Brownfain, 1985; Buxton, 2001, 2004; Hays & Samuels, 1989; Latham & White, 1978; Lee, 2002; Ross, 1990).

Third, previous research suggests that challenges to commitment in mixed-orientation relationships will include narrow religious and moral views about marriage (Alessi, 2008; Bozett, 1982; Brownfain, 1985; Buxton, 2001) and negativity from family of origin and from peers (Alessi; Brownfain; Buxton). Finally, it is assumed based on previous research (Buxton, 2001) that the nonheterosexual partner in mixed-orientation relationships that endure tend to consider themselves more bisexual than homosexual.

The Researcher

At the time of conducting this study, I am in a committed, mixed-orientation marriage of over eleven years, and over four years have passed since coming out to my wife, although I had been aware of my homosexual attractions since early adolescence and out to various close friends since then. Thus, I bring to the research process personal experience and insights that may be particular to mixed-orientation relationships that survive for longer than three years post-disclosure. I acknowledge that while my experiences are valuable in providing insight, they could also serve as a liability in biasing my judgment regarding the research design and the
interpretation of the data. For example, I hold that one’s sexual orientation, whatever it is, should be accepted, whereas some individuals discuss their sexual orientation as something they “struggle” with or something that requires “healing” (Yarhouse, Pawlowski, & Tan, 2003, p. 381). As another example of potential bias, I am ideologically committed to openness and transparency as an intentional strategy toward countering heterosexism in society, whereas two of the couples that I talked with wished to keep the sexual orientation of the nonheterosexual partner private. Interviews with participants would likely have yielded somewhat different information had I been a straight female rather than a gay male. I have engaged in critical self-evaluation throughout the research process and intend to make clear to my readers my assumptions and subjective views when reporting my results. Further, I have taken certain procedural safeguards such as clarification of researcher bias, secondary coding, and member checking, which I discuss further in Chapter 3.

A note is warranted about the use of voice in this dissertation. Qualitative research acknowledges researchers’ subjectivity and role as the interpretive instrument in the research. The use of the first person “I” is therefore consistent with the interpretivist approach to qualitative research because it makes clear the role of the researcher and is usually clearer and more engaging than the impersonal passive voice that is commonly used in objectivist research (Holloway & Brown, 2012; Lichtman, 2006). In Lichtman’s words, avoiding the use of first person removes the researcher from the research and “is inconsistent with the fundamental assumptions of a non-foundationalist movement” (p. 180). The use of first person is particularly relevant in the methods section, where I may wish to communicate succinctly and in the active voice that “I interviewed couples,” which, in both my opinion and in the opinion of other qualitative researchers (Holliday, 2007; Wolcott, 2009), is simply better writing and more appropriate for qualitative research than some alternative phrasing in the passive voice, such as
“Couples were interviewed,” or “Interviews were conducted.” The sixth edition style manual of the American Psychological Association likewise privileges clarity over supposed objectivity, advising writers to “use a personal pronoun rather than the third person when describing steps taken in your experiment,” (p. 69) and to “use the active rather than the passive voice (p. 77).

**Rationale and Significance**

The rationale for investigating commitment in long-lasting mixed-orientation relationships through a social exchange lens is to uncover the complexities of these understudied relationships. Social exchange theory assumes that individuals have a set of desires, needs, and preferences, and that individual behavior can be explained by how well behaviors fulfill the preferences or needs of the individual. In other words, individuals evaluate their options, and then behave in a way that maximizes their rewards and minimizes their costs. Thus, individuals enter into and maintain relationships only as long as the rewards outweigh the costs (Bengtson, Acock, Allen, Dilworth-Anderson, & Klein, 2005). Social exchange theory is particularly adept at understanding the rewards and costs of staying in a relationship, including the attractiveness of the relationship, available alternatives, the attractiveness of those alternatives, expectations for the relationship, which vary from person to person, constraints, and a recognition that relationships change over time, altering the exchange equation (Sabatelli, 1984, 1988; Sabatelli & Cecil-Pigo, 1985).

In addition, during my training as a couple and family therapist, I did premarital counseling for a couple that would classify as a mixed-orientation couple. Nothing in our diversity training directly dealt with the particular characteristics of such relationships. It became clear that there is a need to include information regarding mixed-orientation relationships in family training programs dealing with family diversity. Increased understanding of commitment in mixed-orientation relationships can prove valuable to educators when
discussing diversity in family relationships, to researchers in understanding commitment generally, and to family therapists who may encounter mixed-orientation couples in their practice.

**Definitions of Terminology**

I use the following definitions when referring to the terminology below.

*Closed-loop relationship (CLR)*—Several participants refer to being in a CLR, which refers to two people who have a sexual relationship only with each other and with one other partner. The term can be applied when one partner is single.

*Commitment*—“One’s desire and intent to maintain, rather than terminate, a relationship” (Michaels, Acock, & Edwards, 1986, p. 162), encompassing Johnson’s (1999) three components including personal commitment, moral commitment, and structural commitment.

*LGBT*—The common acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender, sometimes also expressed as GLBT. LGBT is more common in the academic literature and connotes more feminist overtones by placing the L first.

*Mixed-orientation marriage (MOM)*—All of the participants in this study were legally married, and many made reference to being “in a MOM.”

*Mixed-orientation relationship*—In this study, a mixed-orientation relationship refers to a male/female couple in which the male experiences same-sex attractions or behavior, regardless of self-identification, and the female partner is heterosexual. The couple is in a committed intimate relationship, legally recognized or not, although all couples in this study were married. Couples did not need to be sexually monogamous, but they identified one another as their primary partner.
Moral commitment—A sense of moral obligation to stay in one’s relationship.

Nonheterosexual—Sexual orientation that involves same-sex attractions or behavior, regardless of self-identification. Equivalent terms may include, but are not limited to, homosexual, gay, bisexual, queer, pansexual, and those who reject any categorization. I generally use the term nonheterosexual throughout, although occasionally I use the word gay or homosexual to reflect the participants’ language.

Personal commitment—The sense of wanting to stay in one’s relationship because of attraction to one’s spouse or to the relationship.

Protective factors—“Individual or environmental characteristics, conditions, or behaviors that reduce the effects of stressful life events.” This is the definition offered by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2013), and accurately reflects the way the term is used in this study.

Same-sex attraction (SSA)—In some religious circles and among some of my participants, “same-sex attraction,” or SSA, is preferred over the term gay, which connotes an embracing of “the lifestyle,” and over the term homosexual, which connotes a clinical deficit that cannot be helped.

Secondary partner (or secondary relationship)—A romantic or sexual relationship that demands or requires fewer expectations of time, money, or emotional intimacy than the primary relationship. In this study, secondary partners are typically the boyfriends or sexual partners of the nonmonogamous husbands, whereas primary partners are the wives.

Structural commitment—A constraint to stay in one’s relationship regardless of one’s personal or moral commitments.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

This critical review explores empirical studies on mixed-orientation relationships. To conduct this review, I searched multiple information sources including scholarly research journals and books. I accessed these sources through EBSCOHost, including the Academic Search Elite, ERIC, Family and Society Studies Worldwide, and Family Studies Abstracts databases, PsycINFO, Google Scholar, and Web of Science. Because scholarship related to this relationship type has been relatively limited, the search was not limited to a particular timeframe. Articles needed to meet the following criteria for inclusion in the review: (a) publication is in a peer-reviewed journal; (b) explanation of the study design, method, and results are reported; and (c) inclusion of participants in mixed-orientation relationships. Theoretical articles or anecdotal accounts were not included. The 29 articles identified come from 13 journals and 2 books. The Journal of Homosexuality has given the most attention to mixed-orientation relationships, and five of the articles come from a 1985 volume dedicated to the topic. Although these and some other articles are older, they provide information valuable enough to warrant consideration given the limited body of research on the topic.

Of the 29 articles found focusing on mixed-orientation relationships, nine sample both partners in the relationship, 16 sample men only, and two sampled only the heterosexual wives. Only two of the 29 articles focus on lesbian and bisexual women partnered with a heterosexual man, and it is not clear whether these relationships are less common or if they have just been ignored. Seventeen of the studies were qualitative, four used mixed-methods, and eight were quantitative. This information is displayed in Appendix A.

In addition to reviewing literature related to mixed-orientation relationships, it was also necessary to review the literature about social exchange theory, the theoretical framework used
in the current study, queer theory, and literature regarding commitment. This literature is reviewed below, followed by a concluding summary that illustrates how the literature has informed my understanding of this study’s conceptual framework.

**Mixed-Orientation Relationships**

Much of the literature on mixed-orientation relationships seemed to cover three main topics, which are reasons the couple decided to get married, what relationship strengths the couples reported, and what challenges the couples reported. Each of the studies included in Appendix A are synthesized by these three main topics below, after which attention is given to the nine studies that gather data from both partners in the relationship.

**Reasons for Entering the Relationship**

Nonheterosexuals have reported varying reasons for partnering with a heterosexual. The most common reason given for marriage, perhaps encouragingly, is love (Edser & Shea, 2002; Hays & Samuels, 1989; Lee, 2002; Matteson, 1985). Some have reported marrying because they believed that doing so would lessen or eliminate their same-sex attractions (Corley & Kort, 2006; Kort, 2005; Ross, 1971, 1990; Yarhouse, Pawlowski, & Tan, 2003). Others suggest that many of these couples married young, before the nonheterosexual partners fully understood their sexual orientation (Higgins, 2002). Likewise, the spouses of many nonheterosexuals are unaware of their partners’ sexual orientation before marrying (Coleman, 1989; Lee, 2002), while other couples report the disclosure occurring before marriage (Matteson, 1985; Yarhouse, Pawlowski, & Tan, 2003). Couples have reported marrying due to familial or societal pressures (Corley & Kort, 2006) or from a desire to form a family and have children (Brownfain, 1985; Lee, 2002). In a sample of highly religious participants, both partners reported wanting a companion, feeling like marriage was the right thing to do, being in love, and wanting children and a family life as the most common reasons for marrying (Yarhouse, Pawlowski, & Tan, 2003).
It is worthy of note that some older studies report an escape from homosexuality as a reason for marriage, whereas this reason does not appear in more recent studies. For example, in a 1971 study of 11 married Belgian homosexuals, ten male and one female, Ross observed that some of his participants believed that their same-sex attractions were due to a lack of sexual experience and that the attractions would disappear once they were married. It was often a priest, chaplain, or doctor who advised them to marry as a cure for their homosexual attractions. Ross (1990) further observed in his review of earlier studies that in a 1979 study by Masters and Johnson, men reported marrying in an effort to hide or eliminate their homosexual orientation. This reason for marriage is largely absent in later studies, with the exception of studies of couples married long ago (Kort, 2005) or the studies conducted by Yarhouse and his colleagues (2003, 2006, 2009) on a group of highly religious couples, in which several of the nonheterosexual partners indicated that they thought the same-sex attractions would go away or could be concealed through marriage.

**Protective Factors**

Protective factors are “individual or environmental characteristics, conditions, or behaviors that reduce the effects of stressful life events” (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013). In the literature, protective factors are sometimes referred to as strengths of the relationship or as reasons that mixed-orientation couples remain together. Approximately one-sixth of mixed-orientation couples remain together longer than three years after disclosure (Buxton, 2004). The reasons given for staying together are not really different from other couples, such as a strong friendship, love, emotional attachment, and a desire to remain committed to one’s spouse and family (Brownfain, 1985; Buxton, 2001, 2004; Edser & Shea, 2002; Hernandez & Wilson, 2007; Matteson, 1985). Among a religious sample, love for spouse, obedience to God, and commitment to family were the most frequent reasons given for staying
together (Yarhouse, Pawlowski, & Tan, 2003). Open communication that is empathic, frequent, and honest recurs in the literature as an essential protective factor (Ben-Ari & Adler, 2010; Buxton, 2001; Edser & Shea, 2002; Hays & Samuels, 1989; Matteson, 1985). Such communication, while important in any relationship, seems particularly crucial in mixed-orientation relationships in which difficult conversations regarding sexual expression and redefining the relationship are all but inevitable (Edser & Shea; Matteson).

Several studies suggest that most mixed-orientation relationships that last tend to be sexually open. In summarizing his earlier study of eleven married homosexuals in Belgium, Ross (1990) notes that the “innovative” [sexually open] marriage appeared the most successful and free from interpersonal conflicts, but this depended on the versatility of the husband and the broadmindedness of the wife” (p. 46). Ross (1990) also reports on a study originally published in German on 789 homosexual males, ten percent of whom had married women. Half of these married homosexual men were divorced and half were still married. Those who had more frequent homosexual sex also had more frequent sex with their wives and regarded their marriage as happy, whereas those who had infrequent sex with men also had infrequent sex with their wives and considered their marriages less happy. Ben-Ari and Adler (2010) found that although many nonheterosexual husbands in their sample engaged in homosexual relations secretly, their desired ideal was to integrate their homosexual and heterosexual/family lives in a fashion that was complementary rather than duplicitous. Finally, a family therapist (Kort, 2005) who has worked extensively with mixed-orientation couples notes that many couples do not want to separate and they find that responsible non-monogamy is a viable option.

Another quality of long-lasting mixed-orientation relationships is adaptability, sometimes referred to as acceptance or flexibility in the literature. Like communication, adaptability is beneficial to any relationship, but mixed-orientation couples face unique opportunities to
redefine their relationship and to negotiate new rules, particularly surrounding sexual behavior (Ben-Ari & Adler, 2010; Brownfain, 1985; Buxton, 2001, 2004; Hays & Samuels, 1989, Lee, 2002). Buxton (2001) reported that couples that lasted after disclosure were the ones who took the time needed to make adjustments in the relationship, which often involved the heterosexual partner reading books or information, or otherwise making modifications to long-held conceptions of sexual orientation. Some couples decide to remain monogamous (Edser & Shea, 2002), which is a commitment likely to be broken by the nonheterosexual partner (Kort, 2005; Yarhouse, Gow, & Davis, 2009), while others privilege honesty over monogamy and choose to pursue a sexually open relationship (Ben-Ari & Adler; Brownfain; Hays & Samuels; Latham & White, 1978; Lee; Ross, 1971).

Mixed-orientation couples have also identified outside support as an important protective factor in maintaining their relationships. Outside support is support that comes from friends, family, or from counseling or therapy (Buxton, 2001, 2004). Online support groups have been identified as an important source of support for some mixed-orientation couples, as they can turn to individuals and couples in similar circumstances for advice, support, encouragement, and community (Buxton, 2001, 2004; Peterson, 2001).

Some studies (Buxton, 2001, 2004; Edser & Shea, 2002; Malcolm, 2000, 2002) have compared experiences of gay married males to the experiences of bisexual married males. Bisexual male/heterosexual female partners tend to report more satisfying sex lives (Buxton 2001, 2004; Ross, 1971). The bisexual husbands also reported love for their wives as the primary reason for staying in the relationship, whereas gay husbands reported the understanding of friends as being most protective. Similarly, Edser & Shea found that bisexual men who enjoy sex with women reported a sense of commitment and good communication as reasons for staying together, whereas gay men more often reported staying married to their wives due to religious
reasons or societal expectations. Malcolm (2000) investigated sexual identity in behaviorally bisexual married men and found that of the men who identified as bisexual, 86% (124 out of 140) were still married, whereas 45% (62 out of 139) of men who identified as gay were still married. In a later study of life stress, Malcolm found that bisexual married men had significantly lower life stress than gay married men. Taken together, these findings indicate what Ross (1990) has stated: “The higher the degree of homosexuality, the less chance any marriage has of surviving” (p. 50) and which Buxton echoes: “The wider the chasm, the stronger the bond needed to join the two sides” (p. 186).

**Challenges to the Relationship**

Some studies have reported that when there is conflict within a mixed-orientation relationship, the sources of conflict are the same challenges common to traditional relationships, such as child rearing, money management, communication, or a lack of quality time together (Latham & White, 1978; Yarhouse, Pawlowski, & Tan, 2003). However, there are certain challenges that are particular to mixed-orientation relationships.

The disclosure period can be a difficult time for the couple, particularly for the heterosexual partner, who often has not had time to adjust like the nonheterosexual partner has had. Some researchers (Buxton, 2004; Kort, 2005) have identified several stages that many straight spouses go through, including disorientation, disbelief, renewed hope, and resolution. Hernandez and Wilson (2007) similarly identified stages the heterosexual spouse may go through after disclosure, including confusion, preoccupation, feeling responsible, and disorientation. They also report that the straight female partner experiences what Boss (1999) calls ambiguous loss, which is the sense that their husbands are physically present but psychologically absent. Women tend to be more forgiving of male partners who have sex with other women than with men (Confer & Cloud, 2010), and wives report initially feeling humiliation over marrying a
nonheterosexual (Kort, 2005), and shock, anger, disbelief, rage, and resentment before moving toward acceptance (Brownfain, 1985). In contrast, the most common partner reaction reported by a highly religious sample with intact marriages was understanding and acceptance (Yarhouse & Seymore, 2006), even though this same sample also discusses repentance, overcoming same-sex attraction, and reparative therapy, which might be interpreted as a lack of understanding and acceptance.

Sexual activity and sexual satisfaction in some mixed-orientation relationships decline for both partners after disclosure (Alessi, 2008; Coleman, 1985; Lee, 2002). Men who had been sexually active with men prior to marriage tend to have more stable marriages, whereas husbands who are new to homosexual sex withdraw sexually and emotionally from their wives (Bozett, 1982; Matteson, 1985). Some nonheterosexual partners have sexual encounters outside of the relationship and in secret (Corley & Kort, 2006; Higgins, 2002; Kort, 2005). Within a highly religious sample, 63% of nonheterosexual spouses admitted to clandestine extramarital sex, including 25% within the previous 12 months (Yarhouse, Gow, & Davis, 2009). This is a much higher prevalence rate than the 4% rate of same-sex activity within the previous year as reported by Ross (1990), despite the religious sample’s presumed commitment to monogamy in principle. When heterosexual women discover that their partner has had sex outside of the relationship, they often experience grief, social isolation, feeling deceived, and fear of stigma (Hays & Samuels, 1989). Some heterosexual women also report feeling unwanted sexually (Yarhouse, Gow, & Davis).

Several influences external to the relationship can threaten mixed-orientation relationships. Couples have reported experiencing negativity from members of their families of origin and from peers (Buxton, 2001, 2004). Others who have sought professional help have reported feeling that their therapist did not understand the complexity of their issues (Alessi,
Narrow religious and moral views about marriage jeopardize the viability of mixed-orientation marriages (Alessi, 2008; Brownfain, 1985; Buxton, 2001). Societal and internalized homophobia, manifested as guilt, shame, denial, or self-hatred, has been found to further undermine the health of mixed-orientation relationships (Alessi, 2008; Ben-Ari & Adler, 2010; Coleman, 1989; Higgins, 2002, 2004; Lee, 2002; Malcolm, 2000; Pearcey, 2005; Ross, 1990). Some heterosexually married gay men are able to integrate their homosexuality with their married life, while others feel compelled to lead a double life of sorts by splitting their emotional, cognitive, and behavioral selves between family life and their homosexual activity (Ben-Ari & Adler; Brownfain). Finally, some couples have felt a lack of support from the LGBT community. Buxton (2001), for example, notes that some bisexual husbands reported opposition to staying married from gay men, and one wife was advised from a lesbian therapist/minister to divorce her bisexual husband.

Studies of Couples

Given that there have been only nine studies to date that have gathered information from both the nonheterosexual males and heterosexual female partners, it is worth highlighting their findings here. I review each study below in order of publication. Three of the studies come from the five that were published in a special 1985 edition of the Journal of Homosexuality on mixed-orientation marriages, and another three of the most recent studies draw upon information gathered from one sample studied by Yarhouse. Of the 27 studies focusing on nonheterosexual men partnered with women, only nine obtained data from both partners in the relationship, shown in Table 1.
In the oldest of the studies, Ross (1971) interviewed 11 homosexuals, of whom one was female, and four of their heterosexual partners. The homosexual participants cited three primary reasons for marriage, which were not knowing about their sexual orientation before marriage, a hope that marriage would end their homosexual attractions, and the desire to form a family and have children. Challenges in the marital relationships included sexual dissatisfaction and conflict over extramarital relationships, which decreased the wives’ marital satisfaction but increased the husbands.’ The marriages with the highest relationship satisfaction were open—what Ross calls “the innovative marriage”—and included wives who were “broadminded.” Of particular relevance to the present study is Ross’ finding that husbands reported that their wives had little interest in sex, but that the wives, when interviewed, strongly disagreed, suggesting that interviewing both partners in the relationship can increase the trustworthiness of the findings.

Latham and White (1978) interviewed both partners in five heterosexually partnered couples in which the men had sex with men and with their wives’ knowledge. They report that the men were internally motivated to establish the relationship and to have children. The relationships moved through three distinct phases. In the withdrawal-avoidance stage, during the
first year to five years, the men avoided extramarital homosexual contact. In the disclosure-acceptance stage, the male’s homosexual identity was more openly acknowledged in the marriage. In the adjustment-coping stage, the partners were more sexually expressive and desired a high degree of honesty. Those who were most internally motivated to marry had the most stable marriages. Further, the couples were adaptable and established mutually agreeable guidelines for relationships with secondary partners.

Coleman (1985) conducted a mixed-methods study of 18 nonheterosexual men, whom he labeled as bisexual given their marital status, and 14 of their wives in stable marriages. They were all White, highly educated, with high incomes, and the average length of marriage was 18 years. The couples had sought therapy related to adjusting to the husband’s nonheterosexuality, which had been revealed on average a little more than five years previously. When asked about their reasons for getting married, the men indicated, in order of frequency, an inability to find intimacy with men, love for their spouse, and a desire to have children, and the women indicated love and a desire to have children. Couples indicated that open communication, love, and commitment benefited their relationship the most, and that greater openness seemed to be correlated with greater relationship quality. The couples’ greatest difficulty was in their sexual relationships. He concludes that mixed-orientation relationships endure because of open communication, acceptance, and understanding.

Matteson (1985) used mixed methods to investigate 30 gay and bisexual men in stable marriages and 11 of their heterosexual wives. The sample was largely White, well educated, and had high incomes. The majority of the men reported their motivations for getting married as wanting a family life, including having kids and loving one’s partner, and some reported feeling societal pressure to get married. He followed couples in which homosexual activity was acknowledged (N = 13) to those in which it was secretive (N = 9) and found no difference in
separation rates after two years—one-third of couples in both groups separated. He further found that in both groups, the husbands were dedicated to the primacy of the marital relationship and the wives were adaptable and accepting. Most helpful to their staying together were having sexually open relationships—theoretically open on both sides, but most often with the males having secondary partners, the man having premarital same-sex experience, the husbands’ dedication to the marriage, and the wives’ adaptability and acceptance.

Wolf (1985) used mixed-methods to study 26 stable mixed-orientation marriages in which the husband was nonheterosexual. The sample was highly educated and had high incomes. Participants completed a questionnaire regarding the strengths and challenges to their relationships. Most participants reported high relationship quality, were sexually active within the marriage, and open about the man’s homosexual behaviors. Participants indicated that factors that contributed to the success of their relationships were a high level of sexual activity within the marriage, open and direct communication, friendship, previous counseling, cognitive flexibility, and financial independence. Challenges to the relationship were largely rooted in the males’ struggle to reconcile their marriage with their homosexual feelings, reflecting the contradiction and confusion resulting from societal dichotomization.

Buxton (2001) conducted qualitative research, using a phenomenological approach, to study 32 self-identified gay husbands and 28 heterosexual wives of gay husbands, of which 12 husbands and wives were married to each other. Participants reported that the most beneficial post-disclosure coping strategies were therapy, peer support, honesty, communication, love, and acceptance. Regarding the most supportive circumstances for maintaining their marriages, participants cited the quality of their relationship, having children, love for one another, and supportive friends. The greatest challenges to their marriages included husbands’ dishonesty and
the wives’ resulting distrust, and wives’ fears and anxieties. Further conflict arose when the men were online with other gay men because of time that it took away from their wives and children.

Yarhouse and his colleagues (2003, 2006, 2009) administered questionnaires to highly religious couples in which, in their 2003 and 2006 studies, referred to the nonheterosexual partners as “strugglers” because the term seemed to reflect the individuals’ conflict that they experienced between their same-sex attractions or activities and their religious convictions. In their 2009 follow-up, they adapted the more neutral term, “sexual minorities.” Their samples consisted of, in 2003, 11 nonheterosexual males partnered with heterosexual women, attriting to ten couples in 2006 and nine in 2009. Five nonheterosexual women and their straight male partners were also included in the study in 2003 and 2006, attriting to four couples in 2009. In 2003, the couples had been married for 6 to 24 years and all were White. They reported reasons for marrying as wanting a companion, seeming to be the natural thing to do, being in love, and wanting children and a family life. The majority of the nonheterosexual men had disclosed their nonheterosexuality before marriage. The most common spousal reactions were understanding and acceptance, followed by an array of more negative emotions like confusion, disbelief, shock, and anger. What nonheterosexual partners liked best about their marriages was friendship, love, and shared values, and heterosexual partners best liked love, openness, perseverance, and shared religious belief. The biggest challenges the nonheterosexual partners identified were parenting, financial stress, poor communication, and sexual dissatisfaction, and the heterosexual partners identified as challenges a lack of time, financial stress, poor communication, and sexual dissatisfaction.

In 2006 participants were again asked respond to questionnaires. The most frequent motivations the nonheterosexual partners reported for staying married were love for spouse, commitment to spouse, commitment to children, affection, and obedience to God, and the
heterosexual partners indicated love for spouse, commitment to spouse, obedience to God, and covenant. Regarding what they liked best about their marriages, both the nonheterosexual partners and the heterosexual partners reported shared values, friendship, and mutual religious faith. The biggest challenges both partners reported were a lack of time and communication issues.

In 2009, the remaining couples indicated via their questionnaire responses that their main motivations for staying married were, for the nonheterosexual partner, commitment to spouse, commitment to children, covenant, obedience to God, and love for spouse, and for the heterosexual partner, covenant before God, love for spouse, and commitment to spouse. Regarding the best part of being married, the most frequent responses for the nonheterosexual partners were shared values, mutual religious faith, support, love, perseverance, affection, companionship, friendship, openness, and authenticity, and for heterosexual partners were friendship, love, mutual religious faith, and sexual enjoyment.

These eight studies are particularly valuable because they sought the perspective of both partners in the relationship, thereby capturing more of the complexities of mixed-orientation relationships than can be understood when sampling only one partner. Buxton (2001), for example, found that despite some overlap in responses to coping strategies after disclosure, there were differences between the male and female responses. Further investigation into mixed-orientation relationships from the perspective of both partners has the potential to offer much insight into the nature of commitment in these relationships and perhaps in intimate relationships generally.

The pattern that appears to emerge from these eight studies, as well as from the other studies of mixed-orientation relationships that endure, is that they require open communication first and foremost. Open communication seems to be predicated on friendship and a willingness
for both partners to be adaptable in how they co-reconstruct their relationship. Couples have identified support from family, peers, professionals, and others in mixed-orientation relationships as being especially helpful to maintaining their own relationships. Challenges particular to mixed-orientation relationships involve anger from the straight partner after disclosure, a decline in sexual satisfaction post-disclosure, and lack of support from others and social negativity towards homosexuality. The findings from the literature have been categorized as *a priori* codes (Gibbs & Taylor, 2005) in Appendix B.

**Theory & Models**

What follows is a discussion of the main theory and model that served as my lens for understanding mixed-orientation relationships as I began the study. The overarching theory is social exchange theory. In addition, Johnson’s (1999) three-part model of commitment is used to better understand the nature of commitment in these long-lasting mixed-orientation relationships. Social exchange theory and Johnson’s commitment model provided me with a framework for coding and interpreting the transcripts related to the three research questions: how do mixed-orientation couples get together, what keeps them together, and what challenges do they encounter?

In addition to discussing social exchange theory and Johnson’s three-part commitment model, I also briefly discuss Rusbult’s (1994) commitment model. I mention her model, not because it informed how I interpreted the data, but as a point of contrast with Johnson’s model, and by way of explaining why I decided to use Johnson’s model instead. Finally, I touch upon queer theory, again, not because it is central to how I analyzed the data, but because of its contribution to freeing the categorical constraints that societal expectations so often place on gender, sexual orientation, and relationship configurations.
In Chapter 5, we will encounter two other models, namely a gay identity development model and the Circumplex model of family functioning (Olson, Sprenkle, & Russell, 1979), which I have chosen to reserve for Chapter 5. Why wait? The decision is not arbitrary. I had embarked on this study without knowing ahead of time just how relevant these other models would be. Qualitative research is a process of discovery, and saving the discussion of these models for Chapter 5 reflects the exploratory nature inherent in the research process. Further, saving discussion of these models for Chapter 5 also reflects how I employed them, which was to draw connections within data only after the process of coding and distilling the findings had taken place.

**Social Exchange Theory**

Social exchange theory is one of the main theoretical perspectives in family studies research and is the overarching theory used to frame this study. The theory is well suited for understanding relationship commitment (Leik, Owens, & Tallman, 2012) has been used in previous research concerning commitment and relationship quality (Sabatelli 1984, 1988; Sabatelli & Cecil-Pigo, 1985), and it is well suited for examining the phenomenon of mixed-orientation relationships because of its attention to rewards and costs. A theoretical foundation appeared to be absent or was left unstated in the majority of the literature regarding mixed-orientation relationships. This is unfortunate because theory is useful not only for interpreting research findings, but also for comparing findings across studies. Indeed, much of the literature appears to approach mixed-orientation relationships with an eye to rewards and costs, as they include discussions concerning reasons for marriage, reasons for staying together, and challenges to the relationship. I have therefore used these three concepts—reasons for marriage, reasons for staying together, and challenges to the relationship—in organizing my review of the literature and in my three research questions. I have interpreted the literature on mixed-orientation
relationships presented earlier through the perspective of social exchange theory. My hope is that by avoiding the theoretical deficiencies of earlier research and using the well-established framework of social exchange theory, we can gain a greater understanding of the rewards and costs that individuals encounter in mixed-orientation relationships.

Social exchange theory was first introduced by Thibaut and Kelley (1959; Kelley & Thibaut, 1978) and its focus concerns the subjective cost-benefit analysis of social exchanges and the comparison of available alternatives. Desirable consequences of a social exchange are considered rewards, and can include emotional comfort, financial gain, or elevated social status. Undesirable consequences are costs, and can include lost opportunities or the expenditure of money or time. Outcome is defined as the overall difference of the rewards and costs. The theory assumes that individuals wish to maximize their available rewards and minimize their costs.

Social exchange theory goes beyond rewards and costs of being in a relationship and takes into account people’s expectations of relationships. In their summary of social exchange theory, Hamon, Ingoldsby, and Miller (2009) explain that individuals have a comparison level that is based on previous experiences, as well as a comparison level for alternatives. Relationship satisfaction, then, is a product not only of one’s outcomes, but of one’s outcomes compared to one’s comparison levels. Happy, stable relationships are characterized by outcomes that exceed comparison levels. When outcomes are lower in comparison with previous experience but no better alternatives are available, the relationship is unhappy but stable. When outcomes exceed the outcomes of previous experience, the relationship may be happy, but it is unstable if better alternatives are available. If outcomes fall below the comparison level to previous experience and the comparison level for alternatives, the relationship is both unhappy and unstable.
A final assumption of social exchange theory worthy of note is that comparison levels based on previous experience and comparison levels for alternatives change over time. Because comparison levels are based on experience, they are continually fluctuating, influenced by both the individual’s personal relationship experiences, as well as cultural changes regarding relationships (Hamon, Ingoldsby, & Miller, 2009).

How might we apply social exchange theory to understand a mixed-orientation relationship? When a nonheterosexual man enters into a relationship with a woman, he is likely seeking many of the same rewards that heterosexual men seek, such as intimacy, financial security, stability, and social conformity. Indeed, Nord (1969) has argued for social exchange theory as an integrative approach to social conformity, and Corley and Kort (2006) have identified conformity as a factor in the forming and sustaining of mixed-orientation relationships. Later, when the man comes out to his partner about his nonheterosexuality, he likely anticipates an outcome in which the rewards exceed the costs. His rewards may include having a reason for exiting the relationship, a possibility of opening up the relationship sexually, or a greater level of communication and authenticity that can deepen the relationship. His costs may include hostility and anger from the woman and the possibility of altogether losing the relationship with his partner and with any children they may have together. His partner may experience some rewards, such as greater emotional intimacy that can accompany her partner’s self disclosure, but the costs of his coming out are likely to be very high, particularly just after disclosure (Buxton, 2004; Hernandez and Wilson, 2007; Kort, 2005). In accordance with social exchange theory, the coming out event will influence each partners’ comparison levels, related both to previous experience and to alternatives. Additionally, social and cultural influences regarding nonheterosexuality will also affect each partner’s outcomes and overall relationship satisfaction.
Some might assert that social exchange theory assumes that to choose another sexual partner necessarily implies rejecting or replacing the marital partner. This assertion, however, reflects the assumption that marriage is a monogamous arrangement, as there are no such implied restrictions in the applicability of social exchange theory when investigating multiple friendships (Glanville & Bienenstock, 2009; Hand & Furman, 2008), multiple parents, siblings, or children (Gierveld & Dykstra, 2008), or multiple grandchildren (Even-Zohar & Sharlin, 2009). Thus, applying social exchange theory to mixed-orientation relationships does not expand the theory itself, but merely our understanding of the relationship configurations to which the theory may usefully be applied. Like any theory, social exchange theory continues to evolve with continuing research. For example, recent research has centered on the issues of power, fairness, emotion, status, and networks in intimate relationships. (See Cook & Rice, 2006, for a thorough review of many of these studies).

**Commitment Models**

Given that commitment is the focus of this study, a commitment model was needed to investigate its role in mixed-orientation relationships. Commitment has been defined as “one’s desire and intent to maintain, rather than terminate, a relationship” (Michaels, Acock, & Edwards, 1986, p. 162). Social exchange theory and commitment models dovetail with respect to the role of love; that is, love is both intrinsically rewarding from a social exchange perspective, and it is the motivator for couples to stay together (commitment). Although any relationship will experience challenges with time, such as interpersonal conflict, mental and physical health problems, substance abuse, financial stress, unemployment, and so on (Peterson & Bush, 2013) a mixed-orientation relationship arguably presents a host of additional stressors, as discussed earlier in this chapter, including the partner’s anger after the disclosure of homosexual attractions or behavior (Hernandez & Wilson, 2007), sexual dissatisfaction (Alessi,
2008; Coleman, 1985; Lee, 2002), negativity from family members or peers (Buxton, 2001, 2004), religiously-based intolerance of homosexuality (Alessi, 2008; Brownfain, 1985; Buxton, 2001), and internalized homophobia (Alessi, 2008; Ben-Ari & Adler, 2010; Coleman, 1989; Higgins, 2002, 2004; Lee, 2002; Malcolm, 2000; Pearcey, 2005; Ross, 1990). To contemplate how couples in mixed-orientation relationships remain committed to one another in the face of these extraordinary challenges, therefore, is to contemplate the furthest stretches of commitment’s bounds, where costs can be considerable and the rewards must be greater still for such relationships to endure.

Two commitment models, one proposed by Rusbult, Drigotas, & Verette (1994) and another by Johnson (1999), were candidates for understanding mixed-orientation relationships in this study. Johnson’s model was ultimately the better fit, but let us first consider Rusbult’s model. Rusbult and her colleagues (1994) proposed the Investment Model of Commitment Processes. According to the model, commitment is influenced by three factors: relationship satisfaction, quality of alternatives, and investment size. A high level of commitment generally reflects high relationship satisfaction, low quality alternatives, and high investment, whereas a low level of commitment reflects just the opposite—low relationship satisfaction, high quality alternatives, and low investment. Variation in any of these three equally important factors will either increase or decrease one’s commitment level (Hamon, Ingoldsby, & Miller, 2009). The investment model has been validated empirically (Le & Agnew, 2003) and shown to pertain equally to heterosexual and homosexual couples (Kurdek, 1992) and to women and men (Bui, Peplau, & Hill, 1996).

Rusbult’s Investment Model of Commitment Processes (Rusbult, Drigotas, & Verette, 1994) is rooted in interdependence theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978), as it conceptualizes commitment as the allegiance that people feel toward those on whom they depend and includes
an intention to continue the relationship, a feeling of attachment to another, and a long-term view of the relationship (Rusbult, Drigotas, & Verette, 1994). Commitment, then, is related to people’s outcomes, discussed earlier. Remember that when current outcomes exceed comparison levels, the relationship is happy and stable. Likewise, when current outcomes exceed comparison levels, commitment will be high. This is not to say that relationship quality and commitment are the same—they are not. An unhappy couple can be committed to their relationship, not because they enjoy the relationship, but because they feel they have no alternative.

A second model of commitment was put forward by Johnson (1999), and the model has considerable overlap with social exchange theory (Michaels, Acock, & Edwards, 1986; Stanley, Rhoades, & Whitton, 2006), the theoretical framework for this study. Specifically, Stanley and his colleagues note that in both social exchange theory and Johnson’s commitment model, one’s relationship satisfaction and the perceived attractiveness of relationship alternatives determines the extent to which one’s relational needs are being met. Johnson argues that the general concept of commitment obscures distinctions in people’s experiences of relationship commitment. In Johnson’s model, commitment consists of three distinct kinds of commitment, and his model is sometimes referred to as a tripartite (three part) model. The three kinds of commitment, Johnson says, are personal, moral, and structural commitment. First, personal commitment refers to a person’s desire to stay in the relationship, either out of attraction or attachment to one’s partner, to the relationship itself, or both. Further, part of an individual’s sense of identity is often tied to participation in the relationship. The second kind of commitment, moral commitment, is the feeling that one ought to continue in the relationship, whether one wants to or not. Factors contributing to moral commitment are feelings that marital dissolution is inherently wrong, feelings of moral obligation to one’s spouse or partner, and moral obligations to others, such as
one’s children. Third, structural commitment refers to constraints or barriers to leaving the relationship, such as common children or financial interdependence. Structural commitments are largely irrelevant when personal and moral commitment is high, but may make a person feel trapped in a relationship when personal and moral commitment is low. The three commitment types can be reflected by how much individuals want (personal), feel they should (moral), and feel they have to (structural) stay in the relationship.

Johnson (1999) notes that factors influencing one’s commitment to a romantic partner are not always necessarily conscious, and neither are they as simple as the model may imply. In reality, there are joint effects of the three kinds of commitment. Further, a full model of relationship commitment involves two people’s feelings of commitment, and each partner in a relationship may have different commitment experiences; a financially dependent partner, for example, may feel strong structural commitment whereas the earner-partner does not.

Johnson’s (1999) tripartite model of commitment has been supported empirically, particularly through factor analyses, which confirm that commitment, rather than being a global concept, is best conceptualized as consisting of personal, moral, and structural components that are distinguishable experiences and only moderately correlated with one another (Adams & Jones, 1997; Johnson, 1999; Johnson, Caughlin, & Huston, 1999; Kirk, Eckstein, Serres, & Helms, 2007; O’Riordan, 2007; Stanley, Rhoades, & Whitton, 2006). Further, unlike Rusbult’s (1994) model, Johnson’s (1999) model acknowledges that societal expectations may greatly impact couple commitment (Le & Agnew, 2003). Johnson and his colleagues suggest that structural commitment encompasses pressure from family and friends to continue the relationship. Johnson’s notion of structural commitment captures investment, which is the focus of Rusbult’s theory. Given the closer affiliation between Johnson’s model and social exchange
theory, its attention to social pressures on the relationship, and its inclusion of Rusbult’s idea of investment, Johnson’s model seemed best suited to understanding commitment in this study.

**Queer Theory**

Queer theory is not the central theoretical framework for this study—that is the charge of social exchange theory—but just as mixed-orientation relationships challenge societal concepts of relationships, queer theory challenges societal norms regarding sexuality. Although the male participants in this study chose labels other than “queer” to describe their sexual orientation, most commonly “gay,” it is first useful to define the term queer as it relates to queer theory. Halpern (1995) writes:

> Queer by definition is *whatever* is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. *There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers.* It is an identity without an essence. ‘Queer’ then, demarcates not a positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative—a positionality that is not restricted to lesbians and gay men, but is in fact available to anyone who is or who feels marginalized because of her or his sexual practices: it could include some married couples without children, for example, or even (who knows?) some married couples *with* children. (p. 62)

Based on the work of Lauren Berlant, Judith Butler, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgewick, queer theory takes a critical approach to understanding the socially constructed character of gender, sexual behavior, and sexual identity (Wilchins, 2004). The concepts of heterosexuality, bisexuality, and homosexuality are relatively recent, appearing in the medical journals in the late 1800s (Katz, 2007). Queer theory is post-structuralist, in that it resists conceptualizing gender, identity, or social norms in terms of what is natural or unnatural, preferring instead to understand these concepts as normative or deviant, thereby revealing underlying structures of power. The
theory is relevant to mixed-orientation relationships inasmuch as it destabilizes traditional identity categories such as gay or straight, married or available, and even committed or unfaithful. As we shall see by way of the participants’ stories in Chapter 4, mixed-orientation relationships challenge heteronormative conceptions that “married” implies “straight” or that “faithful” implies “monogamous,” qualifying such relationships as non-normative, and thus “queer.”

**Summary**

The present study seeks to update our understanding of the reasons couples enter into mixed-orientation relationships, the protective factors that keep them together after disclosure with particular attention given to commitment, and the challenges they face in maintaining their relationships. To do this, social exchange theory will be used as the theoretical perspective through which to interpret the findings, and Johnson’s (1999) model of commitment will be used to augment social exchange theory with an understanding of the role of commitment in mixed-orientation relationships.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Overview

The purpose of this study is to investigate relationship commitment with a sample of 13 couples in mixed-orientation relationships. A better understanding of the protective factors and the challenges that couples encounter in maintaining their mixed-orientation relationships is valuable for family scholars, family practitioners—particularly therapists—and for other individuals in mixed-orientation relationships. In an effort to understand this type of relationship, the study addresses three research questions: (a) How do participants describe their reasons for entering into a relationship with their partner? (b) How do participants describe the reasons they remain committed to their partner, including any benefits to maintaining their relationship? (c) How do participants describe the challenges, if any, to maintaining their relationships?

This chapter describes the methodology that was used in answering these research questions. I begin with a rationale for a qualitative research design, followed by a rationale for using a phenomenological approach more specifically. I then describe the research participants and how they were recruited. I provide an overview of the research design, and discuss conducting the literature review and obtaining IRB approval to conduct the study. I then describe the data collection methods, methods for data analysis and synthesis, and ethical considerations. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of limitations of the study and a chapter summary.

Rationale for Qualitative Research Design

Qualitative research is rooted in a tradition of social constructivism and is concerned with the meaning that individuals make of their experiences within spatial and temporal context (Merriam, 2002). The strength of qualitative research is its ability to examine complex social
phenomena from the perspective of individuals within their particular social contexts, resulting in a richly descriptive final product (Merriam, 2002). Qualitative research regards social reality as being subjective and socially constructed (Lichtman, 2006). Given that mixed-orientation relationships defy heteronormative assumptions and scripts regarding how to perform their relationships, and given that mixed-orientation couples have reported needing to redefine the nature of their relationships after disclosure (Buxton, 2001, 2004; Edser & Shea, 2002; Matteson, 1985), a qualitative research design is best suited for investigating the subjective experiences of mixed-orientation couples. The purpose of qualitative research emphasizes contextualization, understanding, and interpretation, and the approach of qualitative research is inductive, honors complexity, uses the researcher as instrument, and is descriptive in its presentation of findings (Glesne, 2006). As the primary research instrument, qualitative researchers interview participants, code the transcripts, describe the findings, create meaning, and interpret significance in a way that is uniquely their own. The objectives of qualitative research stand in contrast with quantitative research, in which the intent is usually to test hypotheses and to determine the relationships between variables.

The research questions for this study were formulated to understand how participants describe their subjective experiences being in a mixed-orientation relationship. Quantitative methods are unlikely to elicit the data necessary to address these research questions. A qualitative research approach, on the other hand, assumes the socially constructed nature of the social world and therefore fits nicely with the objectives of this study.

**Rationale for a Phenomenological Approach**

Within the framework of a qualitative research design, a phenomenological approach is best suited for the current study. Phenomenology is a method of inquiry that seeks to understand individuals’ experiences from their own perspectives (Moustakas, 1994). Researchers use
phenomenology when they wish to ascertain participants’ perspectives, thoughts, and reflections on experiences related to the topic of investigation. These inner experiences usually remain unspoken in everyday life (Merriam, 2002). Phenomenologists identify the phenomenon of interest, and then focus on the lived experiences of individuals involved in the experience (Lichtman, 2006). Individuals’ descriptions of their experiences are compared to identify the “essences” of the phenomenon (Lichtman, 2006, p. 72; Merriam, 2002, p. 7), for example, the essences of childbirth experiences, the essences of religious conversion, or in this case, the essences of commitment in mixed-orientation relationships.

A phenomenological approach was used to obtain detailed descriptions of each participant’s thoughts and experiences related to commitment to their partner. Employing a phenomenological approach allowed participants to communicate their unique experiences being in a mixed-orientation relationship. Previous studies of mixed-orientation relationships explicitly state that a phenomenological approach was used (Bozett, 1982; Buxton, 2001; Buxton, 2004; Pearcey, 2005). I have been trained in couple and family therapy, and phenomenology is a method of inquiry that is compatible with therapists’ already developed skills of observation, empathetic listening, intuition, creativity, and analysis (Boss, Dahl, & Kaplan, 1996).

**Overview of Research Design**

The following summarizes the steps involved in the research process. Following this list is an expanded discussion of each of these steps. After passing preliminary oral examination, I sought and obtained approval to proceed with the research from the university’s Institutional Review Board (IRB), the agency commissioned with protecting human subjects involved in research. This includes submitting a proposal that outlines the procedures in place to protect human subjects involved in the research, including informed consent and protecting
confidentiality. I invited potential participants to participate in the study (See Appendix C for the recruitment message), and conducted in-depth interviews with them (See Appendix D for the interview questions) by phone or by videoconferencing. Given the sensitive nature of the research topic and the need to protect participant confidentiality, my advisors suggested that I not ask interview questions that pertained directly to sexual behavior. I then transcribed the interviews and analyzed the transcripts through a process of open and axial coding, a research strategy consistent with the epistemology of phenomenology.

IRB Approval

I received approval from the university’s IRB before conducting any of the research. I had no contact with research participants before obtaining approval from the IRB to commence with recruitment and data collection. I had not been personally acquainted with or contacted by any of the participants included in the study prior to IRB approval. A full committee was required to approve the study. During recruitment, I learned of other potential online communities that I wished to recruit from, so I submitted a modification form requesting approval to recruit from other sources if they seemed appropriate. A full committee again met and granted approval for the modification.

Sampling Procedure

To select participants for this study, I used purposeful sampling, a typical sampling procedure in qualitative research (Glesne, 2006). Purposeful sampling yields individuals who have experienced the phenomenon under investigation, and who can therefore provide the richest data regarding the phenomenon. Qualitative researchers do not usually work with populations large enough to warrant random sampling, nor do they seek to generalize to a broader population (Glesne). I also requested some participants to pass along my research announcement to those who may qualify for participation in the study, a sampling strategy referred to as snowball
sampling (Glesne; Groenwald, 2004; Merriam, 2002), and one that is useful in reaching participants who would otherwise remain invisible or difficult to reach (Lichtman, 2006). The criteria for selecting participants were (a) the male experiences same-sex attractions or behavior, regardless of self-identification; (b) the nonheterosexuality of the male has been acknowledged between the couple for at least three years; (c) the couple is in a committed intimate relationship, legally recognized or not; (d) both partners are willing to be interviewed, and (e) the female partner identifies as heterosexual or straight. The couple did not need to be in a sexually monogamous relationship, but they identified each other as primary partners.

There are several reasons for these criteria. First, I chose to focus on nonheterosexual men rather than heterosexual partnerships that include nonheterosexual women because previous literature has identified key differences between the experiences of nonheterosexual men and nonheterosexual women in mixed-orientation relationships (Buxton, 2001, 2004), including five main areas identified by Wyers (1987): overall demographics, marital history, marital problems and their impact, parenting issues, and dealing with homosexuality. I have also chosen to focus on nonheterosexual men rather than on nonheterosexual women because of the personal experience and insight that I bring as a researcher, although I plan to study nonheterosexual women in committed relationships with men in the future because there is a need for further research in this area. Second, sexual orientation lies on a continuum rather than in the more common categorizations of gay, bisexual, or straight. Since a phenomenological approach to research is interested in the meanings that individuals give to their own experiences, I wish to allow participants to define their sexual orientation with whatever language they choose. Third, previous literature (Buxton, 2001; Pearcey, 2005) indicates that mixed-orientation couples who separate typically do so within three years after disclosure. Thus, limiting my participants to couples who have remained together for three years or longer after disclosure should illuminate
how long-lasting mixed-orientation couples maintain their relationship commitment. Fourth, although previous literature generally refers to such relationships as mixed-orientation marriages, I favor the word relationship because committed relationships can and do exist independently of legal or religious sanction, although it so happened that all of my participants were married.

I announced that I was recruiting participants by sending a recruitment message (Appendix C) in the following ways: (a) by email to individuals for whom I have an email address in my personal email account; (b) by message to individuals whom I am directly connected to via Facebook; (c) by placing an announcement in Zippy, the e-newsletter for the National Council on Family Relations (NCFR), the national professional organization of which I am a member; (d) by individual email to NCFR members with a published email address; (e) by announcement through the Straight Spouse Network (SSN); (f) by listserv to Queers United On Campus (QUOC); Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Ally Alliance (LGBTAA), and Bisexual Married Men of America (BMMA). I also had approval to recruit from the Monogamous Mixed-Orientation Marriages listserv, but the listserv appeared no longer to be active. I did not ask participants how they learned of the study, but some participants volunteered that they had learned about the study when someone had forwarded the announcement to two other listservs: Help, Understanding, Growth, and Support (HUGS) and Alternate Path (AP). Participants contacted me directly by email or telephone, thus protecting their confidentiality regarding gatekeepers’ knowledge of participants’ involvement in the study.

My initial target was to recruit between 10 and 15 couples. Although each couples’ story is unique and fascinating, it became clear by my later interviews that I was reaching saturation. Data saturation in qualitative research occurs when the most recently collected data are no longer generating new categories that offer insight into better understanding the phenomenon under
investigation (Charmaz, 2002). I felt confident that saturation had been reached and I stopped recruiting new participants after interviewing my 13th couple.

**Data Collection Methods**

The most common phenomenological method of data collection is interviews, but can also include observations and written descriptions (Moustakas, 1994). After potential participants contacted me to volunteer to participate in the study, I sent them the informed consent document and questionnaire (See Appendix E). The questionnaire was designed to obtain certain demographic information that is commonly presented in the literature, including age and length of relationship. The length of time in the relationship since coming out was determined from participant responses to items 11 and 12 on the questionnaire (Appendix E), which asks for the month and year that the couple began living with each other and the month of year of coming out. I also obtained their rating on an adapted version of the Kinsey scale (Latham & White, 1978; Ross, 1990) in which participants rated themselves on a scale of 0-6, with 0 indicating no sexual attraction for the same sex and 6 indicating no sexual attraction for the other sex. Upon receiving the signed informed consent document and questionnaire, I emailed the participants to set an appointment for the first interview. Interviews were conducted by phone and by videoconferencing (via Skype) at a time and location convenient to the participants.

Phone or videoconferencing conversations were held when I was in a private office with a locked door that displayed a sign reading, “Interview in progress. Do not disturb.” Each interview was audio recorded. To record telephone conversations, I used masking tape to affix the built-in microphone found on iPhone earbuds to the speaker (ear) end of the telephone handset to record on a passcode-protected iPhone. Additionally, I observed participants when interviews were held by videoconferencing with the video feature enabled to have a better sense
of the nonverbal communication exhibited by the participants. However, after losing connection several times using Skype, I decided after interviewing my second couple that telephone interviews resulted in fewer disconnections and provided better quality audio recordings from which to transcribe.

I transcribed the interviews as soon as possible after each interview. I used pseudonyms and changed any potentially identifying information as I transcribed. For example, if a participant named a family member during the interview, I used a pseudonym instead while transcribing. This is also true for names of towns and workplaces. I attempted to be extremely attentive to protecting participant confidentiality, and the precise names of friends, family members, places of work, and city names that I thought could be used to identify participants were replaced in the transcripts as I transcribed. Changing identifying information during transcription is acceptable practice in qualitative research (Kvale, 1996). However, since pseudonyms for people, workplaces, and cities could be misunderstood to be a verbatim transcription, it was determined that a clearer and more straightforward way to refer to such information was with a bracketed reference to the omitted words, such as the following: [son’s name] or [name of city], and pseudonyms were used only in place of the participants’ names.

To understand participants’ perceptions of commitment in their relationships, I conducted two rounds of interviews: couple interviews and individual interviews. I interviewed couples together for the first interview. The individual interview was scheduled for one to two weeks after the couple interviews. There were three reasons for the second interview. First, interviewing the couples individually offered a different interactional context in which new information and ideas could be expressed. Second, it allowed me to ask follow-up questions that I had while transcribing the first interviews. Third, it allowed participants an opportunity to share any additional thoughts that they had about commitment within their relationship. All
couples who participated in the couple interviews also participated in the follow-up individual interviews.

Each couple interview lasted approximately one to two hours, during which I followed a semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix D). Three central questions of the interview protocol addressed a) the history of the relationship, b) the strengths of their relationship, and c) challenges to the relationship. After the first couple of interviews, it became clear that the coming out experience was a significant moment in the history of the relationship, and as couples brought up the topic of coming out during the interviews, I sought to understand this pivotal moment as it contributed to an understanding of the history of the couples’ relationships. Many couples likewise brought up religious beliefs, which were addressed in the written questionnaire, but was not included in the interview protocol. However, many of the couples made comments that indicated religion as being either protective or damaging to the relationship, and sometimes both, and so the role of religion likewise became an unexpected topic of many of the interviews as well. During the course of interviewing participants, I began to ask participants toward the end of our interview for their general cost/benefit assessment of their relationship as a way to understand their perception of their relationships’ strengths and challenges.

Within qualitative research and in qualitative interviewing, it is common and acceptable to ask previously unanticipated questions that maintain focus on the phenomenon under investigation (Merriam, 2002). Although the interview protocol provides a guide regarding the questions to be asked and topics to be explored, some useful questions cannot be anticipated in advance (Glesne, 2006). The researcher may find it useful to ask participants to elaborate on a topic if it seems useful to help answer the research questions (Adler & Clark, 2008; Charmaz, 2006; Lichtman, 2006; Turner, 2010). Thus, flexibility is a defining characteristic of qualitative interview questioning (Alder & Clark, 2008; Merriam, 2002; Turner, 2010). The topics that
were added to the approved interview protocol, regarding coming out, the role of religion, and a cost/benefit assessment of the relationship, were consistent with my investigation of commitment in mixed-orientation relationships and with the three guiding questions that were approved regarding the history of the relationship, the strengths of the relationship, and challenges to the relationship.

Individual interviews tended to be shorter, lasting approximately 20 to 40 minutes. During the follow-up interview with Beth and Brandon, I spoke first only very briefly to Brandon, who had no additional comments for me, and I had no further questions for him, so he passed the phone to Beth, whom I understood to be speaking to me privately thereafter. When I called for the follow-up interview with Lisa and Larry, they chose to be interviewed at the same time and mentioned that they did not have anything to say that they could not say in front of each other, so I did not insist on speaking to them individually. Finally, I did not transcribe the individual interviews with the last couple I interviewed because I did not note any information that substantially contributed to the data, which were becoming saturated. This is not uncommon in qualitative research. Glesne (2006) suggests that interviews need not be transcribed in their entirety or at all if such transcriptions are not needed.

I audio recorded the interviews using two digital audio recorders (an iPhone and an iPod). Transcripts were password-protected. This is done by clicking on the Office button in 2007 Word, then ‘Prepare,’ then ‘Encrypt Document,’ then typing in a password that only I knew. Audio recordings were deleted after transcription. The interview with a couple and with the partners separately were put into one Word document, resulting in 13 Word documents, one for each couple. Completed transcripts, which included the interview with the couple together and the interviews with each partner separately, averaged 212,000 words, or 29 pages long, ranging from 20 to 52 pages.
Methods of Data Analysis and Synthesis

Although not formalized, procedures for analyzing phenomenological data involve an iterative process that occurs at all stages of the research. The concentrated period of data analysis occurred after the interviews were transcribed when I coded the interviews. The goal of data analysis is to arrive at a small set of themes that characterize the phenomenon under investigation. Although I began data analysis with some *a priori* codes that were informed by the literature (See Appendix B), I remained open to the data and coded concepts that I identified through a close reading of the transcripts.

I used a student license for the coding software NVivo 9 to allow for easier coding of passages within the transcripts. Qualitative analysis software like NVivo can help researchers organize, reorganize, search, and link data, as well as aid in storing their own ideas, reflections, and theorizing. They can assist the researcher to sort and manipulate the data more quickly than can be done manually. Software, however, does not code the data automatically. It is only a tool, and the researcher remains in control of deciding how to code and interpret the data (Glesne, 2006).

To begin coding my transcripts with NVivo, I first created a hierarchy of “nodes,” or themes, that paralleled both the major concepts I had come across in the literature, as well as the main interview questions that guided the conversations with my participants. The five main nodes were (a) reasons for marriage, (b) coming out, (c) strengths of the relationship, (d) challenges to the relationship, and (e) advice. There was not an interview question related to coming out, but coming out was an integral part of each couple’s story that it warranted its own node.

Next, as I read through each transcript, I had the ability in NVivo to highlight excerpts, and then drag and drop them into the appropriate node. The *a priori* codes were a good starting
point, but I periodically needed to create a new node to accurately classify particular excerpts. For example, I did not have an *a priori* code related to coming out, so I added a node with this label. I further realized that the husband’s experiences and the wives’ experiences of coming out were quite different and were thus best discussed separately, so underneath the node of “coming out” I created nodes for “his experiences” and “her experiences.” Underneath each of these nodes I created still more nodes that were even more narrowly defined. For example, under “his experiences,” I created nodes related to gay identity development, turmoil pre-disclosure, and a sense of relief after disclosure, and after “her experiences” I created nodes related to her emotional reactions, her fear of abandonment, acceptance of his homosexuality, and so on.

In addition to relabeling nodes, NVivo allows for nodes to be rearranged, or for one node to be subsumed under another node if needed, which I found useful in the process of constantly comparing what I was reading with what I had read previously. This process of constant comparison is known in qualitative research as axial coding (Pomrenke, 2007), whereby the researcher is continually comparing what is presently being coded with previous codes and deciding, given each new piece of information, whether the existing codes are still the best representation of the data overall. For my coding process, this meant that periodically I found it necessary to move a node elsewhere in the hierarchy.

To give an example of adjusting the coding hierarchy during data analysis, as I read more and more transcripts, I realized that coming out seemed to be the culmination of a prolonged process of gay identity development. Therefore, I eventually renamed the node “his experiences” as “gay identity development,” as this seemed better to reflect what the men were talking about as they discussed events that led up to their coming out. For another example, as I was finalizing my dissertation, I revisited my themes and observed that I had created a subtheme under “Challenges to the relationship” related to lack of trust, and I realized that the quotations
about trust really were best situated as a sub-subtheme of poor communication, and so I moved “trust issues” under “poor communication” and reflected this change in Chapter 4 as I wrote about poor communication and how it can lead to a lack of trust. As another example, under the node “strengths of the relationship,” I had a sub-node called “behaviors” that included yet three more nodes: “adaptability,” “communication,” and “space,” the last of which referred to couples giving each other space or privacy. I had a separate node under “strengths of the relationship” simply labeled “sex,” which included comments related to a good sex life as contributing to the strength of the relationship. However, it became clear that the node “sex” would be more appropriately categorized under the larger category of “behaviors,” so I was able to click and drag the node “sex” to become a sub-category of the node “behaviors.”

After coding was complete, I ended up with five main themes and various levels of subthemes, resulting in a total of 115 different nodes in NVivo. See Appendix F for a screenshot of how transcripts were coded and assigned to nodes. As I was preparing to write up the results in Chapter 4, I first needed to decide which findings to report, as some nodes represented topics that participants discussed widely and in depth, such as open communication, while other nodes represented topics that perhaps only one or two participants discussed, such as advice to be kind when coming out. NVivo displayed the number of transcripts out of the total possible number of 13 transcripts that I pulled quotations from for each node. Thus, for example, the number 8 showing next to the node “therapy” as a source of support indicates that eight of the thirteen couples discussed therapy as a source of support. I used these counts to inform and prioritize the order in which I present the findings in Chapter 4. For example, noting that the challenges that participants talked about were narrow religious views (11), then poor sex life (10), then the wives’ feelings of inadequacy (9), as a general rule I reported them in order of descending frequency. There were also cases in which two or more topics were mentioned by
the same number of couples. For example, again under the theme of “challenges to the relationship,” “poor communication,” “internalized homophobia,” “feeling alone” and “therapy” were each mentioned by seven couples. However, these seven couples made more comments that I coded as “poor communication” than they made about “internalized homophobia,” and so I present “poor communication” first. When presenting the themes in Chapter 4, I do not offer every participant’s quotation related to the theme, but rather I present only the quotations that I judged best to illustrate the theme. Appendix G displays the final hierarchical scheme of themes, sub-themes, and sub-sub themes, as well as which codes were included in the final results and which were excluded due to the infrequency with which participants mentioned them.

Lichtman (2006) outlines the coding procedure that I followed. The transcript from the first interview was read carefully and units of meaning were categorized into codes. The same was done with the second and subsequent transcripts, using previous codes and adding new codes when necessary. This process continued until all transcripts were coded, and eventually yielded 115 total codes, 9 of which served only as labels, leaving 106 codes containing excerpts from the transcripts. These codes were then organized hierarchically into a smaller set of categories and subcategories. These categories were then organized into five themes that best seemed to capture the essence of commitment in mixed-orientation relationships.

Ethical Considerations

Protecting participants involved in this research was of utmost importance (Bengtson, Acock, Allen, Dilworth-Anderson, & Klein, 2005; Glesne, 2006; Lichtman, 2006; Merriam, 2002). IRB requirements address general ethical considerations, such as providing the participants with an informed consent document that discloses the purpose and details of the study and including potential risks and benefits associated with being involved in the study.
Unexpected occurrences may raise the most challenging ethical dilemmas, and I was constantly mindful about how my actions, behavior, and decisions impacted others involved in the study.

One ethical dilemma that arose, for example, was the disclosure during a couple interview that one of the spouses had a secondary partner, which the other spouse knew about, but which they wanted to keep confidential from others. Therefore, I needed to be judicious about what information to report and how to report it, both during member checks (explained below), and during my final presentation of findings, so that I protected these participants’ confidentiality. Even when participants seemed to be comfortable and forthcoming with details about their relationship, my goal was to report on general concepts, themes, and lessons learned, and to omit any information that could possibly be used to identify the participants.

**Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is a term used in qualitative research that roughly parallels the concept of validity in quantitative research. In-depth qualitative analysis often requires many analytic interpretations that can potentially undermine the trustworthiness of the findings compared to research that uses more standardized methods of analysis (Akkerman, Admiraal, Brekelmans, & Oost, 2006). There are a number of ways that qualitative researchers can ensure the trustworthiness of their data analysis, although the particular methods used to ensure trustworthiness depend on the study (Glesne, 2006). The methods that I used include triangulation; clarification of researcher bias; member checking; rich, thick description; secondary coding; and memoing, which are explained in more detail below.

Triangulation in this study refers to making use of both individual interviews and couple interviews, and comparing the data from each interview. Interviewing the participants individually sometimes yielded different responses from interviewing the couples together since each interview presented a different interactional context. For example, two of the men were
more forthcoming about their sex with men during the individual interviews than they were during the couple interviews. Additionally, some of the women went into greater detail during the individual interviews about the trying emotions they experienced related to their partners’ homosexuality. It is not clear, however, whether some participants went into more detail during the second individual interview because their partners were not present, because they felt more comfortable with me by the second interview, because we had the additional time and opportunity to go into more detail, or some combination of all three factors.

Clarification of researcher bias involved reflecting on my own subjectivity and how I would use and monitor it in my research. Phenomenologists cannot be detached from their own presuppositions, and they should not pretend otherwise (Groenewald, 2004). They can, however, make use of “bracketing,” which means to set aside one’s preconceptions and to try to understand the participants’ experiences from their own perspective. This concept is discussed in the therapeutic literature with the possibly more enlightening term, “informed not-knowing” (Anderson & Goolishian, 1992). I strove to “bracket” my own assumptions by reporting participants’ experiences as faithfully as I could, and indeed many of their experiences were very different from my own.

Member checking provides participants with an opportunity to approve of the researchers’ interpretation of the data that participants provided (Carlson, 2010). Participants are given a document and asked to edit, clarify, or elaborate on the content. Although the document can be the actual interview transcript, it is often most useful to have the participant comment on the researcher’s interpretations or on patterns or themes that the researcher has identified (Creswell, 2009). This latter approach was the one taken for the member checks in this research. An individualized Word document was emailed to each couple containing the table of couple characteristics (Appendix H), the biographical sketch of the couple at the beginning of Chapter 4,
selected excerpts from Chapter 4 where the couple was mentioned or their statements were used, a portion of the section from Chapter 5 called “Three Essential Characteristics of Long-Lasting, Mixed-Orientation Couples,” and the last two paragraphs from the conclusion of Chapter 5. Six of the 13 couples responded with comments. Each stated that they believed they were portrayed accurately. Three couples suggested slight changes in their biographical sketch to further protect their identity.

Rich, thick description is almost an injunction in phenomenological research (Groenewald, 2004) and involves providing enough detail for readers to understand the context of the research. Such details may be about the setting or include the general appearance, intonation, or nonverbal cues of the participants (Lichtman, 2006). To achieve rich, thick description, I have given priority to allowing quotations from the participants to guide the narrative that unfolds in Chapter 4, and tying together their statements with my own commentary only where it might provide clarification.

Secondary coding is a process whereby another person, usually an academic colleague, is asked to code a portion of the transcripts. A recent doctoral graduate from my department, who identifies as female, religious, and heterosexual, volunteered to serve as a secondary coder, and I provided her with three digital, de-identified, uncoded transcripts. Some qualitative researchers attempt to calculate a numerical value of inter-coder reliability of the codes. However, the purpose for the secondary coder in this study was not to determine inter-coder reliability, but rather to provide me with a valuable second perspective to identify themes relevant to commitment in mixed-orientation relationships (Charmaz, 2002). See Appendix I for a comparison of how the secondary coder and I coded the transcripts.

In terms of coding technique, I captured larger units of meaning than the secondary coder did, preferring full phrases, or sometimes multiple sentences related to a particular idea, rather
than individual words or short phrases. Another difference in technique lay in how we coded rewards and costs from a social exchange perspective. We agreed on what the rewards and costs were, but I coded, for example, dishonesty by highlighting and dragging the relevant passage to the “communication” node under the “challenges” node, whereas the secondary coder inserted a comment noting that the dishonesty was a “cost.” Further, our differing positionalities were sometimes apparent: for example, she noted next to a positive comment made by the straight female partner, “Positivity exudes from straight spouse almost to talk herself into lifestyle??????,” which conveys a sense of disbelief that the wife could be genuinely happy married to a gay man with a secondary partner. Overall, the secondary coder and I agreed on “costs,” although she tended at times to overlook some of the strengths of the relationships that I had identified. What differences there were in our coding serves to confirm the subjective nature of qualitative research and that the conclusions I come to here are my own, and that another researcher would likely come to different conclusions.

Memoing is the researcher’s written account of the research process in which notes, observations, thoughts, and reflections are recorded (Groenewald, 2004). In addition to being a useful tool of interpretation and analysis during the qualitative research process, memoing provides a type of audit trail that can be referred to during an external audit (Merriam, 2002). I wrote the majority of my memos while coding the transcripts. See Appendix J for example memos related to the issue of gay identity development, a concept that I had not been thinking of at the outset of the research but that became apparent as I coded the transcripts.

**Limitations of the Research Design**

This study has several limitations, some of which are common critiques of qualitative research generally, and some of which are inherent to this particular study. Careful consideration has been given to accounting for these limitations and for mitigating their influence. The
limitations include subjectivity of the researcher, participant social desirability bias, and restricted sample.

Researcher subjectivity is a limitation of any qualitative research because data analysis depends on the researcher’s decisions and interpretations. The decisions and interpretations are influenced by the researcher’s individual interests, experiences, needs, and perceptions. My own subjectivities and experiences, not only as an individual, but as a member of a mixed-orientation relationship, ostensibly provide me with valuable insight, but also constitute one of the main limitations of this study. The methods of ensuring trustworthiness mentioned above, particularly clarification of researcher bias, member checking, and use of a secondary coder, were used to minimize the effect of researcher subjectivity.

The quality of the data largely depends on the information provided by participants during the interviews. Given the personal nature of intimate relationships and given that sexual orientation is a sensitive topic, some participants seemed to be slightly more guarded, or not entirely candid, in their responses than others. Other participants might have attempted to amplify the strengths of their relationships while minimizing the challenges. Buxton (2001) commented on this focus on the positive as possibly reflecting a characteristic of long-lasting mixed-orientation couples. To minimize this limitation, I attempted to assure participants that what they said would remain confidential, and I reminded them that they may choose not to discuss any topic that makes them feel uncomfortable.

Although generalizability is not a goal of qualitative research, a major limitation of this study is its restricted sample. Participants were necessarily self-selected and were willing to spend time and energy in participating in this study. It may be difficult, therefore, for readers to understand how the findings of this research can apply to other mixed-orientation couples. Qualitative research, while not generalizable, should be transferable. That is, I have attempted to
report the findings of this research in sufficient detail that readers can determine to what extent the findings can appropriately be applied to other contexts. The primary method of ensuring transferability is through rich, thick description, discussed above.

Chapter Summary

In summary, this chapter has provided a detailed description and rationale for the research methodology used in conducting this study. Qualitative research was determined to be most appropriate for investigating the socially constructed nature and subjective experiences of commitment in mixed-orientation relationships. A phenomenological approach is best suited for understanding the lived experiences and meanings that participants ascribe to their relationships. An ongoing literature review provided an understanding of key issues regarding the phenomenon, and literature pertaining to social exchange theory and Johnson’s (1999) model of commitment provides a theoretical framework with which to interpret the data. Purposeful sampling and snowball sampling were used to recruit qualified couples, whom I confidentially interviewed as a couple and then individually. Interview transcripts were coded, and the codes were organized hierarchically into categories, and the categories were organized into themes that best illustrate the phenomenon of commitment in mixed-orientation relationships. I wished to uphold the highest ethical standards while conducting this research so that participants and their confidentiality were protected. I concluded by describing several methods for ensuring trustworthiness and I discussed the limitations of this study.

The methodology that I have outlined in this chapter served as a roadmap that detailed the principles and procedures of inquiry best suited to understand why individuals form mixed-orientation unions, what keeps them together long term, and what challenges they face in maintaining their relationships. It is hoped that this study will be of value to family scholars, to therapists and other family practitioners, and to individuals in mixed-orientation relationships.
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

The Couples

What follows is a short biographical sketch of each couple. Participants were given pseudonyms alphabetically starting from the letter A, and couples were given pseudonyms beginning with the same first letter so that it is clear who is partnered with whom, for example, Anna and Alan, Beth and Brandon, Caitlin and Chad, and so forth. I list the women’s name first because I am a feminist, meaning that I hold the radical notion that women should be treated equally to men, an adaptation of the definition attributed to Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (in Schroer, 2003, p. 2) that “feminism is the radical notion that women are people.” Following the biographical sketch of each couple, I present the participants’ overall characteristics, followed by the five main findings with quotations and details that support each finding. I have attempted to provide the reader with “thick description” (Denzin, 2001) and a broad range of participant experiences to enable the reader to enter the participants’ mindset as fully as possible. I use illustrative quotations from the interview transcripts in an attempt to capture some of the complexity and richness of participant perspectives. The emphasis throughout is to let participants speak for themselves. I include data from the questionnaires where appropriate to augment the interview data.

Anna and Alan, both 68, have been married for 46 years. They run a business out of their home. Nineteen years ago, Anna discovered that Alan had been corresponding with gay men online. Plagued by panic attacks over fear that Alan would leave, Anna realized that her fear stemmed from not understanding the “dark and dangerous” world of homosexuality, until she “jumped in with both feet” to learn as much as she could. “And I worked my guts out, and I tried opening the door, then I’d shut it, then open and shut it, and it wasn’t until I stepped through the door and slammed it behind me that I was able to make any progress. He’s worth
it.” They later hosted meetings in their home with guest experts for other mixed-orientation couples. Says Alan, “I’ve never met anyone that even came close to threatening the commitment or the connection that I feel with Anna. It’s an emotional commitment, an emotional fidelity, and that has never been compromised.”

Beth and Brandon, both 31, have been together for three years and married for two. They both hold professional jobs and are members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS, or Mormon) church. “I had already come out to my ward,” says Brandon. “My whole ward knew that I had same-sex attraction. But she didn’t, and yet she was coming to the ward and our relationship developed really, really quick.” Within a month after meeting at a dance, he decided to come out to Beth. “It was nerve-wracking,” he says. “Yeah,” says Beth. “I wasn’t expecting to hear he was gay.” When I asked them what they liked about each other, they provided the most thorough answers by far of any of my participants, talking for over six-and-a-half minutes. They clearly had a strong personal connection, but Brandon also stressed the importance of the religious basis to his commitment to Beth. “I was taught in my family to keep covenants—to mean what I say and say what I mean. I mean, I think definitely the way I was raised, divorce was not an option.” Without that religious basis, says Brandon, “I really don’t know how other people do it.”

Caitlin, 26, and Chad, 28, another LDS couple, have been married for four years. Caitlin works and Chad is pursuing a graduate degree. Chad had been viewing gay pornography, and “about nine months into our marriage,” says Chad, “I ended up disclosing to her the, maybe, ‘dark secret?’” Caitlin says, “I think that what’s best about our marriage is the open communication that we have.” Chad provides an example: “We’ve kind of established a little code about rating attractions” that ranges from one to four. During a recent visit to a restaurant, “one of the guys who was waiting was particularly attractive and… I turned to Caitlin and said,
‘You know, we’ve got a 3.5 going on over there,’ and she turns and says, ‘Ugh, he’s small.’” He continues, “It’s funny how quickly that diffuses something that could turn into a real drain on the relationship…. Yes, we find other people attractive, and here we are still in a committed relationship, so that must say something about our love.”

Diane, 49, and David, 54, have been married for 29 years. Both hold professional jobs. “We’re LDS,” says David. “We believe that marriage is eternal, and so we believe that if you really love each other you can work through anything,” which included a year-long separation, legal trouble, and mental health issues. “I’m disfellowshipped from church… for acting out with other guys.” Consequently David has missed participating in his children’s religious ordinances. “I’m kind of angry about all that, so I’m not real big about church stuff right now.” “There are days when I think, ‘This stinks. It’s not much fun,’” says Diane. “But just doing it on my own isn’t much fun either.” But, she says, “He’s a child of God and a valiant spirit, and you know, there’s something there, that I just want to be able to see the real him and not see all this other stuff that gets in the way.” Diane continues, “It’s all a roller coaster and the only person who gets hurt on a roller coaster is the one who gets off in the middle.”

Eileen, 55, and Eric, 56, have been married for 34 years and both hold professional jobs. After returning from his mission to the location where Eileen was born and meeting Eileen in his home state, Eric returned to the area where he had served to live with a young man he had proselytized. “Two weeks after we were married,” says Eric, “I told her I wasn’t sure I could love her like I loved this kid in [my mission field].” Later, Eric “left me and the kids, wanted to see what he was missing out in his life to live the gay lifestyle.” He returned the next day, but “the bishop told Eileen to divorce me,” says Eric. “And we went to a counselor, and he told me that there was no such thing as homosexuality.” Eric began viewing pornography two years ago, which angered Eileen, but “I went upstairs and said a little prayer, and had a strong impression
came over me that Heavenly Father loves Eric.” About being out, Eric says, “I’m starting to experience feeling truly understood and truly loved, not by everybody, but certainly by some. That’s a marvelous thing, actually.”

Frances, 53, and Frank, 54, have been married for 32 years. Frank had sexual contact with men while on a trip abroad, and he told Frances about it while they were on vacation together. They spent the next two years being monogamous and learning about mixed-orientation relationships together. After talking with a straight male friend who had had a long-term affair and who “thought that having outside relationships had bolstered their marriage and helped him to be a responsible, loyal, devoted husband,” Frances came to separate sexual exclusivity from marital commitment. “And I, I just had a paradigm shift. I just woke up one morning and thought, ‘You know what, I think maybe we can do this.’” Frances continues with a metaphor of why traditional social scripts for relationships do not work for her and Frank, saying, “We’re operating outside the box because the box is broken…. I’m outside the box because there is no box, so I might as well just do what works.”

Gina, 39, and Greg, 37, have been married for 14 years, and Gina knew Greg was gay when they first started dating. Gina worked but now stays home with their child, and Greg holds a professional job. Greg underwent reparative therapy for several years with an ex-gay ministry. “I would fall under their failure category,” he says. “I really honestly began to contemplate suicide as an option for trying to beat this.” Instead of suicide, Greg decided to reinterpret his homosexual attractions. “I just switched my perspective altogether, that being gay is a good gift from God. It’s something that can be celebrated and that I can be happy about.” For Greg, part of his gay identity development has been to become socially and politically active. “Putting on a wife-beater and going to the gym and getting like a bunch of looks of disapproval just make me feel like I’m saying, ‘Fuck you’ to the people in the gym…. I just love it.” Gina is adjusting to
Greg’s newfound gay identity. “The way we always talked about it was Greg struggled with being gay—it’s not a part of his life or it’s not on the front burner. So it’s gone from that to now I have a gay husband.”

Holly, 41, and Hank, 44, have been married for 17 years and both work. “When we first got together, he said he was bi,” says Holly. “I guarantee ninety percent of the guys on campus [where I went to school] were gay.” About a year ago, Holly began drinking and partying with friends. “He was feeling very lonely and isolated and abandoned,” she says, “and that made him kind of reevaluate what was going on.” Hank recalls, “I had a little bit of a nervous breakdown.” He continues, “I realized, you know, when I am in my head, I don’t look at girls.” Holly notes that any “bickering” stems mostly from raising three children and “having financial issues,” but Hank’s fuller acceptance of his homosexuality presents its own difficulties. Says Holly, “He loves me. He loves our family. But we’re having some more challenges with our relationship just because he’s trying to come to the terms of what it means to be essentially a gay man married to a woman.”

Isobel and Ian, both 51, have been married for 29 years. Ian first came out sixteen years ago, then several years ago, he spent three months working in another city, where “I actually got to experience the freedom, if you will, of… living the gay lifestyle. And it was very liberating. It was very freeing. And when I came home I went through very, very major depression.” He continues, “I was ready to do something, including, you know, checking out because I was sick and tired of the feelings that I had.” Isobel says, “I guess I sometimes look upon this as maybe an illness and in the back of my mind hope that he’s healed and it changes.” She explains, “I can’t see God creating someone in a way that He thinks is an abomination, so I don’t hold with, ‘I was born that way.’ As far as sinning, yes, I do think it’s a sin.” Ian remains unsettled about his attractions for men, stating, “I don’t really feel like I’m worthy of love... And even with all
of my faults, she continues to love me unconditionally.” Isobel says, “I haven’t given up on him.”

Janet, 63, and Jim, 70, run a business and Janet additionally works from home most of the time for a major company. Jim has a background in religious leadership and enjoys reading and current events. Janet’s job is “very stressful” and Jim “has had a lot of health issues.” Jim says that he “was being blackmailed” by his ex-wife who told him that if he “didn’t give her money or send her money, that she would contact my [church associates] or contact the church and would make life really miserable for me.” Janet was comforted knowing that Jim did not want to leave her, “but the difficult part for me was when he fell in love with this guy, and this guy moved in with us…. And I actually ended up liking the guy more than Jim did” (laughs). Jim sometimes worries that marrying Janet has kept her “from being all that she should have been as a straight woman…. I’ve been in it for… years, and I love Janet with all my heart. So what am I supposed to do?”

Kathy, 70, and Ken, 72, are retired and have been married for 29 years. Kathy knew Ken was gay five years before they married. “We began to realize we were showing up to the same things,” says Kathy. “We ended up doing everything together.” Ken says, “There was something about the gay world that was losing its luster…. There were so many transitory encounters with nameless faces, and… I was always looking for some kind of commitment.” He continues, “She was very lonely before we got married, as was I… and so I married my best friend, and she married hers.” Kathy adds, “I cannot imagine life without him. There’s just no way. He enriches me in every way.”

Lisa and Larry, both 64, have been married 43 years. She runs a small, home-based business and he holds a professional job. Larry was closeted for years, saying, “All of my life I lived fearful that somebody would find out and I’d lose my job.” He was depressed, was a chain
smoker, and was becoming an alcoholic. Then four years ago, a young employee started working in his office, “and I found out that he was gay and openly gay and had a partner, and it just sort of like made me realize that it didn’t matter anymore.” When Larry came out, he quit smoking and drinking, but Lisa initially felt that her “whole life had been a lie,” until another straight spouse told her, “‘This is the same man that you fell in love with, and he hasn’t changed. You just know more about him.’ What a terrific piece of advice that was! So we’re still together four years later and happier, I’d have to say, happier than I’ve ever been.”

Millie, 53, and Martin, 56, have been married for 33 years. Millie is a professional and Martin is retired military and also works. Martin came out about a year after they were married, and over the next seventeen years, they raised their children and remained monogamous. “When I was over in [the war zone], I don’t think I had one thought about having sex with anybody,” says Martin. “I was just trying to make sure that I was keeping my people safe.” While taking a class, Millie began realizing how oppressed LGBT people have been, “and I felt like that was in a sense what I was doing. I was oppressing Martin by not talking about it, acting like it wasn’t there.” They agreed that Martin could pursue secondary partners, but another few years passed before he took the opportunity. Says Martin, “There’s no way I’m going to end this relationship that I have with Millie… I’m very happy with the relationship that I have with Millie.”

**Overall Participant Characteristics**

Demographic information was gathered using a short questionnaire (Appendix E), and a one-page summary table of the 13 couples is presented in Appendix K, which includes information both from the demographic questionnaire as well as information gathered from the interviews. The average age of the participants was 51 for wives and 53 for husbands. The sample was highly educated, and all were Caucasian except for Eileen. All participants had
attended college, and most had either earned a college diploma (6) or an advanced college degree (15).

On the adapted Kinsey scale, which asked about their sexual attractions, rather than attractions and behavior as in the original Kinsey scale, the average score for the wives was 0.38, falling between 0, “exclusively heterosexual with no homosexual,” and 1, “predominantly heterosexual, only incidentally homosexual.” The one exception was Holly, who indicated a 2, “predominantly heterosexual, but more than incidentally homosexual.” When I asked the couple what label they would use to describe their sexual orientation, Holly replied, “I’m straight.” Since a requirement for inclusion in the study is that “The female partner identifies as straight or heterosexual,” I judged that her answer “I’m straight” met this criterion. The husbands’ scores ranged from 4, “Predominantly homosexual, but more than incidentally heterosexual,” to 6, “Exclusively homosexual,” with an average score of 4.85, closest to 5, “predominantly homosexual, only incidentally heterosexual.”

On a religiosity scale that asked “How religious would you say you are?” and that ranged from 0 (Not at all) to 5 (Very much so), the wives’ average score was 3.23, on the more religious side of “moderately,” and the husbands’ average score fell in the middle of the scale at 2.54. Both wives and husbands considered themselves more spiritual than religious, scoring 3.96 and 3.69 out of a possible score of 5. Although I did not specifically recruit in any circles catering to members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), four of the thirteen couples identified as members of this church. The mean length of time since the couples began living together was 26 years, the average length of relationship at time of disclosure of the husband’s nonheterosexuality was 9 years, and the average number of years since disclosure was 17.46 years. Household incomes for the couples ranged from $30,000-$40,000 (a young couple with the husband in graduate school) to over $100,000 for six of the couples. Finally, although this
was a non-clinical sample, it became clear during the interviews that some of the men (approximately four) were in a formative phase of their sexual identity, and that they usually learned of the study in online support groups for mixed-orientation relationships where they had been seeking to communicate with others in similar circumstances.

The demographic questionnaire did not inquire about the relationship type, that is, whether the relationship was monogamous, sexually open, celibate, and so forth, but the nature of each relationship became clear during the interviews. The relationship types are shown in Appendix K. Four of the couples were monogamous. Four of the couples were in sexually open relationships on the man’s side, although the wives also had the option for a secondary partner. Two of the couples were in what I am calling “reluctantly open” relationships, indicating that the men have sex with men, but they found their sexual behavior to conflict with their religious beliefs and felt guilt and shame, and their wives likewise expressed discomfort with their husband’s extramarital sexual activities. One of the couples were in what I am calling a “reluctantly monogamous” relationship, which was the term suggested by the couple during the member check, indicating that the husband wanted to open the relationship, but the wife expressed discomfort with that possibility. One couple was celibate, and their celibacy was mutually agreed upon and the preferred option for both partners. One couple was open in theory but celibate in practice, in that both had secondary partners in the past, but had been celibate for a number of years at the time of the interview.

Age appeared to be a good indicator of relationship type. The trend seemed to be for the younger couples to be monogamous, the middle-aged couples to be open, and the older couples to be celibate. One couple were in their 20s and two were in their 30s, and these three couples were monogamous. The couple in their 40s were reluctantly monogamous. Five couples were in their 50s, four of which were open and one that was monogamous. Three couples were in their
60s, two of which were open, and the third was open in theory but celibate in practice. The couple in their 70s was celibate. Table 2 presents the couples from youngest to oldest and each couple’s relationship type.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Av. Age</th>
<th>Rel. Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Caitlin &amp; Chad</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Monogamous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Beth &amp; Brandon</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Monogamous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Gina &amp; Greg</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Reluctantly monogamous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Holly &amp; Hank</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Monogamous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Isobel &amp; Ian</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>Reluctantly open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Diane &amp; David</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Reluctantly open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Frances &amp; Frank</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Millie &amp; Martin</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Eileen &amp; Eric</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>Monogamous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Lisa &amp; Larry</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Janet &amp; Jim</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>Open/celibate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Anna &amp; Alan</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Kathy &amp; Ken</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>Celibate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Age may also play a role in how early in the relationship the males disclosed their nonheterosexuality. Three of the males disclosed prior to establishing the relationship, and five others disclosed within two years after establishing the relationship. I refer to these eight males as “early disclosers.” The remaining five males, whom we can call the “late disclosers,” waited an average of 20 years before disclosing their nonheterosexuality to their wives. At time of disclosure, the average age of the early disclosers was 27, and the average age of the late disclosers was 52. It is not clear why disclosure occurred either early or late in the relationship rather than there being a more even distribution across relationship duration. There did not seem to be any relationship between calendar year and disclosure, as three disclosures occurred in the 1970s, one in the 1980s, five in the 1990s, and four in the 2000s. There did seem to be a trend, however, for the early disclosers to be more likely to be monogamous. Of the eight early
disclosers, four were monogamous, one was reluctantly monogamous, one was reluctantly open, one was open, and one was celibate. Of the five late disclosers, three were open, one was reluctantly open, and one was open in theory but celibate in practice. Table 3 shows the early disclosers and late disclosers by age and relationship type.

Table 3

*Early Disclosers and Late Disclosers by Age and Relationship Type.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Current Age</th>
<th>Age at Disclosure</th>
<th>Relationship type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Early disclosers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Chad</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Monogamous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Brandon</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Monogamous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Greg</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Reluctantly monogamous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Hank</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Monogamous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>David</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Reluctantly open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Eric</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Monogamous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Martin</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Ken</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Celibate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Late disclosers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Ian</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Reluctantly open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Frank</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Larry</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Alan</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Jim</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>Open/Celibate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean Age: 27</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean Age: 52</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Although I did not ask participants to report on their relationship quality, some participants expressed more positivity about their partner or their relationship than others. Some participants gave more confident answers about their expectations for the future of their relationship; for example, Lisa said, “I expect we’ll be together forever,” followed by her husband Larry, “Well that’s my expectation as well.” Hank, however, responded after a pause, “You know, at this point we’re taking it one day, one week, one month at a time.” Other participants used discourse markers of uncertainty such as, “for the most part…” or “I think as long as.” I roughly rank ordered the couples by how happy I perceived them to be in their
relationship and labeled their relationship quality in Appendix K, as either good (*), very good (**), or excellent (***) based solely on my subjective sense of the couples’ relationship quality based on the interviews. None of the couples seemed to be unhappy in their relationship. When I considered the factors that likely contributed to their relationship quality as I perceived it, three factors seem most salient: the presence of children at home, whether the couple had a sexually open relationship, and geographic region.

None of the seven couples whose relationship I considered to be excellent had children in the home. Beth and Brandon are a young couple and had not yet had children and the other six couples did not have children at home. The two couples whose relationship appeared to be very good, and two of the four couples whose relationship seemed to be merely good, still had children at home. This lends support to previous findings that relationship quality often deteriorates with the birth of the first child (Doss, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009) and improves when the couple becomes empty nesters (Gorchoff, John, & Helson, 2008).

Of the seven couples who seemed to have excellent relationship quality, four had open relationships, two were monogamous, and one was celibate. The six couples with good or very good relationship quality were monogamous (3), reluctantly open (2), and theoretically open, but actually celibate (1).

Although participation in the study was open to any couple who met the criteria living within the United States, recruitment yielded participants only from the West (6 couples) and the South (7 couples), with the Midwest and the Northeast remaining unrepresented. (See Appendix L). This disproportionate geographic representation is likely best explained by the small sample size. However, it is also possible that mixed-orientation couples living in the West and the South are, for whatever reason, more likely to participate in online forums where this study’s recruitment message was circulated. Further, none of the participants live in states that recognize
same-sex marriage, which at the time of data collection were Connecticut, Iowa, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, Vermont, plus Washington, D.C. As of this writing, same-sex marriage has also been legalized in Delaware, Maine, Maryland, Minnesota, Rhode Island, and Washington. Of the six couples whose relationship appeared to be only good or very good as opposed to excellent, four lived in states categorized by the U.S. Census to be the South. The other two couples lived in the West.

**Overview of the Findings**

The purpose of this study was to better understand commitment in long-lasting, mixed-orientation relationships by attempting to answer three research questions related to (a) what brought them together, (b) what keeps them together, and (c) what challenges they face, if any, in staying committed in a mixed-orientation relationship. It is hoped that a better understanding of commitment in mixed-orientation relationships can provide some guidance to others in mixed-orientation relationships, family educators, family scholars, and family therapists. Below I present five key findings that I identified from the interviews, which are shown below as related to the three research questions:

(a) How do participants describe their reasons for entering into a relationship with their partner?

Finding 1: The primary reason couples entered into a relationship with each other and decided to get married was love. They reported getting along well, enjoying each others’ company, being physically attracted to each other, and sharing common interests.

Finding 2: The coming out process impacted commitment in the relationship, and husbands felt it was necessary to develop their gay identity, and the wives found it necessary to adapt to their husband’s changing identity. Eight of the thirteen wives reported a turning point, or a key moment when they came to accept their husband’s homosexual attractions.
(b) How do participants describe the reasons they remain committed to their partner, including any benefits to maintaining their relationship?

Finding 3: Couples reported strengths of the relationship as involving love for one another, support from others, including family, friends, others online, “gatherings” with other mixed-orientation couples, and therapy, and some behaviors that keep the relationship strong, including adaptability, overcoming codependence, communication, mutual support, a good sex life, and space in the relationship.

(c) How do participants describe the challenges, if any, to maintaining their relationships?

Finding 4. The main challenges that couples identified in their relationships included religiously based intolerance of homosexuality, a poor sex life, the wife’s feelings of inadequacy, continuing challenges with communication, internalized homophobia, feeling alone, negative experiences in therapy, negativity from family and peers, and challenges associated with maintaining a secondary relationship.

Lastly, I present Finding 5, in which couples offer advice to other couples who wish to make their mixed-orientation relationships work. The most frequent advice given was to be adaptable, communicate, take time, and talk to others. One of the basic motivations to conduct any kind of research is ultimately to benefit society. Facilitating an opportunity for long-lasting mixed-orientation couples to offer advice to other such couples who may be looking for advice is one way to create value in this work. The fifth finding regarding advice might possibly have been included under the second research question, related to strengths of the relationship, but I determined that placing the advice section between participant’s stories of the strengths and challenges in their own relationships interrupted the narrative flow. Presenting finding 5 at the end allows the focus of the participants’ stories to remain centered on their own experiences.
before turning their attention outward by giving advice to other mixed-orientation couples. This approach makes the most sense to me, as I hope it will for the reader.

The aim of phenomenological research is to understand as accurately as possible the phenomenon under question. The convention for reporting phenomenological research in dissertations is to present the findings in Chapter 4, and to reserve discussion of the findings for Chapter 5 (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008; Holloway & Brown, 2012). Certainly, judgment was required in determining which passages of the transcripts to code and which to present, but inasmuch as it is possible, my task in Chapter 4 is to remain faithful to the experiences shared by the participants and to report my findings without interpretation (Hycner, 1985). Maintaining some semblance of “objectivity” is accomplished through “bracketing” (Groenewald, 2004; Merriam, 2002), which entails focusing on the participants’ experiences and creating a separate space—in this case, Chapter 5—for my commentary and deeper analysis. Readers benefit from a forthright presentation of the findings because it allows them to encounter participants’ comments in some measure as I encountered them and perhaps draw their own insights, and it helps distinguish the findings from the meaning that I make of them in the last chapter.

When including quotations in Chapter 4, I attempted to present excerpts from the transcripts that were most illustrative of the concepts under consideration. I made small edits to enhance readability while taking care to maintain the participants’ original meaning. For example, I removed some repeated words, such as “I, I, I,” removed some filler phrases such as “you know,” and replaced some phrases or sentences within a quotation with ellipses (…) to indicate where a word or words were omitted. I retained some occurrences of repeated words or filler phrases to preserve the distinctive quality of natural speech and if I judged them not to detract significantly from the overall readability of the quotation. I also did some final editing with punctuation in the quotations presented in the final dissertation that I did not attend to while
transcribing the 377 pages of transcripts. For example, there were many instances where a comma in the transcript was substituted with an em dash (—) to more accurately indicate a parenthetical statement. Additionally, I sometimes replaced a pronoun or otherwise inserted within brackets an explanatory term to make the passage clearer for the reader. Appendix M shows comparative examples of transcript excerpts and the quotations that are presented in Chapter 4. Such editing is acceptable practice in qualitative research. For example, in a study of how qualitative social researchers report verbatim quotations, Corden and Sainsbury (2006) write, “To enhance readability, some researchers expected to do some re-punctuation. It was also common practice to take out the ‘ums’ and ‘ers’, phrases such as ‘I mean’ and ‘you know’, and the word repetitions which pepper most people’s speech” (p. 18).

While reading the findings below, I recommend that readers keep a finger on either the page containing the table of contents or on Appendix G. The table of contents can help provide a map of the five major themes and the subthemes, and provides a birds-eye view so that the forest is not lost for the trees, to mix metaphors. Appendix G contains both the themes and subthemes that were included, indicated by an underline, and the themes that I ultimately decided not to include, which are not underlined. As a general principle, I include themes if six or more couples made comments related to the theme, and subthemes are included even if fewer couples commented because it is considered relevant to the larger theme. Subthemes follow larger themes and are indented, much the way a formal writing outline would be formatted.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the themes are generally presented in order of descending frequency—the topics discussed by a greater number of couples are presented before topics discussed by fewer couples. There are, however, several exceptions. For example, there were more comments by more participants about the wives’ emotional responses to learning of her partner’s homosexuality than about the man’s sense of relief after coming out, and yet I
present the men’s experiences of coming out, followed by the woman’s experience to her husband coming out, to keep the husbands and wives accounts of the coming out process separate, and because the men in this sample went through the coming out experience first, followed by the wives. As another example, more women discussed eventual acceptance of their husbands’ homosexuality than those who discussed some immediate negative reaction after their husbands came out, and yet it only makes sense chronologically to discuss initial reactions to coming out first and acceptance second. A third example: even though 10 of the 13 couples discussed reasons for not being out to some people (which largely boils down to “It’s nobody’s business but ours”) I did not include this as a theme because it seemed tangential to the focus of this study. Finally, some concepts are included, especially as a subtheme under a larger theme, even if the number of participants who commented on the topic were few; for example, only three wives expressed fear that their husbands may leave, but the topic is included as a subcategory under challenges related to the woman’s sense of adequacy as a woman or wife, about which nine women made comments. That is, strict commitment to presenting the data in order of frequency would sometimes have resulted in a disjointed narrative, irrelevant asides, or an incomplete treatment of a particular theme. As one authority in qualitative research (Patton, 2002) has stated, “In short, no absolute rules exist except perhaps this: Do your very best with your full intellect to fairly represent the data and communicate what the data reveal given the purpose of the study” (p. 432), to which Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) add, “Indeed, because qualitative research depends on the skills, training, capabilities, and insights of the researcher, qualitative analysis and interpretation ultimately depends on the analytical intellect and style of each individual analyst” (p. 128). With these explanations (or caveats?) out of the way, let us dive in.
Finding 1—Reasons for marriage

Partners from 11 of the 13 couples indicated that they had truly fallen in love. Other reasons that participants discussed associated with being in love were getting along well, enjoying each other’s company, being physically attracted to each other, and sharing common interests.

Love for Spouse

Many of the participants, including the men, indicated that they had fallen in love with their partners. Based on participant descriptions, the initial attraction for one another was not unlike the initial attractions that many heterosexual couples experience, including enjoying each others’ personalities, feelings of infatuation, and wanting to spend time together. Frances and Frank had met in college, and although Frank knew he had been attracted to men as a teenager, Frances reports that he was genuinely infatuated with her:

We were really in love. I mean, Frank was goofy, walking-on-clouds in love. Like he couldn’t hear what was being said to him. He couldn’t remember what the conversation was because he was so distracted. So it wasn’t, it’s not pretend when we look back and try to sort things out. It was real.

Jim recalls falling in love with Janet. Unlike Frank, who had met Frances in college, Jim was in his forties and had already been in a long-term relationship with a man before he met Janet:

We fell in love, you know. It was, it was very apparent that we were soul mates. I know that’s kind of mushy and sentimental but… when I saw Janet, I was really smitten right off. I don’t think of myself as bisexual at all, but thought she was the most beautiful, competent, incredible woman I had ever met in my life.
Martin, who likewise identified as gay as a young man, recalled falling in love with Millie, which he characterized elsewhere in the conversation as coming as a surprise to him:

I would say, to me it was just this is the person that bells and whistles have gone off and I, I look back on it, there’s nothing that can convince you otherwise. I mean, it’s not scientific. It’s not something you can prove. I just know in my mind and my heart that this was the person I was going to spend my life with.

Many of the other men likewise described falling in love with their wives. Further, the men were at various stages of their gay identity development when they met their wives, from having a vague awareness of homosexual attractions at one end to fully identifying as a gay man and having had prior same-sex relationships on the other end, as was the case for Martin, Brandon, and Ken.

**Clicked**

Ten of the couples discussed how their ability to “click” together was one of their reasons for entering the relationship and getting married. “We were really a good click from the very beginning,” said Frances. Other participants made similar comments. Lisa said, “We obviously were very compatible,” and Ken said, “Kathy and I were tight.”

**Physical Attraction**

Seven of the men reported feeling some physical attraction for their wives, although none of them used the language of sexual objectification that might be expected from heterosexual men, such as thinking that their wives were “hot” or having a “great body” or being their “type.” That is, if degree of physical attraction were plotted on a scale from low to high, the comments from many of these men suggest that they would have rated their physical attraction for their wives when they met on the lower end of the scale. Nonetheless, these men describe feeling
some level of physical attraction, which sometimes developed only with time, as one of the factors contributing to their entering into the relationship.

One of the young men in the sample, Chad, remarked that his physical attraction for Caitlin developed later in the relationship. He said, “I don’t think that it was a situation that I lacked sexual attraction to Caitlin…. Later in the dating relationship just before we got engaged, we had plenty of make-out sessions and I was thoroughly aroused.” Other men acknowledged that their wives were the only female for whom they had felt physical attraction. Eric, for example, stated, “She’s the only girl that I’ve ever been attracted to, which is still the case.” Ian said, “When I first saw her, I thought she was the most beautiful woman I’d ever seen. She just had a glow about her that was very, very appealing.” Beth and Brandon recalled that Brandon’s sexual attraction for Beth developed later in the relationship, and that the lack of physical attraction early on allowed them to establish a stronger relationship than might have been possible had sexual attraction been strong from the start. Beth said:

So it was really very, I don’t know, wonderful for me to actually be in a relationship where I knew that for the first several months of our relationship, I mean, he certainly likes me, but it wasn’t for anything physical at all, and that made me much more comfortable and willing to open up and talk about who I was as well, because I knew it wasn’t progressing too far too fast. I always had the impression that once hormones got involved, most of the other sensibilities of a human being shut down and, and so it was definitely a relationship with room to grow in the absence of a lot of that to begin with, and then that happened later, which was remarkable.

Brandon described how his physical attraction for Beth developed over time. They had their first kiss shortly after they had met, but Brandon began enjoying kissing Beth only later on.
“It was gradual, and it started getting better, and then… I started enjoying kissing her, and that was—She noticed the difference. She was able to like—you know I enjoyed a make-out.”

Thus, about half of the men described some physical attraction to their wives when they met, for some the attraction grew with time, and for others still, physical attraction for their wives may never develop.

**Personality**

Eight of the couples recalled an attraction for each other’s personality as another factor in their consideration for marriage. The term personality has its specialized meanings in the field of psychology, but I coded personality as a reason for marriage when participants referred to the observable characteristics of their partners that attracted them, including being fun, kind, humorous, caring, empathetic, energetic, and creative. For example, Hank said of Holly, “She was tenacious and… she was funny, and she was cute and sparkly. You know, she was fun to hang out with.” Greg similarly described his enjoyment in Gina’s company as they were getting to know each other:

I would say like the things that I liked about Gina were things about her character and personality. Back then, Gina was kind of a very independent, feminist woman. She has a lot of unusual interests, highly creative. She was really funny and fun. She surprised me with a couple of things that she did for me which made me feel great. So, I mean, like, they were just sort of the kinds of things that catch your attention about anyone, but Gina just really caught my attention. I really liked her a lot and just thought, like I really enjoyed our friendship a whole lot. That’s probably, back then, I would say, that was the initial spark for me.
The wives likewise commented on enjoying their husbands’ personality as an initial attraction. Diane said of David:

I just had a great time with him. He is a very, is a great person, knows lots of things, does lots of things. You know, he was a great fit with my family too, I mean he fit right in with the family, and just, I don’t know, I thought he was great.

These comments suggest that enjoyment of a person’s character traits play a role in interpersonal attraction and in judging whether the individual would make a compatible life partner. Statements about compatibility, friendship, and enjoyment of the other’s company seemed to underlie the statements about personality.

Common Interests

Common interests was yet another component of the couples’ reasons for getting married. Common interests refers to couples enjoying similar activities and pastimes, or having similar concerns. Activities and pastimes mentioned include travel, dancing, and other recreation activities, and concerns mentioned include religious beliefs, a shared family background, professional involvement, and education. Ken recalled:

I said, ‘You know, you and I keep showing up at the same place. We keep going to the same things inadvertently. We end up seeing the same movies. Why don’t we just take a house together?’ And she said, ‘Oh, that’s a grand idea!’

Larry enjoyed travel and appreciated that Lisa could share in his enjoyment of similar recreational activities. He said, “I just thought she was interested in the same things I was interested in, mostly at that time, …so, we just shared a lot of interests.”

Frances and Frank spent a great deal of time during their junior year of college together. They were additionally drawn together by a shared cultural upbringing. Frances said:
We got to know each other quickly and had a lot of similar interests, partly as two
[people from one part of the country] being plunked into a small liberal arts college in
[another part of the country] I think we had some similarities and all kind of other, you
know, similar family background type things.

In sum, couples reported being attracted to one another as the most common reason for
entering into a relationship with one another and eventually getting married. Their attraction was
physical, including for some of the men, but they also reported being attracted to one another’s
personalities and enjoying common interests as reasons for forming their relationships. The
participants’ comments indicate that attraction to another person need not imply sexual attraction
exclusively, but that attraction can be multifaceted and can transcend sexual orientation.
Nonheterosexual men who may not necessarily be sexually attracted to women may nonetheless
feel attracted to them in other ways, including enjoying their humor, their intellect, and their
friendship, and enjoying their companionship in pursuit of shared pastimes and educational or
professional interests.

Finding 2—Coming Out

The coming out process impacted commitment in the relationship, and husbands
expressed that coming out was necessary for them to develop their gay identity. Once married,
however, coming out is no longer an individual process but an event that impacts the couple, and
wives found it necessary to adapt to their husbands’ changing identity. Eight of the thirteen
wives reported a turning point, or a key moment, when they came to accept their husband’s
homosexual attractions.

Gay Identity Development

For three of the couples, the nonheterosexuality of the male was known prior to marriage.
Even for these couples, however, wives found themselves needing to adapt to their husbands’
continuing gay identity development. All of the women identified their sexual orientation during the interview as straight or heterosexual, whereas ten of the men used the label “gay.” One man avoided using a label, another used the word “confused,” and another preferred the term “not straight.”

Many of the men discussed how their development of a gay identity was a process, a process that some of the men were still in the midst of, while others were more firmly established in their gay identity. Consider the following statement from Greg, who had undergone reparative therapy, which is a religiously motivated therapeutic attempt to change a client’s sexual orientation to become heterosexual. Although Greg knew he was attracted to men for many years, he reported beginning to affirm his homosexual attractions only within the past year.

I just don’t know that I’ve totally figured out what it takes for me to be gay. The identity component I don’t think I’ve fully sorted out yet. I’m trying out… how to integrate being gay into my whole life and being and self-concept and relationships. I mean, those are all unknowns. But I’m good with it. That’s just part of the process of figuring things out.

David, who identified his sexual orientation as “confused,” noted that he was still in the process of his sexual identity development.

Over the last [few] years I thought, ‘Am I gay? Am I straight? Where am I? Where do I fit on this spectrum?’ And I’m still kind of trying to come to terms with that because I don’t think I really know yet where I am…. So I think it’s an ongoing process. I don’t think I’m finished with trying to identify what I am.

Some participants likened gay identity development to that of a typical teenager. Shortly after Larry came out to Lisa, he sought her counsel during his first relationship with another man. “I would actually ask her advice about whether or not I should call him at this point or send him
an email and I really wanted her advice on what to do, how to handle the situation.” Lisa added, laughing, “He’d be fussing to go out and trying to see what, you know, ‘Do I look,’ that and this, and it really was teenage-girlish in a lot of ways.” Frank similarly drew a parallel between his gay identity development and a teenager’s experience of sexual identity development. He and Frances remained monogamous for two years after he had come out to her.

That monogamous stage was really, really good. It was somewhat more than two years and for me it let me figure out what it meant to be gay without that being all mixed up with sex, what actually, like you’d think a healthy teenager would do. You know, what does my sexuality mean without having all the complications of sex? It was, it was interesting. Very interesting. Very healthy, I think.

Part of the men’s gay identity development involved some modifications to wardrobe and personal appearance. Frank recalls, “I got a new hair cutter so I had a cooler haircut…. I got better shoes, nice shirts.” His wife Frances added, “You got some capris. Straight guys never wear capris.” Gina, who was supportive of, but still adjusting to, Greg’s identity shift laughed as she described Greg’s changes: “He’s changed the way he’s dressed. He, (laughs), he’ll use the phrase like, ‘I’m getting all gayed up,’ (laughs). He has chosen more clothing that is more gay, which—I like it. It’s fine.”

**Bisexuality as a Transition to Gay Identity**

Several of the men (5) initially identified themselves as bisexual in their transition to identifying as gay. Jim observed that, “Often bisexuality is a way of gently getting into the fact that, ‘I am homosexual.’” Holly recalls of Hank, “He said that he had dated some guys in college and stuff, that he wasn’t strictly gay, he was kind of bi.” For Frank, bisexuality was a way to reconcile the reality that he was attracted to his wife, yet had homosexual attractions:
“Even just learning the vocabulary of the word like bisexual, I thought, ‘Okay, well I guess I’m bisexual and that’s the way it is.’” Eventually, Ian observed, there comes a “point where I think I stopped being bisexual and basically said, ‘You know, this is who I am.’” Martin’s path to bisexuality was slightly different. He had identified as gay until he met his wife:

I remember when I first met Millie, I was having all these attractions to her. It was puzzling because if I had to label myself, I would say that I was gay. And then all of a sudden I met this girl that I like and I wanted to spend my life with her, and that was like really screwed up because I couldn’t even be gay right! And so that was when I learned more about the term bisexuality, figured that’s probably where I was.

These comments should be understood with reference to the men’s self-reported sexual orientation rankings on the adapted Kinsey scale, which was close to 5, “predominantly homosexual, only incidentally heterosexual.” None of the men currently identify as bisexual, neither did their comments suggest that they were sexually responsive to both sexes relatively equally—the definition of bisexuality. Thus, the term bisexuality served for these men as a transitional identity as they came to a fuller understanding of their attractions for men.

**Pornography**

Several of the men (5) discussed how viewing pornography online was part of their realization that they preferred men sexually. Frank said that before coming out to Frances, “I had had a prolonged period of sort of exploring my sexuality online, including some emailing.” Hank, whose wife had no objections to him viewing gay porn, considered pornography as a way of being authentic. He said regarding gay pornography, “Whenever I had looked at porn or whenever I had looked at anything, or had kind of let my id out, as it were, whenever I let myself be whatever, I tended to gravitate towards that [homosexuality].” Eric considered pornography
as something to avoid, yet he looked at it nonetheless and noted that viewing pornography “was my way of expressing my homosexuality.” Chad also regarded viewing pornography as undesirable behavior, but said, “I had just kind of a moment of realization that whatever it was, it wasn’t going away.” Another participant, Greg, put it this way:

The first time I really ever looked at porn, it was this giant relief and release, and I found myself just feeling so much more, not validated, but it definitely clued me in that I liked guys, whereas before I wouldn’t let myself believe that about me.

Regardless of the men’s attitudes about pornography, their comments indicated that viewing pornography served to confirm that they were sexually attracted to men. Given that some of the religious men (Greg, Brandon, and Chad) who reported being monogamous with their wives also had experience with pornography, it is possible that satisfying their curiosity with viewing pornography and perhaps their sexual urges through masturbation served not only to confirm their nonheterosexual orientation but also as a “safety valve” that allowed them to abstain from sex with men while married. Jim said, for example, “If I didn’t have those outlets, I’d probably want to go out and cruise a lot more, or try to pick up men or what have you.”

Sex with Men

In addition to viewing homosexual sex, having sex with other men was a confirmation for several of the men (4) of their gay identity. Alan recalls, “I had my first experiences in [grade school] with a male classmate, so I had known about myself for a long, long time.” Frank said, “It was like an epiphany, and ‘Yep, this is it. This is what I really like,’ as opposed to my imagination.” Martin similarly came to a realization that he was gay, rather than bi, while on a trip abroad. He said, “I did go out to the… bars there, and it was just very liberating, just how
the [people there] are pretty well tolerant and open to people.” He continued, “And it allowed me to open up, to be very open and open up to Millie and talk to her.”

Although experiencing sex with other men served to confirm for some of the men their gay identity, this was not true for every man in the study. For example, Brandon and Chad identified as gay without having had sex with men, although they had both viewed gay pornography. Further, Greg spoke directly about developing his gay identity while remaining monogamous, saying, “I just think there are plenty of expressions of being gay without having to have sex with a man.” Ken also identified as gay, but chose to remain celibate while married to Kathy. Other men, such as Frank, Larry, and Martin, valued their ability to incorporate sex with men as an expression of their gay identity. Larry, for example, said, “I told everybody else we had to have an open relationship on my side because I just wasn’t going to live anymore without being fulfilled.” Thus, the men had varying opinions regarding the role of sex with other men in their ability to achieve and maintain a gay identity.

**Turmoil Pre-Disclosure**

Most of the men (10) described the emotional turmoil that they experienced prior to coming out to their wives. Anxiety ranged from moderate to extreme. Martin’s anxiety was on the milder side. “I was kind of nervous,” he said. Brandon, who was already out to nearly everyone, still experienced anxiety before coming out to Beth. He said, “Anxiety was really, really starting to build because I didn’t know how she’d react.” Beth noticed his anxiety as well, saying, “He was super stressed out.” Frances similarly noticed that something was wrong with her husband before he came out:

I knew something was up with Frank. I had been asking him for two or three years.

‘You seem depressed. What’s the matter? You’re more mopey. You hate your job more than you used to. You’re complaining about it more. You’re
pouty more. You’re not your usual, perky self. What’s the matter? What’s the matter? What’s the matter?”

Other men experienced more severe anxiety. Three participants (Ian, Chad, and Greg) reported feeling suicidal before coming out. Ian recalled how he felt before coming out to Isobel. “I was just at the breaking point, and I was ready to either get some help or, or you know, check out.” Greg recalled his suicidal ideation to avoid his “compulsions:"

Before I decided to own this and say, ‘Okay, I’m gay.’ I was more afraid of myself. I was constantly fearful that I was going to have a compulsion to go to a gay bar or go pick up somebody when traveling out of town. So for a year I dealt with major compulsions to do that. I didn’t ever do it, but I felt like I really wanted to. And I feared how badly that would hurt my family and Gina. So that was a time that I contemplated suicide as a way of ending that temptation. So that was a pretty rough point for me. And… I realized, ‘This has got to change. This is not right. I cannot stay where I am now.’

In Larry’s case, the anxiety he felt being in the closet, although not spurring him to suicidal thoughts, made him miserable nonetheless:

I mean, the reason I think that I drank so much was because I was, I sort of hated myself for all the cheating and whatever and the lying and things, and I didn’t have to do that anymore when I came out. And I… quit drinking. I used to smoke compulsively. I don’t do that anymore.

The comments related to turmoil pre-disclosure seem to indicate anxiety about two main areas. The first source of anxiety is related to being in the closet, feeling a need to keep thoughts, feelings, or behavior secret, and the turmoil related to living inauthentically. The
second source of anxiety is related to fear about how the disclosure of one’s nonheterosexuality will affect significant relationships, primarily with their partners, but also with other family members or friends.

**Sense of Relief**

“Coming out changed everything,” said Larry. The feeling of “liberation” associated with being able “to inhabit this side of my personality,” as Alan put it, was mentioned by eight of the men. Jim noted that after coming out, “I felt a great sense of relief.” Brandon said, “When I came out to her, it was like this huge load coming off.” Chad said that his sense of relief came not just from coming out, but from knowing that Caitlin did not reject him. He said:

> Almost instantly as I got that confession out, there was a huge release to see that she didn’t stand up and walk out of the room, didn’t say, ‘We’re done.’ I mean, to feel her support and love… [was] a hopeful feeling.

Part of Frank’s sense of freedom in his newly revealed gay identity came from being released from the constraints of stereotypical masculine behavior.

> I did feel freer with my body, for example, how to use my hands…. I felt freer. I felt like I could use my hands in the way that felt natural to me instead of being, instead of tying myself down, basically.

In sum, the men expressed two main reasons for feeling relief after coming out, which are related to the two sources of anxiety that they experienced pre-disclosure: secrecy and fear of their wives’ reactions. Regarding no longer keeping his sexual orientation secret, Larry said, “It was just a relief to be able to be honest.” Martin recalled that it was “very liberating” to be able to “open up to Millie and talk to her.” After disclosure, some men enjoyed feeling the relief of their wives’ acceptance, but wives experienced a range of reactions to their husbands’ disclosure.
Wives’ Emotional Reactions to Coming Out

Gay identities, like other identities, are achieved in part through social interaction, and the men likely had more social interaction with their wives than with anyone else. The wives, therefore, play a role in their husbands’ gay identity development, and some were more validating of their husbands’ emerging gay identity than others. After the initial shock of learning her husband was gay, Frances quickly decided, “We were going to weave it into our lives. We were going to make it more visible. We were going to make it affirmed. And we were going to take it from there. So that’s what we did.” Gina, although not as enthusiastic about embracing Greg’s gay identity, was nonetheless adapting: “We’re moving into this whole new world of he is gay and what do we do with all that?... It’s a brave new world. We’re just learning about all of this.”

The wives expressed a range of emotional reactions to learning that their husband was gay. The news was much more easily digested when disclosure occurred early in the relationship. Kathy, for example, knew Ken was gay when she first met him, five years prior to their marriage. “I’ve known Ken was gay ever since I’ve known him,” she said. Frances, in contrast, had been married to Frank for twenty-two years when she learned he was gay. “I was completely blown away,” she said.

Eileen likewise said she was, “blown away,” in addition to feeling “devastated” and “betrayed.” Although Eileen has known about Eric’s nonheterosexuality for as long as they have been married, she only recently learned that he was never sexually attracted to her. She said it was “like somebody punched your gut. I was angry and I was devastated and I was, ‘Now I’m in my fifties, you know, what do I do at this point in my life?’ (laughs). Really angry more than anything.” Millie recalled, “At the time I was very hurt. I was very upset. I was sick at my stomach. I was in shock.” Lisa expressed feelings of betrayal, saying, “I felt, quite frankly, that
my whole life had been a lie.” Caitlin, who learned of Chad’s nonheterosexuality within months after their marriage, reported her predominant reaction as confusion:

I do remember the night being very, almost numb the night he told me. And then the next morning I had a half an hour commute to work and I sometimes wonder how I made it to work safely because I just balled the whole way. Just kind of that, like, overwhelming, just confusion, not knowing what that meant for my marriage and what it meant for our relationship and just a lot of, lot of confusion.

Ian came out to Isobel 13 years into their marriage. Her primary emotional reaction was guilt:

I went through a lot of feeling like, ‘It was my fault. I hadn’t treated him like I should have,’ or whatever. There was a lot of guilt there. It, it took a long time, a lot of convincing on his part that it wasn’t anything I did or didn’t do. Sometimes I still have those little twinges, but not as often.

Disclosure took place an average of nine years into the relationship, and wives’ reactions tended to be less emotionally intense if disclosure took place earlier in the relationship or if the wife had suspected her husbands’ non-heterosexuality. For example, Janet said, “I don’t guess I was really all that surprised. You know, I had had my suspicions for years.” In contrast, the wives who assumed their husbands were straight until disclosure were the ones who expressed more feelings of shock and betrayal.

Fear of Abandonment

For five women who learned about their husbands’ nonheterosexual orientation later in their relationship, the predominant emotional reaction was fear of abandonment. Isobel said, “There was a fear at the time of him just up and leaving, and not knowing if I’d be able to make
it or not.” Janet recalled, “My primary concern when he told me he was gay, and in fact I think the first thing out of my mouth was, ‘Does this mean you’re going to leave me and get with some guy?’” Anna said, “I was just very, very fearful…. I couldn’t imagine that Alan would want to stay with me. I went through different times like that. I mean, why would he not go off into the sunset?” Millie said, “My biggest fear was that he would meet somebody, he would fall in love, and he would leave me…. And it was scary. It was really scary.”

Given that many of the women expressed profound fear of abandonment, one implication for gay men who wish to remain with their female partners is to reassure them of their intention to remain committed to the relationship if this is the case.

Acceptance

Eventually, most of the women (10) came to accept their husbands’ nonheterosexuality. The wives who had suspected their husbands to be nonheterosexual seemed to accept their coming out more easily than those who did not suspect. Millie recalled, “I had already told him he was gay years before then.” Janet’s experience was similar. She said, “You know, I love Jim. His… sexual orientation is really irrelevant. The fact that he’s gay is… just part of the whole package…. It’s just part of who he is.” Part of Holly’s acceptance of Hank’s homosexuality came from her prior familiarity with gay people. “The place I hung out were always gay bars because they played the best music.” She said about Hank’s homosexuality,

I really don’t care…. The sexuality doesn’t bother me…. Ever since we got together, I thought, ‘Well, hey, I’m lucky because I couldn’t compete with just girls, I had to compete with boys and girls.’ …I figured out of everybody in the world, he chose me. So that made me kind of feel special.
Diane’s acceptance of David took a different form, insofar as she continued to love David while suggesting that he still could change. David recalls, “She just said, ‘You know, it’s not the end of the world. Let’s work through it. Keep trying, and I have faith in you that someday we’ll understand differently. We’ll sort it out and it will diminish,’ you know.” This suggests that there may be two levels of acceptance, one being acceptance of the situation, as exhibited by Diane, and the other being acceptance of the husband’s homosexuality as being a core component of his identity, which was exhibited by most wives with the exception of some of the more strongly religious wives like Diane and Isobel.

**Turning points**

Eight of the 13 women described a key moment, referring to them as a “turning point” or a “paradigm shift,” when they began more fully to accept their husband’s nonheterosexuality, and the turning points were sometimes religious and sometimes secular in nature. The three wives whose turning points came in the form of a religious experience reported a feeling, a dream, or a thought perceived to be from God. Eileen, for example, who had waited for a spiritual confirmation before agreeing to marry Eric, described overcoming her anger after learning that Eric had never been sexually attracted to her. She said it came to her while she attended the LDS temple together with Eric:

> I was holding his hand. That’s when the strong, strong Spirit came over me, and it’s like Heavenly Father was right there telling me, ‘You can do this. You can do this, and I love both of you, and I’ll help you through, and you can do this.’ And that… instant, peace came over me, and the anger and all of that just washed away. And of course I was in tears.
Eileen’s turning point came as a feeling, whereas Beth’s turning point came as a feeling in combination with recalling a previous dream. She prefaced her description of her dream stating that it was, “very, very personal and I consider it quite sacred:"

The night he actually told me that he was more attracted to men than to women, it was, it was interesting because I had had an experience quite a few months earlier where I had a dream which I would say was very different from most dreams that I have—I’d consider it more like a vision—where I saw a person who I was super excited to be with and see again. I couldn’t see their face clearly…but in this experience they told me that they were still wanting to marry me, and they were working on a few things and still needed some time and asked me to wait. And… when I knew that we had to part, that individual walked up and kissed my forehead before he went, and I wanted him to actually kiss me, but he just kissed my forehead. And then that was it. The vision ended. So the night that Brandon actually took me back home after he had had this big explanation of what was going on, he walked up as he was leaving, he walked up to me and kissed my forehead. And it was like everything clicked. You know, all of a sudden he walks away and I was like, (voice quavering) ‘Wait a minute. I know who that is!’

It is worthy of note that both Eileen and Beth are LDS, a faith that places particular emphasis on feelings as a basis for knowing what to do or what decisions to make. Chad, who is also LDS, noted that in the LDS church “there’s kind of a high emphasis placed on personal religious experience.” Thus, having an emotional experience that is perceived to be a confirmation from God to accept their husbands’ nonheterosexuality can be an especially convincing justification to continue the relationship.
The third religious wife who described her turning point in accepting her husband’s homosexuality is Gina, who described her turning point in more cognitive terms. She said, “I think I’ve made that shift to thinking gay is okay, compared to where I was before, where gay is not okay.” Gina related her experience during a hike as an “experience from God.” She described the beginning of her hike as a place where “everything you see is just dead and desolate.” As she looked for the path among the rocks to continue her hike, she came upon “a false trail because it went nowhere.” She continued:

There’s this little dirt path and you can’t see where it’s going, but I take it, and I get around the corner, and it opens up into this really lush, green, open, new area where there’s things growing. There is a river flowing near, but it’s inviting and calm, and it’s not going to kill you, and there’s greenery and tons of life and everything is just growing. It’s growth rather than death on the other side…. The God I found there was inviting and warm and welcoming and it was not going to kill you for a misstep and was all about life and growth rather than the really desolate, rushing, angry God surrounded by rocks and a raging river…. I think God was using that to confirm that this is where I’m going, and I’ve thought back to that many times.

The religious wives in this sample ultimately came to accept their husbands’ homosexuality, but there are likely many other stories of religious wives whose religious views provide the rationale to end their marriages. As Gina noted, “Religion gives you an out if your spouse is gay. Like if you’re going hardcore conservative religion, you know, it’s almost like, ‘Well, yeah, but he’s gay, so that’s a free card out of the marriage.’”

The secular wives attributed their turning points to more natural, rather than supernatural, causes, but their experiences were nonetheless pivotal in their continued commitment to their
husbands. The turning points for Frances and Lisa, highlighted in the biographical sketches of the couples at the beginning of this chapter, came as insights during communication with others. Frances’s “paradigm shift” came after a friend told her about his extramarital sex partner, and Lisa’s moment of acceptance came when the founder of an online support group told her, “This is the same man that you fell in love with, and he hasn’t changed. You just know more about him.” Anna’s turning point came as an insight after a sleepless night. She recalls experiencing high levels of anxiety and regular panic attacks after learning of Alan’s nonheterosexuality, which she largely attributed to a lack of information and understanding about homosexuality. She recalled:

Well that night I spent the night wrestling with, ‘Why am I not getting anywhere? I might as well try and see if there was a place in his life, or can I deal with this?’ So by morning, I had struggled with this all night, and I finally told him, ‘Well, I think the reason I’m not getting anywhere is I don’t know anything! I mean, what is it like for a man to be with another man? What am I dealing with?’

Alan continues, “That moment, that was a turning point. So she came to a place where she committed to herself, ‘I don’t care what I have to do. I don’t care what I have to see, or whatever, but I need to find out if there’s a place for me.’” Anna used this insight to propel her to read and learn more about gay culture, replacing her fear of what she did not understand with information and acceptance.

The finding that many of the straight wives report a turning point when they came to accept their husband’s nonheterosexuality has not been reported in the literature previously. This is likely because the majority of earlier studies either neglected to gather data from the straight wives altogether, or they relied largely on surveys to obtain their data. It is noteworthy that,
unlike gay identity development, which is often an extended process, the wives’ acceptance of their husbands’ nonheterosexuality can come in a moment. If the wife is religious, she may perceive her newfound acceptance as divine communication, while less religious wives express their moment of acceptance coming in a flash of penetrating insight.

Finding 3—Strengths of the Relationship

Couples reported several factors that served to strengthen their relationship. One factor is love, both love for their partner and love for the relationship. A second factor strengthening their relationships is support from family, from friends, from others in mixed-orientation relationships, and from therapy or counseling. A third factor strengthening their relationship includes a constellation of relational behaviors, including adaptability, communication, supporting one another’s educational, professional, and personal goals, maintaining a good sex life, and granting each other space. Each of these three main factors—love, support, and behaviors—is discussed below.

Love for Partner

All thirteen couples talked about love for each other as a primary reason for remaining committed in their relationship. Of Johnson’s (1999) three-part model of commitment that includes personal, moral, and structural commitment, personal commitment, as expressed as love, was by far the most common reason couples cited for wanting to stay together, and both husbands and wives made the comments with equal frequency. Frank’s comment illustrates the personal commitment that he feels toward Frances:

I have commitment for sure, but it’s not… a rule-based kind of commitment. It’s commitment based on a really, really deep emotional connection. So if it were just commitment kinds of bonds of other sorts, I would more readily consider breaking them to find something new, but this is so awesome that I don’t want to do that.
Another husband, Larry, said, “We love each other. I love her, and I love her very much. I’d be lost without her. She’s a foundation to my life.” Other husbands suggested that the love they have for their wives transcends their nonheterosexual orientation. Chad, for example, said, “I’ve developed a very strong love for my wife, and that’s very fulfilling and satisfying for me.” Jim had a similar comment:

You know, I really fell in love with Janet. I don’t know how that’s possible in terms of sexuality. I know how that’s possible in terms of person to person. I’m still very much in love with Janet after [all these] years. …She is still in my eyes the epitome of the woman every man would like to have in his life.

Ian’s perspective suggested that his wife’s love for him was a more significant motivator than his love for her to remain in the relationship. “I would say the most important thing that has kept us together has been her continual, nonjudgmental love for me.”

Among the wives, Eileen expressed a similar opinion regarding Eric’s love for her as being the primary reason why she remained committed to the marriage. “Most of all he told me that he loved me. And he always told me that he loved me, and that’s the reason I stayed.”

Other wives spoke of their love for their husbands. For example, Beth said, “I think it’s very evident to all the people who are around us that Brandon is head over heels for me, and me for him, that we have a very strong relationship.” Similarly, Holly said, “We love each other, and we genuinely care for each other.” Lisa commented how the love that she shared with Larry grew after he had come out.

We were married, it was a normal kind of marriage, and then all of a sudden after he came out, I feel like I have the husband that I’ve always wanted. I have someone who is affectionate, who is loving, who is caring, who treasures me. And hey, that’s beautiful.
The couples’ descriptions of their love for one another are suggestive, not of romantic love or infatuation, but rather of companionate love (Sternberg, 1986), the kind of love observed in many long-lasting relationships where passion may be absent, but where commitment and abiding affection abound.

**Love for Relationship**

In addition to feeling love for each other, all of the couples expressed love for the relationship. David described his relationship with Diane as a best-friend relationship. “There’s something about being together that’s wonderful…. We’re best friends, really. I mean, we finish each other’s sentences, we know what each other’s thinking.” Larry knew that he wanted to preserve his relationship with Lisa through the coming-out process. “You know, it’s a relationship that I adore…. I didn’t want to destroy it. I didn’t want to lose it if I could possibly not lose it.” The wives likewise expressed personal commitment as love for the relationship. Frances said:

> We have something really great. We know we have something great, and we cherish that and we want to preserve it and we want to protect it. So I think we don’t take it for granted as much as some people might…. We have a wonderful relationship, and so much about what is good about our lives is the things that we share with each other.

Millie similarly described a relationship that she found fulfilling and full of interpersonal relatedness:

> I love our relationship. I love the banter. I love what our lives are like. I mean, we have lunch together almost every day. We just really make it a point to spend time together to really appreciate each other. So we start the day together, we have lunch together. We
connect after work. We have a routine where… it’s always about us being together, reconnection, sharing, and sharing what our days are like.

Lisa, who is sexually active with Larry, noted that there are many aspects to their relationship besides sex. She stated, “We get along so well. I mean, you know, we finish each other’s sentences. We know what the other’s thinking. It’s, you know, there’s a lot more there than just the sexual relationship.” Two of the wives expressed a love for the relationship, even without the sexual component to the relationship. For example, Kathy said, “I feel like, besides sex, I feel like I’ve got everything anyone could ever want for. I feel loved, I feel protected, I feel treasured, I feel secure…. To me, it’s not a bad tradeoff.” Another wife, Isobel, suggested that despite there being a lack of sexual intimacy in her relationship with Ian, that there were other reasons to value the relationship:

We’re still a family. We, I guess we’re still intimate emotionally. And I think that’s real important. I mean, if something happens and I needed him to be there for me, he would. I mean, and that, that’s a big plus. I know that he would do anything for me in the world. I’d do anything for him. You know, …I mean I’ve heard people say we’re an ideal couple.

Some couples remarked that the process of discussing and attending to the husbands’ homosexual attractions had served to strengthen the marital relationship. Eric, for example, stated, “There’s so many of the other aspects that we are able to work through so much easier because of having SSA, and having that compassion of heart and loving and deep feeling ability that many other couples don’t have.” Other participants made similar observations. Beth said regarding Brandon viewing gay pornography:
It was something that I think really would be the one experience that we’ve had that actually made us grow as much as we have as a couple. I think our relationship is actually pretty deep on a lot of different levels. And I think a lot of it has to do with the fact that he, he has something really enormous that he’s had to deal with and we’ve had to deal with together. Because otherwise either it’s just, those are places you just generally don’t go with people…. There’s just, there’s an emotional depth there that most people just don’t have to encounter often.

Chad noted that discussing his homosexuality with Caitlin not only deepened their relationship but also provided him with confidence of their ability to endure future relationship challenges:

I feel optimistic that if we can handle this [my homosexuality], you know, we can probably handle about anything. And as much as my love for Caitlin has grown and our relationship has gotten deeper in the last [few] years, I’m really excited to see what twenty or forty years is going to do to our relationship. Because I think it’s pretty amazing right now.

In summary, the couples’ comments lend support to Johnson’s (1999) description of personal commitment as consisting of love for one another and love for the relationship. This finding is noteworthy because Johnson’s commitment model presumes applicability to heterosexual partnerships, but says nothing regarding partners’ compatibility of sexual orientation. In other words, relationship commitment is not the exclusive domain of heterosexuals, but as these couples’ statements indicate, mixed-orientation couples may also exhibit and express profound personal commitment.
Sources of support

In addition to love of spouse and love of relationship serving as relationship strengths, participants also discussed external sources of support as a protective factor to their relationships. The most commonly mentioned sources or support included family, friends, online support groups, “gatherings” with other mixed-orientation couples, and therapy.

Family

Ten of the thirteen couples discussed family as being a source of support to being in a mixed-orientation relationship. Participants primarily talked about positive reactions from children and from parents. Support from children ranged from mere acceptance to more enthusiastic responses. Larry and Ken described support on the acceptance end of the spectrum. Larry said of his two grown daughters, “I think they’re fine with it.” Ken also said of his daughters, “The girls didn’t care. Our daughters are both very liberal. I mean, they don’t see homosexuality as an issue. To them it’s a non-issue, and for people to try to make it an issue is confounding to them.”

Other statements revealed more overtly supportive behavior. For example, when Kathy and Ken talked with Kathy’s children, who knew Ken was gay, about a possible timeline for getting married, Kathy recalled, “Our… son looked at us. He said, ‘Well why don’t we do it tomorrow?’” Frances and Frank also had an earnestly supportive son, who became involved in a gay-straight alliance. Other children were similarly supportive. Millie described when Martin came out to their two grown sons and their wives:

The most important thing about [Martin] coming out to the kids to really acknowledge is just how heartwarming it was. I mean, all four of them were so loving and telling you that they loved you all the same, and the embraces and the hugs…. I mean, it was a very enriching experience, I think, going into it being very fearful and having the kind of
reaction that we had from the children, made it all worthwhile to come out to them and disclose to them.

Eric had already discussed his nonheterosexuality with his oldest son before coming out to his other children, but when he came out again, he made sure to assure them that he intended to stay married. Referring to his oldest son, Eric said:

He expressed great relief at that because he didn’t really want me to break from his mother. And I talked to all of our other… children and each of them was very gracious. In fact, all but one of them said that they already suspected that, and the youngest just said he had no idea. It was just the furthest thing from—, he couldn’t believe that.

Parents were another source of familial support for the mixed-orientation couples. Kathy and Ken knew each other for five years before getting married. Kathy said, “My mother knew that I was just really lonely, and she says, ‘Well, why don’t you marry Ken?’ And I said, ‘Come on, Mom. You know he’s gay.’ She said, ‘That’s alright. Why don’t you marry him anyway?’” Kathy added of her parents, “They were very happy when we got married.” Caitlin related feeling pleasantly surprised at her dad’s reaction to Chad’s nonheterosexuality. “I was a little bit worried as to how my dad was going to take things when we first told him,” but she continues:

My dad… out of everyone in our families, I think has been Chad’s biggest supporter and willing to bend over backwards and do whatever he can to help Chad. If Chad would take time to go to support groups and things, my dad would make sure that I wasn’t just sitting home alone, and he’s been just extremely supportive.

Beth reported a similar sense of surprise at her father’s seemingly carefree acceptance of Brandon’s nonheterosexuality:
He [my dad] took it really well. I was shocked. He was like, ‘Okay.’ And that was kind of it. We had a few conversations and every once in a while he’ll still ask a question or two, but he, he really doesn’t care much. He knows that Brandon loves me, and he can tell that watching us interact, and that’s all he needs to know. And, so he has been very supportive as well.

As for Beth’s mother, Beth said, “She was very, very encouraging and supportive, and she knew I was happy, so I think that really made it easy on her.” Alan recalled coming out to his mother shortly before she died. Her response was, “And you know, I have never told anyone or loved you any less because of that.” Alan decided to come out to his siblings in a letter. He said:

I wrote this letter and sent it to… my siblings. And my first sister said she wanted to express her love and support in spite of everything. My brother… his response was, ‘Well, it’s about time.’ He thought he knew when I was in [grade school]. He thought, ‘Everyone has known already.’ It wasn’t negative, but that was his response.

To summarize, the majority of couples spoke of family members reacting to news that the husband was gay with a range of supportive responses, ranging from casual nonchalance, to words of reassurance, to an outpouring of love. As noted later under the heading “Negativity from family,” family members can also fail to be supportive, but among the couples in this study, family members were more supportive than not.

Friends

Eleven of the thirteen couples discussed supportive reactions from friends after learning of the couples’ mixed-orientation relationships. For example, Chad, who is in college, said, “I’m very open at school, in particular about what I experience and my life and attractions and my
choices, and I, I’ve never experienced any negative reactions. I think that’s awesome.” Eric likewise talked about how he enjoys the ability to have friends who know that he is gay:

That’s been really helpful for me, to have people that I can talk to about it. I have people that actually will call me who don’t have same-sex attraction, but they’ll call me on the phone if I haven’t talked to them in a while and say, ‘Are you all right? Is everything okay?’ I did share with my bishop, and he has been tremendous…. He goes out with me every couple of weeks to go do things together. A very kind, loving man. So I do have some of that kind of support, too.

Otto suggested that even when friends are not outright supportive, the absence of a negative response can be affirming:

The people who do know are supportive of us being married. They want us to be happy. And they don’t, you know, they don’t express an opinion one way or another…. Those of that [gay men’s] group who have met Holly have said, you know, ‘She’s a great girl, and I can see where you have a great time with her.’ So, I think for the most part, there’s not a whole lot of pressure from anybody, either from anyone to have me be closeted or from anyone to suggest that I need to live a different life.

Three men talked about the benefits of developing non-sexual relationships with other men. Eric, for example, said, “Working on meeting some of my male bonding needs with other men has been very helpful and continues to be very helpful.” Brandon made a similar remark, saying, “Different things work for different people when it comes to SSA, but for me what seemed to work really well was getting guy time, doing things with people I look up to, where I feel very masculine doing it.”
Support from friends was equally important for the wives. Caitlin remarked, “I’ve been able to have people to turn to and to disclose that to my own friends, it’s made it a lot easier for me to deal with.” Other wives shared similar opinions about the value of finding support from friends. Janet said:

(Laughs). Several years ago I was like, ‘So, okay. I’ve got to tell somebody. Somebody quote normal unquote has to know.’ So I went to lunch with two of my friends from work, and in the middle of lunch I go, ‘Jim is gay.’ And they went, ‘Okay.’ (Laughs). And life went on. So it was like, that’s really cool.

Janet’s comment suggests that she felt relieved just having someone else know that Jim was gay, and their acceptance of the news was reassuring. Millie described the strength she drew from her ability to discuss her situation with a close friend over an extended period:

I called up my best friend on the phone immediately [after Martin came out] and she was great. She was wonderful. She was the most supportive person you could ever imagine. I mean, …she was my rock during the first three or four years just because I knew she was somebody that I could talk to.

Finally, Caitlin reported that friends’ comfort and willingness to ask questions indicated support for her and Chad’s relationship:

We also have several close friends who are aware. And they’ve been the same. They’ve been very supportive, and lots of questions. If they don’t understand something or they don’t quite catch what we’re meaning or what’s going on, they’re full of questions and support and help and they’ve just provided a real sense of support and strength for us.
Again, negativity from friends will be discussed in Finding 4 below, but participants in this study made nearly twice as many comments regarding supportive responses from friends than negative responses. These supportive friendships were found at work, at school, at church, and among existing networks of close friends. For the most part, supportive behaviors came simply in the couples’ ability to communicate honestly and to feel accepted and understood. It undoubtedly takes courage for mixed-orientation couples to disclose the nature of their relationship to selected friends—as Millie put it, “It takes a lot for me to disclose,”—but some couples’ comments suggest that doing so can have its rewards.

Online

Many of the couples (6) talked about finding support being in a mixed-orientation relationship through online listservs that cater to couples, to the nonheterosexual male partner, or to the heterosexual female partner. Lisa spoke about the value she found in communicating with other women in mixed-orientation relationships:

I first got involved with [an online] group, …and that’s the first place that I found hope. And that particular group, it was absolutely wonderful because we [Larry and I] would be discussing something or talking about something and, sure enough, somebody on [the listserv] would write in with the same question and I’d hear all the answers that would come flowing in…. And you know, it was an amazing group. I found great support and great help there…. I found out I wasn’t alone. There were lots of people in the same position, and it kind of opened my eyes, you know, that maybe this could work…. And, fortunately, since we’ve gotten involved in [two other listservs], we felt we really do have a number of couples that we’ve become very close to and I know I could pick up the phone and I could call any one of them and talk to them if I had a problem.
In addition to feeling like they are not alone and receiving answers to questions, online listservs can serve as a forum to come to a deeper self-understanding through writing. “I did a lot of processing on [the listserv] basically by writing,” said Frank. “It probably adds up to a book.” He added that it is helpful for people who are new to mixed-orientation relationships to see that there are other couples who have navigated the adjustment process and remain together years after disclosure. One of the ways that the listservs facilitate interaction with other mixed-orientation couples is by allowing couples to organize “gatherings,” when mixed-orientation couples can meet to visit in person.

“Gatherings”

Seven of the thirteen couples talked about support that they found in attending “gatherings,” or group meetings, with other couples in mixed-orientation relationships to find support, exchange stories, develop friendships, and to realize that they are not the only ones in a mixed-orientation relationship. Here is how Larry described the value of the gatherings compared to getting to know others only online.

I think there’s a fundamental difference between just participating in emails on the Internet and actually meeting and getting to know people and talk with them at length…. They [the meetings] have been absolutely crucial to our adjustment. I’m not sure we would have made it to this point without having the meetings. And what they do for me, well, I think what they do for Lisa too, is they sort of re-stabilize things, bring us back to a state of normalcy about our relationship and acceptance of our relationship. They’ve always improved it, and they’ve always made us closer…. It’s like going to a marriage enrichment weekend. You come back more in love with one another.
Frances and Frank have also used a listserv to network with other mixed-orientation couples and to arrange to meet with them in person when possible. Frank said:

We met so many people and had so many conversations about everything, but definitely meeting people in person and just sitting down over a meal and just talking about the weird lives we live, that was so powerful. I mean, I would recommend that to anyone. Online support groups are great, but actually meeting people, like in real life, is so powerful. It’s just great. So that was definitely a benefit of joining [the listserv], was just meeting people online that you get to like online, and then when the opportunity presents itself… wherever you might be traveling through, you talk with them, whether it’s for a meal or a weekend.

Caitlin and Chad found solace in connecting with others in mixed-orientation relationships. Caitlin noted how she found support through “interacting with some of these women who were just so sure of themselves, and that were where I wanted to be in their marriages, or were these women who were very uplifting and brought out the best in me.” Chad added, “It was a huge source of hope to see other couples successfully navigating this challenge and just to realize that we weren’t alone. We didn’t have to figure out all the answers on our own.” Millie likewise commented on how the gatherings are supportive of her relationship. She said, “We don’t define ourselves most as being in a mixed-orientation marriage, but that we’re working on making our relationship grow, which ideally should be applied to any relationship.”

Whereas the gatherings of listserv participants are focused on bringing mixed-orientation couples together for support, there are other support groups that participants talked about as providing support for their relationships. Hank talked about attending other support meetings that are unrelated to sexual orientation issues, which, he said, “has probably been the most
powerful.” Eric talked about his involvement with a group for “men who have unwanted same-sex attraction and don’t want to act out on their inclinations.” He said, “They have a retreat, a weekend retreat. It’s pretty powerful, at least it was for me in helping to come to a realization that I do fit, that I am just like everybody else.”

One of the benefits of attending gatherings or group meetings is the opportunity to develop relationships with others that couples continue to maintain. Martin, who travelled across the country to attend a gathering, stated:

We met so many people… that we’re very good friends with that we’ll just get together to go out together and just talk and relax, and just that feeling that I don’t have to watch my pronouns. I don’t have to watch what I say, and it’s an opportunity for the spouses to talk with each other because they have their own concerns and their up and down moments.

Eileen and Eric also commented on the relationships they have developed as a result of attending meetings. Eileen said:

I do have a couple of ladies that I can call and talk to and, and I value their wisdom and their knowledge, and they’re willing to share and help in any way, and they lift me up instantly and know what I need to do.

Eric further described the continuing association he and Eileen have enjoyed with others whom they have met through the meetings they have attended:

And so we just kind of became friends and been a great support to one another, being able to text each other and share how we’re feeling, share some of the things that we’re going through at the moment and that kind of thing, and we’ve actually had a couple of
opportunities to go—my wife and I and he and another couple… do some things together, go hiking,… and a few things like that.

In short, the Internet allows mixed-orientation couples to connect with each other and learn from one another. It provides a means by which to find others, ask questions, provide support, think out loud, and arrange meetings in person. Perhaps most importantly, it allows mixed-orientation couples to realize that they are not the only such couple in the world, and to see that other couples who decide to remain together post-disclosure have found ways to make their relationships work.

**Therapy**

Eight couples talked about the value of therapy as a support to their relationships. Among the aspects of therapy that participants found useful were attributes of the therapist, the role of therapy in facilitating communication, and the chance for participants to understand themselves better.

Based on participants’ comments regarding their therapists, there were three attributes that participants seemed to appreciate. The first was that the therapist attended to both partners, without preference for one partner over the other. “She’s just very aware of both of us sitting there and really kind of seems to be empathetic to both of us,” said Gina. A second therapist attribute that was valued was directness. Hank remarked, “She calls us on our bullshit really quick… so that’s really helpful.” Third, Eric appreciated that his therapist shared his religious perspective, saying that he uses “a therapeutic method where the Savior is involved, and that has been very helpful for me.”

Participants found therapy supportive of their relationships when the therapist helped to facilitate communication, particularly when husbands were fearful of hurting their wives. Holly remarked, “Hank’s scared sometimes to tell me things because he thinks he’s going to hurt my
feelings, so if there’s a third party there to help us work through it… he’ll help me understand it so that my feelings aren’t hurt.” Eric similarly noted the role of his therapist in communicating with Eileen:

He’s also been able to help me with things relating to my wife. When, when you’ve kept this kind of thing in and not said hardly anything about it for all the years you’ve been married, and then you come out and start sharing more authentically with your wife, that brings up issues between you and her that’s got to be worked through.

Greg recalled how he and Gina decided during therapy to try an alternative method of communication. “I try to take a little time each week to write to Gina about something that has changed in my view, just so she can kind of get into my mind and heart a bit more,” he said. “I think that that has been really helpful for both of us.”

The third aspect of therapy that participants found useful was to understand themselves better. Eric said, “Working on past trauma has been very helpful and has helped me to become a better person.” Millie noted that her individual therapy benefitted her relationship with Martin, even though she felt Martin’s attraction for men was not the issue. Her therapy, she said, “was about my relationship with my mom,” but, she observed, when “one person changes, the relationship changes.”

None of the participants reported their therapist to be uniquely skilled in working with couples in mixed-orientation relationships. Nevertheless, some participants found therapy useful inasmuch as they were able to establish a good relationship with the therapist, improve couple communication, or gain a better understanding of themselves.
Behaviors

There were a number of relationship behaviors the participants discussed as serving to strengthen their relationship. The most important of these behaviors seemed to be the ability of the couple to adapt their relationship after the coming-out process, and many women in particular discussed needing to overcome codependence by developing a stronger sense of self-worth that was not dependent on their husbands finding them sexually attractive. Other behaviors that participants noted as strengthening their relationship included being supportive of their partners’ needs and goals, having a good sex life, and giving each other space.

Adaptability

Twelve of the thirteen couples described the need to be adaptable and their ability to do so as being a protective factor in the relationship. Comments about adapting within the relationship seemed to cluster around five main areas. The first set of comments came primarily from the wives about needing to adapt to the news that their husbands were not heterosexual. The second sub-theme regarded how adaptability was necessary to the continuation of the relationship. The third set of comments pertained to the need to adapt one’s religious perspectives. The fourth set of comments was about accommodating a secondary partner. And fifth, couples adapted the way they defined marital commitments, covenants, or contracts.

With respect to wives adapting to their husbands’ nonheterosexuality, Beth knew Brandon was gay before they got married, but she recalls underestimating how far-reaching his homosexuality would be for their lives together. “It was a little bit of a mental shift for me at the beginning to think that was always going to be something I was going to have to deal with,” she said, “and I think I’ve come a long way in that understanding.” Lisa’s ability to adapt to being in a mixed-orientation marriage was largely influenced by talking to other wives. As she spoke to one wife, she noted, “She was accepting it and I was thinking, ‘Okay, I can do this too.’”
Regarding adapting in order to continue the relationship, Eileen related the following analogy to describe the need to adapt to Eric’s homosexuality:

Someone once told me, okay, you purchased a ticket to go to Italy, because you’ve always wanted to go to Italy. You got there. You’re plane landed, and you got out and it wasn’t Italy. You landed in Holland. Now you’re regretting, ‘No, I wanted to go to Italy.’ But you got Holland. You’re stuck in Holland. Now, are you going to pout all your life, or are you going to go enjoy Holland? There’s wonderful things in Holland. Enjoy Holland.”

Some of the more highly religious participants found that they needed to adjust their religious perspectives in light of homosexual attractions in the relationship. Gina knew that Greg was attracted to men before they got married, but as Greg began to more fully realize his gay identity, Gina felt the need to adapt her beliefs about homosexuality. Rather than believing that scripture is the sole source of moral authority, she came to believe that God also guides her through personal experiences.

In my tradition, it would always be like, ‘Whatever you read in the Bible, that’s what it is.’ But I think it also, God also teaches us through his spirit, through spiritual things rather than only what we read. He teaches us through people. He teaches us through the world around us.

The religious husbands likewise made adaptations to their religious perspectives. Greg, for example, discussed his need to change his view of homosexual attractions from being a defect to being a gift from God.
I just switched my perspective altogether, that being gay is a good gift from God…

Given my experience, I’d say it [my homosexuality] is not something that’s going to go away. I’ve got to think of it in different terms, you know, if I’m going to be able to make it in life.

Whereas Greg’s perspective of his homosexual attractions changed from being a defect to being a gift, Chad’s perspective of his homosexual attractions changed from being an indication of failure to being a growth opportunity:

My spiritual and religious beliefs really had to change in order for us to be successful. I had a really immature, juvenile view of religion and the world, and they contributed to a lot of my emotional turmoil. I think being able to hold on to your values but at the same time kind of examine them and be willing to let them mature and grow has been huge for me… and being able to see my mistakes not as an indictment of how horrible a person I was, but as an opportunity for growth.

As Chad suggested above, many of the couples regarded adaptation as necessary for the relationship to continue. Anna recalled Alan saying, “‘We’ve never gone on this path before and are you willing to come with me and we’ll see where it takes us.’ So that’s probably a lot of the reason we stayed together.” Eric recalled that, although he did not demand Eileen to change, that they likely could not have stayed together had she not been willing to adapt by reading and learning more about homosexuality:

I know a lot of men with wives out there who say, ‘This is your problem, not mine,’ and so they don’t want to do anything. But Eileen is just the opposite. She wants to learn everything she can so that she can understand, and if it hadn’t have been for that, then yeah, there’s no way that things would have worked out.
In Eileen and Eric’s case, the adaptation came in the form of Eileen being willing to learn, whereas in Frances and Frank’s case, Frances became willing to open their relationship sexually to allow Frank to have a secondary partner. Frank commented that monogamy may not have been sustainable long term:

Our first agreement after disclosure was sort of provisional monogamy—you know, monogamy, until *something*. And no one really knows how long that would have been sustainable, even though it was great for those two years for various purposes. So I don’t know what challenges there would have been there if Frances hadn’t had her paradigm shift and we hadn’t gone this other way.

Several other couples also discussed adapting to transitioning from a monogamous relationship to an open relationship. In an effort to better understand nonheterosexual married men like her husband, Anna corresponded with the male members of a listserv. She said, “One thing that was important for me to learn on [the listserv] was that I heard guys tell other guys how much they really loved their wives.” Alan added, “It wasn’t about them not loving their wives. Their interest in men came from a different part of their personality.” Alan commented further about how he and Anna adapted their understanding of commitment. He said:

We redefined commitment from being about sexual exclusivity to being about other things. What is it that’s keeping us together? We do find lots of reasons to stay with each other that don’t have anything to do with sex. We learned that we live in our own life, and what we do works for us. It may not work for anybody else, and we can be glad that we live in our life and not in someone else’s.

Related to redefining commitment, Frank explained his definition of a contract, noting that despite popular opinion to the contrary, contracts can be changed:
Marriage vows or a marriage contract—, like I always tell people, contracts are always up for renegotiation among the parties. There’s not a single contract for which that’s not true. And… if you see marriage as a legal contract of some sort, even metaphorically, you should be ready to renegotiate it if it is to mutual benefit, and that is I guess the way we’ve thought of it.

Adaptability, then, was referred to in a variety of ways in the participants’ comments. Wives needed to adapt to their husband’s nonheterosexuality. The continuation of the relationship depended on the couple’s adaptability, including with regards to certain religious views and, for some couples, accommodating a secondary partner. Finally, couples’ understanding of commitment or contracts was redefined from a rigid agreement to something more flexible that allows for adjustments to the changing nature of the relationship over time.

**Overcoming Codependence**

“Codependence” is another term from psychology that some of the wives borrowed to characterize an unhealthy relationship pattern whereby they worked to meet the needs of their husbands while neglecting their own needs. Five couples discussed how the wives had made a mental and emotional shift from “codependence” to a greater sense of independence from their nonheterosexual husbands, and that this shift was healthy for them in light of being in a mixed-orientation relationship. Millie, for example, recalled how therapy helped her overcome her fear of abandonment. She came to realize that “just because my mom didn’t love me didn’t mean that Martin didn’t love me.” Millie continued:

I’m codependent by nature. That was part of my issue, and trying to control by enabling and being the pleaser. And stepping back and looking at what I needed and what I
wanted. And voicing that and talking about what I needed was really the pinnacle of my therapy that really helped me.

Eileen similarly talked about needing to become less dependent on Eric, a realization she came to after attending a religiously based support program for wives of men with sex addictions.

I feel like I piggybacked on my husband all these years and depended on him, you know, kind of codependent, and my happiness lies in what he does or what he does with himself…. It’s like I’m dependent on him. My happiness is dependent on him. My being is dependent on him. That’s not right!

Although Janet accepted Jim’s homosexuality, she struggled with fear of abandonment when Jim began a relationship with a man. Janet recalled overcoming her codependence while driving to see her counselor when she found peace with Jim’s relationship:

I was going up to see her one day and driving up the road, and I could probably go back on that same road and pretty much tell you exactly where this thought came to me. I thought, ‘Huh, well, if it’s over, I can make it. I don’t want it to be but I’ll be fine,’ (laughs) and that was a real freeing thought. ‘Okay, whatever happens, I can handle it.’ And, and after that it was a lot easier to deal with.

Caitlin’s comment likewise suggests a realization that she would be okay if her marriage to Chad ever ended:

I feel like I’m much stronger. I love myself much more than I did when I first got married, and realize that I am happy in my marriage but I don’t need my marriage to be happy anymore. Like, I can be happy within my own skin. And I love Chad and I’m
happy being married to him, but if he were to choose to leave me, I could still find happiness and joy in my life. And… that was the hurdle, because… I was at first like so many wives who go into marriages with SSA men, really dependent, and their sole source of worth comes from their spouse, and so when they learn about the SSA, or when they learn that there is any pornography or cheating or anything like that, that woman is crushed. And to finally just to detach from that, and it’s not about you, and it’s not personal as a wife, and it’s not anything you did or didn’t do or what you wore or didn’t wear (laughs)… it’s just their issue, and separating yourself from that, and focusing on who you are and who you want to be.

The unifying sentiment in each of the comments above is that many of the wives suffered anxiety over the possibility of being abandoned—which is discussed in further detail below—and that the level of this anxiety was likely too high to be sustained for long, necessitating an acceptance that the relationship indeed may end at some point, which paradoxically allowed the wives to adjust and remain in the relationship.

**Communication**

All thirteen couples discussed good communication as being a protective factor in staying committed in their relationship. Caitlin, for example, said, that open communication was the best part of her marriage, and comments such as Caitlin’s were not uncommon. Open communication, which is characterized by a high degree of honesty and voluntary disclosure of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, was a hallmark of relationships. The husbands expressed that a benefit to having open communication is simply the ability to be honest. For example, Frank said, “Basically I enjoy so much being honest. It’s really thrilling to be honest about everything, not just about being gay,
but about everything.” David likewise commented on his ability to be authentic with Diane: “I don’t really feel like I have to hide this whole dimension of me from her.”

Open communication had been a characteristic from the beginning of some participants’ relationships. For example, Kathy recalled that when she first met Ken, “Basically, the conversation started and it never stopped,” to which Ken added, “And it’s still going on.” For other couples, open communication developed only after the nonheterosexuality of the husband was acknowledged within the relationship. Larry, for instance, said, “We’re communicating. We’re talking. We didn’t do that before.” Communication was particularly important immediately after disclosure. As Frances put it, “We talked and talked and walked and walked and cried and cried and talked and talked.”

Several of the participants talked about how being in a mixed-orientation relationship has enhanced the quality of the communication that they experience in the relationship. Greg noted, “In a lot of ways, we have more intimacy and more communication now than prior.” Millie made a similar observation, saying, “It’s made us really have to talk and to really get to know each other, to really understand each other.” Brandon explained that one of the reasons for greater intimacy is “because there was a lot of bearing of my soul.” An increased sense of intimacy was particularly noted by the wives. Here is how Millie put it:

I think that we have something that a lot of relationships and a lot of marriages don’t have, and I believe that probably a part of that is because it is a mixed-orientation marriage and that we’ve had to be really open and honest with each other and really allow each other to be who we are…. Having the same-sex attraction has forced us to have to talk in order to make it work, …so I think that there’s just an intimacy that a lot of marriages don’t have.
Caitlin similarly expressed that knowing about Chad’s nonheterosexuality has led to improved communication, becoming a strength of their relationship:

I think one major strength is that through,— especially, once this is out, there’s not (laughs) much else that’s really worth hiding in a marriage anymore. And we are just, we have very open communication. There’s no secrets between us…. And we’re willing to talk about anything that comes up…. And that open communication, I think, was very much opened by his disclosure…. It just opened a lot of doors, and that communication is one of the absolute strengths in our marriage.

Finally, Beth explained that discussion of Brandon’s sexuality strengthened their ability to have open communication and deepened their relationship:

One of the strengths of our relationship is that it, it’s based very much in open communication. I think that was really assistive—perhaps is a good word to use—by the fact that we did have a lot of very in-depth conversations, both regarding some of Brandon’s problem in terms of, like, pornography, but as well as just in terms of like what he was feeling and going through with his SSA and, and that was something that really, I think it accelerated our relationship in a lot of ways.

Several participants suggested that fear of hurting the other person, specifically the husbands’ fear of hurting their wives, was a potential barrier to open communication that they had some success in overcoming. Honesty in the face of potential emotional distress is not always easy, as evidenced in Holly’s comment: “Recently we’re really, really trying hard to make sure that we’re really honest about everything, whether you think it’s going to hurt somebody or embarrass you.” Developing the mutual trust necessary to be fully honest can take time but was achievable by most of the couples.
Some participants described striking a balance between honesty and too much information. Ian said, “I certainly don’t come home and, you know, give her a rundown of, ‘Here’s what I’ve—, here’s who I saw, here’s what I’ve done,’ or anything like that,” explaining, “I would not want to hurt her.” Although Isobel agrees that she does not want to know every detail, she likes when Ian is honest with her.

Open communication was further discussed as a protective factor in the relationship when the men’s sexual activities involved other men. Millie explained that she wanted to know when and where Martin planned to meet someone because having this information lowered her anxiety because she knew when she could expect him home. She said:

I knew what he was doing. We had some parameters as far as whenever he was going out…. He would go to meet someone and I had requirements as far as I needed to know where he was going to, and I needed to know when he was leaving to come home, because I’m one of those people who—, I go in my head. I make up the worst scenarios you could ever imagine.

For Frances and Frank, maintaining open communication about extramarital sexual contact was, in part, motivated by a concern to remain free from sexually transmitted infections. When discussing parameters of the relationship, Frank said:

Rules were very, very clear, very explicit. And anytime I had some kind of encounter, or my boyfriend had some encounter, he would tell me and we would just say what was okay…, what we did. That was it. But we’re very explicit. Frances would not have anything else…. If vagueness were to any advantage, I might go there, but (laughs) she doesn’t let me, so we’re very explicit about that.
Some participants commented that open communication was facilitated by the wives proactively asking questions, questions motivated not by anxiety but by curiosity. “We spent hours talking,” said Beth. “I would ask Brandon a question, and that would lead to another question, and that would lead to a third question.” Similarly, Kathy recalled that as she and Ken became friends:

I asked him every question in the book, including what do you do and how do you do it. I mean, I didn’t ask him that right off, but as we grew in our relationship, I’d say, ‘Would you mind if I asked you this?’ I was just curious.

“And I never minded,” added Ken. Couple communication was facilitated by the wives’ questions not only early in the relationship, but throughout the relationship as well. Frank, who describes himself as an introvert and as “naturally conflict-avoidant,” discussed the value of Frances being intentional about bringing up his homosexual attractions:

Frances has done a great job all along, all of these… years, making sure that the issues were always surfaced…. Or… if anything needed to be said, there was an opportunity to say it, that things would not slide back into the closet.

Like Frank, Brandon would sometimes prefer not to talk, but Beth noted that his willingness to answer her questions has helped foster her feelings of intimacy for him. With reference to Brandon viewing pornography, Beth said:

I’ve always appreciated the fact that he’s very open about it [pornography], and I can ask him very, very difficult questions, and as much as he doesn’t like to sit down and talk about it and think about it sometimes—he’s been through a lot of counseling sessions and stuff where he learned how to actually talk and actually verbalize things about the way he
feels—so for whatever reason he’s always been willing to do that with me. He will talk about what it is that he’s feeling and we can have very intimate conversations about those types of things.

In addition to the wives asking questions, participants discussed some very specific behaviors that have helped facilitate open conversation, including reading books or manuals together, scheduling a weekly time to talk, practicing therapist-recommended communication strategies, and reassuring one another. Reading together was important for Anna and Alan, not only because of the information that they were able to discuss together, but also because of the physical closeness that reading together provided. Anna said, “When I was next to his body, I could feel the timber of his voice when he was reading in his low voice and I’d just make him keep reading to me.” Eric also discussed how important it was for him and Eileen to read books together:

We’ve read seven or eight books about SSA, and books about overcoming it. We’ve read some books where they don’t necessarily believe that you can overcome it, and ultimately you have to find your own path no matter what.

Beth also observed that reading together and talking was valuable in facilitating communication and in strengthening her relationship with Brandon. Here Beth refers to a program that Brandon was attending to stop viewing pornography:

What we decided to do that would work for me was that he would come home or on a separate evening we would actually go through the… program together, because it’s a manual you can follow along, and you can have conversations around different topics that they suggest. ‘Well why don’t you talk about this?’ And it was actually really, truly a wonderful process in rebuilding and strengthening our marriage and our relationship.
A second communication strategy mentioned was scheduling time each week to talk. Caitlin said that although Chad’s homosexual attractions are not the central topic each week, having a scheduled time to talk about anything, including sexual orientation, has been important for them to remain informed about each other’s lives. Caitlin explained:

We have a scheduled time set aside every week that is like our check-in time, and… every week we know that we’re going to check in with each other and make sure that we’re aware of what’s going on with each other…. And that had been key, because once we’ve been able to have that time, then if there isn’t time, there’s still a time appointed for that open communication to happen.

Anna recalled learning specific communication strategies in therapy that were helpful for her when talking with Alan. She said of her counselor, “She gave me a page of something like thirty faces so that I could point at one to identify my emotion instead of just attacking him.” She continued:

Our counselor said, ‘Don’t attack him. Engage him.’ She taught me to say, ‘When you do this, I feel—,’ and it was so hard to do all this. And we got him a pager so that if I felt a panic attack coming on, I could call him so he could tell me what was going on.

Several participants also noted the importance of hearing reassuring comments from their partners, and this was true for couples both in open and monogamous relationships. Larry, who is in an open relationship with Lisa, said:

I spend a lot of time trying to, trying to reassure her and, you can never stop—let me put it that way. It’s reassuring for something that has to go on continuously. You know, I
send flowers. I send notes when unexpected. I do what I can to try and confirm for her that she’s my number one, and that my relationship with [boyfriend] is secondary.

Gina also commented on needing continual reassurance from Greg, even though they are monogamous:

We’ve figured out kind of what each of us needs to hear and needs to know, like I identified that I need to hear from Greg every day that he intends to stay in the marriage, that he loves me, that I’m attractive to him, and I’ll pretty much call that out, but it’s still meaningful (laughs). And at the time he needed to hear from me that I know he’s gay and I’m good with it.

In sum, open communication seemed to play a substantial role in strengthening the relationship for these mixed-orientation couples, and many of the participants believed that their relationships were stronger and more intimate because of being in a mixed-orientation relationship and the open communication that such a relationship requires. Furthermore, open communication seemed to be greatly facilitated by the wives’ wanting to talk about their husbands’ extramarital sexual activities and by asking nonthreatening questions. Finally, participants mentioned specific behaviors that promoted open communication, including reading books or manuals, scheduling time to talk, avoiding attacking and using I-statements, and reassuring one another.

**Mutual Support**

Participant comments were characterized as exhibiting “support” if they referred to supplying the emotional, cognitive, or physical resources necessary for partners to feel that their needs were being met. Nine of the couples referred to mutual support as a factor that contributed to their relationship commitment. Participants talked about supporting each other generally, as
well as specifically related to being in a mixed-orientation relationship. Examples of general support included helping one another achieve educational or career goals. Caitlin, for instance, who works while Chad attends college full time, said, “Education has been something very important to both of us, and that’s something that we’ve been able to support each other through.” Frances also related how she and Frank have supported one another: “It’s always been true that we have each been really strong advocates for the other and for the other’s personal and professional development and so on, and just… making it possible for each other to do what was good for each other.”

Other participants’ comments about mutual support centered on having an open relationship. Larry, for example, expressed his appreciation for the support he felt from Lisa to pursue male companionship: “I mean, you know, I appreciate her even more, I love her even more for allowing me to be complete.” Frances expressed her support for Frank to have a “closed-loop relationship,” or CLR, which refers to two people who have a sexual relationship only with each other and with one other partner. She said:

I am heartsick for Frank right now not to have a really fabulous CLR partner. Because… he used to have one and I want him to have one again. And it is not about us not being partners. It’s not about us not being together. It’s that that’s a reinforcing and enriching and enhancing experience that I can’t give him that I want him to have and that he deserves to have in his life…. And I’m sad that it’s not here right now.

Mutual support in the context of a mixed-orientation relationship was not uni-directional, with only the woman supporting the nonheterosexual partner, but the nonheterosexual man can also support his heterosexual partner. Alan explained that since he was fully comfortable with
his identity as “not straight,” he was able to support Anna in her adaptation to understanding homosexuality. He said:

> When things came into the open after [so many] years of marriage, I wasn’t trying to explore some newfound part of me or trying to experience something that I had suppressed and denied this whole time. I felt free to put myself aside and concentrate on supporting her through.

Anna added, “And that was just major because it was like I was down this big long hall and it was all foggy and funny and he just took me by the hand and stuck with me.”

In short, participants discussed many of the same kinds of support for one another that long-lasting heterosexual partners might describe, including meeting personal, educational, and professional needs and goals. Maintaining a secondary partner, however, was also mentioned as a personal need related to being in a mixed-orientation relationship.

**Good Sex Life**

I did not ask participants questions related to sex, but eight of the thirteen couples volunteered that they had a good sexual relationship in their marriage. Recall that participants were asked on the demographic questionnaire to indicate their sexual attractions on a scale from 0 to 6. The men discussed in this section rated themselves as a 4, “Predominantly homosexual, but more than incidentally heterosexual,” or a 5, “Predominantly homosexual, only incidentally heterosexual.” I indicate how the men scored themselves on the adapted Kinsey scale when referring to their quotations below.

Chad, who rated his sexual attractions as a 4, said, “The sex thing does work very well. I think I would rate our sex life as a nine out of ten. It’s satisfying for me.” He explained that
maintaining a good sexual relationship is founded on good communication. “It’s just easier when we’re really open and discuss everything.”

Frank, who indicated his sexual attractions as a 5, likewise attributed a good sexual relationship to good communication. “It has a lot to do with communication,” he said. His wife Frances reported, “Our sex life now is way better now than it was before Frank came out. So that’s been a long-term success.” Additionally, Frank explained that scheduling sex has been important for their sexual relationship:

I think it’s useful to say, ‘Okay, on Thursday, we’re going to have a play date,’ or something like that. I mean that’s probably something that’s true of lots of straight couples in their fifties. They could improve their sex lives if they were a little bit more deliberate about it, intentional about it.

Millie and Martin’s sexual relationship likewise improved after Martin, who scored himself as a 5, transitioned in his identity from bisexual to gay and discussed his attractions with Millie. Martin said, “I think that’s when we really started to talk even more and we started to have a little bit more sparks come into our own romantic lives.” Lisa and Larry also experienced an improvement in their sexual relationship after Larry came out. Larry, who rated his sexual orientation at a 5, said:

We renewed, or resumed, a physical sexual relationship. It’s a little different because we’ve mixed in gay movies and things to kind of add some spice, if you will. But we actually have a pretty strong sexual relationship now. And I’m the happiest, I’m the happiest I’ve ever been in my life.

Eric, who rated his sexual attractions as a 5, remarked that intimacy with his wife is enjoyable despite not being sexually attracted to her. He explained:
We still engage in sexual activity, and sometimes we’re successful, and other times we’re not as successful, but the time we’re spending together, we don’t get frustrated by it. We love each other, we hold each other, and we enjoy each other, and it’s a beautiful thing for us now, much more so than it ever was for me all my life.

Thus, even for these men who identify themselves as gay and who ranked their sexual attractions as a 4, “Predominantly homosexual, but more than incidentally heterosexual,” or as a 5, “Predominantly homosexual, only incidentally heterosexual,” a satisfying sex life with their wives was possible, and was made possible due to a variety of factors, including open communication, planning, the inclusion of gay pornography, allowing for extramarital partners, and enjoying non-sexual intimacy.

**Space**

Six of the couples referred to granting each other a certain amount of “space” and privacy as being a strength in their relationship that helped them to remain committed to each other. Referring to a popular psychology book, Brandon said, “Guys need their cave.” The men in this sample spoke more than the women did about their appreciation of their wives giving them space. I will profile the comments regarding space from two men in particular: Ian and Jim.

Ian expressed gratitude that Isobel does not require him to account for every hour of his day, and asserted that he would not be able to live with someone who did. He said, “Yes, there’s acceptance and yes there’s openness, but at the same time I don’t feel like every little thing that I do needs to be rubbed in her face or, you know, discussed.” From Isobel’s perspective, “Ignorance is bliss,” she said. Ian continued:

And she does not grill me. And that gets back to one of the amazing characteristics about her. If I’m an hour late coming in from work or whatever, I don’t get the third degree.
And she doesn’t try to slip around and read my text messages or open my mail or anything like that, which I think has got to be extremely, extremely rare in most households…. I know me personally, if every time I walked in the door I’m going to get the third degree about, ‘Where’ve you been, what have you been doing, who have you seen, blah, blah, blah?’ I’m not going to live like that.

Jim said that although Janet knows he views pornography, he appreciates the privacy that she affords him. He explained:

I don’t pry too much into it because I wouldn’t want her to pry into me and ask me, ‘What were you doing from the time I went to bed to when you came to bed at midnight?’ Well, I wasn’t always watching porn, but I was on some occasions. And I wouldn’t lie to her. She knows I watch porn anyway. It’s one of those situations where, if she gets up and… comes through, she will turn on the bathroom light, she’ll turn on the kitchen light, she’ll make noise, which says to me, ‘Janet’s coming through the living room.’ And I think that’s exactly what she intends, to let me know she’s coming through, which is thoughtful.

The comments from these two men and others in the sample indicate that even when their female partners know about their extramarital sexual activities, they appreciate a certain level of privacy.

**Finding 4—Challenges in the relationship**

The couples in this study reported a variety of challenges that they have experienced associated with being in a mixed-orientation relationship. The most frequently occurring comments related to such challenges were negative religious views, including internalized homophobia as expressed by the religious participants. Other frequently discussed challenges
included an unsatisfying marital sex life, the wives’ feelings of inadequacy, poor communication, feeling alone, negative experiences from therapy, negativity from family, negativity from peers, and challenges associated with maintaining a secondary relationship. Each of these topics is elaborated upon below.

**Religiously Based Intolerance of Homosexuality**

Eleven of the thirteen couples talked about religiously based intolerance of homosexuality as posing a challenge to their relationship. The quantity of the comments related to the negative influence of religion, even by the religious participants, is remarkable, constituting a challenge to their relationship that the participants discussed at greater length than any other challenge.

Several participants talked about the influence of their religious upbringing as being damaging to their sense of self-worth given their homosexual attractions. Chad recalled, “The way that I viewed God and religion was very orthodox Mormon growing up, and I think a lot of those beliefs ended up working against me.” He explained his earlier experience of religion as one of judgment:

> In the Mormon culture, there’s kind of this idea like life is a test to see if we make it back to be with God and live with Him. And that kind of thing as a pass/fail option—I got really easily frustrated when I felt like I was failing.

Ken similarly discussed his experiences with religion in his youth, noting that he has wrestled “to escape this crap in which I was mired as a child and a young man.” His church community’s interpretation of the Bible’s statements about homosexuality, in particular, was a source of negativity for him:
I grew up in a very fundamentalist church. And I was told that—I mean, I got this from the Bible—that if I touched another man with lust in my heart, I would burn in the flames of hell forever. I mean, it was really, really pounded in my head.

Greg likewise noted the significant influence of the Bible in damaging his self-worth as a gay man, stating:

I spent some time kind of reading and thinking about what does the Bible have to say on homosexuality, and that was a major influence on me. There are only a few passages that exist that speak specifically about it, and they’re all negative.

Greg also expressed anger over the damaging consequences after years of attempting to change his sexual orientation through reparative therapy. He noted that his anger stemmed from “a combination of feeling like I had been lied to and feeling like I’ve made a lot of choices that I wouldn’t have otherwise made based on what I know:”

I felt betrayed by kind of the larger Christian community that puts forward a totally unworkable solution to being gay. And that they would happily encourage me to get into… marriage, and put me in a situation where I, you know, would have kids that I would later put at risk of divorce…. They kind of offered an option that they have no idea how almost impossible and unworkable it is, what they’ve kind of put forth. That just made me furious, totally furious.

In other words, Greg reported feeling “furious” that his religious community pressured him into a heterosexual marriage, an arrangement that affects not only him, but also his wife and children. Although Greg remains committed to Gina and to making the marriage work, his comment illustrates the challenge that religion can present mixed-orientation couples, namely,
that religion is at least partly responsible for the pressure for gay men to enter into heterosexual relationships that are characterized by interpersonal and intrapsychic problems, and to create marriages that most often end in divorce.

The nonheterosexual males were not the only participants disillusioned by religion. Several of the female participants likewise expressed distaste for religion. Kathy asserted, “Basically I think a lot of religion is organized hate,” adding that she and Ken had “just stayed away from churches because of rigidity and the hate that so many of them had and didn’t become involved.” Frances also expressed that she gets “pretty frustrated with a lot of the pieces of organized religion, and I would guess I would have to say the gay thing has been part of our frustration with that.” She continued, “I just get so frustrated by what’s going on with the Christian Right and our society that it’s some negative spillover effect to religion in general.”

Some of the husbands related negativity from their own wives. In the case of Ian, religiously fueled rejection of homosexuality came from his wife Isobel, who asserted, “I believe the Bible and I, I don’t believe God creates people that way.” She added, “I can’t think God created somebody like that if he thinks that an abomination. And I think that if he [Ian] really, really wants to change, it can happen.” Diane likewise seemed to reject David’s homosexuality, saying, “This [David’s homosexuality] is just the trappings. This is just the outer stuff. This isn’t who he really is.”

Participants reported experiencing religiously based rejection from parents as well. Frank spoke about his parents’ lack of acceptance of his homosexuality, saying, “They’re conservative evangelical Christians. They’re, they’re never really going to be okay with it.” Holly explained that her mother’s religious fundamentalism was one of the reasons she and Hank have not told her that Hank is gay. “[Where my parents live], it’s very Bible belt and [religious] and my mom’s family is very, very, very like that.” She added that for her mother’s family “to try to
pray or save Hank or something would be lame and stupid.” Hank agreed, saying, “Oh God, yeah. It’d be obnoxious.” Eric described the negative reaction that his parents had when he told them about his nonheterosexuality:

My dad just hollered, not hollered, but just said, ‘It’s Satan’s work. It’s Satan’s work. It’s Satan’s work,’ was all he could say. And my mother just said, ‘Don’t tell anybody. Don’t tell anybody. Don’t tell anybody. Lots of people respect you. Don’t tell anybody.’

Some participants discussed dealing with religiously based rejection from siblings as well. Jim said of his brother, with whom he now has “practically no relationship:” “The fact that I’m gay, he has some concern about my soul, which I find laughable.” Alan managed to preserve a relationship with his brother, but doing so required establishing some boundaries. Alan explained:

My next younger brother is a [church leader] and he engaged me in some correspondence in his well-meant—I think—interest in my eternal salvation. And I came to a point very quickly where I told him it was obvious that I wasn’t going to fall in line with an ultra-conservative, ‘You’re damned and going to hell,’ where he was sort of coming from, even though he was doing it in a very loving manner. I said, …if you continue trying to dialog with me about these things, we will become adversaries, and I want you as a brother more than as an adversary.’ It just wasn’t something that I felt would ever get resolved.

Several participants described encountering negativity from members of their church. Greg recalled a meeting with a leader in his church who had learned from another leader that Greg was gay. “He was like, ‘You know, [name of church leader] told me your story. Don’t
ever mention that story again. It’s not safe for you. It’s not safe for your kids. Don’t ever speak of it.’ No uncertain terms, it is taboo.” Greg further explained, “In our church it’s kind of, there’s a lot of homophobia, so I think he was saying that it’s not that safe for you to be out here, which pissed me off and kind of worked on me.” Gina observed how the homophobia from church influences her: “They’ll mention in the sermon, you know, ‘Well marriage is only between a man and a woman.’ Like it’s so ingrained. It’s so natural for everyone to take a position that’s totally anti-homosexuality. Sometimes that feeds back into my thinking.”

Another participant, David, expressed anger about being disfellowshipped from his church for having sex with men.

I’m not real big about church stuff right now, because I missed, I will have been disfellowshipped for about seven years, and I missed my son going to the temple, being ordained an elder, my daughter’s wedding, ordaining my son to other things, setting my son apart, I mean all those things—I missed it all. And it makes me really angry because I was trying to do everything the right way. I was doing everything right, and they said, ‘You know, it doesn’t matter. You’re not going to change [your disfellowshipped status] for three more years. Nothing’s going to change for you.’ So, it kind of pisses me off.

Some participants have dealt with the negativity they encountered at their church by leaving and finding another church to attend. Frances, for example, recalled when a new person became the head of their church. “The new guy was very anti-gay, anti-divorce, anti-inclusiveness, right-and-wrong line drawer, and we left.” Frank elaborated, “It was not good to go to a church where you kept hearing all these bad things about yourself. And so we just needed a place where that wouldn’t happen, so we switched to an open and affirming congregation.”
Gina and Greg had not switched churches, but they were considering the possibility of moving out of town altogether for their children’s sake. Greg explained:

I want them to grow up in a church that has a much more positive view of homosexuality. I don’t want them to grow up and feel like I’m a deviant or we’re rejecting God. I don’t want them to grow up in a community that invokes a complex for them related to my sexuality. I want them to grow up in one where that’s just seen as normal, very positive, it’s something to be embraced, accepted, encouraged, celebrated, and they’re not going to get, you know, abused in some way because I’m gay. So that’s to me like the major motivation to moving to a better environment.

In sum, narrow religious views were a source of negativity for these couples in a number of ways. Many of the men reported having a damaged sense of self-worth due to religious attitudes against homosexuality, and Greg reported feeling deceived into thinking that his sexual orientation could change. Many of the wives likewise grew weary of the rigidity and intolerance they perceived in religion. Religiously based intolerance was expressed to some of the husbands from their own wives, and to many of the couples from their parents, their siblings, and their churches. As we shall see next, some participants experienced negativity from themselves as well in the form of internalized homophobia.

**Internalized Homophobia**

In this study, internalized homophobia refers to negative feelings or attitudes that nonheterosexuals have toward their nonheterosexuality. Participants within seven couples talked about having negative views regarding homosexuality. Comments were coded as being homophobic when participants used words and phrases that were pathologizing (e.g., homosexuality as an “illness” to be “cured” or attractions as “triggers”) or that had negative
emotional valence (e.g., homosexuality as an “imperfection” to be “struggled with”). It can be helpful to understand how the comments below are homophobic by mentally replacing references to homosexuality with heterosexuality, e.g., would heterosexuals refer to their heterosexuality as a “fault,” a “mistake,” a “struggle,” or an “illness?” Notably, the seven couples discussed in this section were markedly more religious than the remaining six couples who did not express any negative statements about homosexuality, with the average religiosity score of the participants mentioned here at a 3.8 out of 5 compared with 1.8 of the remaining participants.

Many of the participants referred to homosexuality as a “struggle.” David referred to his homosexual attractions as “a life-long struggle.” Eric recalled that his “first real struggle with homosexuality” occurred when he was in his 20s. Gina suggested how the language she and Greg used to discuss Greg’s homosexuality had recently changed as they began to accept Greg’s homosexuality more. She said, “The terminology we used then was ‘something he struggles with.’” Finally, Ian referred to his homosexuality this way: “It’s a very big struggle. It’s a big struggle.”

Homosexual attractions for some participants were referred to as being unwanted. Chad, for example, referred to disclosing to Caitlin his homosexual attractions as a “dark secret.” Eric related feeling discouraged while looking for support online: “All I was finding was affirmation groups that really wanted you to affirm that you’re gay, and that was extremely scary for me because that’s really not who I am or who I wanted to be.” David said of his attractions, “Well, I wish I didn’t have homosexual feelings. I wish I didn’t, but I do.” Finally, Hank said, “I didn’t want to be who I was, because I didn’t want to be gay and I was trying to be something else.”

Several of the men regarded their homosexual attractions as the basis for a damaged sense of self-worth. Brandon, before he came out, revealed: “For a long time I was very hard on
myself, and like ‘Who would want to deal with someone like me? I just need to hide myself so people won’t be uncomfortable.’” Eric referred to his homosexuality as a “fault” when he talked about the process of coming out: “You start sharing all of your faults for the first time in your life.” Chad’s comment similarly suggests that although he is no longer as hard on himself as he once was, he still regards any expression of his homosexuality as “mistakes” or as an “imperfection.”

Being able to see my mistakes not as an indictment of how horrible a person I was, but as an opportunity for growth… instead of feeling shame that I am imperfect, I can use that imperfection as a motivator to continue growing and as a learning experience.

Ian revealed that because of his homosexual attractions, “I don’t really feel like that I’m worthy of love, especially of her [Isobel’s] love.” Referring to Isobel’s unconditional love for him, he continued:

And I’ve thought, you know, many times that it would almost be so much easier if she hated my guts and threw stuff at me and things like that because I would feel like that would be the kind of response that I would deserve.

Internalized homophobia was evident in the language of pathology with which some participants talked about homosexuality. For example, the grammatical construction that the religious participants used to refer to homosexual attractions as “having SSA” evokes similarly constructed pathology terms such as “having AIDS,” “having cancer,” or “having diabetes.” Isobel remarked that she considers homosexuality “as an illness, that it can be cured or healed.” Ian added, “I don’t believe people are born this way.” Some of the participants referred to having sex with men as “acting out,” which a search of peer-reviewed journals revealed to be predominantly used in the psychoanalytic literature from the ‘40s, ‘50s, and ‘60s with reference
to anti-social behavior and neuroses. Eric, for example, said, “I had acted out with some things with him.” David said, “I had acted out and I felt terribly guilty about it.” While describing his sessions with a therapist, David referred to the expression of his sexual orientation as “acting out,” then compounds its inference to pathology by connecting his sexual orientation with childhood sexual abuse.

I think I’m coming to an understanding more—through some therapy that I’m doing—about why that [homosexuality] is there. I’m working with a therapist…. I think I’m realizing now that a lot of my acting out and my desires come from some sexual abuse issues from when I was younger.

Another term borrowed from the language of pathology was “trigger” to refer to homosexual attractions. A search of the peer-reviewed literature revealed the word trigger to be most commonly used with reference to anger, violence, or the onset of psychiatric disorders. Caitlin, for example, referred to days when Chad is “feeling more triggered and having more homosexual thoughts.” Ian used the word trigger to refer to feeling attracted to men at church.

When I’m going to church, I’m supposed to be going there to worship, not looking over and seeing somebody that’s, you know, attractive, and thinking those kind of thoughts. And I’ve often tried to describe it to Isobel about how difficult it is to focus on anything, especially when those kind of—I’ll call it a trigger—when those kind of triggers are around, because that’s where my mind is constantly going.

Ian spoke at length about the conflict he experiences with his homosexual behavior in the context of his religious views. He said, “If I’m knowingly sinning—which I believe that is—I don’t know how you find peace knowing that you’re not doing what you’re supposed to be doing.” He continued:
Many times it’s caused me to question my salvation. And I would say it’s, it still causes me greatly to question my salvation because… I know in my heart that what I’m doing and how I’m living and the things that go through my mind, they’re not in keeping with the teachings.

The male participants further manifested internalized homophobia by attempting to diminish or eliminate their homosexual attractions. For example, Eric said, “I’ve been working on trying to minimize my homosexual tendencies through therapy.” He continued, “those attractions will go away when you do certain things or be greatly diminished. I personally believe that’s true depending on what level of homosexuality you have.” He added, “I believe that sobriety is a completely achievable and can be maintained.” He explained that sobriety means to “abstain from acting out by viewing pornography and masturbation. That’s what it means for me.” Although Ian said he believes change is possible, he admitted, “I have not gotten to the point to where I think in my heart that I can change.” Further, he believed getting married would eliminate his homosexual attractions: “When we got married [I thought] that those feelings would go away because, ‘Now I’m a married person and now everything’s going to be normal.’” Note Ian’s use of the word “normal,” suggesting the belief that homosexuality is abnormal. Greg had recently come to embrace his gay identity, but he recalled, “I went through reparative therapy during that period [as a young adult], so I kind of developed a view of gay feelings as sort of my enemy, as something I really wanted to minimize or try to suppress.” Hank described how suppressing his homosexual attractions eliminated the possibility of developing relationships with others: “I discovered that I was all alone, because I had turned off, you know, psychologically, turned off everything on my end to deal with my sexuality.”

In sum, participants exhibited internalized homophobia by referring to their homosexual attractions as a struggle, as being unwanted, and as making them unworthy of love. Further, they
pathologized homosexuality by describing it as an illness and by referring to homosexual behavior as “acting out” and homosexual attractions as “triggers.” Finally, the participants discussed in this section wished to diminish or eliminate their homosexual attractions. Although religious views perhaps cannot be established as a cause of these participants’ expressions of internalized homophobia, religiosity and internalized homophobia clearly co-occurred.

**Unsatisfying Sex Life**

While interviewing participants, I did not ask specifically about sex. Nonetheless, participants within ten of the couples expressed feeling dissatisfied with their sexual relationship with their spouse. Some of the men reported a sense of guilt for not being able to provide a fulfilling sexual relationship for their wives. Many of the participants further expressed the opinion that sex is of limited significance in a relationship.

Eric’s comment distills the difficulty with sex in a mixed-orientation relationship: “I’m not sexually attracted to my wife. It makes sex very difficult.” Perhaps the most unrestrained expression of dissatisfaction with sex came from David:

Our sex life, I mean, it’s horrible. We haven’t had sex for probably a year. And it’s never been really terrific. I mean, when we were first married, you know, it was probably a lot more like other normal couples, but as time’s gone on, it’s really disintegrated a lot, and it wasn’t unusual even in the last [few] years, to have sex, you know, three, four, five times a year, maybe.

Jim felt similarly dissatisfied, and eventually he and Janet decided to cease putting forth the effort:

I tried really, really hard to be a sexual companion. I felt so miserably out of place. I felt so miserably inadequate. I felt extremely frustrated. I would say for a good portion of
that time, that subject absolutely was something I dealt with daily and it was just
extremely difficult. (Jim)

He told me [he was gay] about [number] years into the marriage, and a sexual
relationship continued for… years after that. But it just became more and more difficult
for him and I was like, ‘You know, this is no joy for me anymore, so why don’t we just
quit trying?’ (Janet)

Some of the husbands acknowledged that their wives wanted sex more frequently. Hank
said, “I know I’m not giving her everything that she needs.” Diane said that “there’s an
emotional closeness” to sex for her that is often “lacking” in their relationship. Alan likewise
noted that without sexual intimacy, “it becomes a challenge for us to continue doing things that
keep us feeling connected and intimate with one another.” He continued:

It’s a challenge to continue to relate on a sexual basis with Anna. That shouldn’t be
surprising. She’d like sex more often. She’s never been someone to say, ‘Oh, I have a
headache.’ In all fairness, she probably should have been married to someone who had a
hard-on thinking about her during the day, let alone crawling into bed nude with her. But
she didn’t get that, unfortunately.

Three of the men expressed a sense of guilt or inadequacy related to being unable to
satisfy their wives’ sexual needs. For example, David said, “I feel guilty, and I know that she’s
disappointed, that she would like it.” Hank related that Holly is “a little bit of a romantic” who
“would like to… have her legs swept out from under her.” Hank suggested that she deserves to
have that desire fulfilled, saying, “Sometimes I have that in my head that I kind of think, ‘Well
gosh, shouldn’t she be able to have that romance-novel experience?’” Jim likewise said about
his lack of sexual activity with Janet, “I feel guilty about it. I personally think that if I had a
husband that was not sexually active with me for... years, I’d probably be depressed.” He continued:

I have a very strong sense of inadequacy toward Janet. And she has told me that it’s not true and all of this sort of thing, but no matter how many times she reassures me or that sex doesn’t matter to her, I have a sense that I’m an extremely good husband in every respect except sexually. And I hate that. I hate that for me and I hate that for her. And I feel that she’s been deprived of that part of a relationship.

Several participants observed that mixed-orientation couples are not alone in sexual dissatisfaction. “Heterosexual couples—married couples—have sex problems too,” noted Eileen. Chad likewise commented that it “happens with any relationship, where sex isn’t one hundred percent successful.” Kathy commented that forsaking sex was a small price to pay in exchange for an otherwise fulfilling relationship. She said:

I think when you mature, you realize that everything in life is a choice, and you never get everything you want. You have to give somewhere. And I feel like that—and this may sound strange—but the thing I gave up was so infinitesimal in comparison to what I got.

Jim likewise expressed the view that sex is a minor part a relationship. In his opinion:

Sex is only one very small segment of human relationships, and maybe not the most important at all. Maybe it’s somewhere way down on the list, and if everything is in great shape and everything is working well for you, why would anybody ever want to get divorced or separated or throw away everything on the basis of sex? I mean, life is just so much more than an orgasm.
Although some couples reported a satisfying marital sex life, the majority expressed dissatisfaction with sex in their marriages, both because the men did not enjoy sex with their wives, and because the wives wanted sex more frequently. The lack of sex sometimes constrained the level of intimacy the couple enjoyed, or led to feelings of guilt or inadequacy.

**Her Feelings of Inadequacy**

Nine couples referred to the woman’s feelings of inadequacy as a challenge to the relationship. Holly said, “I can have times where I feel insecure,” but noted, “I don’t know that it necessarily stems from sexuality.” In most instances, however, the woman’s feelings of inadequacy were exacerbated by their husbands’ homosexual attractions. Isobel, for example, questioned why Ian wanted to marry her. “I sometimes wonder, you know, did he, did he marry me thinking, you know, this was going to make him normal or was that all just a sham?... There’s still doubts.” She adds regarding his attraction to men, “I was kind of at a loss when it came to men, because I guess when it came to women, I felt like I could still compete with that. And just really wasn’t sure how to deal with the men.” Gina talked about her concern over whether Greg was attracted to her. “I’m really hypersensitive to, ‘Is he attracted to me, does he want me, you know, is there still sexual attraction?’ If I don’t hear that then my mind starts whirring and buzzing and I get all crazy.

Lisa’s concerns stem from Larry’s relationship with his boyfriend, whom Lisa is fond of. “He’s a wonderful fellow,” she said. Nonetheless, she said, “I fight jealousy and envy all the time.” Millie also talked about feeling insecure when Martin was planning a night out. “He was getting ready to go and all my insecurities would come out and I would be this whiny little girl.” Eileen expressed feeling threatened by a friendship that Eric developed with a young man whom he met at a men’s group. “These two, they are very, very close, and they text each other two or three times a day. And that was hard for me at first.”
Two of the wives talked about feeling concerned about their husbands’ looking at pornography. Caitlin recalled her self-critical thoughts: “When he did look at porn, that would have all been, ‘Well, I’m just not pretty enough and I’m just not thin enough,’ and those thoughts went through my head when I very first found out about things.” Beth likewise reported how she felt when Brandon viewed pornography: “It feels like you’re being undermined. It feels like—mmm—that you lack something, or that you’re not measuring up.”

Four of the women specified that they had feared their husbands would leave. For example, when Jim fell in love with another man, Janet said she was upset, explaining, “I really liked our marriage and I liked our relationship, and I valued what we had. And the thought of losing what we had was upsetting.” Isobel expressed a similar fear that Ian may leave someday. She said, “In the back of my mind there’s the chance that he’s just going to up and leave one day and move off and say, ‘I’ve had enough of trying to hide this and I’ll go somewhere else to do it.’” Another wife, Millie, attributed her fear of abandonment, which she says she has subsequently overcome through therapy, to childhood issues with her mother. “I have abandonment issues, and I think that was part of my greatest fear, that he was going to leave me, that I wasn’t enough, that he needed more than me, so he would leave me.”

In sum, nine of the wives reported feeling insecure, unattractive, lacking, or not measuring up as a result of their husband’s lack of sexual attraction to them. Further, when the husbands’ sexual attractions were focused elsewhere, they reported feeling upset, fearful, jealous, envious, and undermined. Clearly these emotions are unsettling, and although these emotions are a continual challenge for many wives, their intensity seems to vary over time.

**Poor Communication**

Seven participants reported that poor communication has been a challenge to their relationships. Some of the comments referred to poor communication pre-disclosure and that
communication has improved after disclosure. For example, Eric said, “We’ve always been poor communicators our whole marriage. Of course, most of that was my fault for hiding.” The idea of keeping something secret as being problematic was also mentioned by Beth. Referring to Brandon’s secrecy about viewing pornography, Beth said:

I think that was what hurt me the most because I felt like he just wasn’t being very forthcoming and honest. So that, I think, was a bigger challenge for me to deal with than the fact that he was doing pornography, and that actually did take a toll on our relationship.

Holly talked about Hank remaining quiet about what he was thinking as presenting a challenge to their success communicating. “He’s very much a, a processing-type person,” she said, “so he was trying to explain to me what was going on, but it wasn’t making sense because he hadn’t had enough time to process it in his brain.” She added, “He’ll sit there and think about something so much in his brain, then he comes to a conclusion and I’m like, ‘But you never even told me that that was an issue.’” When Hank finally communicates what he has been thinking about, Holly is caught off guard. “Being blindsided by things really upsets me.”

Although Millie knew about Martin’s nonheterosexuality early in their marriage, she attributed limited communication to being busy with work and raising children. “A lot of things just weren’t talked about. They weren’t discussed. So we just kind of went through daily life and didn’t really talk about us.” Diane, who still has children at home, likewise commented that the concerns of everyday life often limit deeper communication with David:

I don’t know that I’m a very good support [to David], because I’m not thinking, ‘Gee,’ you know, ‘Hey, how’s it going? How are you feeling about this right now?’ I do when
I think about it, but I am probably, as many women, I’ve got a million things on my mind, and I’m multitasking and I’m thinking about other stuff.

Two women observed that their husbands are sensitive, and Eileen commented that Eric, along with other nonheterosexual men she has met, seems to be overly sensitive.

All these SSA guys are such a baby. They are so sensitive and you can’t even say anything to them. I don’t know. They want you to be authentic, and if I [am] authentic, it hurts them (laughs). So I have to really be careful with what I say, how I say it. Even tone of voice. That’s one thing that’s very difficult.

Four couples reported that not discussing the man’s nonheterosexuality presented a problem to the relationship. For example, Diane and David tend not to discuss David’s homosexuality. David said that in the previous few years, “I haven’t talked to her really about it…. She doesn’t want to know.” Diane agreed, saying, “I think I live in a state of denial usually, so (laughs)…. I don’t think there’s a lot of voluntary sharing.” Gina and Greg referred this pattern of avoiding discussion about Greg’s homosexual attractions as their “don’t-ask-don’t-tell policy,” which they said had presented a challenge to their relationship. “It just didn’t work at all,” said Greg, “because all of the anxiety of being in a mixed-orientation marriage was on me. Gina added:

In retrospect looking back over our whole don’t-ask-don’t-tell thing, I realize now there was a part of him that was hidden because it was a part of him struggling with the gay stuff…. I thought we had good communication, but now I realize what pieces of that are missing and what pieces of his heart I didn’t have, didn’t know about.
Isobel and Ian continue to have a similar pattern of not discussing Ian’s homosexuality. “I don’t ask a lot of questions,” said Isobel. Ian said he remains discrete about his homosexuality because, “I would not want to hurt her.” Isobel, however, said that a lack of open discussion leads to what she referred to elsewhere in the conversation as “trust issues.” She explained:

It’s not that I want to know all the details, but I’d rather he be open with me and, ‘I’m going to be with someone today or tonight,’ instead of lying about it or something like that. And there are times when, you know, he may not come out [and say] he is or isn’t, but I know eventually he will. Things like that eat at him until he’ll tell me. But the trust issue and the honesty issue is still kind of there sometimes.

Anna and Alan experienced a similar pattern of Alan keeping his sexual behavior private but Anna preferring to know. Alan explained that they needed time to transition from keeping his nonheterosexuality closeted to being more open. “We needed to reorganize and redefine how we related to each other.” Anna added:

And there were still times later on when I could tell someone had been here, and I said, ‘Why are you not sharing that with me at this point?’ And he guessed that it was such a habit of protecting himself from me. I mean, it wasn’t lying, it was protecting himself.

Three wives commented that a loss of trust resulting from a lack of honest communication presented a challenge. Caitlin’s trust in Chad was compromised when she learned that he had been keeping his viewing pornography a secret. She said:

One of the biggest challenges that I faced was feeling like I could trust him when, if he was looking at pornography behind my back, it was kind of the, ‘What else is he doing?’ And so the trust was a big struggle for me to rebuild in him for a while.
Lisa related that “the biggest problem that the women have is learning to trust their husband again.” She continued, “Some men come out before they’ve actually done anything, but the ones that have lied for years, they [the wives] don’t know when to trust them and when not to trust them, and that, that’s real tough.” Larry added, speaking from his own experience, “And the trust issue is sort of like the jealousy issue. It never really goes away…. The distrust crops back up every once in a while. All you can do is, you know, keep reassuring.”

In sum, about half of the participants reported that poor communication either was, or had been in the past, a challenge to the relationship. Some couples had difficulty talking openly about sexuality. A lack of open discussion further led to some of the women having difficulty trusting their husbands.

**Feeling Alone**

Seven of the couples expressed that feeling alone as a mixed-orientation couple presented a challenge. Diane, for example, said, “I haven’t felt like I’ve got somebody. I haven’t been talking to my friends either.” Martin said that before he and Millie found others online, “For the longest time we felt like we were the only ones in the world. We felt like we were unique.” Feeling alone was particularly concerning for Caitlin because, “We didn’t know what was available or if making the marriage work was even going to be possible.” Hank reported feeling isolated: “I know that there’s a lot of people who are in mixed-orientation marriages (laughs), but there aren’t a whole lot of examples that exist, so you kind of start feeling isolated after a while.” He wished there were more examples available: “It’s really helpful when you find something that you can model yourself after…. Profiles about marriages that work and others that maybe were made better by various different situations, that would be an awesome thing to know exists.” Similarly, Gina wanted to read other people’s stories: “We were looking for stories of people
who’ve made it work and we couldn’t find any…. You know, it’s like we were looking around for who else had made this work, and there was nobody.”

Mixed-orientation relationships may be monogamous, celibate, open on one end or both, or they may take some other form, and Gina expressed feeling discouraged not knowing of another couple in a monogamous mixed-orientation relationship. Referring to the people who post to the listserv, Gina said:

If there are couples in there who are not in open relationships, they do not contribute to the group, or they do not post…. The way they’re doing their relationship is not for me, and so it’s hard to really find something I want to emulate there…. I think we’re a little bit more okay with forging our own path now…. It doesn’t have to be that we have to find somebody who’s made it. But that helps, I mean, and that’s definitely what we were looking for.

Greg likewise expressed disappointment with being unable to locate other monogamous, mixed-orientation couples:

I would say loneliness is a major component of where we are, where we’ve been, and where we still are. Now we’ve found this kind of community that are mixed-orientation couples, which is really nice… to be in contact with people who have made their relationship work in some way. That said, …the thing that is like paramount in their ability to make it work is opening their relationship, and so that kind of makes me feel like we’re unicorns…. We’re kind of alone out here.

Frank recalled experiencing an opposing challenge—he and Frances were looking for other nonmonogamous couples when they decided to open their relationship, but the only other mixed-orientation couples they knew were monogamous:
During that whole period, during our monogamy period, we didn’t know personally any nonmonogamous couples. We had two or three couples in [town name] that we knew and met but they were monogamous. And then we met [couple’s names] sometime there during that period—they were monogamous. So we didn’t have any model. So it made it very difficult for us to come out to our friends when we became nonmonogamous because we were afraid that we’d wreck their world.

In addition to having models of other successful mixed-orientation relationships, several participants spoke about wanting friends in a similar relationship, or to be able to talk with their existing friends about their relationship. David reported feeling lonely, saying, “I wish that I had some other close friends, a couple friends that I could really be open about, because we just don’t have that.” Millie similarly recalled that before finding other couples online, “We did this for… years, just the two of us without really having a lot of other people to talk to that were in the same boat.” One of the obstacles with discussing their relationship with existing friends is people’s general unfamiliarity with mixed-orientation relationships. “Being in a mixed-orientation relationship,” said Caitlin, is something “that a lot of people haven’t really heard about before.” Brandon and Beth used a metaphor of a bomb to describe disclosing being gay and married. Brandon said, “It’s like you’re letting off a bomb every time you talk about it.” Beth continued:

I’d like to just casually mention it… and not have to have the point of the new subject [be] like, ‘Oh, by the way, he’s gay. Let’s move on with the conversation.’ You know, it’s kind of a bit hard. It’s like it’s this huge bomb, so it’s like, ‘Do I release the bomb now, or—Now’s not a good time to release the bomb, so let’s wait until later to release the bomb.’
Participants expressed a particular need for wives to find support. Ian said of Isobel:

> It’s really sad because it would be nice for her to be able to pick up the phone and talk to someone that understands exactly the situation she’s in, because… I can’t appreciate everything that she thinks and experiences and goes through.

Caitlin reported feeling alone before finding other wives to talk to:

> For the first, oh, six months or so after he told me, I felt very alone because… my friend would talk about problems in their marriage or just even life problems, and I felt very isolated in that I couldn’t share mine. And I didn’t have anyone to turn to if I needed answers. I didn’t know anyone else who dealt with this struggle from the wives’ point of view.

Locating other couples in mixed-orientation relationships is challenging for many of these couples because they are largely invisible. Frances said, “My theory is that there’s a lot of people out there doing this beautifully, and we don’t know who they are because they’re just doing it on their own.” Frank agreed, saying, “Yeah, I think that’s right. I think it’s a whole invisible population of MOMs who don’t connect with these networks or anything. They just do it.” Frances explained that the couples who have reached a state of equilibrium after disclosure or after opening the relationship are the hardest to find. She said, “The people who drop out of the [online] groups after a while drop out either because they’re splitting or because they’re content and things are working and they don’t need it anymore for themselves and so they quit.”

**Therapy**

Seven couples recalled experiences with therapy that were either not useful or damaging. Gina, who knew about Greg’s nonheterosexuality before getting married, said that their premarital counseling offered no guidelines specific to mixed-orientation relationships. “It was
just about how to fight about money, stuff like that. It had nothing to do with being in a mixed-orientation marriage.” Frances noted that the therapist she saw with Frank was likewise uninformed about mixed-orientation relationships. “She was totally useless to us. We educated her for three sessions and we never went back and she had nothing to offer, and we knew way more about it than she did.” She added that their therapist recommended that Frances read a book promoting married women to have extramarital affairs in order to revive their sex lives and to energize their marriages. Frances described her response:

I went into the therapist with Frank and said, ‘How dare you have me read this. I can’t believe you said this! I am not going to have an affair…. I don’t think I need to have an affair to have a healthy marriage….’ And it turns out that you don’t have to have an affair to have a healthy marriage, and you don’t have to have an affair to have a healthy MOM. And you can do it and be monogamous. And we proved to ourselves that we could.

Three couples reported seeing counselors whose recommendations conflicted with their religious perspectives. Hank, who scored himself 2 out of 5 on the religiosity scale, said of the therapist, “He had convinced us that… I should try doing the whole pray-the-gay-away bit. *That* didn’t work.” Conversely, Brandon, who is a devout member of the LDS church, said, “I went to a Mormon therapist… who tried to get me to have gay sex, and it just drove me nuts!” Eric and Eileen, also devout Latter-day Saints, said that when Eric came out, their counselor denied that homosexuality existed. “He told me,” said Eric, “that I needed to go back and work on my marriage. He was touted as the best to help people with homosexual problems in the area. And he just basically said, ‘God didn’t create people that way.’
Two participants discussed their therapists’ personal style as diminishing therapeutic effectiveness. Anna recalled that after Alan came out and she and Alan went to their sessions:

I was so upset, I couldn’t remember anything, so I’d try to write things down and she told me I couldn’t do that, so when I got in the car I’d write down what I could remember. Oh, man, that was really rough.

The following comment by Holly suggests that her counselor failed to establish a therapeutic relationship with her that was strong enough for the therapy to be helpful to her:

I really didn’t click with the guy I had been talking to. I mean, he’s a nice enough guy, but he was too—I can’t think of any other word but—nambsy-pambsy about things. ‘Well, what do you think you should do about that?’ type of thing, and never really was helping. And then when Hank and I both talked to him together, a lot of times he took my side in things, and then just made Hank feel bad, you know. So I stopped seeing him.

No couple reported seeing a therapist that had special skills in working with mixed-orientation couples, which reflects less on therapists’ training than it does the relative infrequency of couples presenting to therapy wanting to work on issues related to being in a mixed-orientation relationship. Couples reported that it is important that their therapist be supportive of their religious values and establish a strong therapeutic relationship with both partners equally.

Negativity from Family

Eight couples discussed negative and unsupportive behaviors from family members as presenting a challenge to their relationship commitment. Some participants reported not being able to interpret what family members’ reactions were like after disclosing the nonheterosexuality of the husband. For example, Gina said, “My dad’s just kind of a closed
book. I don’t know what’s going on in him.” Larry likewise said, “One son-in-law, I’m not sure exactly how he feels about it.” These comments suggest that when the topic of the husband’s sexuality is avoided, the message conveyed is that the topic is taboo. Frances shared how Frank’s sister was critical of their decision to disclose Frank’s homosexuality to his parents. “Frank’s sister told us that she thought we were selfish to tell the parents. She thought it was selfish to tell them for our own purposes because it doesn’t do them any good. It was just for us.” Frank added, “It was hurtful.” Frances further explained how Frank’s parents avoid making any comments whatsoever, even when they attempt to initiate acknowledgement of Frank’s nonheterosexuality:

Basically they had never brought it up in the next seven years and whenever we make any passing humor or passing political remarks or passing comments or passing inclusive statements, there’s never any nod, any laugh, any inclusiveness. I mean, they just would rather not hear it.

Although some family members were unsupportive through their silence, others were more overtly negative. Greg said, “All of our families are like really conservative Christian families, and so they’re sort of in a panic, I think, about it. Some more panicky than others…. I would say that all of my family’s had a negative reaction.” Greg offered an example of his father’s negativity about homosexuality:

My dad, growing up, the only mention of anything gay was constant derogatory statements about people who were gay. It was crystal clear that gay people are sinners going to hell and should be laughed at. Like it was a very, very negative view towards people who are gay…. And so my dad and I had—I would not say that we had any
conversation—maybe one conversation that was pretty good. But most of them have been really contentious, really intense, or a real sense of rejection on my side from him.

Gina related how her mother shared a newspaper article with her about some bullying that children endured because of a gay family member. Gina recalled understanding that the message her mother was communicating by sharing the article was, ‘‘Okay, Greg should change.’ Or, ‘Okay, surely Greg can just stop all this, because just look what will happen with your kids.’’

Brandon likewise reported his mother encouraging him to try to change his sexual orientation.

When I first came out to her [my mom], she wanted me to get a girl pregnant to prove that I was straight, like not even married, and that shocked me, because she’s like one of the most Molly-Mormon women I know, and then wanting her son to get some girl pregnant! But then when I actually started dating [Beth], then she’s like, ‘Well, I don’t know if that’s right either.’

Jim reported that his homosexuality has contributed to his estrangement from his siblings. He said:

[I'm] very liberal, and he [my brother] is very conservative. And I’m sure that my gayness or my being gay has caused a lot of his fear. We just have practically no relationship…. There’s a real negativity there with my brother and with my sister.

Some couples, therefore, report negativity from family regarding their mixed-orientation relationship. The negativity ranged from a lack of acknowledgement or discussion to more overtly critical statements about homosexuality. The words that participants used to characterize
these negative statements were hurtful, exclusionary, shocking, negative, derogatory, contentious, intense, and rejecting.

**Negativity from Peers**

Six couples reported experiencing negativity from peers regarding their mixed-orientation relationships. This negativity came from three main groups: existing friends, online support groups, and members of the gay community. Regarding negativity from existing friends, David expressed feeling distressed over the loss of a long-term friendship after he disclosed his nonheterosexuality:

> There have been a couple [people] that, it’s been a disaster. And there’s one recently that’s just killing me. I kind of opened up and I said, ‘My biggest fear is that you’re going to reject me,’ and that seems to be what’s happened…. And we’d been good friends for [many] years.

When it became known that Ken, who was openly gay, was planning to marry Kathy, colleagues and others in the community predicted the marriage would fail:

> All of them said, ‘This is never going to work.’ And I said, ‘Well, we’ll see.’ And after we got married, one of the women came up to me and said, ‘Do you sleep in the same bed?’ And I said, ‘Tacky, tacky, tacky!’

Ken added, “And all of those people who predicted doom and failure for us, every single one of them are divorced now. And here we are, you know, happily married.”

Frances and Frank described disclosing Frank’s homosexuality to six couples with whom they are friends, and the unsettled reaction of one of the men, who is a leader in his church. Frank said, “I think he was the most uncomfortable, just with the idea. So there was concern, but
also I think he was the least cool with, ‘Hey, one of my friends is gay.’ He took longer to settle into that.” Frances elaborated on the reaction of the church leader and his wife:

There was a lot of, ‘Oh, we’re praying for you, we’re praying for you, we’re so worried for you, we’re so worried for you.’ And, I really appreciated that concern but I also was frustrated by the attitude that that couple especially had of, that this was absolutely dire and this was an overwhelming challenge. All of the couples, including another [church leader] and her husband, responded well and were supportive to us in our marriage. Only one couple had the initial road bumps.

Millie noted that when she has disclosed that she is in a mixed-orientation relationship to friends, she has “had regrets later.” She explained:

What my experience has been is that there are assumptions that are made whenever I disclose about Martin. And some of those assumptions are, I mean they really hurt me because the last thing I ever want to do is to put Martin in a bad light, and it seems that a lot of times that’s where their head goes, that they see Martin as an awful person, that he’s cheating on me—when in fact that’s not the case because everything that he does, I know what he does.

Millie described disclosing Martin’s homosexuality to a group of colleagues. Later, she realized that many of them had made inaccurate assumptions out of insufficient understanding of mixed-orientation relationships:

I mean, they were so off base with their assumptions, and I do believe that a lot of that stems from the fact that they now have information that they clearly don’t have any
understanding of and can’t even begin to imagine how they would ever be able to do that, so how could anybody possibly be happy in that type of situation?

Gina similarly commented that few people are able to understand the nature of a mixed-orientation relationship or how it could possibly succeed:

I think it’s good to have people to talk with, although that’s kind of a double-edged sword because nobody really understands this, and it’s pretty easy to find friends who will tell you, ‘Hey, this won’t work. Give up. Get divorced.’

Six of the couples stated that some of the online groups for people in mixed-orientation relationships were not supportive of them continuing their relationship. Martin recalled when Millie looked for online support groups: “She started looking around, saw some groups, and they turned out to be not the most supportive. They were like fast track to divorce.” Lisa’s comment was similar: “I got online, and of course most of the articles and people were just very disparaging of mixed-orientation marriages and they had no opportunity for success.”

Several of the participants found one of the online groups to be particularly unsupportive of mixed-orientation relationships. Frank, for example, said that after disclosure, “We joined the [listserv], which is terrible—not at all supportive of marriages.” Gina described the group as “a lot of very, very hurt women, and angry and bitter, and they’re all getting divorced.” Anna found no use in engaging with angry wives, “because a lot of the women with the [name of online group] are angry and ugly, and anger only hurts the person who has it.” In addition to joining the listserv affiliated with the online group, Millie recalled attending one of their meetings:

The first group I joined… there wasn’t enough there for me because the sense that I got, and I actually went to a straight meeting down here, and my experience was that it was a
bunch of people who had been divorced from someone who had same-sex attraction, and they were all very angry, so they got together to talk about that. (Laughs). It wasn’t very helpful for me at all.

Gina and Greg named a different group that they found to be more supportive of couples wanting to stay together, but not particularly supportive for couples wishing to remain monogamous. Gina observed, “It seems like the group is kind of cynical, kind of condescending to people who haven’t opened their relationship yet, or they just assume it will happen.” Greg agreed, saying, “I do think there is a subtle condescension among the folks who have open marriages that they’ve become enlightened and are more fulfilled because they established an open relationship.”

Four participants talked about a lack of support from the gay community. As Larry put it, “Gays are as prejudiced about the whole situation as heterosexuals are and they can’t understand how I could be married and have a relationship with a gay man, too.” Martin noted that some members of the gay community make many of the same assumptions about his relationship with his wife as heterosexual people do. He said:

You have the people [in the gay community] who have their own prejudices and assumptions, that, ‘Oh, your wife must be really fat or ugly, or you’re gay but you can’t admit it.’ And it gets to the point that you just say there are prejudiced people on both the gay and straight side.

Hank related how two gay men were attempting to undermine his relationship with Holly when he attended a support group for the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender (GLBT) community:
I go to a GLBT support group thing once a week and I’ll say that there a couple of guys that are involved in that program that have shared the opinion that they think I would be happier if I were to express and live a gay lifestyle as opposed to the closeted life—as they put it—as a gay man in a gay relationship, and leave Holly, for two reasons: They think that I would be happier and they also think that she would be happier because she would then be able to find a relationship that was with a straight man and that would somehow be better for her.

To summarize, occasionally existing friends or associates turn out not to be supportive to mixed-orientation couples. Some online support groups designed for individuals in mixed-orientation relationships may really be designed only to support the straight partner in ending the relationship. Finally, individuals in the gay community may be just as unfamiliar and unsupportive of couples in mixed-orientation relationships as many heterosexuals.

**Maintaining a Secondary Relationship**

Five couples in sexually open marriages talked about challenges associated with maintaining a secondary relationship. “There are just obviously more issues when there’s another person involved,” said Lisa. Larry added, “Because that introduces a whole different element that’s not present with people with monogamy. So, yeah, you have to really be committed to wanting the marriage to continue.”

When Millie and Martin opened up their marriage, Millie felt anxious about Martin’s physical safety if she did not know where Martin was or when he was planning to come home. Having such information was important for her “so that I was calm about things as opposed to being the crazy—I don’t know—psycho-woman at home.”

Three wives expressed feeling jealousy over their husband’s secondary relationships. Although Eric is monogamous with Eileen, he had developed a close relationship with a young
man with whom he communicated regularly. Eileen recalls feeling “obsessed with him spending time” communicating with him, and she would “look at his texts and emails constantly and be obsessed about it.” When the young man invited Eric to attend a conference in another state, “that’s when I got angry and pushed away,” she said. “I just totally thought, ‘Oh, my gosh, he’s just going to go down there and spend time all alone. God knows what’s going to happen.’”

Janet handled Jim’s news that he was gay with little trouble. “My crisis didn’t come until we came home from seeing a friend of his and [he] said he’d fallen in love. And that was, that was the difficult part.” Eventually, she said, “this guy moved in with us, and that was tough.” She grew to like Jim’s partner, though, “so, I was real upset when he left (laughs).” Janet also had a secondary relationship, which also presented a challenge. She explained, “If I have sex with somebody more than twice, I fall in love with them, and that’s difficult.” She clarified, “Not that I want to leave the marriage and leave Jim and go with the other person. It’s difficult in that I’m in love with two men, because I still love Jim.”

Three participants discussed the nature of the secondary relationship being a concerning factor. Martin, for example, eventually ended a long-term relationship that he had with a man because “he was not out to his wife. And that was always going to be a point of contention.” He realized it was important for him to “find somebody that’s very much like you, who’s married, who wants to remain married, who’s really open to his wife, and that you can have a relationship, but the relationship that you have with your spouse is the primary one.”

Although Janet does not object to Jim having a secondary partner, she said, “I have problems with the older man-younger guy kind of gay relationship.” She recounted an experience that illustrated her concern:

The last time we had any issues was when he brought this dumb young boy home and was in some sort of casual relationship with him and I finally said, ‘You can do so much
better’ (laughs). And I said, ‘I’m not going to tell you want to do, but God, if you’re going to be in a relationship, choose somebody that’s worthy of you….’ I see it as, if you’re going to find a younger man, find somebody who’s employed and intelligent and educated.

Frances voiced a similar concern. Although Frank had only one long-term relationship that had recently ended, Frances wanted him to find another partner that was just as good. She said:

Having Frank not have a boyfriend has been really hard on him and it’s been hard on us. I mean, I really want him to have a new partner, a healthy one that’s not destructive of us but who’s just a healthy relationship in his life.

Frances additionally noted some practical concerns related to maintaining a secondary relationship, particularly around time and money. Frank’s long-distance relationship requires “time and money and planning.” She continued, “In addition to our regular family events, we also (laughs) have Frank’s work travel and his CLR travel…. so it can really cramp our family, our couple’s time.”

Finally, two couples expressed apprehension about the process of finding a partner. Frank, who was ready to begin another relationship, felt hesitant about searching for anyone online. He explained, “We’ve heard plenty of terrible stories about that from our friends.” Frances likewise said, “I’m nervous about him hunting.” Lisa was similarly concerned about Larry’s boyfriend search when his first relationship ended: “When that relationship broke up, I got real panicky because I knew he was putting himself out on a number of websites and that did concern me.” After seeing that he was honest in his postings, however, she felt some relief.
Maintaining a secondary relationship, therefore, presented several challenges to the couples. Wives felt a concern for their husbands’ safety and jealousy about their husbands’ relationships with men. Some participants expressed particular standards or criteria that they would like the secondary partner to meet, and others remarked that the process of searching for a good secondary partner can provoke anxiety.

In summary, participants’ comments about the challenges that they encountered centered primarily on ten main areas, which are narrow religious views including internalized homophobia, a poor sex life, the wives’ feelings of inadequacy and fear that their husbands will leave, continuing challenges with open communication, feeling alone, having negative experiences in therapy, experiencing negativity from family, negativity from peers, including online groups intended for individuals in mixed-orientation relationships as well as the gay community, and challenges maintaining the secondary relationship. Some implications related to these challenges will be addressed in the next chapter. However, I will first address the fifth theme that I identified related to commitment in mixed-orientation relationships, which concerns advice that the participants had for other couples in similar circumstances.

**Finding 5—Advice**

The fifth theme that I identified regarding commitment in mixed-orientation relationships was advice that the participants would give to other couples in a similar situation. The most frequently given advice was to be adaptable, to communicate, to take time, to talk to others, and to trust that a MOM can work.

**Be Adaptable**

Adaptability, as the couples discussed it, refers to the ability of individuals to make modifications or adjustments in response to new information or circumstances. Participants within eight couples emphasized the importance of partners being adaptable after one discloses a
nonheterosexual orientation. They also noted the importance of keeping the relationship status open for continual negotiation and not discounting the love that the partners shared.

Words that participants used to communicate adaptability included being adaptable, flexible, creative, and willing to grow. For example, Larry said, “Both parties have got to be flexible about where they’re going with it [the relationship].” Brandon came out to Beth before they got married, which they believe reduced the difficulty of adapting to his homosexuality later in the marriage. “The biggest… advice I usually give people,” said Brandon, “is to get all that stuff out of the way before you get married.” Beth added, “I really didn’t have to change anything because it wasn’t like we already had a relationship established, so that’s why it’s a lot easier at the beginning.” She continued, saying that adaptability is an asset to any relationship:

You have to be very flexible, and so the only way I see that working in a relationship is that both people are willing to be a little adaptable, to maybe try some things that they haven’t tried before…. If you are a person who is going to be completely inflexible, then (laughing) I don’t know, maybe it’s best not to be in any relationship at all because it’s just impossible.

Frances and Millie both discussed the need for couples to be flexible, particularly when attempting to open the relationship. Frances’s comment highlights the interconnection between adaptability and communication:

Consider creative options. Consider options outside the box that may work later even if they don’t work now. I mean, in our first two weeks, we considered all kinds of things, some of which we tried later and some of which we haven’t, but we considered them. We didn’t say, ‘It’s all or nothing. This is the only path.’
Similarly, Millie’s comment suggests that adaptability emerges from continual self-evaluation of what is and is not comfortable for both partners, and a willingness to make changes to try something that will work better:

We may say I’m okay with something and then once we try it or he tries it and finds out, ‘Oh, I guess I was wrong. I wasn’t so okay with it.’ And so you’ve got to go back to the drawing board and figure out what works, …and so that’s another piece of it, to really be able to be flexible and willing to work with each other.

Chad expressed the need for couples to be adaptable in terms of personal growth, and suggested that couples who successfully endure challenges to their relationship have the potential for greater intimacy and personal improvement:

[If] both of the members of that relationship are willing to work and grow and navigate, you know, it’s not easy and you have bumps and bruises as you’re growing, but if you’re both willing to make that growth process, it’s extremely rewarding. The greater the challenge, the more potential for bonding and growth.

Several participants advised that couples be willing to renegotiate the terms of their relationship as the individuals mature and the relationship develops. Diane, for example, noted, “You don’t know when you’re young and you’re just getting married…, you don’t have the same life experience you have as when you get through.” Frank likewise commented on the need, especially for young couples, to remain adaptable: “Nothing’s forever, so you can say you’re going to be monogamous, but if you’re thirty, don’t promise that for the next fifty years. Promise it for two years, or promise it until someone needs to discuss it again.” Frances emphasized the idea that one cannot know the future. She said: “Where you think you are forever may only be where you are now. That’s true about all of life, isn’t it? You can only
stand in the here and now. You can’t stand in the future.” Because the future is unknown, Martin recommended keeping relationship terms provisional, using the metaphor of a written but revisable document:

You’ve got to be honest and say, ‘Okay, this is what we’re going to agree to, but… the rules that you write and the agreements you make are done in pencil.’ Well, or at least done in Word Perfect that you can always change.

Alan similarly expressed that relationship agreements can and should be revised as the relationship matures:

Whatever promises or vows that you make at the beginning of the relationship, for goodness sakes, don’t carve them in granite. Be willing to keep them living issues and to revisit them, every day if necessary, to make sure you’re still in agreement with each other. And we hear so many straight spouses say, [whining tone] ‘But you promised!’

Well, sure, in the flush of new relationship euphoria, you’ll say and do a whole bunch of stuff, and you’ll probably embrace a whole bunch of stuff that’s conventional like other people have done and tweak it here and there to what you think is your own, but when you live together and your relationship emerges, things that maybe you’ve suppressed and denied a long time come to the surface. You just need that kind of flexibility and openness to work that into the weave of that document.

Regarding adaptability, participants further recommended not discounting the love that exists in the relationship, and understanding that the love is not lessened by the disclosure. Beth commented, “There probably is a lot of reason why they got in that relationship in the first place, and you can’t lose sight of that.” Jim similarly advised couples to remember the love they share:
You don’t just stop loving somebody because they have something in their life that’s not quite what you expected…. My advice to any couple that finds themselves in this situation, if you loved, keep loving, keep talking, keep working it out, and keep in mind that you had that love and keep that love alive.

Related to being adaptable, three couples advised avoiding the use of ultimatums. “You can’t just have ultimatums,” Larry said. “It doesn’t work.” Lisa explained how she learned through her involvement on a listserv for wives of gay men that ultimatums are a form of coercive control that discourages honest communication:

We have people who are in monogamous marriages and it seems to work fine for them and they have agreements, that if the husband should feel the need to seek out someone, that they will be honest and come forward and tell the person. And then, on the other hand, we have a lot of women who are in monogamous marriages because they have made the ultimatum that, ‘It’s my way or the highway.’ And that, those gentlemen are really caught between a rock and a hard place because they’re going to cheat again. You know. The honesty isn’t there. And they’re going to continue to lie.

Martin’s advice suggests that if a gay husband is given an ultimatum to remain monogamous, he might accept the ultimatum short term and discuss the possibility of renegotiating when the marital relationship has stabilized. He said:

I would say this especially to the guy, to the gay husband, that yeah, your first reaction is you’re going to say, like, ‘I’ll never do anything else again. I’ll never do anything, and this will never happen again.’ And yeah, everybody will say that, but you’ve got to be totally honest with yourself and say, ‘You know what, that’s what I’m saying now, but if anything ever changes, before I do something, we’re going to talk again.’ Because so
many times guys will say whatever they need to say for their marriage not to end up right there being divorced. But then they go through their life suppressing their feelings and just they’re, they’re miserable.

Thus, the most common advice participants offered was to be adaptable. Participants’ comments regarding adaptability reflected an awareness that relationships are not static, but are continually evolving, and that the ability to make adjustments to their thoughts or behaviors in response to changes within the relationship can enable the couple to maintain and deepen their relationship. A certain level of adaptability is necessary during the coming-out process, and adaptability is needed again for some couples who decide to open their relationship sexually. Further, frequent and honest communication between partners seems to be the primary way couples describe their process of being adaptable.

**Have Open Communication**

Eight couples advised that other couples who find themselves in a mixed-orientation relationship communicate frequently, openly, and honestly with each other. Several participants made comments advising a great quantity of communication and time spent talking, often indicated by the repetition of words. For example, Jim said “Talk, talk, talk. Work it out.” Caitlin similarly said, “Don’t give up and keep talking,” to which Chad added, “Exactly. Talk about it a lot.” Beth noted that communicating adequately about the nature of the mixed-orientation relationship may take much time: “It might mean that they need to spend hours and hours and hours and hours talking like we did.” Millie also advised spending considerable time talking, saying that she wished that she and Martin had made more time to talk earlier in their marriage:
Talk, talk, talk, talk, talk. If there’s anything that I wish that we had done more of, that would have been to have talked more in the beginning, because for a long period of time, I would say that it was a known thing—it was something that we talked about occasionally—but we did not talk about our feelings and what was important to us. And some of it may have been our age and our youth.

Some participants also noted the importance of communicating honestly, without taking offense and without inhibiting one’s communication out of fear of offending. For example, Diane related that “communication is a key. Being able to talk about things and being open about it and feeling comfortable.” Regarding not taking offense, Holly commented on the importance of “making sure that you talk a lot and explain your feelings and explain, not to get your feelings hurt.” She continued, “We’re really, really trying hard to make sure that we’re really honest about everything, whether you think it’s going to hurt somebody or embarrass you.” Isobel cautioned that allowing fear of hurting one’s partner to legitimize withholding one’s true feelings may subsequently result in hurting the partner more:

Communicate. Talk. Be honest. I think it’s important that each person knows the other’s real feelings and fears. And I used to try to keep a lot of that to myself. But it’s important he knows how I feel and that I do have fears and what they are. Don’t try to necessarily protect each other from that, because I think in the long run that will hurt more, you know, if you keep something back just because you think, ‘Oh, well, I’m going to hurt their feelings.’ But I think it will hurt longer later when it comes out.

Other participants expanded upon the importance of being honest. As Larry said, “I think it’s absolutely crucial to have complete and total honesty…. If you don’t have that, it ain’t gonna work, as far as I’m concerned.” Martin advised that after disclosure, “You have to decide
at that point that you are going to be totally honest from that point on, no matter what deviations may have occurred in the relationship before that, you’re going to be honest.” Larry’s comment clarified the value of honesty, particularly if there has been previously undisclosed extramarital sex: “I don’t think we could have gotten where we are without [honesty]. I mean, because… you’re dealing with feelings of betrayal, you’re dealing with mistrust, and you can’t build back the trust without the absolute, complete honesty.” Ken advised that while being honest, “You want to be as kind as you possibly can.”

The recommendation to have frequent and honest communication was nearly as common as the advice to be adaptable. Participants noted that taking offense or harboring hurt feelings can hinder the level of honesty that couples should strive to have. Further, participant comments from elsewhere in the conversations make it clear that a couple’s level of communication can improve after disclosure of the husband’s nonheterosexuality. For example, Gina and Greg have increased their communication after abandoning their don’t-ask-don’t-tell policy. Finally, maintaining a high level of communication may take more time out of the day than one may be accustomed to.

**Take Time**

Five couples advised that other mixed-orientation couples who wish to remain in committed relationships take their time after disclosure and not make any rash decisions. The length of time commonly recommended to abstain from making any life-changing decisions, such as separation, divorce, or opening the relationship, was one year. Both Frank and Lisa, who have been active on listservs, recommended waiting a year. Frank said:

This is very typical advice in every group, but don’t make any decisions fast, unless, you know, your marriage was crap anyway and this was the straw that broke the camel’s back. Don’t make any decisions fast. I mean, the normal advice is don’t do anything for
a year. And I think our experience—what we’ve seen for ourselves and in other people—bears that out.

Lisa’s advice paralleled that of Frank’s:

One of the things that we tell new members who are coming on to [the listserv] is we ask that a couple make no life-changing decisions for a year. And that may involve not opening the marriage, not divorcing, not doing anything. Just letting it lie, and to handle everything with baby steps, little steps at a time.

Like Lisa, Millie also used the metaphor of taking baby steps, saying, “My first response would be to breathe, you know, not make any decisions impulsively, to take time to figure out what is important to you, to take care of yourself, basically to take baby steps.” Frances used another metaphor of time as a friend:

Time is your friend if you’re willing to let it be your friend. You can stop and breathe and get your bearings together and go forward and collaborate. It can be really helpful. But people aren’t always willing to give themselves time and process and settle.

Greg explained that the advantage of taking one’s time is that it allows the intense emotions associated with coming out to subside. “The intensity that I felt at the beginning of this coming out process, one of the most helpful things that’s helped me to stay in our relationship is a belief that it will not stay this intense forever.” He continued, noting that the intensity of the emotions can cloud one’s decisions. “Wait, because you will understand yourself better and when you’re in a more healthy place emotionally, you might make totally different choices than you would at the beginning of your coming out process.” Janet’s advice was similar to Greg’s:
“Don’t do things hastily that you might regret…. There are things that you do that can’t be undone. And I’ve tried very hard not to do anything that couldn’t be undone in the long run.”

In short, participants advised that a couple new to the awareness of being in a mixed-orientation relationship not make any changes for a year, to proceed with “baby steps,” and to regard time as a friend.

Talk to Others

Five couples advised that it is helpful for mixed-orientation couples newly post-disclosure to find and talk with other mixed-orientation couples. Millie suggested joining support groups in which participants share the same goals. That is, if a mixed-orientation couple wants to remain together, they should find a group for other mixed-orientation couples who also want to stay together. Martin further recommended that couples attend gatherings with other mixed-orientation couples. “I really encourage people to go,” he said, “because once you go you can walk away with the realization that, ‘I’m not alone.’” Brandon observed that although talking with others was important for him, it was not valuable to Beth. “She doesn’t need the support. And I was almost wanting to force it on her at the beginning, like, ‘You need to talk to other women. You need to know what it’s like.’ And she’s like, ‘No I don’t.’” Beth explained:

I really didn’t want to get everybody else’s scary stories and bring those into my relationship and try to make it work, because… it becomes a lot harder for me to keep an open mind and listen to what Brandon’s needs are and what we can do together to actually make things work.

Although Beth was not interested in talking with others in mixed-orientation relationships, several of the couples recommended doing so, both online and in person, as a way
to realize that they are not alone, that there are others who have made their relationships work, and to think through issues with others who have been through similar experiences.

**Trust That a MOM Can Work**

Five participants advised that couples in mixed-orientation relationships be encouraged that, if both partners want to remain in their relationship, a mixed-orientation relationship can work. Several participants commented that it should be acceptable, and that it is sometimes desirable, for gay men to marry women. Chad offered encouragement, saying, “There is hope for it [a successful relationship] and it’s possible to make a relationship work. I know not everybody, not all relationships are going to work, but I know that it doesn’t have to be a deal breaker.” David shared that there is no need “to be afraid of marriage because you can work it out. As long as you love each other, you can work through virtually anything.” Diane, whose religion places a special emphasis on families, suggested that the experience of having a family can be worth knowingly entering into a mixed-orientation relationship if the couple decides they wish to pursue such a course together. She said:

> If someone wanted to get married and found the right person to do it with, you know, be in a family relationship and learning how to do that and having children, that’s priceless, and if you’re just giving it up because you think you might not be able to deal with it, I’d like to give the encouragement that yes, it can be done…. [The] whole experience of having a relationship and having children and understanding where you fit in society with that, you know, it’s worth doing. It’s worth having a partner, having a companion, and having that family relationship.

Two participants observed that partnering heterosexually is a viable option for individuals who might otherwise grow old alone. Jim said,
I often say to gay guys, half-heartedly joking, but sometimes seriously, you know, you need to find a woman that will be steady and faithful and have a relationship that will last the rest of your life. Because I think a lot of gay men fear being old and alone.

Ken was similarly supportive of intentionally formed, mixed-orientation relationships, encouraging older women who might want companionship not to rule out the possibility of partnering with a gay man:

I can’t help but believe that there are people out there—I’m thinking of some of my women friends—they’re older, they’re desperately lonely… they’re not interested in sex. But it never occurred to them that this type of relationship would be possible…. [Their] life would be so much happier. Look at us. It works. It can work.

In short, participants advised that others in mixed-orientation relationships should feel assured that mixed-orientation relationships can endure and thrive. The average length of time post-disclosure for participants in this study was 17.5 years, attesting to the potential viability of such relationships and giving credence to their encouragement.

**Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I have presented the five central findings that I identified in this study. The research questions and interview questions largely guided the organization of the findings. Data from couple and individual interviews revealed participants’ perceptions of the strengths and challenges of remaining in a committed, long-lasting, mixed-orientation relationship. As is common with qualitative research, I have included extensive samples of participants’ quotations to most accurately reflect the reality and understandings of the participants’ experiences.

The first finding of this study is that love was the primary motivation for the men, who predominantly self-identified as gay, and for the women, who identified as straight, to enter into
a committed relationship with each other. Participants described being a good match, or “clicking,” including experiencing physical and sexual attraction toward each other. An attractive personality was a strong draw for nearly all participants, as was sharing common interests.

The second finding was that the coming-out process was the most substantial challenge for many of the couples, and that their ability to endure and persist throughout the transition was in large part a credit to their commitment to each other and to the relationship. Most of the men discussed the development of a gay identity, and many revealed that they had once identified as bisexual as a transition to their gay identity. There were two main experiences that confirmed for the men their homosexual orientation: exposure to homosexual pornography and having sex with men. Most of the men reported a great deal of turmoil pre-disclosure, including suicidal ideation and a great sense of relief after coming out to be living authentically. Wives expressed a range of emotional reactions after their husbands came out, from acceptance and unconditional love to anxiety and fear of abandonment. Another finding, which has not been identified in earlier literature on mixed-orientation relationships, was that many of the wives could identify a moment in time that became a “turning point” or a “paradigm shift” when they more fully came to accept their partners’ nonheterosexuality. These turning points were interpreted by religious wives as divine communication, whereas they came as moments of penetrating insight to the less religious women.

The third finding was that there were numerous relationship strengths that participants identified and discussed as reasons for remaining committed to their partners. The primary strength that all couples mentioned was love. Comments regarding love centered both on love for one’s partner, as well as love for the relationship. Other strengths that partners identified included support from family, support from friends, communication with other mixed-orientation
couples online or at gatherings, and therapy. There were also several specific behaviors that
couples reported as serving to strengthen the relationships. These behaviors included
adaptability, overcoming codependence, maintaining open and honest communication, being
supportive of one another’s individuality and personal goals, having a good sex life, and
allowing one another space.

The fourth theme was that couples in mixed-orientation relationships encounter several
challenges. The most commonly mentioned difficulty that participants discussed was religiously
based intolerance of homosexuality, including being taught growing up that homosexuality was a
sin, participation in religiously based reparative therapy, religiously based rejection from family
members, and rejection from members of their faith community, prompting some participants to
switch churches. A majority of participants also brought up an unsatisfying sex life as a
challenge, which included some of the men feeling guilty that they could not satisfy their wives
sexually. An associated challenge was the wives’ feeling of inadequacy resulting from their
husbands’ sexual attractions being focused outside of the marital relationship. Seven of the
participants report either prior or continuing struggles with open communication. Another seven
participants, all of whom reported high religiosity, regarded homosexuality as a negative trait as
revealed by language that pathologized or deprecated homosexuality. Over half of the
participants related feeling alone and wishing to find models of other enduring, mixed-
orientation relationships. Many participants reported negative experiences with therapists and
unsupportive behavior or communication from family and peers, including other members of the
gay community. Finally, for couples in sexually open relationships, there are some challenges

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1 The word “deprecate” comes from the Latin *deprecatus*, meaning “to pray (something) away.” First appearing in
English in the 1620s, it meant “to pray against or for deliverance from” (www.etymonline.com). There is likely no
other word that more precisely characterizes some of the language with which the religious participants discussed
homosexuality.
associated with maintaining a secondary partner, including the wives feeling concerned for their husband’s physical safety, jealousy, the time and money necessary for a secondary relationship, and the logistics of finding a suitable partner.

The fifth theme concerns advice that participants would give to other couples after one of the partners comes out. The main pieces of advice were to be adaptable and to avoid ultimatums, to have open, honest communication, to take one’s time and not make any major life decisions for at least a year, to talk to others, and to trust that a MOM can work.

Themes identified by the secondary coder and feedback from participants during the member check corroborated the five main findings that I identified as well as the subthemes. In the next chapter, I will discuss the extent to which my findings correspond with the findings of previous research, and what insights can be garnered from these findings through the lens of social exchange theory.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore with a sample of 13 couples in long-lasting, mixed-orientation relationships what factors were conducive for them to remain in a committed relationship with each other and what challenges they experienced in being and staying in such relationships. A better understanding of commitment in mixed-orientation relationships can provide insight about how to encourage and support other individuals in such relationships to remain together if they choose to do so. It was also hoped that a better understanding of how couples remain committed in their relationships, particularly through a change of identity in one of the participants, would provide insight into how commitment manifests itself in particular behaviors that could be monitored or assessed by others, including others in mixed-orientation relationships, couples counselors and family therapists, family scholars, and family educators.

This research used qualitative data obtained through in-depth telephone and videoconferencing interviews with 13 couples, first together and then individually, from across the United States and by collecting supportive data by use of researcher journaling, memos, secondary coding, and participant member checks. All males were predominantly attracted to other men and married to straight women and had been out about their nonheterosexuality for three years or longer, with the average relationship length being 26 years and the average time since disclosure of the husband’s nonheterosexuality being 17.46 years. The data were coded, analyzed, and organized primarily by previous literature, which guided the research questions, which in turn guided the main interview questions, and are presented as the five main findings that were identified and reported in the previous chapter. The study was based on the following three research questions: (a) How do participants describe their reasons for entering into a
relationship with their partner? (b) How do participants describe the reasons they remain committed to their partner, including any benefits to maintaining their relationship? (c) How do participants describe the challenges, if any, to maintaining their relationships?

These three research questions guided data collection that resulted in five main themes. The first two themes, which were (a) reasons for entering the relationship and (b) coming out, help answer the first research question about the history of the couples’ relationships. The third theme, (c) factors that protect the relationship, relate to the second research question about reasons the couples remain together. The fourth theme, (d) challenges to the relationship, answers the third research question about challenges that mixed-orientation couples face. The fifth theme, (e) advice to other mixed-orientation couples, is related to the second research question about relationship strengths, but is offered separately since the participants’ comments, while rooted in experiences in their own relationships, are not necessarily about their own relationships, but rather are directed toward other mixed-orientation couples who may be looking for practical suggestions.

The typical long-lasting mixed-orientation couple as represented in this sample was Caucasian, highly educated, high-income, middle-aged, and with grown children. They entered the relationship presumably for many of the same reasons that heterosexual couples begin relationships, involving love and physical, social, and emotional attraction. The male, having suppressed his homosexual attractions for social and often religious reasons, eventually achieved a more fully developed gay identity, experienced emotional turmoil before coming out to his partner, and relief after coming out, while the female partner initially experienced fear of abandonment, but eventually came to accept her partner’s nonheterosexuality. Protective factors to their relationship involved mutual love for each other and for the relationship, support from family, friends, and other mixed-orientation couples, and supportive behaviors such as
adaptability and good communication. Challenges to the relationship were religiously based intolerance of homosexuality and internalized homophobia, a poor sex life, the female’s feelings of inadequacy, communication difficulties, feeling alone as a mixed-orientation couple, unhelpful therapy, negativity from family and peers, and the worry, jealousy, and logistics of maintaining a secondary relationship. The couples recommended that other mixed-orientation couples be adaptable, have open communication, take their time, talk to other mixed-orientation couples, and know that mixed-orientation relationships can work.

It is worth remembering Buxton’s (2001) estimate that five out of six mixed-orientation couples are no longer together three years post-disclosure, and that this is a highly select sample. Their high income affords them instrumental resources to accommodate secondary partners if they are nonmonogamous, to travel cross-country to gatherings with other mixed-orientation couples for valuable social support, and their high income makes alternative potential partners with lower incomes less attractive. Their high education affords them cognitive, social, and informational resources to navigate largely uncharted relationship territory, and the confidence to try relationship options that they may not have observed in other couples. They have innate psychological factors that perhaps incline them to be more adaptable than others, or less affected by social convention or feelings of jealousy. In other words, this sample’s experiences are not characteristic of mixed-orientation relationships generally, but are only a sample of long-lasting mixed-orientation couples. And yet from a family strengths perspective (DeFrain & Asay, 2007), there is value in studying these remarkable couples because understanding how they survive and often thrive, despite what most would consider insurmountable challenges, can be instructive for how other families can improve.

In this chapter, I analyze, interpret, and synthesize the findings. The chapter is organized into three main sections. First, I revisit the assumptions made in Chapter 1. Next, I revisit social
exchange theory. I then take a closer look at open communication, adaptability, and personal commitment, which seemed to be the predominant qualities that characterize the participants’ relationships. Finally, I present a model of relationship dynamics that capture these three characteristics. Throughout this analysis, I discuss connecting patterns within each characteristic and present additional themes and subthemes as they relate to these three characteristics. As a secondary level of analysis, throughout this chapter I compare and contrast my findings with issues raised by previous literature and I revisit the commitment models and social exchange theory referred to in Chapter 2 where appropriate.

In Chapter 4, I presented the themes and subthemes that I had constructed after coding and organizing data from the transcripts. The purpose was to convey a readable narrative that remained as free as possible of bias, which is consistent with the tradition of phenomenological research, which is to understand the phenomenon for what it is (Hycner, 1985). In this chapter, I provide what I hope are interpretive insights into these findings. Now that the findings have been laid out, we are in a position to proceed to a deeper level of analysis and to create meaning and provide insights into the findings (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). It is here, in Chapter 5, that I can replace my reporter’s hat for the hat of an informed and discerning interpreter of the data. Whereas the findings in Chapter 4 were partitioned and arranged to convey the main themes, this chapter presents a more holistic understanding of commitment in mixed-orientation relationships. Throughout the analysis, the elements that contributed to a synthesis were related understandings as expressed by the participants, expected as well as unanticipated connections, correspondence between my findings and those of previous literature, and the ways in which the data extend existing literature.

The discussion takes into consideration the existing research on individuals in mixed-orientation relationships, and some of the literature regarding social exchange theory and
commitment models. The findings of this research are intended to augment the understanding of mixed-orientation relationships generally and with specific focus on the protective factors and challenges to commitment in such relationships. I reexamine my initial assumptions identified in Chapter 1 and which were based on the existing literature, and I revisit social exchange theory in light of the findings. I then present the three characteristics of long-lasting, mixed-orientation relationships—communication, adaptability, and personal commitment—and I discuss the ways in which these three characteristics interact with one another. I conclude with a summary that incorporates the limitations of this study and I present ideas for further research.

**Revisiting Assumptions from Chapter 1**

It is enlightening to revisit the four assumptions underlying this study that were stated in chapter 1. These assumptions were formulated before carrying out the research and were based on my personal background and experiences as well as an understanding of the existing literature.

The first assumption was that younger couples were more likely to have discussed the male’s nonheterosexuality early in the relationship and possibly before marriage. This assumption held true according to the information the participants provided in their demographic questionnaires (Appendix K). Eight of the thirteen couples were “early disclosers,” having acknowledged the nonheterosexuality of the male within two years of beginning to live together, and three of the males (Ken, Brandon, and Greg) had disclosed their homosexual attractions to their wives before marriage. The remaining five males, the “late disclosers,” waited an average of over 20 years into their relationships before disclosing their homosexual attractions to their wives. The average age of the eight early-disclosing males was 27 at the time of disclosure, whereas the average age of the five late-disclosing males was 52. Although growing societal acceptance of nonheterosexuality (Saad, 2012) likely plays some role in younger males
disclosing earlier in the relationship, it is not the whole story, with other contributing factors including how well-established the male’s gay identity is before entering the relationship with the woman, other personality traits (e.g., introversion vs. extroversion, compliant vs. authentic), personal experiences (e.g., with pornography or sex with men), and a host of other personal and societal factors.

A second assumption that I held based on the literature was that open communication would be the most commonly mentioned protective factor that participants discussed. This assumption turned out to be the case, but this may be partially explained by the ubiquity of communication as part of the social scripting related to what is valued (or often lacking) in couple relationships. That is, couples did indeed discuss communication throughout the interviews—as reasons for marrying, in the coming out process, as a strength in the relationship, as a continuing challenge, and as advice—but a great deal of their other comments also directly related to the ability of couples to be adaptable to each other. That is, although participants more commonly directly spoke about communication, the entirety of their comments were infused with the idea of adaptability as playing a substantial role in their ability to stay together post-disclosure. As I discuss in the next section, communication is largely what facilitates adaptability, as other family scholars have already observed (Olson, Sprenkle, & Russell, 1979).

The third assumption was that the main challenges to mixed-orientation couples would be narrow religious and moral views about marriage and negativity from family and peers. The first challenge listed in this assumption turned out to be true—participants discussed religiously based intolerance of homosexuality more frequently than any other challenge, and internalized homophobia seemed to present a substantial cognitive and emotional burden on many of the couples, particularly the more religious ones. Negativity from family and peers, however, was
discussed less frequently than other challenges, including a poor sex life and the female partner’s feelings of inadequacy or fear of abandonment.

The fourth assumption that I made based on previous literature (Buxton, 2001) is that the majority of the men who volunteered to participate in the study would be bisexual rather than homosexual. This assumption was not validated. Although five of the male participants had at one point identified as bisexual as a transitional identity to their current gay identity, none of the husbands in this sample identified as bisexual. Further, their responses to the adapted Kinsey scale indicated that on average they rated their attractions as “predominantly homosexual, only incidentally heterosexual.” There are two possible reasons for this discrepancy. First, it is possible that previous literature used the label bisexual to account for gay men’s marital status (Matteson, 1985). Second, the recruitment methods for this study may have been ineffective somehow at recruiting bisexual married men, even though the recruitment message was sent through the Bisexual Married Men of America (BMMA) listserv. In any event, my advisors to this study determined that results of the research might be confounded if the sample included both men with a stable homosexual identity and men with a stable bisexual identity.

Which themes, then, came as a surprise? For one, my reading of the previous literature had not prepared me for the theme about gay identity development. For most of the male participants, coming out was clearly a lengthy, multi-stage process rather than one event. Second, I was unprepared for the women’s accounts of the moment they came to accept their husband’s homosexuality, particularly the notion of turning points or paradigm shifts that were sometimes experienced as religious. Much of the previous literature on mixed-orientation relationships largely ignores women, so it is not terribly surprising that these accounts have not been reported earlier. Third, many of the couples reported finding tremendous support from online and from gatherings with other mixed-orientation couples, which are largely coordinated
online. Given that many of the previous studies took place before the impact of the Internet reached critical mass, the role of communicating online with other couples is a contribution to the literature. In sum, some assumptions were confirmed, others lacked support, but other themes were entirely unanticipated.

**Social Exchange Theory**

In addition to revisiting my assumptions, I need to revisit the theoretical framework that guided this study—social exchange theory—in light of the findings. Social exchange theory (Thibaut and Kelley, 1959; Kelley & Thibaut, 1978) assumes that individuals wish to maximize their available rewards and minimize their costs. It also takes into account a comparison of available alternatives, which is largely based on previous experiences, and lost opportunities (Hamon, Ingoldsby, and Miller, 2009). As noted in Chapter 2, much of the previous literature on mixed-orientation relationships has focused on rewards and costs, including discussions concerning reasons for marriage, reasons for staying together, and challenges to the relationship. Using social exchange theory as the theoretical perspective for this study warranted following these conventions and to pose my research questions and the interview questions in a manner congruent with the theory. Thus, the results of this study should not be understood as empirical validation of social exchange theory, since the research design—with research questions and interview questions that asked what strengths and what challenges the participants experienced in their relationships—can justly be credited with predetermining the results. Nonetheless, the findings as presented in Chapter 4 can be regarded as supportive of social exchange theory, and I have reserved some of the participants’ comments that most directly speak to rewards and costs to present here, as they seemed best suited for an analysis of social exchange theory rather than a theme in itself.
Several of the participants’ comments supported a tenet of social exchange theory that one’s satisfaction is the product of the outcome minus the comparison level. For example, Gina, who knew about Greg’s nonheterosexuality while they were dating, talked about making the decision to marry Greg rather than teach abroad as she had been planning:

I remember deciding I wanted to, you know kind of the alternate plan was, ‘Okay, I’m going to leave the country and go [abroad].’ And when he started talking about marriage, I realized I would rather spend my life with him.

Five years before they began talking of marriage, Ken had come out to Kathy, whom Ken described as numinous, which he defined as “anything that is touched by what you might call the divine.” He discussed weighing the rewards of companionship with the cost of loneliness:

I thought to myself, here’s a numinous being, you know, who seems to be interested in the same things I’m interested in, and this feels good, and she is alone, I am alone, and we are both growing older. Now, I can do one of two things. I can either get old by myself, which is a horrible thought, or I can take, take my courage in hand and dive into the briar patch and see if I come out on the other side, you know, unscathed. And I did. I dived in. And I’m still here. And happy, very happy. You know? It’s worked out.

For Chad, who is LDS, one aspect of considering marriage as rewarding is that it is congruent with his religious values. The cost of marriage, he says, is that it has required him to change, which in itself is rewarding. He said:

I feel like there’s just a lot of benefits to being married, for me personally. Like, that matches into my value system better. It feels right on a deep level. The biggest cost that there is is that it’s required me to change, and to be willing to make some of those
changes in order to make it work. And I think making those changes is what makes it fulfilling, that level of commitment to go, ‘Hey, this is awesome. I’ve made this work. We made this work.’

Kathy commented that the cost of celibacy is a small price to pay for companionship:

Most people’s question would be, ‘Well, what about the sex thing?’ And here’s the way I feel…. It’s just a, you know, a tradeoff, but when you get old enough you realize that everything is a tradeoff. You know? There’s not perfection, and anybody that thinks there is, is [mistaken].

Greg said that reasons for staying with Gina include having an excellent relationship, stability, as well as stability for their kids, and he noted that the rewards and costs of ending the relationship are largely unknown:

There are costs with every decision, like if you get a divorce, yeah, there’s some benefits that, you know, Gina could marry someone who’s straight, maybe, and I’d probably get together with a guy. Like, there’s some benefits, right? The obvious benefits. But there’s a lot of unknowns and risks involved in those, right?... So while there are some benefits, like there’s a lot more knowns in our relationship and this one giant thing [my homosexuality] aside, I think our relationship is excellent and is extraordinarily good.

Thus, eight of the couples spoke directly of their considerations for entering into or staying in their mixed-orientation relationship, and they often used terminology common to social exchange theory. In fact, I found no comments indicating that any participant felt they had no choice in remaining with their partners. Participant comments lend support to social
exchange theory in that, in their estimation and taking into consideration the possible alternatives, the rewards of being in a mixed-orientation relationship outweigh the costs.

Chapter 4 presented two findings that reflect the rewards and costs proposed in social exchange theory, namely finding 3, “Strengths of the Relationship,” and finding 4, “Challenges to the Relationship,” but what is the balance of strengths and challenges as discussed by each couple? I performed a simple name count within my discussion of finding 3 to determine the frequency with which each name appeared with reference to strengths in the relationship, and I repeated the procedure for finding 4, about challenges to the relationship. The counts are presented in Table 4, and a graphical representation of these numbers is found in Appendix N. This is admittedly a coarse approach to understanding the relative proportion of strengths-focused comments to challenges-focused comments for a number of reasons. For one, the occurrence of a participant’s name does not reflect the length of the comment or the intensity of the sentiment being expressed. For another, participants talked to me about the strengths and challenges to being in a mixed-orientation relationship because I asked them to do so, then I selected only a fraction of the total comments that seemed illustrative of the themes and subthemes that I identified in the transcripts. Therefore, the numbers presented should by no means be understood to represent the actual proportion of relationship strengths and relationship challenges for these participants. For example, Anna’s name appears eight times in the “strengths” section and seven times in the “challenges” section, but this is not equivalent to the actual proportion of strengths and challenges that she experiences in her relationship to Alan.
Table 4

*Frequency of Name References in Strengths and Challenges Section by Individual Participant and by Couple.*

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<th>Challenges Participant</th>
<th>Strengths Couple</th>
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*Note:* These numbers represent the frequency with which participants’ names appear in Chapter 4 under the headings “Finding 3—Strengths of the Relationship” and “Finding 4—Challenges to the Relationship.” See Appendix M for a graphical representation of these numbers.
Despite the crudeness of the approach, the findings in Table 4 and in Appendix M can give us a rough sense of the participants’ relationship satisfaction. In fact, there appears to be some relationship between my initial evaluation of the couples’ relationship quality as being good (*), very good (**), or excellent (***), or excellent (****) in Appendix K and the proportion of name frequency related to strengths-focused and challenges-focused comments. I had ranked Diane and David, Holly and Hank, Isobel and Ian, and Janet and Jim as having a good (*) relationship, and Gina and Greg as having a very good (**) relationship, and their names indeed appeared more frequently in the “challenges” section of Chapter 4, whereas the names of those whom I considered to have an excellent (****) relationship appeared more frequently in the “strengths” section of Chapter 4. Caitlin & Chad was the one couple for whom this pattern did not hold—I had ranked them as having a very good (**) relationship, and yet their names appeared more frequently in the “strengths” section of Chapter 4.

Of further interest is the relationship between the frequency with which couples’ names appeared in the “strengths” section and the “challenges” section of Chapter 4 and the relationship type. Of the five couples whose names were more frequently found in the “challenges” section, two are reluctantly open (Diane and David, Isobel and Ian), one is reluctantly monogamous (Gina and Greg), one is monogamous (Holly and Hank) and one is open/celibate (Janet & Jim). None of these five couples were in open relationships, that is, in relationships that were simply open rather than reluctantly open. Two couples stand out for being mentioned far more frequently in the “strengths” section than in the “challenges” section—Caitlin and Chad, who are monogamous, and Kathy and Ken, who are celibate. Overall, what this simple name-frequency data suggest, and which seem to be true based on my experience interviewing the couples, is that couples who are not in agreement about their relationship type are more likely to have relationship challenges, whereas those who are in agreement and equally satisfied with the
arrangement, whether they are monogamous or not, are more likely to report strengths in their relationships.

**Three Essential Characteristics of Long-Lasting, Mixed-Orientation Relationships**

Based on a comprehensive analysis of the comments of this study’s participants, it seems that there are three essential characteristics of long-lasting, mixed-orientation relationships in which the nonheterosexuality of the male is acknowledged. These three characteristics are open communication, adaptability, and personal commitment. When personal commitment is high, communication is frequent and open, and partners are adaptable to changes both within and external to their relationship, then relationship quality is likely to be high and the couple is likely to stay together. Alternatively, if one, two, or all three of these characteristics are low, then the quality of the relationship is likely to be lower and the couple may be less likely to stay together.

If we had to rank these three relationship characteristics—open communication, adaptability, and personal commitment—by importance, how would they rank? Each is important, but open communication seems to facilitate adaptability and increase commitment, and is the characteristic that individuals seem to have the greatest awareness of, given their frequent mention of communication, and the greatest capacity to change. This is prescriptively important because it implies that a mixed-orientation couple need not give up if their relationship does not rank high in all three of these characteristics. Some of my participants spoke explicitly about increasing their communication as being important to their ability to make the adaptations necessary to stay together. The section on “turning points” in Chapter 4 further illustrates the moment that many of the women described when they realized that they could make their relationship work. These turning points almost always occurred through the process of communication with someone, sometimes with their husbands and sometimes with someone else.
or a higher power. Below, I discuss in greater detail open communication, adaptability, and personal commitment.

**Open Communication**

Consistent with previous research on mixed-orientation relationships (Buxton, 2001; Coleman, 1985), open communication seemed to be a vital characteristic of couples who stay together post-disclosure. All 13 couples in this study talked about the importance of communication. Some couples had open communication and were out about the nonheterosexuality of the man before getting married, whereas other couples enjoyed more open communication post-disclosure. Many participants expressed that coming out forced deeper and more frequent communication, as Larry’s comment illustrates: “We’re communicating. We’re talking. We didn’t do that before.”

Further, couples remarked that honesty was an indispensable quality of their communication. Honesty, particularly the nonheterosexual partner’s ability to be honest without condemnation from the straight partner, fosters a sense of safety to be, and acceptance for being, oneself. Anger and rejection, in contrast, encourage secrecy, which further results in a lack of trust. Couples commented that open communication is sometimes facilitated by the wives’ willingness to ask nonthreatening questions of their husbands. Straight wives, therefore, seem to play a key role in establishing how hospitable the climate for open and honest communication will be within the relationship. Husbands, meanwhile, have an added charge regularly to reassure their wives of their intent to remain within the relationship, whether or not the relationship is sexually open.

Participant comments indicated that frequent, open, and honest communication has far-reaching effects on many other aspects of the couples’ relationship. Couples credited open communication for their ability to enjoy a satisfying sex life, for example. Good communication
fostered a sense of intimacy, particularly for the wives, and was the means by which couples were able to understand one another’s needs and concerns, enabling them to respond and adjust to new developments both internal and external to the relationship.

Communicating with others, especially other mixed-orientation couples, proved valuable to many of the couples. Connecting with others online or in person let them know that they were not the only ones in a mixed-orientation relationship, and it provided a forum to think through newly encountered issues and concerns and to hear how others in similar circumstances dealt with them.

Finally, it is worth underscoring the finding that relationships without open and honest communication can develop this quality with time. Many of the couples in this sample did not enjoy the level of honesty and depth in their communication as they do now. Some couples reported specific strategies that they found helpful in improving their communication, such as reading books together, scheduling a time to talk each week, or enlisting the help of a counselor.

**Adaptability**

Adaptability, together with personal commitment and open communication, is the third prominent characteristic of the couples’ relationships as they described them in their interviews. Although they did not use the words adaptable, flexible, or derivations of these words more than a handful of times, the connotation of adaptability pervaded participant comments, particularly surrounding adjustment to the men’s developing gay identity. The notion of adaptability has received very little attention in previous research on mixed-orientation relationships, and it is here that I believe this study makes the most significant contribution. Clearly, adaptability is essential for couples if the husband comes out after the relationship is established, and again if the partners decide to open up the relationship sexually, but there are three main areas of adaptability that participants described that seem to be unique contributions of this research. The
first area of adaptability regards gay identity development and how the male adapts to his
developing gay identity. The second area of adaptability pertains to the finding that many of the
women in this study identified particular moments in time, which they called “turning points” or
“paradigm shifts,” when they came to accept the nonheterosexuality of their partners. Third,
participants described needing to adapt their religious views in order to remain committed in
their relationships. I discuss each of these three adaptations below.

Adaptability is intrinsic to the process of gay identity development—without adaptability, there is no development. Gay identity development has received little attention in the literature on mixed-orientation relationships. Matteson (1985) asked whether a homosexual man can establish his gay identity while being married to a woman, and found that husbands in mixed-orientation marriages in which their homosexuality was acknowledged could not only accept their homosexuality, but also affirm it. More recently, Swan and Benack (2012) write that mixed-orientation relationships are delegitimized both by heteronormative scripts of marriage and by scripts from the homosexual community of gay pride, leaving mixed-orientation couples to write their own relationship scripts largely on their own, which requires adaptability.

According to Troiden (1988), the four stages of gay identity development are (a) sensitization, (b) identity confusion, (c) identity assumption, and (d) commitment to a gay identity. These stages might be relevant only within a society that marginalizes homosexuals. Anecdotally, one gay man I know who grew up in a city where he felt safe and accepted once told me that he never had to come out because he was always simply himself. For those with a prolonged gay identity development process, however, the coming-out period is a time when great adaptability is needed, especially on the part of the straight spouse, as moral, relational, and practical issues are brought into question. Even if the husband’s nonheterosexuality is known early on, he may only be at an earlier stage of his gay identity development and the wife may
need to adapt as her husband moves through additional stages, as was the case for Eileen, Gina, Holly, and Millie. Often, the nonheterosexual spouse often goes for many years through the earlier stages of gay identity development before coming out, during which time he also needs to adapt, including adapting to his burgeoning understanding of his homosexuality while being married to a woman.

On a practical level, the process of the couples adapting to the husband’s developing gay identity occurs primarily through communication with one another. Perhaps in times of stability in the relationship, couples can get by with less frequent communication, but during times of transition, whether it is coming out or opening up the relationship, couples reported increasing the frequency of their communication together and they advised other mixed-orientation couples to do the same.

A second area of adaptability, and one that provides a novel contribution to the literature, is the finding that a majority of the wives reported a “turning point” when they came to accept their husband’s nonheterosexuality. These turning points were moments of profound insight when the women came to the realization that they could accept their husbands’ sexual orientation and continue in the relationship, and women recounted these moments in great detail. If the women were religious, these moments were interpreted as divine communication in the form of a vision, feeling, or thought. These moments were usually preceded by talking with others, especially others in mixed-orientation relationships. The implication for this finding is that female partners of nonheterosexual men who are still struggling to accept their partners’ nonheterosexuality or who are not sure whether such a relationship will work may come to such an acceptance through talking with others, including her partner.

The third area of adaptability contributing to the literature on mixed-orientation relationships is the need for couples to adapt their religious views. For example, Gina reported
changing her belief that God can speak to her only through scripture to believing that he can also speak to her through personal experiences. Greg changed his view of homosexuality from being a defect to being a gift, and Chad changed his view of homosexuality from being a failure to being a growth opportunity. Still other couples adapted by leaving their church, where homosexuality was disparaged, and finding an open and affirming congregation.

The connection between adaptability and religious views was made apparent by some of the religious men in this study. Religously based intolerance of homosexuality seemed to inhibit or retard their identity development as gay men because there is often more shame and anxiety associated with homosexuality when one is religious. For example, Eric talked about a book written by a former LDS prophet, “where he mentions that homosexuality was a sin. And so definitely I couldn’t be homosexual.” Eric’s comment seems to reveal that negative messages about homosexuality from his church’s leader ruled out for him at a young age the possibility that he could be gay. Another LDS participant, David, had trouble identifying his sexual orientation. Yarhouse (2001) has noted that religious nonheterosexual men often choose not to identify with their same-sex attraction and choose not to integrate their attractions into a gay identity. For many in the religious community, adapting the label of “gay” is not merely an acknowledgement of one’s primary sexual attractions, but is a declaration that one embraces “the gay lifestyle” that they perceive to be in conflict with their identity as a Christian (Dallas & Heche, 2010). The LDS church’s negative views on homosexuality (Phillips, 2009), for example, may help explain why David avoids identifying as gay, even though he indicated his sexual attractions on the Kinsey scale as a 5, “predominantly homosexual, only incidentally heterosexual.”
Commitment

The main commitment model used to understand relationship commitment in this study was Johnson’s (1999) three-part model of commitment as consisting of personal, moral, and structural commitment. Remember from Chapter 2 that someone might express personal commitment as, “I want to stay in this relationship.” Personal commitment, according to Johnson, has three components: attraction to one’s partner, attraction to the relationship, and conceiving the relationship as part of one’s identity. Someone might express moral commitment as “I should stay in this relationship.” Moral commitment also has three components: first, a feeling that one is morally obligated to stay in the relationship, second, a moral obligation to others who might be affected by the relationship, and third, an overall aversion to change. Someone expressing structural commitment might say, “I have no choice but to stay in the relationship.” Johnson identified four components of structural commitment. They are, first, a lack of viable alternatives; second, social pressure to remain together; third, the practical constraints of terminating the relationship, such as cost of a divorce or a need to find housing; and fourth, a sense that too much has already been invested in the relationship. Below, I consider to what extent the data in this study support Johnson’s three-part commitment model. Since evidence of personal commitment pervades Finding 3, “Strengths of the relationship,” I will avoid repeating participant comments here. I do, however, report participant comments related to moral and structural commitment in this section rather than in Chapter 4 because the infrequency of the comments did not warrant inclusion in the main findings, yet they are worth mentioning here with reference to Johnson’s model.

Personal Commitment

The vast majority of participant comments about how they were drawn together initially and what kept them together were about love. Finding 1, presented in Chapter 4, was about love
for one’s spouse as being the primary reason for marriage. Finding 3 presented love for one’s partner and love for the relationship as the primary strengths of the relationship. In fact, the word love appears in the transcripts 307 times, and although this includes phrases such as “I love my family” or “I love being a mom,” the word love most often referred to love for each other: “we love each other,” “a very strong love for my wife,” “I love Chad,” “he still loves me,” and so on. These references clearly fall under Johnson’s category of personal commitment, and predominantly related to the two subcategories of attraction to one’s partner and attraction to the relationship. Further, love—both loving and being loved—is a reward from the perspective of social exchange theory, and a motivating factor in staying together, or feeling personally committed to one’s partner or the relationship.

It is worth noting that the language of researchers and the language of participants do not always match, and sometimes some interpretation is required. Daly (2003) has commented that love serves as the foundation of family connection, and yet family theorists are reluctant to use the word love. What Johnson calls “attraction,” this study’s participants called “love.” This is not to say that “attraction” is the same as “love”—they are not—or that personal commitment is the same as love, but participants’ comments about love for their partners and their relationships could reasonably be understood as the motivating force behind their personal commitment. Johnson’s third component of personal commitment is conceiving of one’s relationship as part of one’s identity, but again, the participants did not speak using this kind of language.

Moral Commitment

The second main component of commitment in Johnson’s three-part model is moral commitment, which consists of three subcomponents: a feeling of moral obligation to stay in the relationship, a moral obligation to others who might be affected by the relationship, and an aversion to change. Comments exhibiting moral commitment were not frequent enough to
include in the results section, but I discuss the three subcomponents of moral commitment below with some illustrative examples by way of exploring the utility of Johnson’s model as applied to the data yielded in this research.

The first of Johnson’s three subcomponents of moral commitment is feeling a commitment to the relationship itself. Five participants mentioned feeling committed to the relationship, as differentiated from commitment to one’s partner. David, for example, said that despite continuing struggles, remaining committed is relatively easy because “the decision is already made.” Gina expressed a similar sentiment, saying, “I do have a commitment to this marriage. I may not feel it right now, but I didn’t get married based on what I’m going to feel and it’s not always going to feel good.” Jim said of his marriage that “the sum was worth more than the parts individually. And we have been committed from day one to our marriage.” Isobel expressed her opinion about marriage this way:

I took my marriage vows very seriously, and for better or for worse…. That’s one problem with marriages today. People get in it and it’s too easy to get out of. And when you make a commitment to somebody and you love them, then you stay together no matter what.

Eileen related a similar view of marriage, albeit more specifically rooted in her religion’s teachings:

It’s like this society is disposable. Everything you try, and then if [it] doesn’t work, you throw it away. For us, the marriage is eternal because you marry in the temple and, you know, temple marriage. The covenants you made is not just commitment for this life, so you work harder, and so hopefully the reward is much bigger.
As Eileen notes, marriage within the LDS faith is considered to be eternal rather than until death, and marriage and childrearing is regarded as part of God’s plan for his children to reach exaltation. It was primarily the religious couples that made reference to commitment to the marriage. This might be explained in part by the enshrinement of marriage, at least within Christianity.

The second of Johnson’s (1999) three subcomponents of moral commitment is feeling an obligation to children or partner. Two participants referred to caring for one’s children or partner as among the reasons for staying committed to the relationship. Regarding staying together, Gina said, “Sometimes it is about the kids,” and Eric recalled that early on his marriage, “it was my family that kept us together…. It was a strong love for my kids and my wife, and a strong love for God.” Part of Ian’s commitment to Isobel was a sense that leaving her alone would be unethical. He said, “The thought of going off and leaving her basically by herself, I just don’t think my conscience could take that.” Janet’s expression of commitment to Jim suggests a sense of reciprocal altruism, that she is willing to take care of Jim in his health struggles with the expectation that he would do the same for her. She said,

When you’re in a committed relationship, eventually that person is the one you come home to. And you, when there are problems, you’re there for them. And in our case, Jim has had a lot of health issues which has required a lot of my time and investment of energy, and that’s something that needs to be done. If I had a similar issue, I would expect him to be there for me also. I guess that means that given a choice, if the other person has a need that you can meet, then you meet that need as opposed to going off and doing something that might be more fun or more enjoyable or more rewarding. The real enjoyment comes from being there for the other person in your life.
These were the only comments participants made regarding feeling moral obligations to children or partner as factoring into their reasons for staying committed in the relationship.

Johnson writes that a third aspect of moral commitment is feeling obligated to continue the relationship out of a general valuing of consistency. When I asked Isobel what she thought the benefits were of being in a relationship with someone who is attracted to men, she said, “I guess I still have that stability. We’re still a family.” Elsewhere, she said, “We still had kids at home and I guess it was more important for me, and still is I guess a lot, just keeping the family intact.”

In summary, Johnson’s conceptualization of moral commitment includes commitment to the relationship, feeling a moral obligation to children and partner, and a general valuing of consistency. Participant comments that could be classified as exhibiting moral commitment were infrequent, indicating that personal commitment, which includes attraction to one’s partner and attraction to the relationship, far outweighed the participants’ reasoning for being commitment to their relationship.

**Structural Commitment**

Structural commitment, according to Johnson, includes four subcategories, including viable alternatives, social pressure to remain together, the practical constraints of terminating the relationship, and irretrievable investments, of which only social pressure and irretrievable investments were mentioned by participants. Social pressure refers to reactions that people anticipate from those in their network who may not approve of their ending the relationship. Only one participant talked about social pressure, and it was with reference to remaining closeted. Ian put it this way:

I have too many family, friends, coworkers, etcetera, who could never accept that [I’m gay], and I think Isobel does too…. It would be one thing for me to just come out and
declare it and be done with it. But when I think of all of the people that it will hurt, that it will disappoint, that I just can never… see me doing that just because of all the collateral damage that would occur.

Irretrievable investments is the second aspect of structural commitment mentioned by participants, and refers to a shared history together and a reluctance to “throw it all away.” Participants within seven of the couples referred to their shared history together, although only five discussed their shared history as a potential loss should they ever decide to separate. For example, Hank, who has been with Holly for 21 years, noted, “There’s a lot of history there, and so I think that’s really what, I’d say that’s the main thing that keeps us together.” Lisa was a bit more detailed about her shared history with Larry, saying, “We met as kids. We’ve grown up together…. We’ve buried parents together. You know, we just have too much history to let it go.”

In conclusion, even though Johnson (1999) distinguishes between personal, moral, and structural commitment, moral and structural commitment were practically irrelevant to most of the participants in this study. Even when I asked participants directly about external forces, such as the expectations of others, or about values—religious or otherwise—the notion of moral or structural factors contributing to their commitment seemed almost foreign to them. For example, when I had asked Beth and Brandon what social influences they thought kept them together, they seemed at a loss for words. Beth’s reply was:

I mean in terms of, just like the church as a whole, they definitely discourage divorce, and I’m sure that does play into it a little bit, but it surprised me how readily even, you know, how those types of influences fall apart…. In terms of immediate like social reasons to stay together, I don’t think we have a lot at the moment.
Similarly, when I asked Lisa and Larry about the values they hold that keep them committed to the relationship, Lisa responded, “Well, we’re not religious.” After clarifying that I was not necessarily looking for religious values, Larry said, “I mean, I don’t know, I’ve never thought of it in terms of values.” Thus, even though the focus in this section has been on the exceptions, the rule is that comments revealing personal commitment far outweighed the comments revealing moral or structural commitment. These findings should not be regarded as invalidation of Johnson’s (1999) conceptualization of moral and structural components to commitment because of this study’s highly select sample. Participants were a self-selected sample of the one-sixth of mixed-orientation marriages that remain intact for three years or longer post-disclosure. Further, Johnson similarly noted that in his earlier work with newlyweds, he was struck by their inability to articulate structural constraints, concluding that they may go largely unrecognized when personal and moral commitment is high. Buxton (2001) has previously speculated that mixed-orientation couples are likely to accentuate the positives of their relationships, which they may do not only when talking to researchers, but in how they think about their relationships in general.

**Interactions of Relationship Characteristics**

The three relationship characteristics of open communication, adaptability, and personal commitment could each be conceived of falling along a spectrum. A relationship characterized by communication that is infrequent, non-disclosing, and not particularly honest would fall at the “low” end of the spectrum, whereas communication that is frequent, disclosing, and honest would fall on the “high” end of the spectrum. Similarly, couples might be rated as high, low, or somewhere in between high and low with reference to adaptability and personal commitment. Precisely where along the spectrum from high to low one might fall can change over time—a couple can learn to be more adaptable over time—or from situation to situation—communication
might be generally restricted when job stress is high, for example, but more frequent at other times. Open communication, adaptability, and personal commitment should not be considered to be three entirely discrete and separate characteristics, but rather are often interrelated. Buxton (2001) found, for example, that couples cited communication as the means by which couples worked to redefine (connoting adaptability) their relationships. Further, high personal commitment may motivate couples to be more adaptive, and open and frequent communication facilitates both adaptability and may foster higher levels of personal commitment.

Let us remember that there are two people’s commitment levels, two people’s communication skills and patterns, and two people’s adaptability at play in these relationships. It is possible, for example, that a husband’s communication may leave much to be desired, having been stymied by his years in the closet or having experienced the anguish of upsetting his wife in the past, yet he may be highly adaptable and feel highly committed to his wife. The woman’s ability to openly communicate her feelings is high, she has great difficulty being adaptable, and commitment is high. Thus, the number of variables and their variability across time and situation make for incredibly complex relationship dynamics, which is good to remember as we consider how the participants fall along the spectrum of these relationship characteristics.

Eleven of the thirteen couples in this study could be currently ranked high in each of the three relationship characteristics. They have attained a high degree of honesty and open communication. They have shown themselves to be highly adaptable by being able to accommodate the nonheterosexuality of the male as a part of the relationship, ranging from simply acknowledging it to opening up the relationship sexually. Their comments also indicate that they are highly committed to their partners and to their relationships.

Two couples—Janet and Jim, and Diane and David—both exhibited communication that seemed not to be as open and honest as the communication of many of the other couples, yet
they were highly committed to each other and had needed to adapt to significant challenges in the course of their relationship. For example, as Jim speculated reasons for what he referred to as Janet’s apparent depression, he added, “But I don’t know. We’ve never talked about that. Not at length,” and when Janet discussed Jim’s earlier relationship with their houseguest, she commented that she assumed they had sex, but “We never talked about it.” Likewise, David stated that he and Diane had not talked about his homosexuality for a number of years, and Diane related that when David approached her about participating in this study, she agreed, but “Then he gave me the papers to fill out, and all of a sudden I thought, ‘Oh, you mean I have to deal with this again?’” Other couples, such as Lisa and Larry, Millie and Martin, or Anna and Alan, would have been characterized as having less open and less frequent communication in the past but have since improved their communication.

Gina and Greg exhibited poor communication and low adaptability, but strong personal commitment before Greg began more fully to embrace his homosexuality. They were highly committed to one another, but they maintained a don’t-ask-don’t-tell policy regarding Greg’s homosexual attractions, and their belief that homosexuality was wrong and something to be ignored demonstrated that they were not adapting to the reality of Greg’s homosexual attractions. Greg conveyed this lack of adaptability when telling about when he and Gina saw a counselor related to Greg viewing gay pornography. Looking back, Greg wished that the counselor had said, ‘Now what does this tell you about your sexual orientation?’” in order to prompt them to adapt, starting with acknowledging Greg’s homosexuality.

What does the distribution of couples in this sample along the spectrum of these three relationship characteristics reveal? First, it is noteworthy that all of the couples could be characterized as being highly personally committed to one another. Second, although personal commitment may be essential to staying together, couples need not have frequent and open
communication or be highly adaptable to remain together. Two couples showed evidence of two of the three relationship dynamics—personal commitment and adaptability—but were low on communication, and yet they have been able to remain together. Third, improvement is possible. Gina and Greg, who had been lower in their open communication and adaptability for most of their marriage, had recently abandoned their don’t-ask-don’t-tell policy, and through more frequent and open communication, they were able to make some adaptations in their thinking, especially regarding homosexuality, and shift to having more frequent and honest communication and greater adaptability.

The three essential characteristics of long-lasting, mixed-orientation couples that I have identified in analyzing the present research data—open communication, adaptability, and personal commitment—resembles and lends support to the Circumplex Model of Marital and Family Systems (Olson, Sprenkle, & Russell, 1979). I had become acquainted with the Circumplex Model during my graduate training, but I did not have the model in mind while analyzing the data from this study. It was only after identifying open communication, adaptability, and personal commitment as central concepts in the present research that I recalled the Circumplex Model. Reserving discussion of the model for here, as opposed to the theories section in Chapter 4, reflects the chronology of how the research unfolded and developed as it progressed. Further, referring to the Circumplex Model here will make more sense in light of the analysis presented earlier in this chapter. To be clear, my findings are rooted in the data obtained in this particular study. I discuss points of similarity and differences my findings and the Circumplex Model only by way of comparison. For example, what Olson and his colleagues refer to as “cohesion” may share some qualities with what I am calling “personal commitment,” but the concepts and terms that I have discussed above are grounded in my participants’ experiences and in my interpretation of the data as the researcher.
The Circumplex Model illustrates the relationship between four levels of cohesion (disengaged, connected, cohesive, or enmeshed) and four levels of flexibility (rigid, structured, flexible, or chaotic), resulting in 16 possible combinations. The three key relationship concepts according to the Circumplex Model are cohesion, flexibility, and communication, and although communication is acknowledged, it is not customarily shown in the model. Olson, Defrain, and Skogrand (2008) note:

There is considerable agreement among theorists who have studied couples and families that the dimensions of cohesion, flexibility, and communication are central to understanding relationship dynamics. Although the descriptive terms vary from theorist to theorist, the majority of concepts relate to the three dimensions of relationships. (p. 83)

Indeed, the characteristics that I have identified in the present research—open communication, adaptability, and personal commitment—do correspond with their concepts of communication, flexibility, and cohesion. Let us consider the similarities in order, beginning with communication.

The most significant point of departure between the long-established Circumplex Model and my findings lies, paradoxically, in the concept that shares the same label—communication. Although Olson, Defrain, and Skogrand (2008) discuss communication in their Circumplex Model, they do not provide a concise definition. Olson and his colleagues discuss communication in terms of listening and speaking skills, self-disclosure, clarity, staying on topic, and respect and regard. Participants in this study, in contrast, describe the essence of good communication simply as being frequent, open, and honest. Participants said nothing of listening skills, speaking skills, clarity, or staying on topic. Rather, self-disclosure and perhaps respect
were of most consequence to the participants. Further, although communication is acknowledged as facilitating movement between levels of cohesion and flexibility in the Circumplex Model, a three-dimensional model that fully integrates and displays communication as one of the three dimensions of the relationship would better capture the significant role of communication in relationships.

Next, Olson and colleagues define flexibility, what I am calling adaptability, as “the amount of change that occurs in leadership, role relationships, and flexibility rules” (p. 87). The authors define cohesion as “a feeling of emotional closeness with another person” (p. 83), while the evidence for personal commitment that I have found in this study I called “love of spouse” and “love of relationship” clearly overlaps with the definition of cohesion above.

Finally, the Circumplex Model’s representation of cohesive or enmeshed relationships overlaps with high personal commitment. Further, rigidity and structure in the Circumplex Model overlaps with low adaptability in my findings, while the concepts of flexibility and chaos overlap with the concept of high adaptability.

Having acknowledged the similarities between the Circumplex Model and my findings that are based on this research, and with the assurance that I stand in good company with other family scholars in having identified essentially the same three relationship characteristics deemed central to understanding relationship dynamics, we may now proceed to summarize the chapter, consider some limitations to the study and directions for future research, and conclude.

**Summary of Interpretation of Findings**

In this chapter, I have synthesized and interpreted the findings related to the experiences of a sample of long-lasting, mixed-orientation couples. The prior discussion illustrates the complex and multifaceted nature of commitment in mixed-orientation relationships. The discussion reveals three characteristics that these couples demonstrate as being essential to the
longevity of their relationships: open communication, adaptability, and personal commitment. I have offered an explanation as to how each of these three characteristics is either strengthened or diminished, and I have highlighted the unique contributions to the understanding of mixed-orientation relationships this research has made, particularly related to factors that influence adaptability, including gay identity development, the wives’ turning points, religion, and homophobia.

Undertaking the analysis of the findings was intended to produce a multilayered and nuanced, but integrated and holistic, synthesis. The challenge throughout the interlocking phases of data collection and analysis for this research was to distill the large quantities of information, to identify significant patterns, and to construct a structured approach to communicate the essence of what the data reveal in light of this study’s purpose.

Presenting an analysis of the findings of this study warrants a measure of caution for several reasons. First, the research sample was small, comprising only 13 self-selected couples with sufficient interest in communicating about their experiences in a mixed-orientation relationship to have learned about the research and to volunteer their participation. Other mixed-orientation couples were either unaware of or not interested in participating in the research and may very well have differing reasons for being committed to their partner or to their relationship. When considering the characteristics of long-lasting, mixed-orientation relationships, we gain additional insight by considering the demographics of this sample. It could be asserted that being together a long time (average length of relationship was 26 years), being White, being highly educated, being legally married, and being financially secure likely serve as additional protective factors that contribute to a couple’s ability to weather the sometimes tumultuous event of coming out. Participants whose partners possess many of these socially privileged characteristics may find that, in terms of social exchange theory, attractive alternatives are
scarce. Previous studies of long-lasting, mixed-orientation relationships (Coleman, 1985; Matteson, 1985; Wolf, 1985) had participants with similar demographic characteristics.

A second caution in interpreting this study is that the focus of this study was on couples who met the qualifications of participation, including being at least three or more years post-disclosure and the female partner identifying as straight or heterosexual. Thus, the perceptions of those couples who did not meet these selection requirements are not represented. For these reasons, although it is hoped that these findings can shed light on other couples, even heterosexual couples, it must be emphasized that the implications that can be drawn are specific only to the experiences of the participants included in this study.

Acknowledging that the human factor is both the greatest strength and the principle limitation of qualitative inquiry and analysis, I recognize that the claims I make about the meaning of the data are subjective. Potential biases exist in all qualitative research (and I would say all research), but possible additional biases in analyzing the findings exist given my own experiences. For one, I am in a mixed-orientation marriage and I have insights that I have personally gained in such a relationship, particularly about the socially constructed nature of relationship scripts and gender roles. For another, I have been religious and my experiences with religion were largely positive, although I am not currently religious, and I am not hostile toward religion. I have a largely libertarian view of sexuality, and my graduate training in a couple and family therapy program helped me to value diversity and the uniqueness of people’s individual experiences. To help minimize potential biases, I have involved a second coder during analysis, and comparison examples were referred to in Appendix I, and I have engaged in ongoing critical reflection through journaling during the process of data collection and analysis, and I referred to Appendix J as an example of such reflection. While remembering that others may have told a
different story, this chapter, therefore, is ultimately a presentation of how I understand and make meaning of the material.

**Directions for Future Research**

How do couples remain intact when one partner undergoes a dramatic change of identity after the establishment of the relationship? Such couples include heterosexually married men who achieve a gay identity, as many of the men in this study did, but they also include women who achieve a lesbian identity while married to men. Thinking more broadly, it is worth investigating couples who remain together through other identity changes—how do couples remain together when one of the partners transitions to the other sex, as has been reported in the popular media (Abraham, 2012; Boyd, 2007)? What about religious couples in which one partner becomes atheist (Gowan, 2013), or nonreligious couples in which one partner becomes a devout believer? And how does a change in one identity influence other aspects of the individual or couple identity? The intersection of sexual identity and religious identity is of particular interest since sexual orientation and attitudes are inexorably connected with religious views (Worthington, 2004). Gina, for example, reported that her conception of God was changing from being punishing to being accepting as a result of her husband’s coming out. At the heart of these questions is the nature of commitment and how couples endure when an identity change seems to stack the odds against them. There is much that more typical couples can learn from family strengths research (DeFrain & Asay, 2007) and what it may uncover about commitment and relationship quality from these extraordinary couples.

Future research might more thoroughly investigate power within these relationships. For example, my demographic questionnaire asked only about household income, and although each of the partners reported working, it was unclear how financially dependent one partner might have been on the other. There may be other structural constraints, such as the availability of
alternatives, social pressure, termination procedures, and irretrievable investments (Johnson, 1999) that could be more directly assessed. Further, participants in this study said remarkably little about their children or, for sexually open couples, the secondary partners, both of whom would presumably have a sizable influence on their relationships. Research that includes the children or the secondary partners, or both, would be a step towards a more systems-based approach to investigating mixed-orientation relationships. Regardless of the specific research question—whether about sexual orientation, sexual identity, religion, or power—if relationship quality or commitment is the focus, I feel strongly about the value of including both partners in the research.

**Conclusion**

Prior to the 1960s, homosexuality was taboo and heterosexual marriage was the unquestioned norm for young adults. This resulted in many gay men marrying women and lesbians marrying men. These mixed-orientation marriages, many of which ended and continue to end, were often the unfortunate product of societal heteronormative pressures. It is likely that fewer mixed-orientation relationships would form in a society in which nonheterosexuality was accepted or as inconsequential as being left-handed, and in which nonheterosexuals felt physically and psychologically safe to present their sexual orientation to others as freely and as authentically as heterosexuals do. In such an environment, nonheterosexuals would probably achieve their sexual identities earlier, before marital age, because there would be no reason to suppress their attractions and there would be more exposure to nonheterosexual partnerships in their everyday experience. The Internet is in large measure providing such an “environment,” where anonymity, or at least some remove from the immediacy of face-to-face contact and its accompanying social threats and demands, has provided many nonheterosexuals to be more authentic (Hillier & Harrison, 2007). Some people would still enter into mixed-orientation
relationships, perhaps less because of societal pressures and more because of personal choice. Greg and Ken, for example, already had fully developed gay identities, and their partners, Gina and Kathy, knew about their homosexuality before marriage. Homosexually attracted but heterosexually partnered men challenge expectations of what it means to be gay and what it means to be married. Although many gay men may find it unfathomable for them to accommodate being heterosexually partnered into their gay identity, some men do make this accommodation.

Mixed orientation relationships are perceived by many to be incompatible, unworkable, or riddled with hypocrisy, fraud, and deceit, as the intersection of identifying both as a gay male and as a heterosexually partnered husband and father may seem irreconcilable. One of the valuable contributions of the LGBT movement in the United States is the way it challenges dualistic thinking regarding gender (male/female) and sexual orientation (gay/straight) to recognize the diversity of people’s sexualities. The graphic representation of such a spectrum of sexual identities, and standing in contrast to the dualism of male and female, black and white, is the rainbow flag. A gay rights activist I know once dismissed men in mixed-orientation relationships (well, me specifically) as being traitors to the cause of LGBT rights while selfishly reaping the social capital associated with being heterosexually partnered. The gay, married men in my sample, however, defy this accusation with their quiet declarations that they genuinely fell in love with their wives and find their marriages intrinsically satisfying despite their same-sex attractions. They model how one can live authentically and honestly as a homosexually attracted but heterosexually partnered man. Similarly, some of the wives report that other have assumed them to have low self-esteem or to be preventing themselves or their husbands from achieving their full potential, and yet they likewise affirm that they in fact love and want to stay with their husbands. It is hoped that this research contributes to the awareness that couples need not be
sexually matched to enjoy satisfying partnerships with each other and to promote acceptance that such relationships, while they have their challenges and will not appeal to many, can be a satisfying lifestyle for some.
### APPENDICES

#### Appendix A

Empirical Studies of Mixed-Orientation Relationships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Authors</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Publication</th>
<th>Qual.</th>
<th>Mixed</th>
<th>Quant.</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focus: Gay/bisexual men Couples</td>
<td>Buxton</td>
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<td><em>Bisexuality in the Lives of Men: Fact and fiction</em></td>
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<td></td>
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<td><em>Bisexuality in the United States: A social science reader</em></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Lee</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Malcolm</td>
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<td>Pearcy</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Heterosexual wives</td>
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<td>2004</td>
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<td>Women only</td>
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</table>
## Appendix B

### A Priori Codes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Rewards</strong></th>
<th><strong>Reasons for entering the relationship</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>ELIM</td>
<td>eliminate same-sex attraction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FAM</td>
<td>family pressure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KNOW</td>
<td>did not know sexual orientation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LOVE</td>
<td>love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REL</td>
<td>religion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOC</td>
<td>social conformity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| **Protective factors** |  |
|------------------------|  |
| ADAP                   | adaptability                          |
| COM                    | open communication                    |
| COUN                   | counseling/therapy                     |
| EMAT                   | emotional attachment                  |
| EXPEC                  | expectations                           |
| FRND                   | friendship                             |
| LOVE                   | love                                   |
| MORC                   | moral commitment                       |
| NETW                   | networks                               |
| PEER                   | peer support                           |
| PERC                   | personal commitment                    |
| SEX+                   | good sexual relationship               |
| STAT                   | status                                 |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Costs</strong></th>
<th><strong>Challenges to the relationship</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BETR</td>
<td>feeling betrayed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEC</td>
<td>deception</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIN</td>
<td>financial constraints</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HOMO</td>
<td>homophobia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEFP</td>
<td>negativity from peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEGE</td>
<td>negative emotions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEGF</td>
<td>negativity from family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEGL</td>
<td>negativity from LGBT community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRV</td>
<td>narrow religious views</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POWR</td>
<td>power issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEX-</td>
<td>sexual dissatisfaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STRC</td>
<td>structural commitment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRUS</td>
<td>lack of trust</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Although I remained open to the data and coded concepts that I identified through a close reading of the transcripts, I developed these codes *a priori* from my understanding of the literature.
Appendix C
Sample of the Recruitment Message

Hello [Name],

I am a doctoral student of Human Development and Family Studies at Iowa State University. I am doing my dissertation research on commitment in mixed-orientation relationships (nonheterosexual man partnered with a heterosexual woman). This study has been approved by the university’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the protection of human subjects. Please pass this along to anyone who may be interested.

Participants qualify IF:

• The male experiences same-sex attractions or behavior, regardless of self-identification.
• The female identifies as straight or heterosexual.
• The non-heterosexuality of the male has been acknowledged between the couple for at least three years.
• The couple is in a committed intimate relationship, legally recognized or not.
• Both partners are willing to be interviewed.

The couple need not be in a sexually monogamous relationship, but they should identify each other as their primary partner. Participants may come from any state within the United States.

Participants will be asked to sign an informed consent document and to complete a short demographic questionnaire. I plan to interview the couple together once and each partner individually once. Most interviews will be held by phone or Skype. If participants live within the state of Iowa, interviews may be held in person, if possible. Interviews will last approximately 60 minutes. After I have completed my interviews, participants will be invited to review a preliminary analysis of the results and to provide feedback if they wish.

Participant identity will be kept strictly confidential. Digital transcripts will be kept in password-protected computer files. Printed transcripts and completed demographic questionnaires will be kept in a locked file cabinet in my office until the end of the study. Audio recordings will be deleted after transcription. Pseudonyms will be assigned to participants on the transcripts.

Those interested in participating in the study can contact me by email at kevinz@iastate.edu or by phone at 515-441-9397. To ensure participant confidentiality, respondents should indicate how they wish to be contacted.

Thank you for your time!

Kevin Zimmerman
Doctoral Candidate
Department of Human Development & Family Studies
Iowa State University
Appendix D
Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Interview questions consist of three “grand tour” questions, which are numbered. The three sets of questions relate to my three research questions, respectively. The bulleted questions under the grand tour questions may be used as probes if the information is not forthcoming after posing the broader questions. Note: It is impossible to anticipate every possible question that I may need to ask during an interview, but these serve as the types of questions I will be asking. I will not ask questions related to sexual behavior, although there is a chance participants may bring up the topic themselves. During the second interview, I will ask any questions below that were not adequately addressed during the initial interview, as well as any follow-up questions that I identify while transcribing the first interview.

Tell me a little about yourself.
• (At some point, I will ask participants how they would describe their sexual orientation).

1. How did you and your partner get together?
• What were your reasons for pursuing a relationship with [name]?
• What were your reasons for getting married [if couple is married]/getting together?

2. What circumstances support your continuing the relationship?
• What do you think are the strengths of your relationship? [Personal commitment]
• What do you like about your relationship? [Personal commitment]
• What do you like about your partner? [Personal commitment]
• What values do you hold that keeps you committed to the relationship? [Moral commitment]
• What practical considerations do you think keep you together? [Structural commitment]
• What kinds of social influences keep you together? [Structural commitment]
• What else do you think keeps you together?

3. What challenges do you face in your relationship?
• What factors work against or interfere with staying together?
• What challenges, if any, have you experienced as a result of being in a mixed-orientation relationship?
• What negativity have you experienced, if any, from family, friends, or acquaintances?
• What other challenges, if any, do you have in your relationship?

What are your expectations for the future of your relationship?

What advice would you give another couple after one of the partners comes out?

What else would you like to share with me?
Appendix E
Demographic Questionnaire

ID#: ____________

This is a short questionnaire for you to complete and return with your signed informed consent document. Your participation is entirely voluntary and your completion of the questionnaire indicates that you agree to participate in this part of the study. Your responses will remain strictly confidential. Do not write your name on this questionnaire. If you are completing this questionnaire on the computer, click in the grey fields to type, and double-click on the boxes you which to check and select “checked” for an ‘X’ to appear in the box. Otherwise, you may write your responses by hand.

1. Gender (Check one.)
   □ male
   □ female
   □ intersex

2. Year of birth: _____ (e.g., 1971)

3. Which state do you live in? _____ (e.g., California)

4. Marital status (Check one.)
   □ married
   □ not married, living with partner

5 a. Are you Hispanic or Latino (Check one.)
   □ No
   □ Yes (If ‘Yes,’ check one below and skip 5 b.)
   □ Mexican, Mexican-American, Chicano
   □ Central American
   □ South American
   □ Hispanic Other

5 b. What is your race/ethnicity? (Check one or more.)
   □ Asian American
   □ Native American
   □ Caucasian
   □ Other
   □ African American

6. Household Income (Check one.)
   □ Less than $10,000
   □ $10,001 to $20,000
   □ $20,001 to $30,000
   □ $30,001 to $40,000
   □ $40,001 to $50,000
   □ $50,001 to $60,000
   □ $60,001 to $70,000
   □ $70,001 to $80,000
   □ $80,001 to $90,000
   □ $90,001 to $100,000
   □ Greater than $100,001

7. Please indicate your highest level of education: (Check one.)
   □ Some high school
   □ High school diploma
   □ Some college
   □ College diploma
   □ Advanced college degree
8. Please check the box next to the number that you think best represents your sexual attractions. (Check one.)

- 0- Exclusively heterosexual with no homosexual
- 1- Predominantly heterosexual, only incidentally homosexual
- 2- Predominantly heterosexual, but more than incidentally homosexual
- 3- Equally heterosexual and homosexual
- 4- Predominantly homosexual, but more than incidentally heterosexual
- 5- Predominantly homosexual, only incidentally heterosexual
- 6- Exclusively homosexual
- X- Asexual

9 a. How religious would you say you are? (Check one.)

- 0 Not at all
- 1 Moderately
- 2 Very much so

9 b. Please explain in your own words if you would like to expand your answer to #9 a.

10 a. How spiritual would you say you are? (Check one.)

- 0 Not at all
- 1 Moderately
- 2 Very much so

10 b. Please explain in your own words if you would like to expand your answer to #10 a.

11. When did you begin living with your spouse or partner?
   Month: _____ Year: _____ (e.g., June, 1998)

12. When did you come out to your partner/did your partner come out to you?
   Month: _____ Year: _____ (e.g., June, 1998)

When you have completed the questionnaire, please return with your signed informed consent document.

Thank you!
Appendix F
Example of Coding

Note: Numbers were added to the right-hand margin of this screenshot of NVivo to indicate how typical chunks of text were selected, highlighted, and dragged to the corresponding nodes to the left. These six excerpts were coded as follows: 1 = COMM; 2 = Love; 3 = GTHR; 4 = LOVE; 5 = SEX+; 6 = LOVE.
## Appendix G
### Coding Hierarchy

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<th>Themes</th>
<th>Sources</th>
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<td><strong>1-REAS FOR MARRIAGE</strong>: Reasons for getting married</td>
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<td>—</td>
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<tr>
<td>LOVE: Fell in love</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CLICKED: We just clicked / got along well</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PHYS ATTR: Physical attraction</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PERSONALITY: Enjoyed each other’s personality</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTERESTS: We had similar interests</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELIM: Hoped marriage would eliminate homosexual attractions</td>
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<tr>
<td>NEXT STEP: Getting married just seemed like the next logical step</td>
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<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>RELIG: Religious pressure</td>
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<tr>
<td>FAM: Family pressure</td>
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<tr>
<td>KNOW: Didn’t know sexual orientation</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>MUT FRIENDS: Mutual friends</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>2-COMING OUT</strong>: The coming out process</td>
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<tr>
<td>HIM: What was the experience like for him?</td>
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<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IDENT DEV: Gay identity development</td>
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<td>68</td>
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<tr>
<td>BI: Identifying as bisexual as a transition to gay</td>
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<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>PORN: Viewing gay porn helped to realize homosexual orientation</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEX W MEN: Having sex with men helped to realize homosexual orientation</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TURMOIL PRE-DIS: Negative emotions, fears, and concerns</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RELIEF: Feeling a sense of relief after coming out</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONFESSION: Confession of extramarital sex</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HONESTY: Felt a need to be honest</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HER: What was the experience like for her?</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EMOT: Emotional responses to learning of partner’s homosexuality</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FEAR: Fear of abandonment</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACCEP: Acceptance of partner’s homosexuality</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TURN PT: Turning points, paradigm shifts, defining moments when she came to accept partner’s homosexuality</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DENIAL: Denial of partner’s homosexuality</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNDERSTANDING LACK OF SEX: Learning of partner’s homosexuality helped to understand why they were not connecting sexually</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOT OUT: Reasons for NOT coming out to some people</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TO FAM: Considerations about the how and when of coming out to family members</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COMM: Communication immediately following disclosure</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
TO OTHERS: Considerations about the how and when of coming out to family members

CONSID DIVORCE: The couple discusses or considers divorce 6 8
SOC & POL: Social or political reasons for being out 4 10
SEX HONEYMOON: Increased sex, or sexual honeymoon, after coming out 1 4

3-STRENGTHS: Protective factors supporting staying together

PERS COM: Personal commitment

LOVE: Love for partner
   RELAT: Love for the relationship, stability 13 55
   LIFE: Love for one’s life or lifestyle 6 15
   CHLD: Love for children 5 7

PHYS ATT: Being physically attracted to partner 3 4

SUPPORT: Sources of support for the couple

FRND: Support from friends 11 27
FMLY: Support from family 10 37
ONLN: Support from online groups 6 12
   GTHR: Support from attending gatherings 7 32
   IN PERSON: Support from meeting others in MOMs in person, outside of planned gatherings 7 14

THER: Support from therapy or counseling 8 22
CHURCH: Support from church 6 12

BEHAV: Supportive behaviors

ADAP: Adaptability 12 71
   OVER COD: Overcoming codependence: The wife learning to become more independent or emotionally stronger 5 8

COMM: Open communication 13 65
INTERESTS: Common interests 11 28
MUTUAL SUP: Spouse as an advocate 9 30
SEX+: Good sexual relationship 8 15
SPACE: Giving each other space, not prying 6 22
REL BEL: Support from one’s religious beliefs 4 8
WORK: Supportive work environment 2 3

MOR COM: Moral commitment 5 10
RELG: Religious covenants 5 15
GOLD: Golden rule: Don’t hurt others 4 7
IDENT: Couplehood as a part of identity, can’t imagine oneself without current partner 3 5
   HIST: Shared history together 7 17
MODELS: Parents who were good role models of couple relationships 3 5
   SHOW OTHERS: Staying together to prove to others that they can make it work 3 3

4-CHALLENGES: Challenges related to being in a MOM

NEG REL: Negative or narrow religious views about homosexuality 11 51
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTR HOMO: Internalized homophobia</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEX: Poor marital sexual relationship</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HER ADEQ: Challenges related to the woman’s sense of adequacy as a woman or wife</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FEAR: Fear he will leave</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COMM: Challenges in partner communication</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRUST: Lack of trust for partner</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSA: Regarding same-sex attraction as a challenge in itself</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STRUC COM: External reasons for keeping the couple together, e.g., “for the kids,” or economic reasons</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALONE: Feeling alone in the MOM experience, lack of models</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THER: Negative experiences in therapy or counseling</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEG FAM: Negativity from family</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ORD CHAL: Ordinary challenges, e.g., children, finances, job stress</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEG PEERS: Negativity from peers or friends</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ONLN: Negativity from online</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEG GAY: Negativity from the gay community</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PORN: Challenges in the relationship associated with pornography</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd REL: Challenges associated with finding or maintaining a relationship with a secondary partner</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DADT: Having a don’t-ask-don’t-tell policy about his homosexuality</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEG SOC: Negative view of homosexuality from society generally</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADAP: Challenges adapting</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GATH: Challenges that can arise for couples who attend the gatherings</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SECRET: Discomfort with the need to keep secrets</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OVER SENS: The male is overly sensitive</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EXPECTATIONS: Expectations for the future of the relationship</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BE TOG: Expect to be together</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OPEN MAR: Expecting to transition from monogamy to an open relationship</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNKN: Unknown. Can’t predict. Take it one day at a time.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-ADVICE: Advice to others in a mixed-orientation relationship</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BE ADAPT: Be adaptable</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NO ULTIM: Couples should avoid giving ultimatums</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COMM: Have frequent and honest communication</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BE HONEST: Advice to be honest</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TIME: Take your time. Don’t make any rash decisions</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEV GAY ID: Take time to develop your gay identity</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TALK TO OTH: Talk to others, especially others in MOMs</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRUST MOM: Trust that a MOM can work</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IT TAKES 2: Both partners need to be committed to the relationship</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BE KIND: When disclosing nonheterosexual orientation to partner, be kind</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRUST: You have to trust one another</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ANTI-DEP: Get on anti-depressants  
CPL DECIDES: Decide what is best for you as a couple, disregard others’ advice if it doesn’t fit  
LABL UNIMP: Labels are unimportant. Don’t worry about “bi” vs. “gay.”  
REL FAITH: Have faith and God will help  
SPACE: Give each other space

Note: Bolded words indicate node labels that I created in NVivo. Words not bolded are the descriptions. Underlined labels (N = 56) indicate the concepts discussed by most couples and were therefore included in the results in Chapter 4. Sources refers to the number of transcripts out of the 13 that contributed to the theme. Ref. refers to total number of references, or excerpts, within each theme. There are 115 total nodes, 9 of which served only as labels, leaving 106 nodes with content.
Appendix H
Instructions for Member Check and Feedback Form

Commitment in Mixed-Orientation Relationships
Kevin Zimmerman

Instructions for Reviewer
Thank you for your willingness to review the preliminary results of this study and to offer your feedback. Your feedback is very important to me and it will help me as I continue to refine and finalize my conclusions regarding commitment in mixed-orientation relationships. Your participation is entirely voluntary and your completion of the feedback form indicates that you agree to provide your feedback. Your responses will remain strictly confidential. Below are a few ideas that may be helpful as you read the results document.

Diversity of Participants
The results that you will be reading come from data provided by [N] couples. Because each relationship is unique, some of what you read may or may not resonate with you. However, I have attempted to represent your collective experiences as accurately as possible.

Writing Style
This document is a draft and not yet a final product. You may find typos or ideas that may not be clear—feel free to point them out to me. However, I am more interested in your general thoughts and reactions to the content rather than your editing. The writing style is academic, but hopefully it is clear. You will find both direct quotes from interviews as well as my statements summarizing the main ideas that I have identified.

Feedback
The purpose of conducting this review with you is to obtain further input and reflection on my analysis and conclusions. You may offer as much or as little feedback as you like, and I will use it as I re-evaluate and refine my synthesis and conclusions. For this research to be trustworthy, the results that I report should be representative of the participants’ experiences. I am not seeking agreement from each participant, since you each have very different experiences. Rather, I hope to know whether the categories that I have identified make sense—do they seem accurate to you?; am I on the right track? If you think I am not understanding something correctly, I want to know about this.

Following your review of my preliminary results, please complete the feedback form on the next page and return it to me by email, mail, or fax.

Email: kevinz@iastate.edu
Mail: Kevin Zimmerman (You may call or email me to
Iowa State University request a self-addressed,
84 LeBaron stamped envelope.)
Ames, IA 50011
Fax: 515-294-3177 (Please call me at 515-441-9397 or email me so that
I can turn on the fax machine.)
Appendix H, Continued

Feedback Form

Instructions: Please consider and respond to the following questions regarding the document you read. If you are completing this feedback form on the computer, click in the boxes to enter a checkmark or to type. Otherwise, you may write your responses by hand or on a separate piece of paper.

Please indicate your gender. (Check one.)

☐ Female   ☐ Male

1. **What did I miss?**
   *What do you think I may have left out or not emphasized enough?*

2. **What did I get wrong?**
   *What pieces in the document do you disagree with, feel I over/understated, or would have said differently?*

3. **What did you connect with?**
   *Did any section resonate with you? Please elaborate.*

4. **What do you feel you could not relate to?**
   *Did any section not fit with your own understanding about commitment in mixed-orientation relationships? Please elaborate.*

5. **Please share anything else with me regarding the document you reviewed.**

Thank you!
Appendix I
Comparison of Coding by Primary and Secondary Coder

Primary coder

Note: Selections were coded as follows: 1 = RELIEF, 2 = ADAP, 3 = COMM

Secondary coder

Frank: But, but I did feel freer with my body, for example, how to use my hands. You know, I [work responsibilities] in front of [many] people often. And I felt freer, I felt like I could use my hands in the way that felt natural to me instead of being, instead of tying myself down, basically. Stuff like that.

Frances: And I started putting all this stuff in my [work responsibilities]. And so I started [talking] about mixed-orientation marriages and, you know, just weaving all this stuff into my [work]. I mean, we really tried to weave it into our lives. I was so committed that we were not going to be a couple who had the elephant go into the living room and hide under the rug. You know. Maybe I could be burned once, but this was not going to happen twice. And, poor Frank, if he had wanted to go back into the closet, he wouldn’t have had a chance because if this is reality and this is our lives, we’re going to just live it.

Frank: Frances has done a great job all along, all of these nine years, making sure that the issues were always surfaced, I guess you’d say. Or, you know, if anything needed to be said, there was an opportunity to say it, that things would not slide back into the closet.
Appendix I, Continued
Comparison of Coding by Primary and Secondary Coder

Primary coder

Note: Highlighted selection coded as BE KIND

Secondary coder

BRANDON: And also from the person with SSA, I think we need to realize, like, when I was having problems with pornography during our marriage, I was having a hard time especially when I lost my job, you know, I felt like my whole world was caving in on me. But I also had to realize that my wife was having a hard time. And I think that, that’s one of my difficulties, especially, so when you’re going through a hard emotional time, and just coming out would be, you’re very vulnerable, you’re hurting, you’re looking for support. You’re looking for someone to be the strong one, but you’re spouse is going through the same thing. And so, trying to figure that out. I don’t know the answer (laughs), but to be aware that your wife does need that support. She does need that assurance. She does need someone to be strong for her as well.
Appendix J
Example Memos

Topic: Identity development

Coding the transcript of my conversation with Eileen and Eric, as well as the other transcripts, it is becoming evident that many of the men go through various stages of coming out. Eric first came out two weeks into his marriage, saying that he didn't think he could love Eileen as he loved his friend in the country where he served his mission. And he came out again a couple years ago telling her that he was never attracted to her.

Martin commented that he believed he was gay, but that after falling in love with Millie he thought he “really screwed up because I couldn’t even be gay right.” This stands in contrast to other men’s comments about their gay identity development. Other men assume they are straight and feel confounded by their same-sex attractions, whereas Martin believed he was gay and felt confused by his heterosexual attractions.

Martin said, “there were two people that, prior to that, I thought were attractive, but when I was over in the [war zone], I don’t think I had one thought about having sex with anybody. I was just trying to make sure that I was keeping my people safe, making sure that they were getting everything that they needed, and that we were doing our job, which was, we did the interrogation of [nationality] prisoners of war. So there was a lot for me to think about. Certainly, having sex with somebody in the middle of the [war zone] wasn’t one of them.” This statement illustrates that although Martin was aware of his attraction for men, it seems that it was not his most salient identity, at least while in the military. His identity was also heavily invested in being in the military.

Martin seems to be saying in the following statement that he needed to come out (and presumably for his wife to accept his homosexuality) in order for them to remain married. He said, “For our marriage to really be successful and survive had meant for me to be honest with myself and, I, I think I started to be honest with myself more and more… but really it took me another [several] years for me to be honest and say, ‘Yeah, well actually I, I’m gay.’”

Eric talked about a book which the prophet of the LDS church had written, “where he mentions that homosexuality was a sin. And so definitely I couldn’t be homosexual.” Eric’s comment seems to reveal that religion’s negative messages about homosexuality interfere with achieving a fully developed gay identity.

David, who is LDS, had trouble identifying his sexual orientation. He said, “over the last 25 years I thought, ‘Am I gay? Am I straight? Where am I? Where do I fit on this spectrum?’ And I’m still kind of trying to come to terms with that because I don’t think I really know yet where I am.” Religion seems to inhibit or retard identity development for gay individuals. There's more shame and anxiety associated with homosexuality when one is religious.
### Table of Couple Characteristics

| #  | Name       | Age | Ed | Sexual Attr. (0-6) | Relig. (0-5) | Spir. (0-5) | Years Living Togeth. | Years Post-Disclosure | Rel. Type     | Children at home | Household Income | Rel. Quality |
|----|------------|-----|----|-------------------|--------------|------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|---------------|-----------------|-----------------|--------------|-------------|
| 1  | Anna       | 68  | 3  | 1                 | 5            | 5          | 46                    | 16                    | Open          | 0               | 60-70K         | ***          |
|    | Alan       | 68  | 5  | 5                 | 3            | 3          |                       |                       |               |                 |                |             |
| 2  | Beth       | 31  | 5  | 0                 | 5            | 5          | 2                     | 3                     | Monogamous    | 0               | >100K          | ***          |
|    | Brandon    | 31  | 5  | 4                 | 5            | 5          |                       |                       |               |                 |                |             |
| 3  | Caitlin    | 26  | 4  | 4                 | 4            | 5          | 4                     | 4                     | Monogamous    | 1               | 30-40K         | **           |
|    | Chad       | 28  | 4  | 4                 | 4            | 5          |                       |                       |               |                 |                |             |
| 4  | Diane      | 49  | 4  | 0                 | 5            | 5          | 27                    | 25                    | Reluctantly open | 3               | 60-70K         | *            |
|    | David      | 54  | 5  | 5                 | 3            | 3          |                       |                       |               |                 |                |             |
| 5  | Eileen     | 55  | 3  | 0                 | 5            | 5          | 34                    | 34                    | Monogamous    | 0               | 90-100K        | ***          |
|    | Eric       | 56  | 5  | 5                 | 5            | 4          |                       |                       |               |                 |                |             |
| 6  | Frances    | 53  | 5  | 1                 | 1            | 1.5        | 32                    | 9                     | Open          | 0               | >100K          | ***          |
|    | Frank      | 54  | 5  | 5                 | 1            | 2          |                       |                       |               |                 |                |             |
| 7  | Gina       | 39  | 5  | 1                 | 4            | 5          | 14                    | 16                    | Reluctantly monogamous | 3               | >100K         | **           |
|    | Greg       | 37  | 5  | 5                 | 2            | 5          |                       |                       |               |                 |                |             |
| 8  | Holly      | 41  | 4  | 2                 | 3            | 3          | 17                    | 17                    | Monogamous    | 3               | 40-50K         | *            |
|    | Hank       | 44  | 5  | 4                 | 2            | 4          |                       |                       |               |                 |                |             |
| 9  | Isobel     | 51  | 4  | 0                 | 3            | 4          | 29                    | 16                    | Reluctantly open | 0               | >100K          | *            |
|    | Ian        | 51  | 3  | 5                 | 3            | 3          |                       |                       |               |                 |                |             |
| 10 | Janet      | 63  | 5  | 0                 | 2            | 2          | 28                    | 17                    | Open/celibate | 0               | 90-100K        | *            |
|    | Jim        | 70  | 5  | 5                 | 4            | 4          |                       |                       |               |                 |                |             |
| 11 | Kathy      | 70  | 5  | 0                 | 0            | 4          | 29                    | 34                    | Celibate      | 0               | 40-50K         | ***          |
|    | Ken        | 72  | 5  | 6                 | 0            | 4          |                       |                       |               |                 |                |             |
| 12 | Lisa       | 64  | 5  | 0                 | 2            | 2          | 43                    | 4                     | Open          | 0               | >100K          | ***          |
|    | Larry      | 64  | 5  | 5                 | 0            | 1          |                       |                       |               |                 |                |             |
| 13 | Millie     | 53  | 5  | 0                 | 3            | 5          | 33                    | 32                    | Open          | 0               | >100K          | ***          |
|    | Martin     | 56  | 5  | 5                 | 1            | 5          |                       |                       |               |                 |                |             |
|    | Average female |   |   | 51.20             | 4.40         | 0.38       | 3.23                  | 3.96                  | 26.00         | 17.46          |                |             |
|    | Average male |   |   | 52.50             | 4.50         | 4.85       | 2.54                  | 3.69                  |                |                |                |             |

**Note:** “Reluctantly open” indicates that the men have sex with men, but the men and their wives regret that they are not monogamous. “Reluctantly Monogamous” was the term suggested by the couple during the member check, indicating that he wished to open the relationship but she needed them to remain monogamous. Relationship ratings of good (*), very good (**), or excellent (***) are based on my subjective impressions of their relationship quality during the interviews.
Appendix L
Geographic Distribution of Participants

**West**
- Anna & Alan
- Beth & Brandon
- Caitlin & Chad
- Diane & David
- Eileen & Eric
- Frances & Frank

**South**
- Gina & Greg
- Holly & Hank
- Isobel & Ian
- Janet & Jim
- Kathy & Ken
- Lisa & Larry
- Millie & Martin

*Note:* A solid star (★) indicates the six states where same-sex marriage was legal at the time of data collection, which were Connecticut, Iowa, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, and Vermont. Since the completion of data collection, six other states, plus Washington D.C., have legalized same-sex marriage, as indicated by a star outline (☆): Delaware, Maine, Maryland, Minnesota, Rhode Island, and Washington.
Appendix M
Comparative Examples of Transcript Quotations and Excerpts Presented in Chapter 4

Example 1:
Transcript Quotation. Underlining indicates words or punctuation that differs in the quotation as presented in Chapter 4. A strikethrough indicates words that were omitted in Chapter 4.

DAVID: In terms of stuff that, that has not been as successful is like, prime example would be our sex life, I mean, it’s horrible. I mean, we haven’t had sex for probably a year. And it—it’s never been really terrific. I mean, when we were first married, you know, it was probably a lot more like other normal couples, but as time’s gone on, it’s really disintegrated a lot, and you know, there’ve been, it wasn’t unusual even in the last [number] years, to have sex, you know, three, four, five times a year, maybe.

The same excerpt as presented in Chapter 4.

Our sex life, I mean, it’s horrible. We haven’t had sex for probably a year. And it’s never been really terrific. I mean, when we were first married, you know, it was probably a lot more like other normal couples, but as time’s gone on, it’s really disintegrated a lot, and it wasn’t unusual even in the last [few] years, to have sex, you know, three, four, five times a year, maybe.

Example 2:
Transcript quotation.

I’ve always appreciated the fact that he’s very open about it, and I can ask him very, very difficult questions, and as much as he doesn’t like to sit down and talk about it and think about it sometimes—he’s been through a lot of counseling sessions and stuff where he learned how to actually talk and actually verbalize things about the way he feels, and things, so for whatever reason he’s always been willing to do that with me. He will talk about what it is that he’s feeling and we can have very intimate conversations about those types of things.

The same excerpt as presented in Chapter 4.

I’ve always appreciated the fact that he’s very open about it [pornography], and I can ask him very, very difficult questions, and as much as he doesn’t like to sit down and talk about it and think about it sometimes—he’s been through a lot of counseling sessions and stuff where he learned how to actually talk and actually verbalize things about the way he feels—so for whatever reason he’s always been willing to do that with me. He will talk about what it is that he’s feeling and we can have very intimate conversations about those types of things.
Appendix N
Frequency of Name References in Strengths and Challenges Sections by Participant and by Couple
REFERENCES

Abraham, T. (2012). My husband became my wife: Transgender woman reveals how a bee sting led to her sex change… and how the woman she had married stood by her. Retrieved from http://www.dailymail.co.uk


