Institute for Clinical Social Work

SECRECY & STRAINED RELATIONSHIPS:

MOVING TO A SAME-SEX STEPFAMILY

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By

DEBBIE BARRETT

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored the subjective experiences of 20 participants who as children transitioned from living with heterosexual parents to living in a same-sex stepfamily following parental disclosure of homosexuality and subsequent divorce. This researcher used grounded theory procedures to analyze data gathered from participant interviews, interpreting the findings using object relations psychoanalytic theory. Chaos and strained family relationships stemming from marital distress in the intact family continued and intensified already deteriorating participant and parent relationships. The quality of ongoing parental ministrations mitigated participants' reactions to post-divorce circumstances. As adults, many participants questioned the permanency of their relationships or held back from fully engaging with others.

Although parental secrecy and ambiguity about being gay or lesbian flourished, participants' defenses were heightened to keep parental sexuality repressed. Even though participants did not talk about their gay or lesbian parent or stepfamily for some time, developmental factors contributed to a relaxation of defenses and allowed them to reflect on their past. Participants' basic sense of themselves and their parent was not altered by the parent's changed sexual orientation and the participants did not wish for return of the parent's original heterosexual orientation. In concluding, there is a presentation of clinical implications and recommendations for future research based on the findings.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

There were nearly 600,000 same-sex couples living across the country at the time

of the last U.S. census (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000). Of those households, one fifth

of the male couples and one third of the female couples were raising children under age

18. Other reports estimated the number of lesbian women or gay men raising children in

the United States ranged from 1 to 5 million and the number of children reared by gay or

lesbian parents was estimated to range from 6 to 14 million (Patterson, 1992; Perrin &

Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health [Perrin & Committee],

2002).

Accurate numbers of individuals who are lesbian or gay are difficult to ascertain,

largely resulting from underreporting due to stigma and secrecy associated with

homosexuality (Cramer, 1986; Lewis, 1980; Patterson, 1992). Nuclear heterosexual

families are viewed as preferred and normal, whereas other types of families are

marginalized (Ahrons, 1994; Demo, 1993; Patterson, 1992). Fear of discrimination makes

it more difficult to obtain actual numbers on how many children of gay or lesbian parents

live in the United States (Patterson, 1992).

Individuals who are gay or lesbian are increasingly becoming parents via artificial

insemination, foster parenting, adopting children, or using a surrogate mother. However,

most individuals who have a lesbian or gay parent were conceived in the context of a heterosexual relationship (Patterson, 1992; Perrin & Committee, 2002; Ray & Gregory, 2001). When a parent in a heterosexual couple comes out as lesbian or gay, many divorce and develop same-sex relationships. The same-sex partner may develop a stepparenting relationship with the children. This requires the children to make some type of intrapsychic and interpersonal adjustment regarding their parents' divorce, the change in one parent's sexual orientation, and the addition of a new stepparent to the family. Furthermore, "lesbian and gay stepfamilies represent a unique type of family, distinct from heterosexual stepfamilies and from gay and lesbian families who have children within the context of a lesbian or gay relationship" (Lynch & Murray, 2000, p. 1).

The purpose of this study was to understand the subjective experience of adults who as children transitioned from living with heterosexual parents to living with gay or lesbian parents following parental disclosure of homosexuality and subsequent divorce. Specific objectives included listening to each individual's story and analyzing the narrative (i.e., the data) to identify common experiences and latent meaning among participants and then to develop a theory about this transition. Reviewing existing literature on children of divorce, children of gay parents, and children of stepfamilies provided a background understanding of what children in these families have in common, what circumstances are unique to them, and what effect these types of living and family arrangements have on development and relationships. An overarching theory of object relations as well as psychodynamic concepts of object loss, trauma, mourning,

identification, and endopsychic structure provided a framework upon which this researcher based interpretations of the data.

Research and literature are sparse regarding the intrapsychic impact on children who transition from being reared by a heterosexual parental unit to a gay or lesbian parental unit. Although a heterosexual person announcing his or her homosexuality is not a historically new phenomenon, a psychodynamic focus on changes of this kind, particularly changes in parental identity and its effect on intrapsychic identifications and sense of self and other, is absent.

The meanings children made of these transitions and the effect on their sense of self and other as they retrospectively reflected on these identity, relationship, and structural changes is an important addition to the literature. Individuals having these experiences may seek mental health services. The significance of this study for clinical social work was due to the fact mental health clinicians who have an understanding of the experiences of these individuals and awareness of intrapsychic modification prompted by these changes can better serve their clients' needs.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature on Children of Divorce

Divorce has been around for centuries despite early restrictive divorce laws. The late 1960s marked the beginning of a significant rise in divorce rates after the establishment of no-fault divorce laws. People who could not or did not divorce under the previous divorce laws were able to divorce. Additionally, marriage was no longer chosen for economic and social position as it was in the beginning of the 19th century. Marriage came to be viewed as a source of satisfaction and intimacy and was sought for emotional reasons. Unfulfilling marriages were ended sooner, making the greatest risk for divorce approximately the fourth year of marriage (Ahrons, 1994). Currently 40% to 60% of marriages end in divorce (Ahrons, 1994; Simons, 1996; Wallerstein, Lewis, & Blakeslee, 2000) and approximately 1 million American children are involved each year (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1999).

Divorce was originally viewed as a time limited crisis. The quality of life of those impacted was believed to improve within a few years after the divorce. It was assumed that after the parents adjusted to the divorce and established their new lives, the children benefited from the parents' newly created happiness and improved well-being. However, each family member had his or her own reaction to and experience of the divorce and

quality of life in the newly formed post-divorce family. Simply because the parent was content with the new arrangements did not automatically mean the children benefited as well (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1996). In fact, children of divorce are less well adjusted socially, emotionally, and academically and have more behavioral problems than children from nuclear two parent families (Amato & Keith, 1991a; Emery, 1999; Hetherington, 1993; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999).

Families change after divorce. The couple needs to end their marital relationship yet maintain their parental relationship. The family unit shifts from a nuclear to a binuclear structure. Two households are created, each headed by a different parent (Ahrons, 1994). It is necessary for parents to develop cooperative parenting techniques and to remain attentive to and responsible for the emotional, economic, and physical needs of their children. A partnership of this kind establishes guidelines among the households, parents, and parent and child to encourage ongoing relationships among family members. The family experiences significant and disruptive changes in structure and size, but its caretaking functions remain the same.

A significant number of couples are able to divorce without causing psychological harm to their family. These couples interact cooperatively and respect one another's relationship with the children. Parent-child relationships continue after the divorce and are enjoyable and positive. Resolving or preventing co-parenting problems takes priority over personal or marital matters (Ahrons, 1994). Other couples divorce with much more animosity. These couples feel constant anger toward one another. The children overhear loud arguments or are privy to the details. The parents speak poorly about one another to

their children. These couples interact through lengthy and hostile court battles. Over time, noncustodial fathers in this group see their children less often (Ahrons, 1994).

The quality of the child's experience depends on how parents handle the post-divorce years. The post-divorce family structure is not likely to be advantageous unless parent-child relationships continue in at least the same manner as in the pre-divorce family, parental conflict decreases, authoritative parenting continues or develops, and the child does not feel rejected by either parent (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999; Wallerstein et al., 2000). Children lose more than they gain when one or both parents are distressed: the conflict continues, the post-divorce family is less nurturing, or the custodial parent is overburdened.

Evolving Family Structure

The divorcing family experiences several years of transition and disequilibrium (Dunn, 2002; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1996). Parental care of the children typically decreases during this time. Once separated, parents spend more time and energy tending to their own needs, rebuilding their lives, or providing the basic necessities for their family. Parents return to school, obtain employment for the first time, or work longer hours. Frequently they feel overloaded and isolated as they try to balance their needs with employment, household, and childcare responsibilities (Hetherington, 1993).

Although parents may benefit from these changes, oftentimes children do not. Children are placed in daycare either for the first time or for longer periods of time. The time parents and children spend together decreases in amount and changes in quality. Many children feel rejected by their parent's departure or new interests and priorities.

Many children are responsible for more of their own care (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1979).

Having increased responsibilities leads to a range of feelings. Children have a feeling of

increased confidence and independence on one end to a feeling of neglect and

abandonment on the other. Parents and children benefit from the changes if the additional

responsibilities are not too burdensome or overwhelming to the particular child. The

children who benefit from experiencing and adapting to the divorce and new family

situation are typically relatively conflict free prior to the divorce. These children use their

intelligence, positive self-esteem, and pleasant personality to elicit and utilize support

from others. These positive attributes are strengthened as children cope with changes

brought on by the divorce (Hetherington, 1989). Within a few years acute parental

distress, depression, and anxiety diminish, and parenting improves (Hetherington, 1993).

The post-divorce family develops its own rules and routines and thereby achieves a sense

of stability.

Relationships Change in the Post-Divorce Family

Because the structure of the nuclear family is neglected and evolving during the

transition to single-parent household, parents and children develop new roles and

establish new relationships with one another in response to the new family's needs. Judith

Wallerstein worked with her colleagues to complete a longitudinal study of family

relationships after divorce. She began the study in 1971. She and her interdisciplinary

team followed 60 predominantly White, middle-class divorcing families from California

and their 131 children, aged 3 through 18, for 25 years. In the study of divorcing families,

two thirds of custodial mothers and children had less cooperation and trust with one

another and had more anger and fighting during the first year after the divorce. This increased animosity was short lived. Within 18 months, most of these relationships improved and many children felt greater trust and respect for their mother (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1979).

The greatest relationship change occurred between noncustodial parents, predominantly fathers, and their children. Following the divorce, children yearned for their fathers and wanted to see them more. Intense longing to maintain connection with their father continued for years and often increased during adolescence, regardless of the relationship or amount of time spent together pre- or post-divorce (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1979). Both the child's and the father's motivation to maintain the relationship and the family's flexibility had an effect on the frequency and quality of the developing visiting relationship.

From the father's viewpoint, many factors influenced his ability to maintain a relationship with his children after separation. Psychological health and emotional well-being played a prominent role in visitation. Visits with children increased as fathers became more emotionally healthy and adjusted to the divorce and decreased when fathers felt depressed, stressed, or overburdened (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1979). Studies differ on the severity and kind of relational change that evolves between noncustodial fathers and children, although many report frequency of visitation is not as significant as the quality and conditions of contact between the two (Ahrons, 2004; Amato, Loomis, & Booth, 1995; Emery, 1999; Wallerstein et al., 2000).

Wallerstein and Blakeslee's (1996) study of divorcing families indicated over two thirds of the child participants had poor relationships with their father after divorce. As the children grew, particularly the boys, they began to reject their father as a role model and did not want to identify with or be like him. Fathers had less influence on their children, and many did not have an emotionally enriching relationship with them (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1996). Despite this, having some type of a paternal relationship was crucial for the children. Though the children no longer felt intense loneliness or a need to see their father, his presence did counter against feeling rejected and fostered self-esteem (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1996). Also, a caring and reasonably well-adjusted noncustodial parent improved children's adjustment, particularly for the same-sex child (Hetherington, 1993).

Constance Ahrons (2004) completed a longitudinal study of family relationships after divorce. For 20 years, Ahrons studied 98 families from Wisconsin to understand any impact divorce had on families. Participants were interviewed at 1, 3, 5, and 20 years after divorce. Her study indicated 50% of noncustodial father-child relationships improve and 33% deteriorate post-divorce (Ahrons, 2004). Fathers' increased involvement with their children helps improve the relationship. Children get to know their fathers more intimately while cultivating and sharing new interests. Remarriage of the father is a main reason cited for deterioration of father-child relationships.

Impact of Divorce on Children

When there is a divorce, some children develop new problems, others show an increase or decrease in previously established problems, and others have a surge in

development. This variability depends on the child's prior adjustment and individual makeup as well as family relationships and parenting both pre- and post-divorce (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). Research of effects of divorce on children is varied and contradictory. Studies suggest the measurable impact of divorce on children's adjustment ranges from none (Harris, 1998), to long lasting (Wallerstein et al., 2000), to somewhere in-between (Cherlin, 1999).

A meta-analysis of 92 studies revealed children from divorced families had lower academic achievement, psychological adjustments, social relationships, self-concept, and poorer parental relationships than those from nuclear families (Amato & Keith, 1991a). However, Amato and Keith (1991a) cautioned that methodologically unsophisticated studies may overestimate the size of the effects of divorce on children.

Yet divorce did not appear to be routinely problematic for all children. In divorce situations with minimal disruptions to the children's life, i.e., relatively little parental conflict, no decline in parent–child relationships, and no subsequent divorces, relatively little risk was involved (Amato & Booth, 1991).

Wallerstein and Kelly (1979) found children of all ages felt tremendous loss and fear after their parent left the household. They worried about their security and if they would be cared for and were apprehensive of future changes. They were concerned for their own well-being as well as for their parents' well-being. The children feared their own relationship with their parents could end, just as their parents' relationship ended (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1979). Generally, children are more lonely and angry after the separation. They yell and hit peers and siblings and have increased outbursts at home or

school. Children's first reactions and responses to the divorce reflect their age and

development (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1979). The parents, depending on their role in

initiating the divorce, recognize and acknowledge their children's distress. The parent

who wants the divorce typically views his or her children as better off and less

symptomatic.

Preschool Children

The preschool children are frightened and sad. They can regress to wanting

security objects, return to baby talk, and lapse in toilet training. These regressions can last

a few weeks to a few months. These children believe they did something wrong and

caused their parent to leave, and fear the other parent could leave, too. They cope by

fantasy and create stories to explain or deny the departed parent's absence. They are

certain their parent will return home and they will be a family again (Wallerstein &

Kelly, 1979).

As adults looked back on their childhood, they felt neglected and alone. They lost

parental care and comfort too soon and too quickly. Compared to other age groups, they

had the most long-term difficulties in adjustment (Allison & Furstenberg, 1989;

Wallerstein et al., 2000). They were less successful in work, more fearful of relationships,

and doubted they could have a happy marriage. These findings conflict with data from

Amato and Booth (1991), who determined age at time of family disruption made little

difference to the long-term well-being of their study participants.

School-Age Children

The younger school-age children have extreme unremitting sadness and frequently cry. They are afraid of being abandoned and alone and miss their fathers a great deal, particularly the boys. The boys feel tremendous rejection by their father's departure from the household. Some children try to restore his presence by donning his attire or acting like him. Boys at this age need a male identification figure. Separation from this figure is distressing. The father's departure at this developmental stage, particularly if he does not maintain a close relationship with his son, disrupts the boy's identification with his father and hampers the formation of the boy's emerging masculinity. Having a close relationship with mother does not always help the boys feel safe and protected. These children want their parents to reunite and typically do not feel responsible for the divorce (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1979).

The older-school age children did not appear as distraught as the younger children despite being more aware of the difficulties caused by the divorce. Their predominant feeling is anger. They actively try to master any feelings caused by the divorce. For example, they spend time with friends, try not to believe—or ignore—what is happening, or conversely, try to be brave in spite of the situation. They use play to help master feelings of powerlessness and their inability to restore the changed family. The older school-age children are embarrassed by the situation and try to hide the divorce from others. They blame their parents for the divorce and are angry at the particular parent they determine responsible for the divorce (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1979). This may be difficult to do because the children need to see their parent in a positive manner (Royko, 1999).

Adolescents

  Adolescents experience a more intense and disheartening disillusionment with their parents than typically occurs during this developmental stage. The perception of their parents changes, which is typical of adolescent development, but happens at a quicker pace. The expected increase in adolescents' sexual and aggressive thoughts, feelings, and impulses creates anxiety and uncertainty. Exposure to their parent's dating brings additional anxiety and uneasiness as the adolescents are confronted with their parent's sexuality as well as their own (Lebowitz, 1985; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1996). Worries over present and future support and family stability are common as well as the wish to have better relationships and marriages than their parents had. Many adolescents resent their parents and feel they acted selfishly and self-centered; however, they try to understand each parent's viewpoint and contribution to the problems and the divorce (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1979).

  The breakdown of the family structure can interfere with the separation process of adolescence. Gone is the necessary secure base that the adolescent can gradually break away from and return to (Lebowitz, 1985). Developmental demands to identify academic and career goals, establish intimate relationships, and act in increasingly independent ways may lead to or highlight difficulties independent of the divorce (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). For some, rules of the household and discipline lessen, and boundaries between adolescent and parent weaken. Many feel they have to grow up too quickly; some respond with increased maturity, others regress (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1979). Being extra helpful to their parent may be a way to ensure connection during times

of uncertainty, but it can lead to parentification of children and unhealthy attempts to rescue the parent (Royko, 1999).

Acute versus Chronic Symptoms

Within 2 years the acute symptoms in response to the divorce typically ease (Cherlin, 1999; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1979). A majority of children resume developmental progress, establish new routines and relationships, and adapt to their parents' divorce (Ahrons, 1994; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1979). Many are no longer overly consumed with or disorganized by the parental separation. Developing maturity and cognitive abilities allows the children to recognize their parents' viewpoint and reasons for the divorce. Children who experience additional stressors and disruptions in the single-parent household are at risk for developing long-term adjustment problems (Amato & Keith, 1991a).

Although children may long for their pre-divorce family, many develop a reality based view of the divorce, grounded in the present situation rather than one based on emotions, fears, or acute stress. Typically, if parents' lives are better and parental anger lessens, children realize the need for and subsequently approve of the divorce. Their approval of the divorce is based on their current life situation, the quality of their relationship with their parents, and whether their needs are met by the new family structure. The child's own maturity, flexibility, intellect, and ability to reach out to others also influence the level of satisfaction in the post-divorce family (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1979).

Because most children of divorce live with their mothers, the single most protective factor in a child's psychological development over the years is the mother's mental health and parenting (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1996). For many mothers, increased confidence, independence, and emotional well-being stem from successfully managing challenging divorce and single parenting situations (Hetherington, 1993). On average, it takes men 2 years and women 3 years to experience life as stable and settled after divorce (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1979).

Explanation for the Variability in Children's Responses

When looking at the effects of divorce on children's adjustment, several factors must be considered. The divorce itself is one piece in a series of changes. The process begins with marital stress, followed by separation and divorce, ending with transitioning to and ultimately living in the new family structure, which may include stepfamily members (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1979). Furthermore, it is important to distinguish between the effects of marital conflict and the effects of divorce. Family relationships pre- and post-divorce influence responses and reactions to the divorce (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999).

Establishing a baseline of children's functioning prior to parental divorce helps identify children's problems resulting from parental divorce compared to problems already established. Malone et al. (2004) followed 365 boys and girls, who came from nuclear families, from kindergarten through ninth grade. Each year they asked mothers if a separation or divorce had occurred; they asked teachers about the children's behaviors. Problematic behavior increased for boys in elementary school the year of the parental

divorce and continued for several years. Problematic behaviors for boys in middle school also increased the year of parental divorce, then decreased the following year, dropping below the baseline level. The timing of parental divorce did not have an effect on girls in elementary and middle school.

How Children of Divorce Fare in Adulthood

Although the effects of divorce are highest during the first few years after parental separation, the impact on development and adjustment continues into adulthood. A meta-analysis of 37 studies revealed adults who experienced parental divorce as children had lower psychological well-being and economic achievement, poorer marital relationships, and a greater tendency to divorce than those from nuclear families, although the differences between the groups were generally small (Amato & Keith, 1991b). However, there was less consensus regarding the size and significance of the effects. Consider the following statements: Parental divorce has negative consequences that can persist into adulthood, although the long-term consequences are relatively modest (Amato & Booth, 1991; Amato & Keith, 1991b). Divorce has much longer lasting effects on both parents and children than previously known. There is no correlation between the child's initial reaction at time of separation and how the child will fare in the long run (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1996; Wallerstein et al., 2000).

Long-term implications of family disruption vary depending on the circumstances of the divorce. Experiencing a low-stress divorce may be less damaging to later well-being than growing up in a nuclear, but unhappy, household (Amato & Booth, 1991; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). Amato and Keith (1991b) determined studies

based on nonclinical samples with controls in place for pre-divorce variables showed

weaker effects than other studies. Additionally, studies completed in the 1980s and later

showed weaker connection between parental divorce and adult well-being.

One account for the difference in well-being between those from divorced and

nuclear families may be attributed to the level of marital conflict, not solely to the

divorce. The impact of divorce on children's lives can be better understood by

recognizing the level of marital conflict prior to the divorce (Ahrons, 2004; Amato et al.,

1995). Both parental divorce and growing up in a high conflict nuclear family are

associated with long-term deficiencies in children's well-being (Amato et al., 1995) and

may predispose individuals to lowered psychological well-being in adulthood (Amato &

Booth, 1991). Yet high-conflict nuclear marriages create more psychological difficulties

for children than high-conflict marriages that end in divorce (Amato & Keith, 1991a;

Amato et al., 1995).

Amato et al.'s (1995) 12-year longitudinal study addressed marital conflict,

divorce, and the impact on children in adulthood. Long-term consequences of divorce

depended on the level of parental conflict prior to separation. In families with high levels

of parental conflict, children fared better in early adulthood if their parents divorced.

Their study determined that those who experienced high levels of parental conflict

followed by divorce appeared to be doing particularly well in early adulthood as well as

those from low-conflict non-divorced families. The changes brought about when a highly

conflictual marriage dissolves can have minimal negative impact on the children's

psychological well-being. The reduction in parental conflict can decrease stress and be

advantageous for children, leading to an overall better situation. Life changes, such as divorce can be non-problematic, even beneficial, when they are preceded by high levels of stress (Wheaton, 1990). In some instances, it is better for children to live in single-parent families than in nuclear families with high conflict (Amato et al., 1995).

In families with low levels of parental conflict, offspring are worse off in early adulthood if their parents divorce. In families with low parental conflict, children may be unaware of marital problems, particularly if one or both parents remain attentive and responsive to their needs (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1979). When conflict is lower, children are not likely to anticipate or feel relief by the divorce. Instead they may react in shock and confusion. In these families, divorce ushers in too many changes and losses for the child with few compensating gains. Divorce in these situations is likely to represent an unappreciated and unwelcome long-term decline in quality of life (Amato et al., 1995). Amato et al. (1995) concluded that being reared in a nuclear family with high levels of parental conflict had modest but detrimental long-term consequences for children.

Adult children who experience multiple parental divorces or high stress divorces are generally worse off than those who experience a single divorce. They have more marital problems, greater marital instability, and a higher rate of divorce. Those who grow distant from their mother have more marital problems and marginally greater psychological distress. Those who grow distant from their father have lower occupational status, greater financial strain, less marital happiness, and greater marital instability (Amato & Booth, 1991; Wallerstein et al., 2000).

Whereas those studies provided significant and revealing information on the effects of divorce on children, this study moved beyond descriptive findings to identify how loss of the parent—whether through divorce or through a change in a significant aspect of the parent—impacted one's sense of self and other.

Literature on Children of Gay Parents

Research on children living with lesbian mothers or gay fathers began in the early 1970s. Much of this research was in response to divorce disputes and the governing view gay or lesbian parents were not mentally fit parents and should not be granted custody of or visitation with their children (Lewis, 1980; Patterson, 1992). Apprehension about potentially detrimental influences of parental sexual orientation on children's sexual identity, psychological health, and social relationships, influenced judicial and public policy (Cramer, 1986; Mooney-Somers & Golombok, 2000; Patterson, 1992).

Long-held theoretical and public beliefs that two heterosexual parents provide the home environment best equipped to raise psychologically healthy children fueled concerns about negative effects of parental homosexuality on children's development (Golombok & Tasker, 1996; Patterson, 1992). Psychoanalytic and social learning theories of development emphasized pivotal contributions of both mothers and fathers for personal and social development of children and adolescents.

Heterosexist underpinnings in psychoanalytic theory and judicial opinions led to the view that children reared by gay or lesbian parents are at risk of developing psychological problems, may exhibit confusion in gender identity, especially during

adolescence**,** and may possibly become gay or lesbian (Golombok & Tasker, 1996). Homophobic beliefs and discrimination generated concerns that children of gay or lesbian parents will be ostracized and teased by peers and develop behavioral and academic problems. It was also believed these children were at greater risk for being sexually abused by their same-sex parent or their parents' gay or lesbian friends or lovers (Cramer, 1986; Mooney-Somers & Golombok, 2000; Patterson, 1992).

Comparison of Children of Gay or Lesbian and Heterosexual Parents

Early research focused on topics and ages pertaining to the largest number of custody disputes. Children of lesbian mothers were studied the most, with less research on children of gay men, or infants and adult children of gay or lesbian parents. Because the largest numbers of children in gay or lesbian families were born in the context of a previous heterosexual relationship (Flaks, Ficher, Masterpasqua, & Joseph, 1995; Ray & Gregory, 2001), early research focused on children of lesbians whose mothers had divorced and identified as lesbian later in life.

Mooney-Somers and Golombok (2000) compared children of lesbian mothers to children of divorced heterosexual mothers. Children of both groups were reared by women without the presence of a male in the household. This allowed Mooney-Somers and Golombok to isolate and study any effect a mother's sexual identity has on her children's development independent of father's influence in the home. As the number of nontraditional families increased, attention shifted to identifying and understanding how children born in alternative living arrangements, many conceived by donor insemination, develop. Mooney-Somers and Golombok (2000) examined how adjustment and

psychological development of children was influenced by family structure and family process.

There were other studies addressing whether parental sexual orientation impacts children's development or well-being. They compared cognitive development, gender identity, gender role-behavior, sexual orientation, self-esteem, psychological development, family functioning and relationships, school performance, peer relationships, and social competence of children reared in same-sex families with children reared in heterosexual families (Anderssen, Amlie, & Ytterøy, 2002; Mooney-Somers & Golombok, 2000; Patterson, 1992). The findings revealed children raised by lesbian mothers or gay fathers did not differ in outcomes from other children.

Few studies inquired into the children's' reactions to learning about their parent's homosexuality. However, Lewis (1980) interviewed 21 children, ranging in age from 9 to 26 years old, whose parents separated after their mother's disclosure of homosexuality. The children's reactions ranged from disbelief and shock to feeling proud of their mother's assertion of her true self. Though many of the children lived in hostile family environments prior to the divorce, they unanimously agreed the ending of their parents' marriage was more painful than their mother's declaration of homosexuality.

Many children denied feeling pain, anger, or ambivalence about their mother's changed sexual orientation. Many mothers did not know how to tell their children, and keeping their homosexuality a secret ushered in or exacerbated a breakdown in communication. Some children learned of their mother's homosexuality by walking in on her and her partner. Many children were unable to discuss or acknowledge any feelings

about their mother's homosexuality. If they did express any anger, it was toward their mother's lover. The lover was an intruder in the family, someone the children felt forced to accept. Some felt her presence signified a gain of another parent, others felt the loss of their mother.

Although they verbally spoke of their acceptance of their mother's lesbianism, the younger children tried to prevent their friends from finding out, fearing they would be teased if others knew. Some older children acted out, and for many, their mother's lesbianism was a taboo subject not talked about with their father. Lewis (1980) noted the overemphasis of acceptance of their mother's homosexuality and the absence of expected reactions of anger, grief, or loss. Those who were able to admit to having those feelings defensively masked the intensity via intellectualization (Lewis, 1980).

Psychosocial Well-Being and Development

Wainright, Russell, and Patterson (2004) completed the first study to draw data from a large national sample. They studied 88 families and their adolescent offspring, who ranged in age from 12 to 18 years old. There were 44 families headed by same-sex female parents who were compared to 44 families headed by opposite-sex parents. The adolescents were assessed on multiple aspects of their psychosocial well-being, school functioning, and romantic relationships.

The adolescents functioned well. They had low levels of depression and anxiety and high levels of self-esteem. There was no difference in psychosocial adjustment between the adolescents of same-sex couples and the comparison group of opposite-sex couples. Both groups had positive school experiences and fairly high grades; however,

the adolescents with same-sex parents felt more connected at school. Both groups reported positive family relationships, felt cared for by others, and felt connected to their community. Girls in both the same- and opposite-sex families felt cared for more than the boys felt. Wainright et al. (2004) concluded adolescent adjustment was not linked with family type.

Several measures were correlated with the quality of the parent-adolescent relationship. Warmer parent-adolescent relationships were associated with the adolescents' having fewer depressive symptoms, higher self-esteem, and less trouble in school. Higher levels of care from parents and peers were associated with higher self-esteem, grades, and school connectedness. The quality of the parent-child relationship and level of care from adults and peers were better predictors of adolescent adjustment than family type or gender.

Chan, Raboy, and Patterson (1998) examined the relations among family structure, family process, and psychological adjustment of children conceived via donor insemination. There were 55 families headed by lesbian parents and 25 families headed by heterosexual parents in the study. The families consisted of 50 families headed by couples and 30 by single parents. The children averaged 7 years of age. Data were collected for child adjustment, parental adjustment, and parental relationship satisfaction.

Children's psychosocial adjustment reported by parents and teachers revealed the children of all family types were well adjusted. The children scored significantly higher on social competence and adaptive functioning and significantly lower on behavior problems than children in the clinical population. There was no significant difference in

child adjustment as a function of parental sexual orientation or number of parents in the home.

Children's behavior was significantly correlated with parents' adjustment. Higher parenting distress and problematic parent-child relationships led to increased amounts of behavior problems in children. In the families headed by couples, a positive and loving relationship between the couple was associated with fewer behavior problems in children. Conversely, parental conflict was associated with problematic behavior in children. Parents' sexual orientation and relationship status were unrelated to children's behavior problems. Furthermore, parents' sexual orientation was unrelated to teacher reports of children's behavior.

Chan et al. (1998) confirmed that the quality of family relationships, rather than parental sexual orientation, impacts children's adjustment. Their findings did not support the statement that only two-parent heterosexual families can raise healthy children and confirmed the statement that parenting ability and sexual orientation are unrelated.

Cognitive Development and Family Functioning

Flaks et al. (1995) examined lesbian couples raising children born to them through donor insemination. Fifteen lesbian-mother families and their children aged 3 to 9 years old were compared to a matched group of 15 heterosexual-parent families. Several assessment measures were used to evaluate the children's cognitive functioning, behavioral adjustment, and social competency and the parents' relationship and parenting skills. Independent teacher ratings of the children were also obtained.

No significant difference was found regarding intellectual functioning and behavioral adjustment of the children from lesbian-mother families and the children from heterosexual-parent families. Likewise, no gender difference was noted; scores for boys and girls of both groups were similar. Mothers and teachers of both groups of children rated them as having significantly fewer levels of externalizing, internalizing, and total behavior problems than children in the clinical population. When compared to children in the nonclinical population, both groups had significantly fewer total behavior problems. Internalizing and externalizing behaviors were not significantly different from the nonclinical population. Teachers rated children of both groups as significantly better adjusted than the clinical population and not significantly different from the normal population.

Flaks et al. (1995) concluded that psychologically healthy, well-functioning children of both sexes can be reared in families of varying configurations, not solely by opposite-sex heterosexual parents. Results of this study demonstrated that neither father presence nor parental heterosexuality is a necessary condition for healthy child development.

School Performance and Peer Relationships

Ray and Gregory (2001) examined school experiences of children of gay and lesbian parents. Their study focused on children in primary and secondary school to determine if they were discriminated against because of their parent's sexual orientation. Forty-eight children from New South Wales participated in the study. Participants ranged

in age from 5 to 18 years. Eighty-one percent had lesbian mothers, 13% had gay fathers, and 6% had both a lesbian mother and a gay father.

The children's peers asked many questions about their family. Children aged 5 through 8 years happily and easily answered questions; however, a small group of children this age felt frustrated by the questions or their peers' lack of comprehending what was said. For example, many peers did not understand what gay or lesbian meant or how it was possible to have two mothers. Questions intensified and peers became more hostile as they grew older. Teasing and bullying, previously nonexistent, began after second grade. Typical remarks made fun of or disparaged gay people. Younger children sought support or assistance from teachers. They were frequently disappointed by the lack of response and believed their concerns were not taken seriously.

Almost one half the children aged 8 to 10 years had been teased and taunted by others. Despite being hurt and frightened by the remarks, many told no one. They became less comfortable and more selective in deciding how to answer their peers' questions. Occasionally they made up answers in effort to avoid future questions or intensified efforts to keep information private. Typically they kept their parent's sexual orientation secret, as the children hoped this would prevent future teasing. Many did not invite friends over or spoke of their parent's partner as if the partner were of the opposite sex. Although they tried to keep their parent's sexual orientation a secret, just under half of the children in the study continued to be bullied and teased via physical threats, verbal abuse, or physical violence. As the children grew, notably around 11th grade, increased maturity and less homophobic attitudes of the peers helped the children spontaneously

disclose their parent's sexual orientation. The children felt relief to be able to talk about their family and subsequently felt more connected to others.

Although many children felt fearful and isolated at school, they felt special and proud of their differences. These children found it enriching to be part of the gay community and welcomed opportunities to talk with other children with similar experiences. Many children believed that because they had same-sex parents they were more tolerant and respectful of differences in others.

Gender Identity, Gender Role-Behavior and Sexual Identity

Golombok, Spencer, and Rutter reported on their longitudinal study in 1983. Twenty-seven lesbian mothers and their 39 children and a control group of 27 heterosexual single mothers and their 39 children participated. Both groups of children were conceived in a heterosexual relationship and later lived in mother-only households. The follow-up study by Golombok and Tasker (1996) was the first to study children reared in lesbian families from childhood to adulthood. Their study presented findings of the sexual orientation of adults reared by lesbian mothers and family characteristics and experiences that may influence development of sexual orientation.

Twenty-five young adults from lesbian families and 21 young adults from heterosexual families were interviewed. The vast majority of mothers of both groups had at least one cohabitating relationship while their children lived in the home. Data were gathered on the young adult's sexual orientation and characteristics of the lesbian family environment.

No significant difference was found between the proportions of adults reared in lesbian or heterosexual families who reported same-sex attraction. However, a significant number of daughters from lesbian families had previously considered or thought they might someday be attracted to or involved in a same-sex relationship. There was no significant difference between sons from either household.

Children reared by lesbian mothers were more likely to have actually had a same-sex relationship than those reared by heterosexual mothers. Six adults from lesbian families had been involved in one or more same-sex relationships, but the majority of adults from lesbian mother families identified as heterosexual. Furthermore, there was no significant difference between adults from lesbian and heterosexual families regarding sexual orientation.

Golombok and Tasker (1996) also explored whether family processes led children of lesbian mothers to be more likely than children of heterosexual mothers to engage in same-sex relationships. Those reared by lesbian mothers who were more open in showing physical affection to their partner and who had more lesbian relationships when their children were school age, were more likely to report same-sex interest. There was a non-significant trend toward reporting same-sex interest from children whose mothers accepted their children's having a gay or lesbian relationship in the future. Golombok and Tasker (1996) concluded the degree of openness and acceptance of gay and lesbian relationships and family attitudes towards sexual orientation were influences that may shape sexual development.

Golombok and Tasker (1996) elaborated that the above finding was supported by social-cognitive and social-constructionist views on gender development and sexual orientation as being partially influenced by social norms: When children are reared in a family environment that accepts or rejects homosexuality, parents have some impact on their children's sexual experimentation. Growing up in a family that accepts or supports gay and lesbian lifestyles enables children attracted to same-sex partners to be more open to explore these relationships. However, Golombok and Tasker (1996) concluded their findings did not support the statement that parents have a determining influence on the sexual orientation of their children.

Overall Findings

Anderssen et al. (2002) reviewed 23 empirical studies published between 1978 and 2000 on nonclinical children reared by lesbian mothers or gay fathers. Their findings revealed the children did not differ from other children in emotional functioning, sexual preference, stigmatization, gender role behavior, behavioral adjustment, gender identity, and cognitive functioning. Furthermore, there was no additional risk to children's psychological adjustment when born into a lesbian family (Chan et al., 1998; Flaks et al., 1995; Mooney-Somers & Golombok, 2000). Ultimately, children who live with gay or lesbian parents develop in a similar manner as children who live with heterosexual parents. No study to date has revealed development of children reared by gay or lesbian parents is compromised when compared to children of heterosexual parents, nor can results be interpreted as harmful (Flaks et al., 1995; Gilgoff, 2004; Patterson, 1992).

However, caution is needed, as most of the studies are based on small samples, retrospective data, or self-report instruments (Baumrind, 1995).

Parental sexual orientation, in itself, is not a significant predictor in determining psychological well-being or development of children (Mooney-Somers & Golombok, 2000). A variety of family forms and home environments foster children's psychological development (Chan et al., 1998; Gilgoff, 2004; Wainright et al., 2004). Regardless of the actual family structure—heterosexual parent(s), gay or lesbian parent(s), or single parent—the quality of relationships among family members and the atmosphere in the home provide the greatest influence on children's development and adjustment (Chan et al., 1998; Mooney-Somers & Golombok, 2000; Patterson, 1992).

Literature on Children of Stepfamilies

The 1980s ushered in a plethora of studies on parental remarriage and stepfamilies. Although stepfamilies were not new phenomena, the circumstances leading to remarriage was. Prior to the 1970s, death of a spouse was the primary precipitant to remarriage, compared to the current pattern of divorce preceding remarriage (Coleman & Ganong, 1990). Divorced people did not reject the idea of marriage and many married again. In fact, over 40% of marriages are remarriages for one or both partners (Coleman & Ganong, 1990). Estimates of the number of stepfamilies in the United States range from 5 to 15 million (Glick, 1989; Johnson, 1980); the increasing number of divorced persons cohabitating instead of remarrying makes this number less exact (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994). About 10 million children under age 18 live in stepfamilies. As with

the number of stepfamilies, accurate data on the number of stepchildren are unknown.

This is a result of data's being collected on households rather than on stepfamilies or

stepchildren. What is evident is a near-majority number of children are reared by multiple

parent figures, including stepparents (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994).

Critique of the Studies on Stepfamilies

Initial research on stepchildren frequently espoused a problem-oriented

perspective. This perspective led researchers to examine differences between children in

stepfamilies and children in nuclear two biological parent families (Lynch, 2000).

Stepchildren's psychological and social development and familial relationships were

studied. As researchers became cognizant of stepfamily complexity and variation, the

focus shifted to examining stepfamily processes in an effort to describe and understand

stepfamily relationships and functioning (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999).

Ultimately, the focus of research changed because divorce and remarriage came to be

viewed as mores firmly established in society rather than social ills or pathology.

Parental divorce typically exposes children to a series of family transitions and

changes. Parental remarriage is one of several changes requiring children to adjust and

adapt. Research on children living in stepfamilies that looks at children's behavior at one

particular point in time can be misleading and does not place enough emphasis on

children's functioning and well-being prior to parental separation and remarriage. It is

important that this be kept in mind when reading studies on adjustment differences

between children in nuclear two biological parent families and stepfamilies (Dunn, 2002).

Studies on remarriage, stepfamilies, and stepchildren often use nonrandom samples of small, White, middle-class stepfather households (Coleman & Ganong, 1990). Less is known about other stepfamily types, such as stepmother households, cohabiting stepfamilies, and gay stepfamilies. Coleman and Ganong contend "given the complexity of stepfamilies, valuable contributions could be made by descriptive qualitative studies and detailed, in-depth studies using reliable self-report and observational measures" (1990, p. 937).

Children's Adjustment in Stepfamilies

Whereas children in stepfamilies are more likely to have adjustment problems and not to fare as well as children in nuclear families (Amato & Keith, 1991b; Dunn, 2002), children in stepfamilies vary in their adjustment and well-being. The composition of the stepfamily and the circumstances of its formation, stability, and relationships within the family, impact children's well-being (Dunn, 2002). Children living in a stepfamily where both parents bring children from previous relationships (often termed complex or blended stepfamilies) are more closely associated with adjustment problems compared to children living in a stepfamily where all children are biologically related to one parent only. Overall, average differences between children in stepfamilies and nuclear families are small and differences between children within the family are great (Dunn et al., 1998; Hetherington, 1999).

Children living in single-parent households typically benefit from an increase in family income following parental remarriage, especially because remarriage is the fastest route out of poverty for divorced single women (Hetherington, 1999). However, financial

improvement does not guarantee improved well-being. Because parents in stepfamilies are often financially responsible for two households, larger financial burdens can increase parental stress and decrease available resources for the children.

Stepfamilies often have stressors inherent to the family, such as marital distress, financial problems, decreased social support, multiple family transitions, and strained parent-child relationships. These stressors, rather than family type, are contributing factors in children's adjustment and may be more disruptive than parental divorce or remarriage itself (Dunn, 2002; Dunn et al., 1998).

Results of longitudinal studies reveal children reared in stepfamilies and single-parent families have higher levels of problems and stress and lower prosocial behaviors and competency than children reared by two biological parents (Bray & Berger, 1993; Dunn et al., 1998). Yet it is important to note the majority of stepchildren's behavior is within normal limits on the rating scales used.

Children in stepfamilies are reported as having higher levels of hyperactivity, conduct problems, and peer problems than children in nuclear families. Older children in stepfamilies and single-parent families are reported as less helpful to others than children in nuclear families. Boys in each age group and each family type have more problematic behavior and less prosocial behavior than girls (Dunn et al., 1998). When the quality of family relationships and various family risk factors are considered, differences in children's adjustment in stepfamilies, single-parent families, and nuclear families largely disappear (Dunn et al., 1998).

Children's Relationships with Biological and Stepparents

The amount of openness children have with their parents is linked to biological relatedness. Children have more warm parental relationships and share more of their thoughts and feelings with their biological parents than with their stepparents. Children are less likely to confide in their fathers, particularly their stepfathers; and many believe their fathers do not understand or care about their problems. The quality of child-parent relationships is also linked to biological relatedness. Child-mother relationships are significantly less positive for children in stepmother-complex stepfamilies than nuclear and stepfather families. Likewise, child-father relationships are significantly less positive for children in stepfather families (Dunn, Davies, O'Connor, & Sturgess, 2001).

The relationship between stepchildren and their stepparent changes over time and does not automatically grow more intimate the longer the time spent together as a family (Bray & Berger, 1993; Ganong & Coleman, 1994; Quick, McKenry, & Newman, 1994). After 5 years of remarriage, family relationships and parent-child interactions are more problematic for stepfamilies than for nuclear families (Bray & Berger. 1993).

Although adolescent stepdaughters experience more conflict with their stepparent than adolescent stepsons (Bray & Berger, 1993; Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994; Ganong & Coleman, 1994), the majority of stepchildren are satisfied with the amount of affection in the relationship and report having a fairly good relationship with their stepparent (Ganong & Coleman, 1994). Furthermore, stepfamilies are not more pathological in their relationships than nuclear families. Regardless of family structure, the amount of family conflict, the communication style among individuals in the household, and the quality of

the marital relationship influence family members' satisfaction with their living arrangements and impact children's well-being.

Ganong and Coleman (1994) caution that findings on adolescents in stepfamilies should be viewed while taking adolescent development into consideration. Although their study focused on adolescent stepchildren, some of the results, particularly decreased closeness to stepparents as stepchildren age, may be attributed to adolescent development in general, not solely to adolescents in stepfamilies. For example, the adolescent's increased separation from family and preference to spending more time with peers is expected, as is the adolescent's exertion of autonomy and independence through frequent questioning and testing of rules. The adolescent's separation and independence lead to changes in parent-adolescent interactions and relationships. Changes in closeness in family relationships resulting from less contact and communication between parent and child do not occur exclusively in stepfamily living or relationships.

On the other hand, Bray & Berger (1993) concluded that children who experience divorce and remarriage face a greater risk for developing psychological and adjustment problems at the onset of parental remarriage and again as they begin adolescence. Although both family types experience less cohesion and increased stress as children enter their teen years, adolescence appears to contribute to problems in stepfamily relationships to a greater extent than in nuclear families. However, the adolescents' use of supportive friends, relatives, or formal resources helps them reframe or reassess difficult family situations and positively impacts their adjustment.

A review of the literature on the stepmother-stepchild relationship reveals higher levels of problematic interactions and greater risk for maladjustment among family members in stepmother households compared to nuclear biological families or stepfather families (Quick et al., 1994). Stepmothers are more likely to be unhappy, dissatisfied, or overwhelmed in their role of stepmother compared to stepfathers or biological mothers (Quick et al., 1994). Connections between parental depression and difficulties in child well-being are established, as depressed parents may be less sensitive and attentive to their children's needs (Dunn et al., 1998).

Frequently a positive stepparent marital relationship is associated with less cooperative, enjoyable stepmother-stepdaughter or mother-daughter relationships, whereas the opposite is true for stepmother-stepson relationships (Quick et al., 1994). The arrival of a stepfather often disrupts and weakens the intimate mother-daughter relationship that can develop after divorce (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994). Considering the majority of mothers retain custody of their children after divorce, this study provided additional information regarding lesbian stepfamily relationships and the experiences of children adjusting to the arrival of a stepmother.

Disparate Parenting in Stepfamilies

Parent-child relationships in stepfamilies vary based on biological ties. More positive relationships exist between parents and their biological children (Dunn et al., 2001), and warm parent-child relationships, regardless of family structure, are associated with better child outcomes (Dunn, 2002; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). However, Wallerstein and Lewis published a paper in 2007 that drew from Wallerstein

and various colleagues' 10-year and 25-year longitudinal studies of parent-child relationships following divorce. Wallerstein and Lewis, reported "major unanticipated changes in parenting following divorce and remarriage, including disparate parenting of siblings" (2007, p. 446) and "widely discrepant psychological adjustment among the siblings" (p. 448). Though these findings were not evident at the time of separation or soon after, they came to be in one half of the families with more than one child.

Wallerstein and Lewis (2007) noted that in 12 of the 16 families having three or more children, one child functioned well and the other children experienced significant difficulty at home and school. They were unhappy, behind in their studies, and had problematic relationships. The children doing poorly felt rejected or neglected by one or both parents or by their stepparent. The child developmentally on track had a supportive relationship with a psychologically stable parent or grandparent.

Noncustodial biological fathers found it difficult to maintain relationships with their children from both their previous and present relationship. Three of 16 fathers in Wallerstein and Lewis's (2007) study had close relationships with all their children. The remaining fathers focused their attention on their current family and were attentive to only one child from their previous relationship. This favored child typically was the one who was more responsive to the father and had an easier disposition than the other children.

Stepparents did not have close relationships with all of their stepchildren nor did they believe it was important for them to do so. One child often received the bulk share of time, attention, and resources, and the remaining children were rejected. Only one quarter

of the stepparents were diligent in treating all their stepchildren fairly. These stepparents considered themselves to be an important resource to their developing children and tried to be helpful and supportive to them. In these families all of the children, not solely one child, were on developmental track (Wallerstein & Lewis, 2007).

Stepmothers had minimal interactions with the children of the new husband. Although few actively rejected his children, no stepmother in Wallerstein and Lewis's (2007) study enthusiastically sought to develop warm relationships with all the children. Stepmothers often preferred the child who was compliant and eager to please. Stepmothers played a dominant role in determining how much the father saw his biological children. Many men acquiesced to the visitation schedule, frequency, and length of contact with their biological children established by the new wife, even though they did not agree.

Stepfathers took an active role in parenting their stepchildren, and this pleased and relieved the mothers a great deal. Many stepfathers came forward to replace the biological father, emphasized strict discipline, and did not realize the importance of gradually building a relationship with the stepchildren. Older children and adolescents, especially the boys, resented their stepfather's stern discipline. This led to many heated arguments. The majority of stepfathers were more loving and attentive to the youngest stepchild, or the child who was receptive to and interested in him and his involvement (Wallerstein & Lewis, 2007).

Gay and Lesbian Stepfamilies

Although the same-sex stepfamily is structurally similar to the heterosexual stepfamily, its gender identity is similar to other same-sex nuclear families. This means the same-sex stepfamily's particular combination of structure and identity create a unique family form necessary of study in its own right (Lynch, 2000; Lynch & Murray, 2000). However, gay and lesbian stepfamilies are often overlooked and ignored in stepfamily research. Significant to the current study is the fact the majority of same-sex stepfamilies with children are established from previously married persons who later announced their homosexuality and gained custody of their children. Though recent estimates reveal 3 to 5 million gay and lesbian parents had children in previous heterosexual marriages, this number is predicted to increase as more individuals realize and accept their homosexuality (Pill, 1990).

Parents in same-sex stepfamilies undergo a transformation in identity. The previously married biological parent's identity changes from heterosexual to gay or lesbian while he or she concurrently experiences changes in marital status and family type. Although the biological parent accepts and integrates a gay or lesbian self-identity (Lynch, 2000), the children are left to reorganize their internal life and representation of themselves and their parents. The stepparent experiences a more complicated identity transformation due to the stigma and disapproval of homosexuality and gays or lesbians as parents. The stepparent shifts from single status to partnered to assume the role as stepparent (Lynch, 2004).

Similar to the gay or lesbian person's decision to openly declare his or her homosexuality, the same-sex stepfamily also makes decisions on how, when, and to whom to come out. However, this time the decision is made as a family. The stepfamily faces numerous challenging situations because not only are they learning how to be and live as a family, they are simultaneously deciding and modifying how "out" to be.

To make this decision, the biological parent and stepparent consider their children's age, comfort level, and wishes. The parent's child-centered focus on the family's sexual orientation and its effect on family members separates same-sex stepfamilies from heterosexual stepfamilies. For many same-sex stepfamilies, the collaboration family members experience as they grapple with decisions on disclosure ultimately help them feel bonded and connected as a unit (Lynch, 2004).

One developmental task in stepfamilies is establishing the primacy of the couple (Hetherington, 1999). However, in same-sex stepfamilies, many stepparents support their partner's connection to his or her children as more important than the relationship (Lynch, 2000). At the same time, the children consider the stepparent a resource and a source of comfort and support in managing any discrimination or taunting they experience.

The current study, though having a primary focus on transitioning to a same-sex stepfamily, did not assume primacy of the nuclear heterosexual family, to which other family forms are frequently compared. Rather, it provided an in-depth examination of the experiences of those children who transitioned from living in a heterosexual family to

living in a same-sex stepfamily and contributed to the literature on the same-sex

stepfamily.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

According to Freud's drive theory, personality and psychopathology are

understood as a function and derivative of drives. The primary instincts of motivation are

sex and aggression. People are oriented toward pleasure, i.e., the reduction of tension.

The object is the route to sexual gratification. The object is of secondary consideration;

the drive is primary. Relationships with others originated secondarily from the need for

drive gratifications.

Object relations had to be accounted for, and were not automatically provided for

within drive theory (Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983). Several theorists accounted for object

relations by revising or rejecting the drive theory model and developed a fundamentally

different relational model. In this model, the establishment of relations and relatedness

with others was the primary motivator of human behavior. In contrast to Freud who

viewed object relating as developing later in life, Klein (1935/1968) viewed the infant as

beginning life with a tie to an object. She did not concur with Freud's ideas on primary

narcissism and spoke of the infant having an internal world of numerous and varied part-

objects, stemming from actual and fantasized others. The ego projects and introjects

objects based on the prototype of the mother's breast. These internal objects are felt as

concretely real and are experienced as either good or bad objects, depending on the

infant's bodily sensations. The idea of the infant being predisposed for object relating is

taken up by Fairbairn (1946), who stated libido is object-seeking and had direction, not pleasure-seeking and directionless. Fairbairn (1946) viewed the energy within oneself that pushes for expression is not based on tension reduction or ending of the unpleasure of excitation, but rather to establish satisfactory relationships with others.

Internalization of an object relationship involves splitting of the ego into parts that, when repressed, constitute internal objects that stand in a particular unconscious relationship to one another. This internal relationship is shaped by the nature of the original object relationship and is potentially modifiable by subsequent experience and relationships (Ogden, 2004).

Interactions with primary caregivers are internalized and establish psychic structure. Psychic structure in turn shapes and influences all future relationships and expectations of self and other. These ideas were applicable for this study because participants experienced significant unanticipated changes in their primary caregivers and relationships. One focus of this study was to discern how significant changes of this sort impacted psychic structure. This study sought to understand the thoughts, feelings, and intrapsychic modifications required of participants who experienced changes in parental sexual orientation, their family structure, and relationship with their parents as well as how establishing a relationship with another potential caregiver, the stepparent, influenced internal object relations and one's sense of self and other. Psychodynamic concepts relevant to the development of psychic structure resulting from internalization of interactions and relationships with primary caregivers provided the framework from

which to explore how each participant intrapsychically and interpersonally processed these events and changes.

<div align="center">Literature Related to the Theoretical Framework</div>

Object Relations

Object relations theory was selected to interpret the data from this study. The general term *object relations* was used to refer to an individual's interactions and relationships with others. This includes both actual others and internal and imagined others, the relationship between one's internal and external object world, and the significance of these relationships for psychic functioning (Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983). An object relations theory conceives of the early relationship between infant and caregiver as forming internal mental representations and patterns of interacting and relating that are carried forward and repeated with others throughout life.

Object relations theory has as its focus unconscious internal object relations in dynamic interplay with current interpersonal experiences. These internalized object relations have a motivating power of their own and shape and influence future attitudes, experiences, and interactions with others (Chessick, 1993; Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983). An individual's intrapsychic psychology informs how one processes and conducts oneself interpersonally. And, at the same time, the intrapsychic is influenced by interpersonal experiences.

Identification

Freud's papers "On Narcissism: An Introduction" (1914/1953b) and "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917/1953c) implicitly address object relations and identification with the object. Together, these papers provide the foundation of later object relations theorizing. The infant's first love objects are those who provide care, an anaclitic type and source of object choice. These are the people on whom the infant depends to provide functions in the service of self-preservation. Freud described a second type of object-choice, a narcissistic object choice. This type of relationship is based on a model of one's own self (Freud, 1905/1953a). The parent is chosen because he or she represents what the child is or would like to be. To be loved is the aim and satisfaction in a narcissistic object choice.

There are many different types of identifications; the child's first identification with his or her parents is based on a narcissistic object choice. Identification is an automatic and often unconscious modeling process (Chessick, 1993). This mental process involves reshaping aspects of one's ego based on how an individual perceives an object. Although identification is a primary mechanism responsible for people's coming to be who they are, the process continues throughout life and is growth promoting. Freud used identification to explain aspects of normal development and psychopathology. In "Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego" (1921/1955b), Freud elaborates identification as a normal developmental process leading to ego and superego formation. In actuality, the series of losses occurring in the course of normal development are inevitable and crucial to the development of mature psychic structure (Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983).

Participants in this study experienced a parent's sexual orientation change from heterosexual to gay or lesbian. This study addressed what happened to a child's belief system and sense of self and other when a previously heterosexual parent announced his or her homosexuality and the parental unit divorced. This study also addressed whether a change in the parent's identity and parental relationship produced a change in the child and whether the parent's declaration of a gay or lesbian identity necessitated a reorganization of the child's internal life and representation of himself or herself and the parent.

Mourning and Identification

Freud (1917/1953c) thought melancholia involved an unconscious process ushered in when loss of the object, disappointment, or hurt has occurred and threatened a relationship with another. An individual in mourning experiences sadness, loss of interest in external activities, and lack of interest in others. However, in melancholia one also experiences a loss of self-regard not found in mourning. The loss is in regard to something inside the self. For melancholia to occur, a narcissistic ambivalent relationship with another person has been established. After a real or imagined threat to the relationship occurs, the libido is withdrawn from the person or the relationship and reinvested into the ego. This results in a regression from narcissistic object choice to secondary narcissism and the establishment of an identification of the ego with the loved and hated (due to ambivalence) abandoned object.

The hatred comes to be aimed toward the self and leads to an impoverishment of the ego, evident by the melancholic's self-reproaches and lack of self-esteem. In

actuality, the self-reproaches are reproaches against the former loved object now directed into the person's own ego. In this manner object-loss is transformed into ego-loss. Through self-reproaches, revenge is taken on the original object and the person thus avoids expressing anger and hatred to the person directly.

In melancholia, object cathexis is replaced by identification. Through the process of identification, one experiences a change in the self. The self is altered to resemble the object following object loss. Identification makes it possible to remember and emotionally replace a lost external object with aspects of oneself modeled after the object. In this sense, the lost external relationship is replaced by an internal one (Ogden, 1983).

Object Loss and Its Impact

Bowlby (1982) identified specific internal reactions and external behaviors a child experiences after loss of or separation from a significant person. The child's initial response is one of protest, reflecting separation anxiety. The child feels despair and hopelessness and begins to doubt a reunion with the absent person is possible. Signs of grief and mourning begin to appear. Finally, the child, in a defensive maneuver to protect from unrelenting psychic pain, detaches from and becomes indifferent to the external world.

The developmental level of participants at the time of the disclosure of the parent's homosexuality, parental divorce, and subsequent family transition impact how the child reacts and adjusts to the news and loss. Object relations theory recognizes how relational templates established in the family of origin consciously and unconsciously

establish conditions for how the child reacts and responds to the news and sequelae of the

divorce, changed parental sexual orientation, introduction to the parent's same-sex

partner, and formation of a new household.

This study addressed whether the parent's revision of his or her sexual orientation

led to a change in the way the child saw and experienced the parent. It was speculated

changes of this sort could constitute for the child an experience of object loss. Following

this thinking, the parent the child knew suddenly became different and reflected an object

loss of what was known. Conversely, it was possible some children would experience the

disclosure as confirmation of something they unconsciously had some sense of or would

validate their perception something was not quite right with that parent. In either

scenario, participants in this study needed to reorganize their relationship to both parents

and address the absence of the noncustodial parent. This study explored whether object

loss or change in one's relationships with significant others led to profound distress or

impacted the person's defenses and coping strategies. Losses of this type had the

potential to be traumatic when considering how trauma shapes the organization of one's

internal schemes and ways of coping with external reality (Herman & van der Kolk,

1987).

Freud wrote that trauma involves overstimulation. He posited that a protective

layer, a hypothetical stimulus barrier, serves to allow only tolerable quantities of

excitation through and thereby protects an individual from overwhelming external stimuli

and actual events, strong emotions, or an accumulation of excitations. For Freud

(1920/1955a), trauma results when damage occurs to this hypothetical stimulus barrier

and the individual experiences an intolerable quantity of excitation. Freud and Breuer noted events become psychically traumatic when a person is unable to integrate an experience into his or her conscious personality (cited in Laplanche & Pontalis, 1967). Using a psychodynamic framework to interpret the data, this researcher discovered the meaning that participants made of the numerous relational and household changes, the intrapsychic alterations that had occurred as a result of modifications and losses of primary caregivers. Additionally, this researcher determined whether the experiences were integrated into their thinking and narrative or were felt as traumatic.

Endopsychic Structure

Fairbairn (1941/1952b, 1943/1952a) explained how inevitable parental failures establish compensatory psychic structure and negatively impact future relationships. He said that psychopathology results from the internalization of objects in response to frustration, deprivation, or unsatisfying relations with parent(s). Internalizing bad attributes of the parent preserves the illusion of the parent's goodness and locates the badness in the child. Now it is the child who is bad, not his or her parent. Having the badness inside brings a sense of control, for if the child can be different, i.e., less bad, parental love and care will resume (Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983).

As the relationship to the parent becomes depriving or frustrating, it is internalized and repressed. Three internal objects result: the ideal object (the warm and responsive attribute of the parent), the exciting object (the promise of future care attribute of the parent), and the rejecting object, previously referred to as the internal saboteur (the absent and withholding attribute of the parent).

As a result of repression, the child's original unitary ego is split. Two subsidiary egos result and are repressed. The unbound libido previously directed outward to actual people becomes bound to the abovementioned three internal objects in an internal object relationship. The remainder of the unitary ego after splitting off of the subsidiary egos is referred to as the central ego, which is bound to and identified with the ideal object yet remains available for outward direction for relationships with people.

The subsidiary libidinal ego is identified with and bound to an internal relationship with the exciting object. The subsidiary anti-libidinal ego is identified with and bound to an internal relationship with the rejecting object. Though the libidinal ego and anti-libidinal ego do not engage in actual relationships with people, these egos do influence actual relationships in an effort to recreate relationships of a similar quality—the promising and rejecting aspect that warranted their formation in the first place. Repression and the splitting of the unitary ego along with the subsidiary egos bound in relationship to their internal objects, result in less libido available for establishment and maintenance of relationships with actual people. The severity of repression and splitting is inversely related to the amount of ego remaining available for others.

Conclusion

For one child, alterations in the family may be traumatic, overstimulating, and difficult to integrate. Yet, another child may experience the changes in a very different way. Alterations can threaten or enhance one's sense of self, security, and identification and can require new internal and external adaptation. An overarching theory of object relations as well as psychodynamic concepts of object loss, trauma, mourning,

identification, and endopsychic structure, provided a framework upon which this

researcher based her interpretations of the data. These concepts provided a reference for

exploring the intrapsychic alternations required when one experiences changes in aspects

of external, internal, and fantasy life and allowed this researcher to perceive possible

latent meaning that might otherwise go unnoticed.

Theoretical and Operational Definitions of Major Concepts

An *adult* is anyone 18 and older who first lived with his or her heterosexual

parents at least 3 years, then lived at least 3 years with one gay or lesbian parent and that

parent's same-sex partner.

Experiences are a person's self report of his or her own life story.

Heterosexual parents are biological parents, consisting of one male and one

female.

Gay or lesbian parents are the biological father and his new male partner or the

biological mother and her new female partner.

Parent coming out is one parent acknowledging a previously unacknowledged

gay or lesbian identity.

Parental divorce is the legal dissolution of marriage.

Same-sex stepfamily is a family that consists of a biological parent and at least one

child who was conceived in the context of a previous heterosexual marriage and the

biological parent's same-sex partner.

Statement of Assumptions

This researcher made the following assumptions regarding this study: Some children experience anxiety as a result of parental divorce, learning one's parent is gay, and transitioning to and living in a stepfamily. Object relations theory says that primary experiences and relationships create expectations for future experiences and relationships. The impact these changes have on the child depends on the quality of those early relations.

Additionally, loss of the object creates internal and interpersonal loss. This particular change is hard to process because there is no model (internal object representation) for what or how life will be. A child's fantasy about self and other generates certain expectations. A sudden surprise, such as parental disclosure and subsequent divorce, that does not fit one's internal fantasy would impact one's core sense of self.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This exploratory qualitative study used grounded theory procedures as outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1998) and expanded by Charmaz (2006). Qualitative research is used when the researcher attempts to understand the meaning or nature of experiences of persons with problems (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Accordingly, qualitative research lends itself to going into the field to find out what people are doing and thinking. Furthermore, qualitative research is used when there is little information known about the topic of study. The research question of this study explored the dynamic experiences of those who transitioned from being reared by heterosexual parents to being reared by gay or lesbian parents. As the literature on this specific topic was sparse, using qualitative methods was appropriate.

Specifically, a constructivist grounded theory approach was used. In this approach, one begins with an area of study and allows theory to emerge from the data, thereby increasing understanding of the area studied (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). A constructivist approach does not assume only one reality of data exists; rather, it assumes that multiple realities exist. A constructivist approach studies how and why participants construct meanings in specific situations; furthermore, it contends the researchers are part of what they study. Both data and analysis are created from shared experiences and

relationships with participants. Both researchers and research participants interpret meanings and actions (Charmaz, 2006). The resulting theory is an interpretation of the data and depends on the researcher's point of view.

Participant Recruitment

This researcher placed flyers describing the study and requesting research participants in a variety of sources, including colleges in Chicago and its suburbs, coffee shops, and bookstores. Gay friendly faith settings and community health centers received letters, flyers, and telephone calls. This researcher also made presentations about this study to PFLAG, a support group of parents and friends of people who are lesbian and gay. In addition, she purchased advertisement space in *Windy City Times* and *Chicago Free Press*, gay and lesbian newspapers, as well as on craigslist and the *Chicago Reader*. COLAGE and other Internet sites specific to gay or lesbian persons (Appendix A) received information about this study. Participants also came from recruitment via colleagues and snowball sampling. The *Chicago Reader* provided in a plurality of participants. The remainder came from the sources indicated above.

Telephone interviews with potential respondents assured they met selection criteria (Appendix B). Criteria for selection required participants to be at least 18 years of age, to have first lived with their heterosexual parents at least 3 years, to have experienced their parents' divorce and then to have lived with their gay or lesbian parent at least 3 years. The duration of at least 3 years came from the following: Most acute stress reactions related to divorce dissipate after the first 2 years, but adjusting to living in

a newly formed stepfamily can take several years. This researcher hoped to understand

more about participants' experiences than their immediate reactions to the parental

divorce and life within the new stepfamily.

Description of Participants

The original proposal called for 20 participants to be interviewed. Twelve women

and eight men who ranged in age between 20 and 45 years old volunteered for the study.

Seventeen participants were Caucasian and three were African American. Two

participants identified themselves as homosexual. Eleven participants were contacted for

member checking interviews, but only one participant chose to respond to the invitation.

Data Collection

Interviews were the data tool. Data were collected via an unstructured face-to-face

audiorecorded interview, with the exception of one interview that was conducted over the

telephone. That participant lived out of state and a telephone interview was more

convenient than meeting face-to-face. This researcher conducted all interviews. Data

collection occurred over a 6-month period. One participant was interviewed twice for 90

minutes each time; the remaining participants were interviewed once each for 90 minutes.

A second interview was optional for all participants and occurred when additional

information was needed or when questions arose after the interview. All 20 participants

completed their interviews without breaks or interruptions. Interviews were held in this

researcher's work office, participants' homes, offices, or school, and the Institute for Clinical Social Work.

The question asked in the initial interview was, Tell me about living with your mother and father and about living with your mother and her partner (or father and his partner). This open-ended question allowed participants the opportunity to share their experiences without influence from this researcher. Open-ended questions encourage unanticipated statements and stories to emerge (Charmaz, 2006). After each interview this researcher noted her thoughts, impressions, observations, or questions about the interview experience in memos. After the recorded interviews were transcribed by an outside professional, the audiotapes were erased.

Interview Process

Each interview began with this researcher describing the study, reviewing the consent form, answering any questions, and obtaining participant signatures on the consent form. Some participants appeared eager to talk and began telling their story without needing the opening question. Others waited for direction and after this researcher asked the open-ended question, they spoke. Participants typically began the interview stating how long they lived with their mother and father and how old they were when the divorce occurred. Each interview progressed from there in its own way. Participants received a $10 gift card per interview.

Data Analysis

Data from the interviews were analyzed in accordance with grounded theory techniques outlined by Charmaz (2006) and Strauss and Corbin (1998). Transcribed interviews were broken down and analyzed via initial and focused coding. Initial coding consists of "naming each word, line or segment of data . . . .being open to all possible theoretical directions indicated by your readings of the data" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 46). All interviews were closely examined line-by-line and the data were fractured into quotes.

Themes emerged and were grouped together to generate initial categories of meaning. Categories were refined and continually compared against one another and were organized chronologically. Constant comparative methods were employed throughout data analysis, wherein each incident was compared with other incidents to identify similarities and differences, both within and among interviews, allowing for clarification and refinement as well as identification of properties of emerging categories. Initial results were shared with 11 participants to obtain feedback and fit regarding categories and properties. This process, called member checking, ensured participants' experiences were accurately captured and described (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Member Checking

Member checking confirmed the accuracy of study results. Eleven participants were contacted via email and asked about their interest in reading and commenting on the results of this study. They represented a range of reactions to the divorce and later circumstances. Two participants were sent a summary of the chapters and six participants

were sent the four chapters in their entirety. Of those participants, one participant provided feedback on the chapters and stated, "It was good to hear about other people in similar situations. A lot of the parts were very relatable for me, so I think you got the idea of everything I said during our interview." This researcher contacted the remaining seven participants and asked for their feedback, but they chose to not respond.

It was possible participants did not provide feedback because the study results resonated with their experiences. Following this hypothesis, participants may have believed there was little to correct or modify and therefore did not respond. Participants' anxiety or discomfort revisiting painful parts of their lives may have been another explanation why they did not respond to the initial invitation to member check or did not comment on the results. Sharing their story during the interview or having access to the written results may have brought suppressed thoughts and feelings into awareness. Some participants defended against uncomfortable emotions by declining to participate in member checking, an idea elaborated on in Chapter X.

<div align="center">Limitations and Generalizability</div>

Due to the small sample size and recruitment of participants from Chicago, Illinois, and its surrounding suburbs, the data obtained from this study are not able to be generalized. Study participants were not representative of the larger population. The purpose of this study, as it is for any study that utilizes grounded theory methods, was to obtain a full and rich understanding of participants' experiences. The data from this study

can be used as a beginning point for additional research on the experience of children transitioning from a heterosexual family to a gay or lesbian stepfamily.

Statement on Protecting the Rights of Human Subjects

All participants were informed of the potential for some degree of risk involved when volunteering in this study. Although potential physical or legal risks were not anticipated, potential risks included participants' feeling uncomfortable or distressed when recalling and sharing personal history and experiences. If participants experienced severe emotional distress, this researcher was prepared to provide referrals to community mental health clinics. No referrals were requested or made.

To reduce further risk, research participants were not members of a clinical population and were 18 years of age or older. Participants selected for the study were not obligated to participate in the interview and had voluntarily agreed to participate. No friends or relatives were interviewed.

Regarding the interview itself, the following steps were followed to protect participants' well-being. Signed consent forms (Appendix C) were obtained from participants prior to beginning their interview. To ensure that participants fully understood the consent form, this researcher read the consent form aloud and asked participants to describe their understanding of the study and their participation. At the beginning of the interview, participants were reminded they could stop the interview at any time for any reason, without consequence. All participants completed their interview without breaks.

Signed consent forms were kept in a secure file cabinet, accessible only by this researcher. To ensure confidentiality completed transcripts and this researcher's memos and notes did not contain any identifying information. These documents were numerically coded and kept separate from signed consent forms, also in a secure file cabinet. A transcriptionist, bound by confidentiality, was hired. The transcriptionist did not have access to names or identities of participants. The audiotapes were erased after transcription. All data collected will be destroyed five years after the dissertation is approved. No identifying participant data were given in the results of the study. All participants were informed they could receive, upon their request, a written summary or verbal report of the study's results.

CHAPTER IV

INTRODUCTION TO THE RESULTS

Each participant's story is unique, but this study is a summary representing a collective voice for all 20 participants. The study results are grouped into four major chronological categories. These categories describe experiences of participants who transitioned from living in a heterosexual family to living in a same-sex stepfamily. These participants experienced a change in the sexual orientation of their parent after one parent disclosed he was gay or she was lesbian. Participants were subsequently reared by the now gay parent and new partner in a same-sex stepfamily. Participants experienced changed relationship and household configurations when they transitioned from one household to another. Chaos and strained family relationships stemmed from marital distress in the intact family and continued or intensified for a significant time period after. Parental secrecy about being gay or lesbian and involved in a same-sex relationship flourished. These factors negatively impacted participants' ability to reflect and integrate the relational and structural changes they experienced transitioning from one family home to another.

Although not every participant reported having a happy childhood with parental bliss and pleasurable family encounters, a fair number of participants began life, for the most part, feeling cared for by their parents. Household stability, positive parental and

parent-participant relationships created the foundation for participants' growth and established a sense of safety in the world and with others. Regardless of how longstanding or severe any parental conflict was, deteriorating parental relationships and household upheaval wreaked havoc on participants' lives, shattered whatever sense of stability they felt, and negatively impacted the care they received. Regardless of whether participants were cognizant of marital trouble, they were shocked and deeply distressed when told their parents were going to divorce. The category Creation of Inner Stability highlights what life was like living with their parents before they divorced and how the participants felt and responded to being told their parents were to divorce. This category comprises eight properties: A Good Enough Beginning, Family Routines to Count On, Being Cared For, Signs of Trouble, Chaos Begins, One Parent Protected Me from the Other, I Didn't Feel Cared For, and Caught Off Guard.

The category Loss of Family Constellation follows. This category explores the period of time beginning with participants or parent moving out of the intact nuclear family home to living in a single-parent family home with noncustodial visitation to living in a same-sex stepfamily. Significant disruption occurred during this time period. Losses and changes were prominent, be they relational, tangible, or economic. These losses and changes were felt not only by participants but were also evident to others outside the family. Family relationships and routines, once so prominent and growth promoting, evaporated. Participants were no longer contained and nurtured by the parental unit, and the predictability of the household and their development was compromised. Participants who had positive relationships with parent(s), extended family

members, or significant others received some buffering from the strains due to changing family circumstances and living arrangements. Participants experienced the loss of their parents' relationship and witnessed the beginning of their parents' new relationships. Ambiguity surrounding the nature of the parent's new intimate gay relationship and household composition was prominent. Properties of Family Changes Begin and Cause Strain, Losing Family Members, Disorganization and Changed Relationships, Financial Changes, Care from Others, and Parents' Dating are included in this category.

The category Chaos Intensifies During Family Reorganization describes participants' life living in the same-sex stepfamily. Parental secrecy or vagueness regarding their homosexuality and the nature of the new household left participants bereft and confused. Unresolved conflictual relationships with parents persisted and often deteriorated even more during this time period. The new family and household routines were not stable enough for participants to regain the sense of safety and security they had while in the intact family household. Participants spoke of extremes in parenting; they were neglected by their parents and left alone or were not trusted and were under too much control.

For most, living with their stepparent was difficult—at times intensely antagonistic—but a small group had a warm relationship and benefited from contact with that person. Participants had no frame of reference to draw from and no narrative to speak from to help them understand the changes in their parent, family composition, and relationships. Participants did not know other gay families. They felt different and had few, if any, people to help them process what they were going through. Properties of

Recognition of the Same-Sex Stepfamily, Tumultuous Beginning, Financial Strains, Being Alone, Relationship with Stepparent, Losing Connection with Parent(s), and Keeping Quiet depict participants' thoughts, feelings, relationships, and experiences while living in this family.

Some participants had an easier time adjusting to their parents divorce and moving into a same-sex stepfamily, but overall the category Stabilization captures participants' efforts and success in regaining control of themselves and their lives. Participants reflected on their lives, reached out to others, and made efforts to understand who they were and how their experiences shaped them. They had goals and future plans. Increased maturity and cognitive abilities allowed participants to consider and sometimes understand their parents' behaviors and viewpoint. Participants had more influence in how they wanted to interact with their family, and made efforts to improve or limit relationships with their parents, stepparents, and extended family members. The properties in this category are Isolations Ends, I Struggled but Survived, Increased Understanding and Empathy, and It's My Life Now.

CHAPTER V

CREATION OF INNER STABILITY

That was the only home we knew, we grew up there, it was warm.

Well, living with my mom and my dad it was, well, towards the
beginning of my life it was great.

The category Creation of Inner Stability describes participants' life living with

their parents and how participants felt and responded to being told their parents were

going to divorce. This category comprises eight properties: A Good Enough Beginning,

Family Routines to Count On, Being Cared For, Signs of Trouble, Chaos Begins, One

Parent Protected Me from the Other, I Didn't Feel Cared For, and Caught Off Guard.

This chapter describes how family relationships, parental ministrations, and

household routines fostered participants' growth and development. Although not every

participant had clear or conflict free early memories of living with their parents, several

felt safe and secure living in their home and felt bonded to one another. However, as

participants were exposed to the decline of their parents' relationship, earlier feelings of

being cared for and connected to each other abated. Participants went from having some

sense of safety in the world and with others to a state of uncertainty. They felt frightened,

alone, and confused. Hostility and instability permeated the household and parental

relationship and participants' quality of life suffered. News of their parents' decision to

divorce was traumatic, except in cases where participants were exposed to parental violence or were abused themselves. Then the news brought relief and hope for a more peaceful living arrangement.

A Good Enough Beginning

The 20 participants in this study can be roughly divided into two groups: those who lived with their mother and father from birth until approximately age 5 years and those who lived with their mother and father from birth until approximately age 13 years. Participants whose experiences did not fit into these two general groupings ranged from living with their parents for only a few months to living with them for 8 years. Most participants who lived with their parents until adolescence recalled their early to mid-childhood as a generally positive time in their life. For the most part, they thought of themselves as having been well-adjusted children. At that point in time they were generally pleased with both life inside the family and the quality of relationships with and between their parents. Participants came to view their parents—individually and as a couple—and their family life as "normal." Normal meant not feeling or being different, and some connected this to having a mother and father.

If the parental divorce occurred when participants were young (for this study young was defined as around age 5), the divorce became a fact they had always known, with few specific memories of the intact family or the divorce itself. These participants' actual memories of living with mother and father were few and faded; in fact, several did not remember living as a family unit. They recalled only fragmented details of the house

they lived in, family vacations taken, or holidays spent together. These participants stated it was difficult for them to discern what they actually remembered versus stories they had been told by others.

All participants felt some connection to other members of their family and knew their being in the family, regardless of how long, meant they were part of a larger group. This was true even with participants who received little parental care or witnessed parental arguments and hostility. Memories of the intact family unit represented their previous life, and as such, contained emotion and meaning unique to each participant. These memories established a tie that united past and present. One participant speculated he would always remember the address and phone number of his first house, as it connected him to his mother, who later abruptly and painfully left when she ended her marriage to his father. He held on to the specific details of his family house, as this memory represented so much more, namely, his early relationship with his mother.

For some, the parental relationship was not overly problematic nor did it draw too much of participants' attention. These participants felt secure enough in their family, and this meant psychological attention was available for their investment. These early cohesive experiences helped participants feel safe and secure and established a foundation for their growth and development. This was illustrated by one participant's comment she and her sibling were "probably off just doing our own thing" predivorce. She navigated the developmental tasks of childhood with a burgeoning sense of accomplishment and success. Good enough early experiences, relationships, and family

interactions created expectancy for ongoing attentive parental care several participants anticipated would continue.

Family Routines to Count On

For a fair number of participants, family routines were established and set the tone for life in the family. Routines were something these participants counted on and therefore provided them with a sense of parental and household stability and reliability. Daily routines contributed to participants' sense of cohesion and security. Participants felt they were part of a family that functioned effectively. One participant recalled, despite having occasional sibling arguments, "everything ran smoothly."

Particular days of the week held special significance. The regularity of preparing for and going to school was one of the most prominent routines for a number of participants and their family. Their parent or parents frequently took them to and from school, and after school participants played with their friends. Days often ended with dinner as a family, followed by completing homework or watching television before bedtime. Participants learned from their parents. They received help from their parent with school assignments, had extra coaching and practice with extracurricular sports, and learned to speak the native language of the parent.

Through norms in daily living, participants came to know what their parents expected of them, whether it was to help with housework, complete schoolwork, or strive for success. Family rules and norms were communicated in a manner that allowed

participants to know what behaviors and attitudes were and were not acceptable. This helped participants feel secure; knowing their parents were in charge protected them.

Participants learned about themselves and each other through participating in daily routines. Although sometimes taken for granted, routines allowed participants to develop a distinct sense of self and other along with guidelines for the roles each person was to play. This was illustrated by one participant, who described this time period of her life as going to school, helping out at home, and ending the day doing homework while her parents watched television or "whatever people do after work and school." Additionally, routines helped transmit family values from parent to participant. Being raised to put the family first and to be loving and respectful towards each other was a common family value transmitted through routines.

Even though a few participants spoke of this as being a stressful period in their life; an even greater number of participants knew what to expect from others, cooperated with what they needed to do themselves, and had dependable relationships with their mother and father. In addition to there being little participant-parent conflict, there was very little conflict between their parents. Occasional parental arguments had little impact on participants. Overall, for many participants, the structure and predictability of family life, parental interactions, and the particular relationship with each parent fostered participants' development.

Being Cared For

Participants whose parents divorced when participants were very young had few memories of life with their parents, whereas the majority of participants whose parents divorced when the participants were early adolescents felt cared for and reported their needs were met by one or both parents. The latter participants felt important, and several connected this feeling to actual physical care they received from their parents or to being able to cuddle close to them when they were younger.

Some participants looked back and recalled this period as one of relative tranquility between themselves and their parent or parents. Several reported a special relationship with one parent. Participants and parents enjoyed being together. Special memories of fun times together remained and brought nostalgia as time passed. Whether it was physical or emotional care, a special bond developed between participant and parent. One said, "He was my daddy when I was little and I remember him putting me on his shoulders walking to the store, I remember being little, fishing."

Another reported, "I liked the growing up from baby to puberty." He elaborated how the best memory of his younger years was resting on his mother's lap and hearing her heartbeat as he fell asleep. He felt surrounded and protected by his mother's care. Extended family members were often involved and some took on a caretaking role. Whether extended family members lived nearby, across the country, or on a different continent, warm relationships with extended family members added to participants' sense of being loved and cared for.

Although the families' possessions varied in degree and quantity, the family, for the most part, had enough economic, housing, and emotional resources to foster participants' development. Whether it was attributed to having parents who were employed or to extended family members who helped the family financially, almost all participants had a stable place to live—the majority in a home—clothes to wear, and toys to play with. Some had their own car to drive, or attended a private school. Participants' birthdays were celebrated and there were family outings of going to the zoo, movies, or museums. Participants' statements that "I was very pampered, I would say" or "I was very well taken care of" revealed family circumstances and the way many of them felt during this period.

Signs of Trouble

An end to these blissful years approached. The majority of participants noticed increased parental irritability. Their parents appeared unhappy and communicated less with them than before. Anger was more palpable in the home. Participants heard screaming and arguing, saw their parents in foul moods, and either witnessed actual violence or heard threats of violence. They saw their parents throw objects at one another and observed their parents manipulate and control each other.

> We were watching TV one night and my father was saying something about Nixon and he went into the bathroom and closed the door. My mother is sitting there, she went back to the dinner table—and I'm watching this—she picks up this heavy porcelain ashtray and she walks out to the bathroom. She opens the door and there is my father sitting on the toilet and she goes, "Once again, we do not say that word in this house," meaning Republican or something like that, and slings that ashtray at him. Bing, right in the head. Closes the door, looks at me,

smiles. I mean it was just, wow. Eventually he'd come out and he would get really quiet and go back and sit on the sofa. And then it would be quiet for a while.

Participants noticed a change in the emotional climate in the home. Participants commented on the serious tone both in the house and between the parents. Having fun together as a family began to disappear and family interactions became more rote and scheduled. Parental energy went to dutifully completing what needed to be done, taking children to doctor's appointments or to school; at the same time, family fun time and spontaneous pleasurable interactions decreased.

Some participants were brought into the conflict itself when one parent told them about the other parent's transgression. They were informed of parental alcohol abuse, violent acts, poor money management, or extramarital affairs. Some realized one parent tried to cover up or minimize marital difficulties. One participant noted, "Mom would hustle us off somewhere when Dad was not doing well."

Some participants reported they kept busy with their own lives, friends, and school activities. Although these participants knew their parents argued, they did not want to know about the parents or family problems. They constructed an alternative reality to maintain the illusion nothing had changed with the significant others in their lives. Denial and other defenses helped these participants believe all was well and feel safe. This allowed them to maintain an internal sense of cohesion and stability despite parental and household upheaval.

Sometimes differences between their parents' relationship and their friends' parents' relationships were observed and prompted participants to realize something was not quite right with their parents' relationship. One participant witnessed how his parents

tried to dominate and control each other and found this lacking in other relationships he observed. As he got older he thought, "It didn't make sense; you obviously didn't really like each other . . . and then I noticed it was fake, it was fake. Yeah, and then I realized there was no family there."

Ultimately, many participants came to the conclusion their parents were not happy and their relationship was not going well. Whether this nascent awareness was attributed to increased parental acrimony and conflict or to participants' own maturity and growing sophistication in interpersonal relationships, they could no longer deny something was wrong. They did not reach out for support or guidance and did not tell anyone how they felt or if they were worried by what they witnessed and heard. "That was fairly common for me to just be quiet, to just shut up and be quiet until it [parent argument] all passed." Their silence illustrates a defensive effort to minimize or disavow their uneasiness regarding the deteriorating parental relationship. However, for a small group of participants, life in the home and the parents' relationship did not change or reveal any indication of trouble. In those homes, parents appeared as happy as before, and participants continued to feel the same sense of well-being and security as before. They did not see early signs of strain; rather, they learned of the marital trouble only after the parents separated.

Parents' interests, friendships, and love object changed. New relationships began and caused tension in the marital relationship. Some participants noticed their parent spent more time with others or with a particular person outside the family. Occasionally, they were introduced to their parent's new friend, mostly referred to as a friend but, in

one instance, as a distant member of the family. At this point, many participants did not

believe the parent's new relationship and outside interests caused any change to the

parent and participant relationship or participants' sense of stability in the family. For

those families where the parent was involved in an extramarital romantic relationship,

participants were not aware of the nature of this relationship, did not pay it any

significant amount of attention, nor were they concerned about it in any way. Participants

did not attribute any growing parental tension to this relationship.

Chaos Begins

While there were participants for whom life in the family home was filled with

conflict and chaos from the beginning of the parental relationship, as time passed chaos

was evident in the house and family system for the remaining participants. Family rules

and routines once so prominent began to disappear. One or both parents had trouble

parenting and this negatively impacted participants' sense of being taken care of and

protected.

Participants were now privy to a regression in parents' behavior. Parents stayed

out late, associated with problematic friends, and spent money impulsively. One

participant recalled a time when her father stole items from his work. He brought them

home, and his wife, the participant's mother, exploded in anger and disbelief. Parental

fights escalated and participants were uneasy and uncomfortable with what they

witnessed.

Parental use of alcohol or other drugs began or increased. Participants were exposed to parental drug use in various manners. Drug paraphernalia was found in the home and parents brought friends home and drank or used drugs together. Participants were uncomfortable with this change in their parents' behavior and some coped by staying away.

> My dad used to be a hardcore alcoholic; you could smell the alcohol through his skin even when he took a bath. He would sweat it out and it would come out through his skin. And he would be like, "I just took a bath," and we would be like, "Daddy you still stink, you need to be desanitized and dipped in some bleach and have your body cleaned out."

Parental supervision was lacking as their judgment gave way. Family rules became lax. Some participants spent more time alone or with friends, others tried not to be home, hoping to avoid impending upheaval. Participants had too much freedom despite needing containment and limits previously provided by parental rules.

> I would do whatever struck my fancy. . . . Instead of going home from school I would go with my friends. . . . If I wanted to do drugs, that was fine. If I wanted to bring people home and have sex in the house, that was fine. If I wanted to do whatever I wanted to do as long as it didn't kill me or light the place down, that was fine.

Family relationships began to suffer as parental conflict began to contaminate the household. At times this turned parent against parent, parent against child, and sibling against sibling. Conflict was abundant and parents were described as emotional, angry, and out of control. One parent and participant regularly left the family home only to return: "It was like back and forth, back and forth, my mom would like, they will go back, stay a couple of months. I think one time we stayed almost 5 years." At times siblings bonded together to care for and protect one another.

For some participants, the beginning of a parent's same-sex extramarital affair brought chaos into the home. These participants were exposed to extreme neglect and abuse during the time their parent was involved in the affair.

> When I was 4 or 5 years old, we'd go over to her friend's house. They were alleged lesbian lovers. She was a married woman with a family and while I wasn't being watched by my mom this woman's husband was molesting my brother and I.

> My mom had gone out; I don't know if she went out with [her girlfriend] that day or if she went out with her sister and her mother. I don't know what my father had planned but I had come home from my part-time job and he had overdosed by taking Xanax. And I think, I just remember vaguely them walking him down the front stairs and putting him in the car and taking him to the emergency room. I don't know if at that time they pumped his stomach but he survived that.

Sometimes conflict was related to the parent's effort to deny the homosexuality, causing strains on the marriage: "My dad was a big alcoholic when they were married, because he was hiding who he really was. He told me about that." Although for a very small group of others, the parent's same-sex attraction brought a less tumultuous end to the marriage and an open disclosure to the children.

One Parent Protected Me from the Other

Being at home did not always feel safe. Parental behaviors and growing tension in the family incited a sense of fear in many participants. In some families, the non-offending parent tried to intervene to reestablish the now non-existent structure and protect the participant. For some, this meant one parent filled a void or tried to take charge when the other parent was emotionally unstable or absent. Participants were ushered out of the house when tension was high and received special caretaking from the

non-offending parent. Participants witnessed the non-offending parent's efforts to soften criticism or to restate harsh words from the other parent. Parents also tried to get the other parent out of the house in an effort to separate family members and to protect participants. Many times the other parent was unable to allay participants' fears. Non-offending parents' efforts to improve their situation did not always benefit or reassure participants. Participants spent more unsupervised time with the unstable parent when the non-offending parent worked or attended school for an advanced degree.

I Didn't Feel Cared For

The overall feeling of being bonded together as a family lessened as participants felt a change in the quality of their relationship with their parents. They began to question how much they were loved, wanted, or viewed as special by their parents. Participants were scared and confused. Some experienced parental care resulting from a now-perfunctory parent-child relationship rather than from the parent's genuine enjoyment of being together or interest in the participants' well-being. And still others could not bond with their parent and felt uncomfortable being with them. One participant described his relationship with his father: As he got older, he realized more and more how little he felt connected to his father. He felt criticized and never able to please his father.

> His presence a lot of times made me uncomfortable and it wasn't just his personality. I always felt judged, I don't know why. It never affected my behavior but I always felt judged when he was there. . . . I never could feel a relationship with him. Growing up, as young as I can remember, it was never emotional, it was just cerebral.

The amount of time participants and parents spent together changed**.** Parents worked, attended school at night, and were absent from the home when they traveled

away for business trips. Participants felt their parent's physical absence. Some were

relieved to have a respite from parental conflict; most felt alone and sad. If the family did

spend extended amounts of time together, while taking a vacation, for example, they felt

strain and angst.

The acrimonious parental relationship was now affecting the parent-participant

relationship. Some believed when one parent was upset with the other parent, the first

parent took it out on the participant. In some instances parental conflict spilled over onto

participants, and they were yelled at more than before or they were physically hit.

Participants went on guard and were hypervigilant. They developed various safety

measures to keep out of harm's way during parental arguments or parental irritability.

They learned to sense danger and rising tension and to stay away from that parent. In

other cases, participants yelled back or initiated an argument with their parent—

sometimes to protect themselves, sometimes to protect their other parent.

> I heard the struggle that was going on and I just didn't feel like taking it anymore.
> I opened up my door and my mom and dad were pretty much going at it. I
> remember going after my father because he was basically on top of my mother
> and with his hands around her neck.

In the most extreme cases, participants experienced traumatic or permanent

abandonment by a parent. Whether it was a parent's suicide attempt or the dramatic

departure of a parent, participants' sense of stability in their most primary relationship

ended.

Caught Off Guard

Regardless if participants recognized signs of marital strife or remained unaware

of their parents' problems, being told about their parents' divorce caught many

participants off guard. These participants were terribly shocked, for they did not

anticipate a divorce would occur. Many cried and screamed hysterically. The specifics of

the conversation could not always be remembered, but many remembered their thoughts,

feelings, and reactions clearly.

> I remember exactly when they told me and my brother that they were going to get divorced. However they explained it, I just remember knowing they weren't pulling my leg, they were basically, they were really going to split up. For me it was just, I just remember thinking it was really hard to imagine life without having a mom and a dad together, it was really strange.

> My brother had a TV in his room and we were watching television. And my father came in and I don't remember what he said, I remember he told us and I just cried and cried and cried. I was just crying hysterically. I went out and talked to my mom about it because I thought this can't be right. If I talk to her then I will find out that it's all not happening. And so then I went out to talk to her and she was just crying and crying, so then I knew that it was really happening.

> Others, who were given minimal explanation for the divorce or were not told

anything until after the divorce was finalized, came to their own conclusions regarding

why their parent was leaving or why they were moving. For some participants the reasons

their parents divorced were not obvious and the news confused them; others pieced

together the divorce was in response to parental conflict; and still others thought their

parents departure was a rejection of them. "I was saddened by it because I didn't know

why my father left. I thought he chose to leave." Another stated:

> I don't know, I just would, I don't know how divorces go because obviously I hadn't had one myself but they just, I assume that people argue or talk about it at least before it happened which I don't even, I don't remember that happening, I don't remember them disagreeing, I don't remember them fighting. I don't

remember anything about the immediate times before they split up. It was just normal stuff. My parents split up but at the time we didn't know why. It was weird. I don't know how it was even said to us. If I try to think about it, I don't even remember the day we moved. I don't remember things about it. . . . We never really talked about it. . . . But we didn't hear about anything until it was already done.

Yet others, perhaps too young to understand the potential ramifications of the conflict at home, were also confused about the divorce or the parent's absence. They heard the words from their parents but were too young to understand what the words actually meant. "There wasn't really a conversation, but I was 5, like I don't think I got it. I didn't really understand I don't think." One participant, whose mother left when he was 5, remembered the specifics of her departure; however he disavowed his emotional reactions.

> I was just a little boy and she stooped down to my level. I remember it very clearly and the car was right behind her, a white car. And she said "I'm going to go to the store." And I said, "Can I go with you?" "No." And that was it. . . . I was so young to understand the trauma of it, I think. It wasn't until later I began to feel that sense of loss, but back then it just wasn't seemingly a big deal.

And still another, age 4 when her parents divorced, illustrates efforts to undo the changes happening in the home.

> This specific image I have is standing at the top of the landing of our stairs and Dad brings this bed out . . . I remember demanding he bring the bed back. I was like, "Dad, you better bring that bed back here in 15 minutes, bring it back." So I think I didn't really understand if I was demanding he bring the bed back in 15 minutes nor did I understand he was moving out.

Quite possibly she speaks for those too young to remember the utter confusion and fear felt when family relationships and the household composition changed as they saw their parent move out of the house.

On the other hand, if parents maintained some sense of their earlier ways of being with the participants, and the immediate living arrangements provided some resemblance to life in the intact family, participants had less than traumatic reactions and inner turmoil.

> The transition between moving and stuff like that I don't really remember just because it wasn't anything out of the ordinary. They [her parents] weren't weird with us or anything, so I guess I don't remember anything specifically. We thought it was just going to be, we would still have both of our parents, they just wouldn't live together.

Conclusion

This category, Creation of Inner Stability, describes the period in time when participants lived with their biological parents through the time they were informed their parents were to divorce. Most participants experienced a stable beginning and their needs were met. The structure of the intact family and positive parental relationships fostered participants' growth and allowed them to build trust in others.

Uncertainty and hostility filled the household as the parental relationship deteriorated. News of the divorce, despite obvious parental conflict, shocked and deeply saddened participants. Concerns about their safety and well-being and fear of losing contact with their parents occurred.

Properties in this category include A Good Enough Beginning, Family Routines to Count On, Being Cared For, Signs of Trouble, Chaos Begins, One Parent Protected Me from the Other, I Didn't Feel Cared For, and Caught Off Guard.

CHAPTER VI

LOSS OF FAMILY CONSTELLATION

There was never one moment we didn't have something. And then
all of a sudden it seemed like when my parents divorced
everything had like ended.

Something had died in our family.

The second category, Loss Of Family Constellation, follows. This chapter
describes a period in time filled with uncertainty, change, and loss as well as a taxing
transition into a same-sex stepfamily. Properties of Family Changes Begin and Cause
Strain, Losing Family Members, Disorganization and Changed Relationships, Financial
Changes, Care from Others, and Parents' Dating are included in this category.

Participants grieved the ending of their parent's relationship and life as they knew
it. The parental divorce did not result in improved family relationships or household
circumstances. Ongoing parental conflict negatively impacted the participant and parent
relationship. Participants experienced many relational, household, and financial changes
when they or their parent moved out of the intact nuclear family home and began their
life in a single-parent family home with noncustodial visitation. These changes were
significant and many times long lasting.

All too often the custodial parent and new household were not stable and many
participants found themselves with less parental guidance, protection, or care.

Participants lost contact with extended family members and this was especially troubling if it resulted in decreased family support whereas others benefited from care and concern supplied by significant others.

Participants were deeply concerned their relationship and contact with their noncustodial parent would suffer, and ultimately this was the case. As participants grew, maintaining visitation schedules and going back and forth between their parents' homes was difficult. Participants wanted to spend more time with friends and this often conflicted with scheduled visitation. When conflict or pleasurable interactions occurred in noncustodial parent and participant relationships, participants modified visitation arrangements to meet their needs.

This period also led to new adults in their lives when parents began dating relationships. Parental dating resulted in awareness of previously repressed parental sexuality, even more so when the parent began a same-sex relationship. Many parents were secretive about their same-sex attraction and did not disclose they were gay or lesbian. Ambiguity and confusion about the nature of the parent's new relationship were prominent, yet participants' development led them to question the nature of their parent's relationship. Strained family relationships, parental secrecy, chaotic living arrangements, and participants' reactions to living in a gay or lesbian headed household were not conducive to help participants reflect on or articulate their experiences, thoughts, and feelings about the changed sexual orientation of their parent and their new and different household configuration.

Family Changes Begin and Cause Strain

Participants experienced significant changes in their lives, relationships, living arrangements, and routines as they transitioned from living in an intact nuclear family to living in a single-parent family with noncustodial parent visitation. These changes were in rapid succession and caused a great deal of turmoil. Life as they knew it was gone. They were destabilized by the ending of their parents' marital relationship and loss of what they had with both parents. "Something was going to have to give in my life. I thought, 'Oh, no, I am in this perfect little family—or what I thought perfect was—and then I am derailed.'" They experienced upheaval and had doubts about what would happen to them and their family. One participant reflected on this immediate time after her parents' divorce:

> It just rocked my world. . . . Everything I felt safe and secure about was no longer safe and secure. So that was the first part of it is, it shakes your foundation entirely. Then there was all of this wondering what's going to happen now and how will my life be.

Participants either moved out of their family homes to new living arrangements or witnessed one parent move out and they stayed in the home. For many of those who remembered this period, their parent's departure occurred within a few days after being told of the divorce and participants were overcome with sorrow when separated from their parent.

> Oh that was terrible. God was that terrible. Well, it was being ripped away from, well, all you've ever known. Plus we are being traumatized, we moved 200 miles away. And it just tore our [siblings] hearts out every time we had to leave my dad.

In contrast, a few others did not have an intense negative reaction. This occurred in families where participants were exposed to parental violence or were abused themselves. Participants often felt great relief to be separated from the abusive parent.

> My mom, she didn't make a lot of money, but she ended up getting an apartment for myself and her. We didn't have very much when it came to furniture or anything like that. If I remember right, for the first year we were there we had a couch and a television in the living room…And in my room we actually didn't have very much either, my father refused to even give me a bed. When it was just the two of us I felt a lot happier. I felt like I didn't have to worry about as much.

Another participant remembered this conversation with his mother:

> He [Dad] was there [when I left] and I came home and I was like, "Where's [Dad]?" "Gone, gone, you never have to worry about him again." And I was like, "Oh, okay. Well, can I have the room, can I have his room?" It was a relief. It was like ooh, ooh, party started, that kind of thing.

A small number of participants no longer had contact with their noncustodial parent whether by parental abandonment or interference from the custodial parent and prevention of contact.

As time progressed, many participants changed residences in what seemed to them to be on a too-frequent basis. One participant stated "In my life, because of having divorced parents, I think I moved 12 times." A small number of participants moved either to a better neighborhood or from an apartment into a house; however, most moved to a comparable or slightly worse living arrangement. These moves were often prompted by parent's changed financial status and led to a change in participants' lifestyle as well. While some participants moved within the same town and therefore did not have to change schools, many changed schools and friends, with repeated beginning and ending relationships and routines.

> My mother, she just couldn't keep us in a place, so we were always moving from place to place. It was just interesting because I could never figure out why we kept on moving and why that kept happening . . . it felt like once you had everything set up you were packing up and going again.

Some experienced not only changes in their own residence, but the noncustodial parent's living arrangements too. "My father went from living with my uncle to living with my aunt to living in an apartment to living with my aunt again to buying a house, to getting married and buying a house."

Having their living arrangements change heightened participants' feelings of anger, tension, and uncertainty. They began to dread future changes, as their primary relationships and living arrangements no longer provided a solid safe base to draw from and rely on as a source of permanence, direction, and guidance. Participants' inner world became as unsettled as their external world. One participant described this as, "I think I was just so stressed out about everything. There was just a lot going on." Another commented:

> I was mad a lot. Just mad about the whole situation. I was mad I didn't have either of my parents anymore. . . . I was mean to my little brother even though he was really the only person I had but at the time I didn't know. I was just mad.

However not all participants had negative reactions to the changes. These participants enjoyed making new friends and being in new scenarios. Some felt better when they turned to others for support; however, very few participants received counseling. Talking and being with friends with divorced parents helped them feel less alienated and different from others. They attributed their present day flexibility and independence resulting from their adaptation to different people and situations.

Losing Family Members

Regardless if visitation arrangements were established quickly and participants had frequent and predictable contact with their noncustodial parent, concern about losing contact with him or her was apparent.

> My friend's telling me, "Oh yeah, first your dad's going to say he'll see you every weekend and all the time and then it will be every other weekend and then it will be once a month and then you will never see him again." Devastating. Devastating.

Those who had a joint physical custody arrangement enjoyed frequent parental contact, "It was great to see both parents when I was a kid." Others experienced decreased contact immediately after the separation or divorce.

> We only did every other weekend, we spent the weekend with him and then in between those weekends, weekends we didn't spend with him, we spent Friday with him and just had dinner and then we would go home. So, we didn't spend a whole lot of time.

Another participant shared how he felt after his mother left: "We didn't have hardly any contact at all, from age 5 to 17 we had very little contact. I think there was this general numbness, then compounded numbness because of my mom."

> Very few spoke of the other parent's helping them maintain the connection, but when he or she did, it was something participants noted and remembered.

> I remember a lot while I was a child really missing my father. I remember really missing him when I was a kid. I remember certain times just saying, "I want to see Dad. I really want to see dad now." And then she would drive me over to his house on just some random day that wasn't a visitation day or anything. She was good about it.

Maintaining contact with the noncustodial parent often meant the participant went back and forth to both parents' homes and this brought its own unique set of troubles. Participants went back and forth from parent to parent and some felt disrupted by not

having a permanent place to call home. They had new routines and a new living arrangement to adjust to. Some attempted to recreate aspects of the original family or life in their family home as they once knew it.

> I built my own room, actually. It [father's place] was a one-bedroom apartment and I had a twin bed, which could have been built up into a bunk bed. . . . But instead of putting up a bunk bed I put . . . a sheet across that and stapled it to the wall. So I had a little square in the living room that was my room. So I built myself a room. It was my own space. I liked that room. It was a nice room.

A small group made a distinction between feeling disruption in their routines versus feeling unsettled and uneasy themselves. For these participants, parental relationships buffered the strain of adjusting to the new family circumstances and living arrangements.

> I mean the lifestyle was different just because we had to go between these two houses all the time, so it was different. . . . I think their main goal at that point was just to make sure we were happy. . . . I guess it's kind of weird, but basically it was kind of like a similar life just instead of being together it was being at Dad's house one part of the week and being at Mom's house the other. But otherwise they both seem to love us the same and it wasn't really different as far as our relationship from them I guess in that way.

As participants grew and had more involvement with their own peer group, going from one parent's home to another meant participants missed out on social activities and time with friends if these plans conflicted with regular parental visitation. Some made friends at both parents' homes whereas others felt isolated and alone when visiting their other parent, not knowing anyone or having anyone to play with.

> I was sort of left out when I was with my mom and missing half of what was going on and just really uncomfortable. I felt really out of place and bored and kind of lonely when I was with my dad.

As participants' relationships with their noncustodial parent changed, so did their attempts to alter custody arrangements. Although some participants' quest to have more

To defend against feelings of profound rejection, several developed an attitude of indifference as well, and both parent and participant withdrew from each other.

Some participants spoke of the noncustodial parent, often the father, not being able to or not knowing how to raise and care for them. Some believed their parents' marriage, particularly the influence of one parent over another, created the illusion of being parented by two parents. Having unsupervised contact with the noncustodial parent proved frightening and overwhelming and led to increased distress. "I started to have panic attacks because every weekend I was with my father and I didn't want to be there." Another said,

> I was 5 and I don't know what I did but he [father] locked me in the closet for an hour or so and turned off the light. I don't really remember too much but I do remember him getting mad at me and he threw me in the closet.

Sometimes the participant acted as a caretaker to their noncustodial parent. This had ramifications on participants' well-being and efforts to psychologically separate from their parent.

> His house was only clean when I came over to clean it. His dishes were only done when I did the dishes. He was only prepared for work, he only looked good for an interview when I picked out the suit, when I said he needed to buy a new suit. He only had matching socks when I matched the socks for him. That is also a very difficult situation. I never saw it as odd . . . until I was in high school. I just felt like he, it was my responsibility to take care of him, not him to take care of me.

Participants having warm relationships with their noncustodial parent wanted to spend more time together. They felt comfortable being with this parent and occasionally used visitation as respite away from the custodial parent, especially when the relationship was conflictual. Weekend visits or summer vacations together went too fast, and again participants took matters into their own hands. They drove themselves to the noncustodial

parent's home to spend more time together. They liked the freedom to see this parent when they wanted, and the relationship benefited. A few ultimately went to live with the other parent.

Siblings were separated when one changed residence to live with a particular parent. Occasionally, loyalty battles between parents and children resulted, a side effect of parental conflict. However it occurred, having a sibling live in another home altered the amount of contact and relationship between siblings and participants, and the majority of participants experienced being away from their sibling as another major loss. A change in parental custody occurred when a sibling needed additional supervision, discipline, or direction from the noncustodial parent. In these circumstances participants were relieved to have less sibling contact and enjoyed the parental attention and calm household that resulted.

Disorganization and Changed Relationships

Parents and participants experienced destabilization in the immediate period after the divorce. Participants were not the only ones who had difficulty adjusting to the divorce and new circumstances. Usually the parent who initiated the divorce fared better than the other parent. Participants were exposed to their parent's grief, anger, and sorrow and sometimes this culminated in deterioration of the parent's ability to care for him or her as well as the participant. Many participants could not turn to their parent for support and comfort from their pain, nor could they talk to their parent about the divorce or the other parent. To defend against feelings of guilt or angst, participants were selective in

what they shared with their parents and did not talk about the other parent. If they shared

any information at all, they talked about what they did during the other parent's time

together in a factual manner.

> Whenever I would bring up my mom to my dad, he would go through this whole range of emotions. He would kind of smile and laugh and then it would turn to irritation and frustration and then he would get angry and cry. . . . It was tough to watch my dad cry about my mom . . . he wouldn't talk about it.

Sometimes participants lost contact with extended family members as well,

leaving them with little family support. At times roles were reversed and participants took

on a parenting role to the parent. One participant spoke of her mother's drug use and how

she told her mother "to get herself together." Another commented:

> My dad was a different person when my parents split up. He was different. I think he was probably depressed. I don't know. I can't imagine what the reason could be at the time, I mean if I think about it now I can think of lots of reasons why he was the way he was but at the time I didn't care why he was. I was just mad that he was.

Many participants were shocked, deeply confused, and traumatized by the

physical or emotional unavailability of their parent or parents. Parental absence was

obvious and shattered participants' earlier feelings of stability and security. "I think the

biggest impact that feels sort of sad to me is . . . my relationship with my parents because

I feel . . . betrayed by them that I wasn't protected."

They missed their parent deeply as the relationship deteriorated. Even though

some felt the physical absence more poignantly, others had a physical connection to their

parent or could access them easily in the case of noncustodial parents; nonetheless, the

relationship and care they received was different from before and many spoke of feeling

as if they were without a parent. "He [father] did cook us breakfast in the morning, it

wasn't like we were neglected by any means. But he just wasn't around like he used to be around, emotionally I suppose."

A very small number of participants were aware of their parent's effort to continue to provide as much love and stability as they had earlier, and this benefited participants greatly.

> I still think definitely at first it was like really hard, I mean it was just really different, really strange. But even though it was strange, again, I think really just the fact my mom and dad both, it was really obvious they both really care about us. I think that really helped us, sort of adjust to it easier, I guess, than if there would have been anything wrong going on.

Conflict with the custodial parent was due in part to participant's belief their parent was too protective and restrictive with them. Participants were scrutinized more, and they believed they had to account for their whereabouts more than others their age. They were frustrated and confused why they were not trusted. Some felt trapped and either the new living arrangements or the financial strains added to their sense of having little freedom. Some tried to maintain their autonomy and worked or participated in after-school activities and kept away from home. Although some speculated their parent was afraid of losing them, they resented this treatment and heated arguments were common.

> Like in high school I never figured out, she [mother] always kept a close watch on me as if I was going to run away or something. She was always just telling me I wasn't doing good enough in school and she just never seemed to trust me.

Custodial parent absences were common and participants were left to form their own conclusions where their parent was and why he or she was not home. Many missed having contact with their parent and were lonely and unhappy. They felt his or her absence made adjusting to the divorce even more difficult. Participants spent more time alone and were responsible for more of their own care. How the parent arranged for

alternative care for the participant and how this was communicated to the participant

buffered or heightened feeling alone or neglected. "I didn't particularly feel bad about it.

I realized very young my mom had to work, especially after divorcing my father. I guess

there's occasional disappointment in that, but it's not like she didn't spend time with us."

As another explained,

> We pretty much did what we wanted. Which is probably not good. We just came home and my dad wouldn't be home. . . . He was never around at home, hire us a babysitter or leave us pizza money. And I don't know where he went, with friends or whatever. And not having him be the same person in my life anymore to be there and talk to and stuff just made it even harder.

In the most conflictual custodial parent and participant relationship, participants

harbored strong negative feelings towards their parent while they waited for the right

time to move to the noncustodial parent's home. Sometimes this occurred at the end of a

school year, if the move would bring another change in school; sometimes the move

occurred when the other parent attained financial stability or a permanent living

arrangement conducive for the participant to live. One participant secretly moved out of

his mother's home to live with his father and did not inform her he was leaving.

> My dad had helped me move out when she was at work. . . . It is interesting because when I was 18, she came home one day and I had packed everything up and left the house. . . . I just didn't want to have her be there and have her yell at me as I'm walking out the door.

Siblings tried to compensate for missing parental structure, and their roles

expanded beyond their developmental level. In these instances, siblings looked out for

and protected participants. "Christmas one year he [sibling] gave us a large amount of

money, $100. We said 'Why are you giving us each $100?' We gave it back to him. We

knew he needed it."

Participants were thankful to have a sibling available to turn to. Others wished they were closer in age and believed that would have assuaged feeling disconnected from their family and made visitation less lonely or scary. "When all of that happened, I felt like Oh, thank God I have my siblings, and we became best friends. And if I didn't have a friend, I always had them."

Participants had to provide more care for their siblings, whether they felt equipped or not. The burden was heavy at times, although the desire to be of assistance was evident.

> I had so much responsibility. I was taking care of him [brother] all the time. From the time I was 10 years old I would get him off the bus right after school. We moved up here and I was with him all the time, babysitting all the time it was just the two of us. My mom was always, of course, she had to work but she was also going to school at night and it was just the two of us. Here we both had all of these feelings and didn't know what the hell was going on. I was kind of angry sometimes and then take it out on him and then I would feel guilt because he's disabled and here I am being a bitch.

Other times, siblings regressed and their internal chaotic world was reflected in how they treated each other. In these instances, siblings took their frustrations out on each other and their relationship became conflictual as well. Some participants were afraid of their sibling's threats or actual aggression.

> As we were growing up, I don't remember them from that young of an age, but I do remember them as we got older. He had a lot of problems . . . a lot of kids just kind of beat up on each other or wrestle each other but that doesn't usually go into the teenage years, which is what happened in our family.

In a fair number of cases, although the marriage ended, parental conflict did not. Many participants were involved in or aware of custody battles, shortages in child support payments, or other legal proceedings. Participants were exposed to a wide range of parent interactions, thoughts, and feelings toward one another. This ranged from one

parent openly criticizing the other parent to making off-putting references about one

another to interacting in a businesslike manner. Sometimes one parent was the primary

offender, other times both parents spoke freely about their dislike for each other. With

few exceptions, participants did not engage in parental conflicts. Participants were

relieved when there was minimal parental conflict or when established conflict decreased.

When conflict persisted, they were angry and resented being put in the middle. This

added tension and hampered the participant and parent relationship.

Occasionally what one parent said about the other resonated with participants and

drew them away from one parent and closer to the other. Although this scenario may

have begun in the intact family, it escalated after the divorce. In those few cases a

positive relationship with both parents was never established and therefore could not be

used to counter one parent's hostility to the other. Alliances developed between parent

and participant versus the other parent, in some cases banding together to not talk to or

ridicule the other parent. Participants who believed they were coerced to choose one

parent over the other had difficulty with this because they did not want to hurt either

parent or pick sides. Participants did not understand why one parent tried to hamper their

relationship with the other parent and were bothered if they could not talk about either

parent to the other.

> She [mother] always put my brother and I in the middle. If we loved her, we
> wouldn't talk to my dad, and when we would see my dad we wouldn't this and
> that. . . . So, I think I tried intellectualizing a lot. Of course it hurt.

> And my dad just threw it out there, "You know you guys can move back here." I
> didn't move back because I knew how she would react. And then when she just
> said to my brother, "You are no longer my son," well, she did say that, there was
> no way I was going to move back; it tore her heart out. I considered moving back

with my brother at that time . . . and so I was kind of being punished for being here because she wouldn't let me forget about it, that I considered moving back.

Financial Changes

Life in the new home brought changed financial status and resources. For some, depleted financial resources brought enormous lifestyle changes in basic resources, such as availability of food and stability in living conditions. In these cases participants were utterly overwhelmed with the circumstance following the divorce. Others became acutely aware how well they were provided for in the intact family only after financial hardships were evident in the new home. And a group of others, whether realizing it or not, denied their needs in effort to not overtax parents or financial resources. "My mom always worked very hard, but we didn't have everything. And it's not like we needed everything."

Many participants were privy to whether their noncustodial parent paid child support, if payments were made on time, and specifics of the arrangements. Although some participants heard their parents talking about post-divorce financial arrangements or were used as sounding boards for parent acrimony, others recalled how their parents never blamed or spoke poorly about each other when money was tight.

> You feel like you're stuck in the middle and she was putting us in the middle. My dad, to his credit, really didn't talk badly about her, she really said all sorts of stuff about him. That he didn't want to pay child support. That if anything he did good, "Oh, well." Like if he paid extra in child support then, "Oh, what is $15? It's nothing."

They ultimately were exposed to new ways of living and altered financial circumstances. The majority of participants had to contend with less money and resources

in the single-parent household than in the intact family. This was evident through

changed living conditions and resources the family had. They were embarrassed by

certain aspects: "I remember my mom's, the apartment she lived in. We only lived there

for a year or two. It was this awful apartment that was a HUD partially funded apartment.

And it had roaches, it was horrible."

Changes in the family makeup and circumstances were recognized by people

outside the family. Participants now had to contend not only with their internal reactions

but with others' reactions and opinions as well. Some stopped bringing friends home.

They were self-conscious how their living arrangements compared to their friends, even

if their friends did not say anything. They were also aware if other adults were critical if

their parent did not stay home to raise the children.

Participants were confused by the financial decisions their parent made. "She

[mother] hadn't been really good with money, so it was almost as if she was throwing it

out the window or something." Whether or not they lived with the more affluent parent,

they realized the financial discrepancy between their parents and households.

> My mother supposedly existed at a point that was at or below welfare in terms of
> wage earning and she always refused, she never wanted to participate in welfare.
> And my father made what I now know is hundreds of thousands of dollars. And I
> think this division of spaces and of all things physical was . . . I don't mean to say
> it this way, but to make sure my mother wasn't getting certain benefits out of
> what my father gave us. . . . There were extremes from everything from the food
> we ate from one household to another to the types of entertainment we would
> pursue.

If one parent re-partnered, the participants were cognizant of financial benefits of

a two-income household and believed this parent now benefited over the other parent,

sometimes unfairly. They were concerned how their long-term goals and need for

financial assistance from their parents, especially regarding college planning, would be impacted.

Care from Others

Participants spoke fondly of significant others who helped care for them after the divorce. These people were extended family members, such as grandparents or aunts and uncles, or babysitters who were treated and considered like family. Participants felt loved and supported by these special others and did not doubt their availability. They turned to them for comfort and questions regarding their parents' divorce or relationships. Whether they provided financial assistance, transported participants for parent visitation, attended participants sporting and school events, shared meals and spent time together, or taught participants new hobbies, these people enriched their lives. Additionally through their consistent predictable presence, these significant others fulfilled a missing role and function, and provided some direction and security from which participants drew. "My grandmother took me and raised me as like her own but she always let me know, 'Your mom's your mom, I'm your grandmother. If something happens to your mom, I'll be your mom and grandmother.'" Another noted,

> They [the aunts] had their own little car, so they would come meet us after school. I lived just down the street from where we went to school so I walked. And everyday when I got home, my aunts were there waiting for me and my next oldest brother.

Some participants, drawing on their own resources, were able to uphold some semblance of inner stability and their development was not completely derailed. They maintained good grades and engaged in healthy friendships despite their grief and loss of

external structure originally provided by the family. One participant excelled in sports:

"In fourth grade I started travel ball, so we had tournaments every Sunday, throughout the

weekend and in the morning." Another participant, who lived with her father, despite

being alone a lot had this to say about how she and her sibling spent their days:

> We just did anything; we would go out and play with our friends. Never anything too ridiculous. Mostly we just went out, like rollerblading, and [sib] played with the neighbors a lot. But I had my own friends from school I would go hang out with. So, do what normal kids do, just without parents.

> Others desperately needed the missing external structure to scaffold their

development. They did not fare as well and engaged in risky self-destructive behaviors

and relationships. One participant described:

> Throwing rocks at windows or we did this craziest thing. We would jump off buildings and stuff. But I'm 6 and to, like, jump off a three-story building and land on a little mattress . . . or, like, playing in traffic, we lived in a busy corner.

Another response illustrates participants' quest to replace missing relationships with

others:

> I was a teenager and the boy thing and smoked marijuana and stuff like that. Got into trouble, teenage juvenile, not going to school, stuff like that. Hanging with the wrong people, that's how my grandmother would describe it. Looking for acceptance and I got caught up with the wrong people, that's how I would describe it.

Parents' Dating

Not only did participants have to contend with the end of their parents'

relationship, they were eventually exposed to their parents' new dating and love

relationships as well. For some participants, the end of their parents' marriage and the

beginning of one or both parents' new relationships occurred in quick succession. "My

parents got divorced and my father was immediately in a relationship with someone. Maybe he was in it prior to that." Another said, "They got divorced and then within the next year or so both of the stepparents moved in. Then they sort of took on a parenting role obviously and then they got married a year after that."

Others had seen their parent in a series of relationships. Sometimes participants were introduced to their parents' partners; most often an introduction or a declaration of the relationship was made only when a parent began another heterosexual relationship and did not occur if he or she began a same-sex relationship. "Back then she [mother] was like, 'Hey, I'm going on a date with this guy,' and she would always want us to meet them right away."

Whether participants liked or disliked the idea of their parents' dating or the actual person with whom they were involved, many were concerned about what would happen next and did not want a new person in their life. Seeing one parent involved in another relationship represented the end of the fantasy their parents would reconcile. Additionally, the new person represented change, someone and something new and different to adjust to, and it unsettled them. Participants were attentive and watchful to what type of person the friend or dating partner was, whether or not their perceptions of this person were accurate.

> I didn't know [mother's friend] that well and she struck me as a very old lady. Some things about her were very older than my mom seemed. Her house was a museum; maybe, she doesn't have kids of her own so maybe that was it.

Participants were troubled if their parent was involved with someone with less than credible behavior. They did not like seeing their parent make poor relationship decisions, nor did they like to be exposed to the person themselves. "[Mother's friend]

was very controlling, very controlling so I saw possessiveness on her part…she would try to assert her power through my mom which was more relational, she would try to hurt through my mom." Other times their parent, and indirectly they, benefited from and liked having this new person around. "On the one hand I felt it was kind of weird, our parents are dating these two people. It was kind of strange but at the same time they were really nice people." One described some activities that followed the divorce:

> They were all the nicest people I ever knew, the most interesting people. . . . They also brought interesting stories; they are always very friendly, amicable people. One time a troupe of singers came along with us and we had an a capella group stay with us in this cottage. . . . They are just so much more filled with excitement, interests. I wouldn't say love but I would say there is a much more family feel to this experience.

Many wondered what was going to happen next and how their life was going to be affected. They were concerned their parent was going to be less available for them and did not want to share their parent with the new person. Participants either feared or realized they would have less attention from their parent and were uncomfortable with this.

> I was pretty upset about it at the time because it had been 9 years it was just us and mom. And that's a long time and then to be like, "Oh, here's this person." . . . I was not all that excited about it.

Some did not want to hear their parent talk about his or her new dating life, or even to know their parent was dating, as this made them uncomfortable. This information conjured up imagery or ideas about repressed parental sexuality. Some participants were either too young or, as they grew older, too busy with their own lives and therefore not aware of or attentive to their parents' dating. This developmental component, although not used defensively, aided in repression as well. They did not consciously think about

their parents' sexuality in any fashion, heterosexual or same-sex attraction. However

once the parents' new dating partner came into the picture, especially a same-sex partner,

participants were exposed to the idea of parental sexuality whether they could tolerate

this or not.

> We were eating dinner and my mom starts crying and says, "I'm in love." And I remember rolling my eyes and saying something like "Whatever" or something to that effect. . . . That's pretty much all that was ever said about it. . . . I was prepared to deal on a practical level with, "Okay, this is what it is and this is how we are going to do this," but I didn't want to hear the details of the fact that she was in love. Or I didn't want to think about their sex life.

Even though a few participants met their parent's same-sex partner predivorce,

they did not know or suspect their parent was gay or lesbian or were too young to

understand what being gay meant. In fact, their awareness of gay and lesbian people was

generally an idea many participants did not consider before. In their minds, the concept of

marriage and relationships was a male with a female. They did not think about other

relationship configurations because they internalized their parents' heterosexual

relationship as a model they then drew from. In addition to that, several commented on

the fact gay and lesbian people were not depicted as frequently in pop culture and

televisions shows as in the present day, and this limited their awareness and

understanding of nontraditional lifestyles.

When a parent introduced his or her gay or lesbian partner, the person was

typically referred to as a friend. Younger participants understood the nature of their

parent's same-sex relationship based on their own development and many compared and

therefore understood this relationship similar to their own friendships. "We were young,

we didn't know. We just thought it was a friend while we were hanging out, my mom and

her friend, on the weekends."

Parents made an effort to keep the sexual nature of the relationship private. They

did not show affection to their partner in front of the participants. If they lived together,

most often the parent and his or her gay or lesbian partner had different bedrooms. If they

shared a bedroom, parents staged one bedroom to look like two bedrooms were used.

Older participants were confused by their parent's behavior or simply did not question

why their parent's friend was always around or why they lived together. Several

participants were given either no explanation or a false explanation for the living

arrangements.

> Mom's partner had lived with us and she had three kids. And the reason I was told
> they were living with us was she was divorcing her husband and he was a psycho
> crazy guy. But . . . it wasn't just her staying at our house. She was actually in a
> relationship with my mom at that time and that part I did not know.

Of those participants old enough to remember the beginning of the parent's same-

sex relationship, there were very few occasions where an early and open disclosure

occurred. Nonetheless, an open disclosure helped participants voice any concerns.

> Every year we would go on vacation and this year when I was 12 years old we
> went to Acapulco. And it was just the three kids and my father and he came out to
> us in this hotel room. Just sat us down and said, "Okay, kids, I need to explain
> something to you." And to my brother and sister this was very strange and
> uncomfortable for them for my father to say, "I'm a homosexual, I like men, I
> have been experimenting with it for a little while." And to me being young, 12
> years old, and always being considered an overly empathic child, I said, "Does
> this change how you love us or interact with us?"

Participants spoke of the ways their parent exposed them to gay-friendly

businesses, got involved in gay-centered activities, or spent time with single friends of

the same gender. These influences, along with their own development, specifically

puberty and maturing awareness of friendship and sexual relationships, led them to

wonder more and more about their parent and his or her relationship.

> He was living with roommates and my mom wasn't and that was strange to me. I had questioned my mother about it, and she said, "Why don't you ask your dad about it." I never was able to because I was always too nervous. I was just nervous he might get offended.

> They really did not want me to know they were together because one night I tried to go upstairs and there was a door leading up the stairwell and they had it locked. They had a contraption, not even just a normal lock. They had a belt that was hooked up from the doorknob to the railing. And so the door literally couldn't open. And I remember being so shocked, like, "God, why do they not want me up there, what are they, what is so terrible that I'm going to find?" I didn't care about, like, that never even bothered me at all that they were gay or might be gay.

When no disclosure occurred, over time all but one participant began to question

the nature of their parent's relationship. They moved from wondering if their parent was

gay or lesbian to feeling more certain about it before any verbalization from the parent

occurred. Occasionally the other parent or extended family members made comments or

directly told the participant his or her parent was gay or lesbian. Waiting for the parent to

disclose or wondering how and if to ask their parent if he or she were gay or lesbian was

not always an easy or conflict free task.

> Finally this teacher, Ms. XXX, she was a younger teacher, really cool to talk to. And I was, like, "I'm suspecting this and that," and she said, "Well, why don't you just ask her?" And I said, "I don't know if I want to know. Just because it would be weird because this whole time it's been a lie. Like my mom has been lying to me this whole time."

> It was just like I knew it was there, it was still shocking though because I wasn't really expecting it, but I was.

> In the end, the parent's gay or lesbian identity was no longer a mystery. This

occurred through a variety of ways: parents disclosed, parents made subtle hints,

participants asked, participants witnessed some type of sexual interaction between the

parent and same-sex partner, partners told the participant, or participants put the pieces

together if parents never directly said they were gay or lesbian. Sometimes participants

knew before their sibling(s) knew, and this put them in an awkward position. If parents

disclosed, specifics of what was said were frequently forgotten, regardless of the age of

the participant.

> I guess at some point our parents explained it to us. I guess it became kind of
> obvious when my mom started dating my stepmom now and my dad started
> dating my other stepmom. I guess it became obvious why, I guess. I really don't
> know. I don't remember. It sort of just happened, I guess. I'm sure at one point
> they just explained to us I guess mom likes women and that's just sort of how she
> is, I guess, something along those lines.

More often than not, participants and parents rarely spoke of it again. Both participant

and parent were uneasy and at times unable to talk more about it.

> What happened was dad and I had the sit-down conversation at 10 and then it was
> like, okay, life goes on. Sort of like, "Okay, we are going to open the door here,
> I'm gay, that's why [partner] lives here. That's this, that's that. Okay, any
> questions?" It was just kind of weird. I don't think I asked anything. Plus the fact
> it was never talked about. It's not like you necessarily would expect it at the
> dinner table everyday, you are going to be, like, "So how is it being gay or
> whatever?" But there was no kind of like activism or no talking about the struggle
> or I don't know, just nothing. It was supposed to be, like, "This is our house, this
> is normal."

> In one particular case, there was a shared collusion between parent and participant

to keep this changed aspect of the parent out of awareness and to keep parental sexuality

repressed. The parent's lesbian relationship or sexual orientation was never, to this day,

mentioned, despite living in the same-sex household over 10 years.

> It was just kind of like a thing we were going to do, we just moved in with my
> mom's girlfriend, into her house and it was never weird. It never was really
> explicit. It was just kind of like we [siblings] could figure it out on our own. . . . It
> was just unsaid. It's open now. We know about it, my mom knows we know
> about it, but we will never have a discussion about it, ever. Which is, I don't know
> why.

Participants had a range of reactions and mixed feelings transitioning into a same-sex stepfamily. They were caught off guard and in disbelief, horrified, embarrassed, emotionally disconnected, and confused or concerned their relationship with their parent might change. They also were accepting, afraid to hurt their parent if they felt any negative reaction, pleased to be in the family, happy their parent was happy, and reassuring to their parent, especially when the parent sought approval or feared rejection after disclosure. Participants' age at the time of disclosure or transition into the new family structure affected how they understood this change in their parent, how they thought and felt about both the change and living in a same-sex family. Younger participants had little awareness of stigmas about gay and lesbian people and had not internalized any prejudices or stereotypes. Participants who were younger often remembered the partner always being there. These participants grew up in the same-sex stepfamily and that became their norm.

> She [mother's girlfriend] was a constant figure. I don't remember meeting her ever. She was always there. I think for me it wasn't really difficult, I don't think, because I don't really remember it that much. . . . I never really thought of it as something odd. Eventually I was able to realize it wasn't the most normal thing, like everyone didn't have two moms and all that. But it never really seemed like a big deal for me.

Whatever their initial reaction, many families never spoke of the circumstances of their family composition again, despite living together in the same-sex household. Though some participants were not always clear or even understood why they rarely, if ever, talked about having same-sex parents or gay-centered topics or activities, others could explain reasons for their silence. Some did not mention anything because they sensed their parent was uncomfortable, especially if their parent had not disclosed his or

her gay or lesbian identity to anyone outside the home; some followed their parent's

advice to not tell anyone or only tell very close friends. This created uneasiness and

anxiety and established a subtle yet powerful message that it was to be kept secret. This

contributed to family members, including siblings, to keep quiet around each other.

Others did not know what to say, believed it was none of their business, or were uneasy

or uncomfortable with their parent's being gay or lesbian, especially if the parent or

partner's sexuality was obvious; for example, if participants heard them make sexual

comments or jokes. These conversations or comments heightened anxiety stimulated by

specifics of parental homosexuality and its ushering in awareness of parental sexuality. A

small group did talk to their parent; usually this was a one-time conversation. Some asked

how and when their parent knew he or she was gay, some asked if he or she loved the

other parent during the marriage.

> I remember when I was younger I asked my mom, "What made you decide? Like, when did you suddenly realize you liked women instead of men? Where did that come from?" Other than that, I haven't really needed to ask her, I mean I understand.

In most cases, the living circumstances in the household and family relationships

drew more of participants' attention and energy than the parent's dating or same-sex

attraction. Participants in these families had significant inner turmoil and external

stressors. Their living environment and family relationships were not stable enough to

allow for their personal reflection and growth. Participants were living day by day, just

trying to survive life in the family. This was especially true in families where there were

chaos, financial strains, or conflict-ridden parent, stepparent, and participant relationships.

> I don't know. I didn't really, I don't think I ever really felt the need to make sense of it. I would think, She's just lesbian, that's how she has always been. It didn't

change anything. Everything was exactly the same, the house was still hostile. It was like walking on eggshells and it had nothing to do with her being a lesbian. That was because [mother's girlfriend] was an asshole and my mom made stupid decisions.

Conclusion

The category Loss of Family Constellation captures what it was like for participants to transition from living in their intact nuclear family home to entering into a same-sex stepfamily home. This period in time was filled with numerous losses, disruptions, and stressors. Relationships and contact with parents changed significantly. Participants were responsible for more of their own care and others took on a caretaking role to their parent. Participants had to contend with parental dating and remarriage. Secrets and confusion flourished when parents attempted to hide their same-sex relationship, despite participants' recognition of the relationship and change in their parent's sexual orientation. Properties in this category include Family Changes Begin and Cause Strain, Losing Family Members, Disorganization and Changed Relationships, Financial Changes, Care from Others, and Parents' Dating.

CHAPTER VII

CHAOS INTENSIFIES DURING FAMILY REORGANIZATION

I had to say goodbye to this whole life I was used to.

I just said, Okay, Dad doesn't live here anymore and now
[mother's girlfriend] lives with us.

So it was all of a sudden, Bam, this is the queer world and that was
a huge adjustment.

The category Chaos Intensifies During Family Reorganization depicts

participants' thoughts, feelings, relationships, and experiences living in the same-sex

stepfamily. Participants' lives were filled with continuing changes and strains. In the

majority of cases, the same-sex stepfamily was not stable enough nor were parent and

participant relationships positive enough for participants to feel the sense of security and

care they once had in the intact family. Properties of Recognition of the Same-Sex

Stepfamily, Tumultuous Beginning, Financial Strains, Being Alone, Relationship with

Stepparent, Losing Connection with Parent(s), and Keeping Quiet are included in this

category.

Participants began living in the same-sex stepfamily in a variety of ways. This

ranged from immediately transitioning from their intact family to the new stepfamily to

living in another heterosexual stepfamily post parental divorce before living in the same-

sex stepfamily. Participants experienced disruptions and changed relationships since the

divorce. Participants moved and said goodbye to familiar neighborhoods, schools, and friends. They experienced decreased financial security in general and wondered if their parents were going to provide monetary assistance for college as planned. Relationships with parents continued to be a primary stressor and many had even less contact with their noncustodial parent as time passed.

Many participants were uneasy living in this unfamiliar type of family. Participants did not know other gay families and few had gay friends. Parents and participants rarely spoke of the nature of the parent's same-sex relationship or uniqueness of their family. Participants felt different from others and were anxious and uncomfortable although there were developmental considerations. Younger participants had an easier time transitioning to the new family. Older participants kept the circumstances of their home life secret. They did not tell others, including family members, their concerns or feelings of unease. Many either had no one to turn to or were embarrassed to reach out to others. Chaotic living circumstances in the stepfamily contributed to participants' feeling frightened and overwhelmed, and perpetuated secrecy.

The impact family relationships and household living arrangements had on participants influenced their well-being more than living in a same-sex stepfamily per se. While having a positive relationship with their custodial parent and stepparent buffered negative reactions to any changes and losses, many experienced hostile family relationships, including an antagonistic relationship with their stepparent, and this made matters more difficult. When positive participant and stepparent relationships occurred,

the benefits were substantial, and participants enjoyed and benefited from this new

relationship very much.

Recognition of the Same-Sex Stepfamily

Typically in heterosexual stepfamilies some type of declaration is made

announcing the parental relationship and melding of two households. This declaration,

whether public or private, deems family members its identity and relationship to one

another and establishes them as a stepfamily. Many participants in this study experienced

ambiguity surrounding their parent's relationship to the other adult in the household and

uncertainty about the nature of the household. Were members in the household a

stepfamily or a group of individuals in a transient living arrangement of two adults

sharing living expenses?

Parental disclosure of homosexuality and participants' realization the parent's

partner was a significant member of the household, marked the beginning of the new

family. Ambiguity of the parent's same-sex relationship and length of time it remained

secret did not provide a distinct marker that signified the end of one relationship and

acknowledged the beginning of another. Furthermore, some families had not achieved

stability nor rebuilt their new lives post-divorce. Ambiguity, continued chaos, and

strained family relationships wreaked havoc on many participants for some time.

The way participants ended up living in a same-sex stepfamily varied. Some

participants moved quickly from life in the intact family and dissolution of their parents'

marriage to a brief period living in a single-parent household before having their parent

remarry or cohabitate with a same-sex partner, whereas others experienced a longer

period living in a single-parent household. Some went directly from the intact family to a

same-sex stepfamily while others lived in a heterosexual stepfamily before their parent

began a same-sex relationship. Some participants were members of two stepfamilies

when their noncustodial parent remarried as well. Regardless of how the specific

relational and household configurations changed, the quality of past and present family

relationships—now including another adult in the household to contend with—and both

custodial and noncustodial parent and household stability, made a significant difference

in how participants felt about and adjusted to numerous changes they experienced, not

only the changed parental sexual orientation but also the changed living arrangements.

<div align="center">Tumultuous Beginning</div>

Initially, living in and being part of the new same-sex stepfamily was difficult for

many participants. To a great extent old wounds and relationship conflicts from the intact

family persisted and intensified with each change and loss, be it a change in the

relationship with one or both parents, a change in the parent's typical ways of being, or a

change in living circumstances. For others, exposure to various aspects of gay culture

created additional internal discomfort. Participants had no previous knowledge or

involvement with what they were now exposed to, and their new environment, including

their parent's gay friends, was different and strange.

Although this seldom occurred, when participants saw their parent and the partner

kiss or hold hands many were taken aback. Seeing their parent's affection toward his or

her same-sex partner was different, and participants had to process this new information. Marching as a family in gay liberation parades brought unwanted attention, as did the particulars of the parent's same-sex partner, especially when they deemed the partner too masculine or feminine looking, or of a different race or age range than the parent. Additionally, no longer being able to trust the parent who hid his or her same-sex relationship contributed to participants' angst about living in the new home and to troubled times being together as a family.

Only a few participants mentioned benefits to living in the new stepfamily. Typically these benefits occurred after participants changed parental custody, moved to a new geographical area, or had a positive relationship with the parent's partner. In those scenarios, participants had opportunities to begin new friendships and other relationships. Being with more mature friends or making friends with a person who was gay or lesbian helped. This was especially important if they felt different from or were ostracized by people outside the family. Meeting new people helped participants feel in control of their lives when they decided how and when to disclose personal information about themselves or their family. They were relaxed and calm when they lived with the parent with whom they felt more connected and supported. Only two participants directly attributed benefits to living in a gay or lesbian household and felt their development was enhanced. They attributed extra care they received as stemming from being part of a gay lifestyle and their living in a gay household helped them relate and be open to others.

> I used to sit there and listen to their conversations, my mom and her girlfriends. You would hear people's plights. It gave me a lot of aspects in sensitivity in regards to feelings for other people and caring for other people.

Participants spoke of numerous stressors they experienced while living in the new family. Although specific strains and any impact on participants varied, a thread many participants had in common with one another was how family relationships and the household structure did not reestablish participants' sense of well-being, safety, and security they once had. All too often, participants' lives had not improved once they entered into the same-sex stepfamily and, in fact, became more problematic. Nonetheless, participants did not directly ascribe, nor did interviews suggest, the predominant strains of living in the stepfamily were an attribute of living in a gay or lesbian family per se or having experienced a change in the sexual orientation of their parent. Rather, strains resulted from troubled family relationships, now including the relationship with the stepparent, lack of structure and routines, and chaotic living circumstances in the stepfamily.

However, there were exceptions. When a parent's homosexual lifestyle or homosexuality brought awareness to nascent questions participants had about their own sexuality or discomfort with or uncertainty about their expression of themselves as masculine or feminine, anxiety arose. Participants countered inner conflict with avoidance of anything connected to parental sexuality or increased aggression or sexual prowess.

> When I turned into a teenager, at some of her [mother] parties she caught me having sex with a couple of her friends at the party. Every time she had a party, it was like three or four of them that I got some from. I would call my friends up and tell them about it and they would be, "Can we come over and join the party?" and I would be, "No." . . . I taped it a couple of times and showed some of my friends and they would just trip out. They were like, "They are grown women."

Financial Strains

For a large number of participants, financial strains occurred in the new home. Whether attributed to loss of two-parent incomes following the divorce, decreased income if the noncustodial parent earned the larger income, or decreased individual and combined earning power of the same-sex couple compared to the intact family, the new stepfamily unit could not meet the financial obligations and participants suffered. Although a few participants had more economic advantages living in the same-sex stepfamily, the majority of participants did not have the same quality of life and resources they had growing up. Sometimes food or clothing needs were supplemented by extended family or community agencies. Financial strains were frequent if the noncustodial parent did not pay or was behind in child support payments. Economic assistance from adults in the household could no longer be counted on and participants felt the burden. Some participants were asked to pay rent and were angry about it. Although older children pay rent in other family configurations as well, the circumstances of being asked to pay rent in their stepfamily bothered them.

> They wanted me to pay a little bit of rent which I was resistant to even though I did, $50 a week. It was a command, basically. We didn't all sit down together. My mom pretty much said, "This has to happen," basically. Two hundred dollars a month would have been half the rent because the rent was $400 something for the whole apartment so I was, like, "This doesn't sound right."

Many participants stated their stepparent did not financially contribute to the household or their care. Some decisions the parent, the partner, or the couple made put the family in economic jeopardy. "My mother and her girlfriend smoked marijuana. I think their money all went up in smoke." Other times there was not enough living space or resources to sustain the family members, and tensions were high. "I actually had to go

to the public aid office for my mother for food stamps or something and that was just a horrific experience."

Many older participants worried about their future educational plans, especially if they had sporadic contact or a conflictual relationship with their noncustodial parent. They worried their noncustodial parent would not follow through with paying for college or help with other cost-of-living expenses. One participant took his parent to court in an effort to enforce the divorce agreement and to receive finances for college. Relationships with noncustodial parents, particularly those that had become more distant over time, became primarily based on trying to obtain money for school. "After I finished high school my father's and my relationship became that, Did you send in tuition payment?" Participants sought and obtained educational scholarships and grants or revised their school plans and attended a community college. Some obtained employment to pay for school and other necessities but others had to postpone their academic plans.

<p style="text-align:center">Being Alone</p>

Participants reported feeling neglected or being left alone, either having no adult in charge of the household or being under too much scrutiny. In both extremes, life since the divorce meant participants had too much independence too early or were under too much control. They needed some rules and structure yet these were often lacking in the same-sex stepfamily. Participants spoke of not being able to manage or cope with all the changes they went through. This was especially true when changes resulted in their feeling less secure about their well-being and future or created distance and animosity

between them and their parents. These factors impacted how participants felt about and actually separated from the family and the type of persons to whom they turned.

Family relationships, now including the stepparent, were a predominant factor in how participants felt about living in the new home. The quality of relationships and types of interactions among participants, parents, and stepparents cannot be separated out and viewed independently from circumstances of life in the same-sex stepfamily. As positive relationships buffered against actual strains, hostile and negative relationships contributed to participants' unhappiness regardless of actual living circumstances or structure of the home (heterosexual or same-sex). Strained or changed relationships, whether parents, sibling, or friend relations, were painful and stressful. These experiences reactivated earlier losses and times of uncertainty and parental unavailability.

Relationship with Stepparent

Participants rarely had neutral feelings about the other adult living in the household. In fact, many did not know how to think of or refer to this person. The parent's partner was referred to as another parent, a stepparent, stepparent-like, a member of the family, their parent's partner or spouse, their parent's friend, by name only with no relationship reference, or were mentioned as little as possible. Usually the initial type of relationship participants had with their stepparent persisted over time, regardless of the age of the participant at the time of meeting or the length of their relationship. Participants' thoughts and feelings about this other adult in the household were based on a variety of factors: how participants were treated, whether they believed the stepparent

cared for them, the relationship between adults in the home, and participants' relationship with their parent.

Some participants had an extremely conflictual relationship with the stepparent. In those cases the stepparent was any combination of verbally and physically abusive, controlling, and manipulative to the parent, participant, or siblings. "One of them [mother's partners] tried to swing a belt at me. I think I was 14. . . . She swung a pot at my brother and swung a belt at me." Police were involved at times due to escalated arguments or physical attacks by the stepparent. Occasionally the parent and partner separated for a time, ultimately to reunite. Stepparents' drug abuse or overall unhappiness and irritability prevented participants from feeling safe or comfortable being or living together. Participants did not always feel protected by their parent and this took its toll on their relationship. Furthermore, participants did not believe the stepparent cared about or wanted to get to know them. Participants disengaged from the household in a variety of ways, sometimes productively, other times putting themselves at risk. They coexisted with the stepparent and had as little interaction as possible. "A lot of the times growing up, because of [mother's partner] I didn't want to be home so I would manage my own after school activities so I could do other things."

If their parent ended the relationship with this type of stepparent, participants' contact with the stepparent ended as well. Loss of contact had little distress on many participants unless it prompted further household changes, such as moving, financial stressors, or led to the parent's beginning a new relationship.

Competition with stepparents occurred. Participants felt upstaged by their stepparent if they believed their parent cared about them less after beginning the relationship. Participants did not like having less attention and resented when their parent put his or her partner before them or tried to force a relationship between the two. Participants' anger was displaced onto the stepparent. Stepparents were blamed for any conflict or strain in the house, and this sometimes included the divorce itself, whether they were involved with their parent before the divorce or not.

Loyalty to the intact family and biological parents was evident in a variety of ways. Older participants stated they already had parents and did not think of or want the stepparent to be a parent or to take on a parent role. They were concerned the stepparent was going to try to exert his or her authority and control both in the household and with the participant. If the stepparent was too domineering, conflict developed. Participants did not like being told what to do and were protective of their parent and household.

> It was the fact you [mother's partner] are not going to tell nobody they have to do certain stuff in the house. And you're not going to run nothing here in this house. Because my mom, this is her house and we are her sons, not puppets.

On the other hand, some participants had very positive relationships with their stepparent. The combination of a stepparent's pleasant personality and participants' desire to connect made a mutually beneficial relationship possible. When they believed their parent and stepparent had a loving relationship and thought their parent was happy, they had warm feelings toward their stepparent and approved the relationship. Participants had routines and special time together with this type of stepparent and as a family.

After a while the two of us started to warm up to one another. [Mother's partner] and I would always have a day to just ourselves and my mom and I would always have a day to just ourselves. [Mother's partner] would usually take me shopping.

[Father's partner] and I would go out and take a walk and appreciate the architecture of the neighborhood. . . . There has been a lot of instances with [father's partner] where I think we share an aesthetic that really allows us to bond over that.

Participants turned to their stepparent for comfort, nurturance, and guidance, and the stepparent responded in a variety of ways to meet their needs.

He [father's partner] was a lot of times the one dropping off at school or was home when we came home from school . . . getting help with homework. He took care of the house. Just so much of what being taken care of when I was sick.

Having stepparents involved in participants' lives was beneficial. Stepparents helped rekindle participants' troubled relationship with their parent and they supplemented missing qualities and roles in either the custodial or noncustodial parent. "My dad was gone. He moved to Florida and so Mom and [Mom's partner] were like our parents."

She [mother's partner] became my father, the other half of my guidance or parents. She took the male role, taught me to do things like play pool, golf, and surf. My mother was more my friend. [Mother's partner] eventually played both roles.

If their parent ended the relationship with this type of stepparent, participants were deeply saddened and felt another loss. They wanted to remain in contact with the stepparent; however, this was not possible. Either the parent did not approve of their continued relationship or the stepparent made no effort to maintain a relationship.

I have actually, over the years, tried to stay in contact with him [father's partner] and he's just really bad at staying in contact. I'll call him and say, "I'm in town for a couple of days, can you call me and let's get together for lunch," and I won't hear anything back. When I'm able to catch him, it is like we pick up where we left off. But in the meantime, I'm just like, "Well, why do we have to, why are

you so difficult?" It is not just me; he is that way with everybody. So that's good, I guess.

Losing Connection with Parent(s)

Many parent and participant relationships remained as strained as before whereas some deteriorated when living together in the stepfamily. In those cases participants felt alone and rejected. They recalled how their parent was absent or emotionally unavailable and distant, especially since beginning the new relationship.

Living with the parent and partner reactivated unmet dependency needs from life in the intact family. Some yearned for contact and connection with either their custodial or noncustodial parent. Although many did not want to return to the intact family per se, they wished for a simpler and easier relationship with both of their parents and wanted to be cared for. Those who experienced their parent abruptly or later in their life change and become unavailable, were angry and hurt. They had significant deterioration in their functioning and emotional well-being and their development was derailed.

> I remember vividly laying in bed not able to get out. I wouldn't be able to get up, I couldn't function. I always drank a lot. During that time I was bulimic. I put a great deal of stress on my weight, my outward appearance.

Participants defended against more longstanding pain of not having their parent or parents consistently available to them by being overly independent or resourceful. They learned to not ask their parent for assistance even when they needed it. These participants outwardly fared better with fewer visible symptoms. Although they may have attributed their independence as resulting from their home environment or upbringing, they were

proud of their ability to take care of themselves and viewed themselves more mature than others their age.

Participants visited their noncustodial parent with even less frequency, especially when the parent remained abusive or his or her emotional difficulties persisted. If the noncustodial parent remarried, the personality of the new spouse also affected participants' relationship and contact with this parent.

Keeping Quiet

Some participants were open with their friends about their living arrangement and their parent's same-sex relationship, but others went to great efforts to keep these details of their life private. Some wished to have a friend or someone to confide in, others were too embarrassed to say anything to anyone. Frequently this meant even siblings did not talk to one another about how they felt living in the family or about their parent's changed sexual orientation. Regardless if participants felt accepted and supported by their friends or were actually teased about their or their parent's sexual orientation, many participants kept their thoughts and feelings to themselves. They were protective of themselves and their parent.

> Sometimes my friends knew and they would give me hints, but I wasn't comfortable with saying it. I just feel I held back a lot. I didn't tell them anything. I would just say, "Oh, she's my mom's friend." . . . I'm afraid they are going to say bad things.

Participants became more guarded in their relationships. For some this was due to past hurts and losses. They did not want to invest in another relationship and have it end. For others being cautious and private resulted from living in the new same-sex stepfamily.

Although they did not always feel embarrassed their parent was gay or lesbian, they were scared and uneasy with others knowing because they knew their family composition was different from most. Developmental factors had an impact. Younger participants who grew up in the same-sex stepfamily did not feel as uncomfortable because their family was different. Growing up in the same-sex family from an early age became what they knew and were accustomed to. Older participants, for the most part, felt different from others and tried to not pay attention or notice others reactions. They coped with feeling different by keeping any differences hidden. They did not invite friends over and did not respond if a friend asked about the other adult in the household. They did not want to be judged, have their own sexual orientation or identity be questioned, or be made fun of, all of which from time to time occurred. Along that line, many friends did not know what to say either, and therefore did not say anything. Other times friends were accepting, indifferent, or made subtle hints to see how the participant would respond. "It was just something my close friends would just know. They figured it out already but they wouldn't say anything to me and then it was just weird for me to tell people."

Except for a small group of participants who ultimately found others to talk to, talking about their parent's relationship and family life was fraught with anxiety. This was especially true when they did not really understand the situation or did not know how to talk about it or what to say. Even though many did not feel different from others because of having divorced parents, they, with the exception of two participants, did not

know anyone who had gay or lesbian parents or who had a heterosexual parent disclose his or her homosexuality.

Having a gay parent was unfamiliar, and without having some narrative to speak from, both within the home with family members and outside with others, many participants felt awkward, did not know what to say and kept silent. They experienced a repetition of what occurred in the family itself where this change in a significant aspect of their lives—the parent and the addition of the same-sex partner to the household and family—was not acknowledged. This extended the shared denial from participants and parents to participants and others outside the family.

Conclusion

The category Chaos Intensifies During Family Reorganization describes participants' life living in the same-sex stepfamily. Family relationships grew more distant and conflict ridden. Participants felt neglected or unnecessarily scrutinized and badgered. Parents or the couple did not provide reassurance or stability and the household atmosphere was strained and hectic. Adjusting to the other adult in the household was not easy and few participants had a warm relationship with this person. Open discussions either with those inside or outside the family about the changed sexual orientation of their parent or the family and household composition did not occur. Participants managed anxiety about these changes via denial and disavowal. Properties in this category include Recognition of the Same-Sex Stepfamily, Tumultuous Beginning, Financial Strains,

Being Alone, Relationship with Stepparent, Losing Connection with Parent(s), and

Keeping Quiet.

CHAPTER VIII

STABILIZATION

He [friend] said, "Dude, you should write a book because I have never met a dude like you that grew up with all the headaches and all of the difficulties and you came out sane."

Any of the changes, how it affected me? I guess it made me a stronger person but in the long run it has caused me a lot of anxiety and depression in my life. Which I don't think I would have if these things didn't happen to me or I experienced them.

Some people don't even get to experience one type. They live with a single parent. I got to grow up with a mom and a dad and then really realize what being a homosexual is and having a partner. And then growing up in that family and understanding that. I feel like, wow, I got to experience both types of lifestyles. That's great.

The category Stabilization captures the period in time when participants were able to better themselves and improve their situation. Increased maturity and cognitive abilities helped participants look back and reflect on their lives and experiences. They gained understanding and clarity about what they went through and its impact. Participants integrated these experiences and changed family relationships into their thinking and, at the same time, felt liberated when they recognized they were individuals, separate from their parents. This chapter highlights participants' resumption of development and the ways they regained control and took charge of their lives. Properties

in this category are Isolation Ends, I Struggled but Survived, Increased Understanding

and Empathy, and It's My Life Now.

Participants revealed the nature of their family and living arrangements to friends

and significant others. They were relieved they could be straightforward and honest with

people and pleased to connect with others who accepted and cared about them.

Participants made concerted efforts to learn new hobbies and improve their academic or

employment status. Their confidence grew and their self-esteem improved. Participants

felt more emotionally stable and made an effort to understand their parents' points of

view. Older and more self-reliant participants separated themselves from negative

interactions or unhealthy relationships with family members, including their parents and

stepparents. They exerted more influence in the quality and type of relationship they

wanted and attempted to have with friends and family.

Isolation Ends

Many participants worked out their conflicts more actively than before and this

provided them a sense of freedom and comfort to relate to and to be with others. They

turned passive into active by researching homosexuality, became active in gay rights and

the gay community, or participated in sports, school activities, and hobbies. This

bolstered their confidence and provided a sense of competence. More importantly,

participants began to think about and reflect on their past. Defenses were lowered and

participants wanted the truth and an apology from their parents about past hurts and

neglect. They wanted to be truthful to others about who they were and what they thought

and felt. No longer immobilized and living in fear or shame people might find out about their same-sex family or gay or lesbian parent, psychological energy became available to relate more intimately with others.

Despite moving on with their lives and feeling better about the choices they were making, participants had trepidation about the permanency of relationships. They wondered if their intimate relationships were going to last and if the notion of being happy with one person was possible. They did not want to be like their parents and get divorced, especially if they had children of their own. Some felt they lacked the skills necessary to sustain deep and meaningful relationships and attributed this to being hurt and mistrusting of others or not having positive early relationship models to draw from. "I had to somehow create my own example of what a relationship was supposed to be. That love is acceptance and when there is love there's enough room for everybody. That was a huge lesson for me to learn."

Interestingly, participants had more reluctance and difficulty being open with family members, especially those whose parent kept their same-sex attraction secret or lived in a stepfamily with turbulence and strained relationships. These participants were cautious to not create or increase family troubles; at times they were seemingly complacent with mediocre yet unsettled relationships. They held on to what they had. They were afraid to be honest about their feelings, especially if they felt some uncomfortable emotion. These participants were apprehensive they might become overwhelmed themselves. They feared the relationship might deteriorate if full openness and exploration of the past was disclosed.

> I still have never talked to him about it [father not being there after divorce]. I guess just because I don't, I would rather not do it. I guess it just seems like if it is not broke, why try and fix it.

> I don't know. It is just very painful. And I don't want, I don't have any interest in opening up and talking about it [with sibling].

Although being open was not easy, participants recognized the importance of reaching out to others as beneficial for their growth. Societal factors assisted their openness. Participants recognized in addition to their own openness about their family of origin, the larger community had become more open as well, with more gay and lesbian people out in public and positively represented in the media. This helped them feel less different from others and gave them courage to disclose.

Going away to college, separating from their family, and meeting new people were common catalysts to opening up. Some, for the first time, told others about their parent and parent's partner, while others continued to let people come to their own conclusions. Whether they talked to friends, romantic partners, or therapists, more participants opened up and talked about their experiences and family composition. Figuring out what to say and to whom allowed participants to put words to their experiences and helped them make connections regarding what happened in their lives and with their family and the influence of those experiences on them.

> When I went off to college for the first time in my life, probably, I told someone before they just figured it out for themselves. And that's years after. Ten years after, . . . I could finally be like, "My mom's gay." You know I have never told anyone.

Participants achieved a second communication spurt and increased understanding of their lives when they had their own family. These participants described how talking to their children about having a gay or lesbian grandparent and participants' own same-sex

relationship, if they were in one, was important, although they were not always comfortable or knew what to say. They did not want their children to feel the same sense of isolation and confusion they had experienced.

> Now that they [mother and partner] share the same room, when my daughter will spend the night there . . . I will just explain to her everybody has choices and Grandma loves Grandma and they share the same room like Mommy and Daddy do. . . . I might have to think about it before I express it. Relief, maybe, because maybe for all that I didn't understand, maybe I'm also explaining it to myself.

I Struggled but Survived

Participants were able to overcome obstacles they experienced. For some, this was the end result of improved family cohesiveness, relationships, and household stability, and for others it was the result of their own intrapsychic maturation. In either scenario, participants felt more stable and less overwhelmed. They were better equipped to manage any strains from living in the stepfamily or earlier losses from life in the intact family forward. The vast majority resumed developmental growth, gained control of their lives, made and implemented plans for their future, and turned instability into order. They believed their experiences and family relationships; positive and negative, helped them grow strong, become independent, and resourceful, and shaped them to be who they are today.

> In traditional families a lot of stuff is done for people, so they don't think as much about, like, they just have this expectation that something is going to be done for you and I don't have that. I think I've been exposed to a lot. I have been able to pull myself out of a lot which is good.

Increased Understanding and Empathy

With maturity, time, and distance, participants reflected on their lives and family. As they reflected on their past and present, participants gained insight and were better able to come to terms with their past. Having relationships and life experiences of their own helped them realize complexity of events and they thought about themselves, their parents and stepparent in different ways. Being able to look back and contemplate decisions their parents made with newfound empathy and understanding for their parents brought additional clarity, peace of mind, and appreciation for the difficulty their parents experienced as well. Although newfound understanding did not automatically lead to forgiveness or decreased anger and hurt, participants' views softened somewhat. Many participants recognized positive attributes of their parent and partner; sometimes the parent's own growth made greater respect possible. Participants realized how difficult it was for their parent to acknowledge his or her homosexuality. This showed participants the important of accepting all parts of their parent and themselves.

> You look back and I completely understand what she did and what she was doing and why she was doing it and why we were sort of left in the dark. I feel she was searching for herself and she just had to take care of herself at that time.

Although a few remained uncomfortable their parent was gay or lesbian, they were pleased their parent was living a life being true to him- or herself. They wanted their parent to be happy, and this included the parent's having a happy and loving relationship. They accepted their parent despite past hurts and came to a newfound understanding and relationship. They were realistic about the type of relationship they had and could have with their parents, given the personality of their parents. They mourned what they never had or lost, and they appreciated more fully who they and their parents were.

It's My Life Now

For many participants who had the most trouble adjusting to living in the same-sex stepfamily, who had the most acrimonious parent or stepparent relationships, or who lived in the least stable households, relief came when they were old enough to move out of the house. Physically separating themselves from the situation or members in the household to begin their own lives gave participants distance and opportunity to put their needs first, to detach from conflict, and to pursue their own relationships, interests, and goals. They wanted to be happy and pursued those means. These participants left their homes under a variety of circumstances. Some were asked to leave and had to quickly find alternative living arrangements, some moved out of the house on their own accord and obtained employment, some went into the military, and a plurality went away to college.

Participants, now able to care for themselves, made decisions about how they wanted to interact with their parents and stepparent. This included how much they wanted to see them and how they would incorporate their parents and stepparent in their lives. Some regretted not including their stepparent in past events, and others were happy and relieved to be as far away as possible from him or her. Some cut off ties completely with one of their parents, after years of sorrow, conflict, and feeling rejected and abandoned. Others went through a slow mutual detachment with their parent who proved to be emotionally unavailable. Participants who did not have some type of connection with their parent, regardless of past or present circumstances, poignantly felt the loss. Hope for a better relationship, although not always directly acknowledged, was present nonetheless.

Conclusion

The category Stabilization describes participants' efforts to improve their lives and move beyond the pains of childhood. The length of time it took participants to integrate the relational and other changes they experienced and maintain a stable sense of self varied. Some needed more time and distance away from their family to reflect and develop coping resources whereas others achieved this living in the same-sex stepfamily. In either scenario, defenses were lowered and participants were able to think and talk about their life and the changes they experienced. Inner conflicts decreased and participants did not feel as alone or different. Increased self-esteem and competence helped participants feel comfortable with who they were and where they came from. Some found appreciation for their family and empathy for their parents. Participants wanted to understand their parents and the decisions they made, although this did not always result in forgiveness or improved relationships. Properties in this category include Isolation Ends, I Struggled but Survived, Increased Understanding and Empathy, and It's My Life Now.

CHAPTER IX

SUMMARY OF THE RESULTS

This study revealed how participants began life in a nuclear family and felt, for the most part, cared for and protected by their parents. They lived in a household led by parents who had a positive relationship with one another and were committed to taking care of their children and providing for their needs. These participants had a stable beginning that established a foundation for their growth and development. Over time hostility permeated the parental relationship. Anger and tension filled the household, parents yelled more often and participants were frightened. Strained parental relationships ended in divorce.

Participants who previously had a secure, growth enhancing upbringing and family unit now had to contend with numerous relational and tangible changes, disruptions, losses, and confusion after the divorce. Parents began new intimate relationships and remarried. Although parents may have benefited from these relationships, many participants did not. Stepfamily households did not automatically return participants to their earlier quality of upbringing. Relationships with stepparents were often conflict filled and participants lost physical or emotional contact with their parents. Participants had to grapple with these changes and losses on their own. Furthermore, secrecy surrounding their parent's previously undisclosed homosexuality

and resulting change in his or her sexual orientation as well as chaotic living

arrangements prevented participants from processing these experiences. Having no

narrative from which to speak, participants felt isolated and confused. As they matured,

participants were finally able to process and integrate their life circumstances. They had a

better sense of its impact on them, and actively worked to improve and heal themselves

and develop positive relationships with others.

The results of the study are divided into four chronological categories: Creation of

Inner Stability, Loss of Family Constellation, Chaos Intensifies During Family

Reorganization, and Stabilization. Each category is summarized below.

Creation of Inner Stability describes participants' beginning life feeling safe and

cared for by their parents. Intact family norms and values, exposure to the parents'

positive relationship, and predictable household routines and structure, fostered many

participants' growth and sense of trust in others. This peaceful beginning did not last

long. Deteriorating parental relationships led to strained family relationships and chaos

within the home. Parent and participant relationships suffered and participants no longer

received the same quality of parental ministration as before. The family was in crisis and

participants were frightened. Regardless whether participants were aware of, or

emotionally and cognitively mature enough to grasp, the serious nature of the parental

conflict, they were caught off guard and sickened when told their parents were going to

divorce. Properties in the category include A Good Enough Beginning, Family Routines

to Count On, Being Cared For, Signs of Trouble, Chaos Begins, One Parent Protected Me

from the Other, I Didn't Feel Cared For, and Caught Off Guard.

Immediate concerns regarding their well-being and fear of losing contact with their parents abound in the next category, Loss of Family Constellation. Participants' relationships and the amount of time spent with their parents changed drastically after the divorce. This category details how participants felt and reacted when they or their parent moved out of the intact nuclear family home to live in either a single-parent family home, or a heterosexual stepfamily, or a same-sex stepfamily after their parent actualized their previously unrevealed same-sex attraction.

Participants lives were disrupted and familiar routines were no longer prominent. Structure and predictability of the household and parental care were absent. Participants were exposed to one or both parents' distress and this influenced how much they turned to them for support. Close contact with extended family and friends dissipated and participants were responsible for more of their own care. Participants who had a special relationship with someone, particularly an older person who nurtured and supplemented missing parental functions, benefited from and greatly valued the relationship.

Parental sexuality, previously repressed, came to the forefront when participants saw their parents dating and remarry. Most often, when parents began same-sex relationships, the nature of their relationship was hidden and kept secret. However, participants were aware something was different, and over time became certain their parent was gay or lesbian even if the parent had not yet disclosed.

This period in time was replete with chaos and difficulty. Participants saw their parents changing in many ways but did not understand why. These changes did not always translate to improved household circumstances or better relationships. Participants

felt rejected and unimportant. Communication continued to deteriorate. Participants felt different and were ashamed and afraid to reach out and talk to others. They did not know how to think about or organize their thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Therefore, they did not share with others and did not develop a narrative that helped them understand and integrate the changes in their parent and themselves. Properties of Family Changes Begin and Cause Strain, Losing Family Members, Disorganization and Changed Relationships, Financial Changes, Care from Others, and Parents' Dating are included in this category.

Chaos, financial strains, and problematic parent and participant relations increased in the same-sex stepfamily. The category Chaos Intensifies During Family Reorganization captures what it was like living in this home. Strained or absent communication between parent and participant expanded to include participants' being evasive and silent with others outside the family as well. Moreover, participants had a new stepparent to contend with. Participants did not know how to define their relationship to this person, in part due to secrecy surrounding the nature of the parental relationship and circumstances of their living together in the household. Many times, in addition to this relationship's being extremely problematic itself, the hostile or abusive stepparent further separated participants from their parent. On the other hand, the small group of participants receptive to developing a relationship with their warm and attentive stepparent approved of the parental relationship and felt better about their lives, their relationship with their stepparent, and changes since the divorce. Properties of Recognition of the Same-Sex Stepfamily, Tumultuous Beginning, Financial Strains,

Being Alone, Relationship with Stepparent, Losing Connection with Parent(s), and Keeping Quiet are included in this category.

The final category, Stabilization, describes how participants were able to overcome hurts and losses they experienced and rebuild their lives. The length of time it took participants to reach this stage varied. Some participants achieved a period of stability while living in the same-sex stepfamily whereas for others this stage was not achieved until they left the household and gained distance from their parent, stepparent, or continued chaos in the house.

Participants no longer lived in fear of being judged by others. They wanted to have open and honest relationships with others, and this included talking about their family and life circumstances. They felt comforted when meeting people with different histories and came to appreciate uniqueness in themselves and others. Conversely, they also met people who had gay family members or who were gay. Knowing others with similar experiences provided a sense of connection and belonging, and made past differences less important.

When circumstances in the same-sex stepfamily improved, participants benefited from being part of this household. Some specifically identified benefits to living in a same-sex stepfamily. Other times, regardless of continued stressful household situations and problematic familial relationships, participants got back on track through their own hard work and desire to succeed and improve their lives. Relationships with parents or stepparents changed, including empathy for their parent. Participants also mourned the loss of familial relationships that did not materialize as they hoped. Properties in this

category include Isolation Ends, I Struggled but Survived, Increased Understanding and

Empathy, and It's My Life Now.

CHAPTER X

FINDINGS AND THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

This chapter describes pertinent findings and theoretical implications of participants' experiences of living in an intact nuclear heterosexual family household and later living in a same-sex stepfamily. The findings and theoretical implications, analyzed through object relations theory, will be discussed and compared with relevant literature. Clinical implications and areas for future research conclude this chapter.

Brief Summary of Findings

Results of the study reveal nine major findings. Each finding is elucidated in its own section in this chapter. Findings are related to dynamics contained in transitioning from living in a heterosexual intact family to living in a same-sex stepfamily post parental disclosure of homosexuality and subsequent divorce.

Finding 1

Participants' basic sense of themselves and their parent was not altered by the parent's changed sexual orientation but their perception of their parent was modified by ongoing circumstances and their relationship.

Finding 2

Participants' reactions and adjustment to the numerous changes post-divorce were influenced by whether they felt loved, taken care of, and protected by their parents. A change in sexual orientation of a parent and his or her beginning a same-sex relationship did not produce the greatest impact.

Finding 3

Participants' relationship with their parents changed dramatically following the divorce. Emotional separation occurred too quickly and too early and their development was derailed.

Finding 4

Anxiety resulted from awareness of parental sexuality. A change in the parent's sexual orientation brought more attention to parental sexuality. Participants' defenses were heightened to keep parental sexuality repressed, including denial of the parent's homosexuality.

Finding 5

Participants did not talk about their gay or lesbian parent's or stepfamily's living arrangements.

Finding 6

Developmental factors contributed to a relaxation of defenses and led participants to think about their lives and reflect on their experiences. This did not automatically translate into their being more open with family members.

Finding 7

Participants did not wish for return of the parent's heterosexual orientation.

Finding 8

Participants' lives and family relationships did not improve in the same-sex stepfamily. Destabilization and strains from the immediate period after the divorce persisted.

Finding 9

Participants questioned the permanency of their relationships or held back from fully engaging with others.

Elucidation of Findings

Finding 1: Participants' basic sense of themselves and their parent was not altered by the parent's changed sexual orientation but their perception of their parent was modified by ongoing circumstances and their relationship.

Participants originally learned about themselves and their parents through numerous observations and interactions together and participation in daily routines in the intact family household. Seeing and interacting with their parents allowed them to formulate rudimentary ideas about who their parents were and over time helped them develop a general understanding of what they could count on and expect from them (Chapter V). A fundamental sense of themselves and their parents stemmed from these innumerable interactions within the context of their relationship and familial milieu.

Participants' narrative did not suggest their basic sense of who they or their parent was changed based on parental acknowledgment of previously undisclosed homosexuality. This is expectable, given object relations principles. An individual's basic sense of self is established in early life and is not easily changed. The change in the parent occurred later in life after the template is laid. On the other hand, participants' narratives did indicate this significant change was overwhelming in other ways when the parent was so preoccupied with this revised aspect of him- or herself and was not emotionally available to help them understand this change.

Participants were unable to go to or use their parent to lessen their anxiety or help understand this change in sexual orientation and living arrangements. These experiences were overstimulating and unprocessed. Parental availability and communication could have helped participants integrate any tension they experienced. Accordingly, parental help and effort to understand and validate participants' thoughts and feelings as they navigated these changes may have prevented the event from becoming traumatic, a result of an intolerable quantity of excitation (Freud, 1920/1955a). Although parents are frequently more attentive to rebuilding their own lives post-divorce, Hetherington (1993), results of this study suggest their unavailability may be more prominent in cases when the parent is also coming out for the first time, thereby having a more pronounced effect on children's psychological health.

Participants' narratives revealed the ways their parent and their relationship changed, particularly if there were disruptions in caretaking or emotional or actual separation, and whether their parent was open and communicative about his or her

change in sexual orientation and beginning a same-sex relationship had more meaning

and impact than the change in sexual orientation itself. Consistent with previous research

on children of divorce (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagen, 1999; Wallerstein et al., 2000),

how the parent behaved and reared participants since the beginning, over time, and in the

various household configurations, was critical in determining how participants felt about

the circumstances. Seeing and experiencing their parent become more impulsive or

reckless, less caring, more evasive, and unavailable was what was so distressing, or, in

the few cases where the parent became more open and relaxed and their relationship

enhanced, so pleasing. In either scenario, both cases were psychically reorganizing for

participants. These experiences prompted intrapsychic modifications of how they viewed,

interacted with, and thought of their parent and themselves. Reality testing demanded a

change in their perception of the parent based on the parent's actions and attitudes.

Identifications with the parent were established independent of the parent's sexual

orientation and not impacted by this change. Therefore, it may be impossible to know

what the role a change in sexual orientation impacts. Or what role a change in a singular

although significant attribute of the parent has on identifications in totality.

Finding 2: Participants' reactions and adjustment to the numerous changes post-divorce

were influenced by whether they felt loved, taken care of, and protected by their parents.

A change in sexual orientation of a parent and his or her beginning a same-sex

relationship did not produce the greatest impact.

How participants thought and felt about and adjusted to their parents' divorce,

breakup of their original family home, and circumstances of family life thereafter

predominately resulted from the stability and quality of the parent and participant

relationship and participants' sense of well-being and security in their new living

arrangements. Participants' reactions were similar to findings from previous literature of

divorce. Ongoing family circumstances and relationship with parents mitigate or

exacerbate the effects divorce has on children. The ways parents respond and manage the

post-divorce years, including provision of ongoing care to the children and maintenance

of positive relationships and household structure has a tremendous influence on

children's reactions and adjustment to the divorce (Hetherington, 1999; Wallerstein &

Kelly, 1979; Wallerstein et al., 2000).

Participants' narratives indicated they felt less important to their parents once the

marital strife began and they viewed their parents as less emotionally and physically

available. Participants took responsibility for more of their own care, a common

occurrence for children during the marital conflict and post-divorce transition phase

(Hetherington, 1993; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1979), and this persisted for many years,

regardless of the type of family structure in which they later lived. Their sentiments are

woven throughout the three chapters covering participants' lives and family relationships

beginning with the intact nuclear family household through the same-sex stepfamily

household (Chapters V, VI, and VII).

External stressors and their impact on participants, although not eliminated, were

lessened by having a loving, secure, and reliable relationship with their parent to rely on

and benefit from in times of difficulty. Participants wanted and benefited from supportive

contact with their parents. Bowlby (1982), who originated attachment theory, recognized

the child's need for a reliable ongoing attachment to a primary caregiver explains how contact with their parents eased overwhelming or stressful feelings. Sroufe (1996) expanded this notion and identified attachment as a biologically based down regulating system, helping the infant to modulate his or her arousal level. Bowlby recognized attachment is not something a person outgrows, nor should it be. Attachment does not wane; attachment behaviors eliciting proximity to the attachment figure change in expression with development. One's emotional security results from confidence in the availability of attachment figures. Participants needed their parents to help them modulate their arousal level in response to the numerous changes.

The quality of participant and parent relationship as well as the parent and partner relationship influenced how poignantly or painfully participants experienced the numerous changes in their lives. In addition, seeing their parent and new partner, regardless of sexual orientation of the couple, in a loving relationship that was responsive to participants' needs fostered their sense of feeling safe in their parent's care. Consistent with previous studies, the level of family conflict, communication, and quality of marital relationship had an influence in mediating participants' level of problems and adjustment, independent of family structure (Dunn, 2002; Mooney-Somers & Golombok, 2000; Patterson, 1992). Participants' reaction to learning the news their parent was gay or lesbian varied and was not always shocking or distressing (Chapter VI).

What seemed like a radical transformation itself, namely, a change in sexual orientation of a parent and his or her beginning a same-sex relationship, did not produce the greatest impact. Participants' basic sense of object relations with their parents was

laid down early in life. The quality of that relationship is long lasting and had more impact on participants' later life than the change itself.

Finding 3: Participants' relationship dramatically changed with their parents following the divorce. Emotional separation occurred too quickly and too early and their development was derailed.

Participants were alarmed they would loose connection with their parents, particularly the noncustodial parent, following the divorce. Although the amount of time participants and parent spent together lessened post-divorce and hindered their relationship, those who had a warm relationship developed ways to stay connected and emotionally engaged with one another. On the other hand, the vast majority of participants felt less emotionally connected with their parents over time, regardless of custodial arrangements. Although a temporary loss of emotional connection or increased conflict with their custodial parent occurs and resolves itself in many divorcing families (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1979), problematic relationships persisted longer than expected for participants in this study. Some participants believed their parent was less available to them when he or she was involved in any intimate relationship, regardless of whether the relationship was heterosexual or homosexual. Others believed their parent coming out and beginning a new same-sex relationship contributed to his or her absence and increased unavailability.

Participants reported they received less care than before and did not feel protected by their parents post-divorce (Chapter VI). Participants questioned how much they were loved and this caused them much anguish. Their anguish can be understood when

recognizing separation from the parent due to the divorce, particularly if it is a radical separation and the child perceives to have lost one or both parents in an emotionally drastic way, triggers core anxiety due to the sense of object loss and loss of attachment to the object.

Parent and child relationships post-divorce have been studied extensively. Studies indicate these relationships become more problematic over time, most often with noncustodial parents (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1979) or with fathers (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1996). Negative changes in the quality of relationships and growing emotional distance between parents and participants in this study were similar to findings in previous research (Amato & Booth, 1991), although other studies identify relationships often improve post-divorce, particularly when noncustodial parents and children rebuild their relationship in a manner more receptive to one another's needs (Ahrons, 2004). With very few exceptions, improved relationships were not reflected in participants' narratives.

Participants' narratives revealed their concern for their safety and well-being growing up, a frequent response from children after divorce (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1979). Some spoke of one parent being ill equipped to parent without the guidelines provided by the marital structure or supervision by the other parent. Roles were reversed and some participants took care of their emotionally distraught parent. Participants' narratives echoed studies noting parentification of children of divorce (Royko, 1999), and weakened household rules and parental guidance and discipline post-divorce (Lebowitz, 1985; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1979).

Many participants needed the missing external structure, previously provided by the cohesive parental unit, parental nurturance, and stable household for their ongoing development. This is expectable given the centrality of establishing and maintaining relationships with others as a necessary condition for development. Fairbairn and others recognized an individual needs satisfying relationships with others for growth. Although participants experienced a range of severity in emotional or behavioral problems post-divorce and for a significant time thereafter, psychological attention, previously available and directed towards their own growth and development, was refocused on their parents, caretakers, and instability of the household (Chapters VI and VII).

An important task of successful stepfamilies is the establishment of new and efficient family roles, relationships, and daily schedules. It often takes several years after its formation for a stepfamily to settle in and function effectively (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994; Hetherington, 1989); however, the usual destabilization period lasted longer for many same-sex stepfamilies in this study. Although some participants' experienced a resumption of development after the same-sex stepfamily achieved a level of stability, more often than not stabilization did not occur at all. In those instances, participants' growth resumed after their own maturation and physical separation from the continual chaos and strained relationships in the stepfamily home (Chapter VIII).

Finding 4: Anxiety resulted from awareness of parental sexuality. A change in the parent's sexual orientation brought more attention to parental sexuality. Participants' defenses were heightened to keep parental sexuality repressed including denial of the parent's homosexuality.

Previous studies indicated breakdown in communication occurs between parents and their children when parents do not come out to their children despite their involvement in a same-sex relationship. Impediments to open communication were attributed to parents' difficulty acknowledging their homosexuality and efforts to keep the relationship secret (Lewis, 1980). Secrecy and ensuing communication barriers were evident in this study. Many parents went to great lengths to keep the nature of their same-sex relationship secret. If they lived together with a partner, a second bedroom was staged to make it appear as if the parent and partner did not share a bedroom. Participants were given inaccurate explanations as to why their parents same gender "friend" moved into the house. The majority of parents delay coming out to their children (Schulenburg, 1985) or make the decision to disclose based on the children's age (Lynch & Murray, 2000). Only a very small number of participants in this study reported their parent openly disclosed he was gay or she was lesbian; instead, many participants received an ambiguous disclosure of various sorts or no disclosure at all (Chapter VI).

As participants matured and developed sexually, they began their own intimate relationships. Along this line, they were able to observe and differentiate between friendships and sexual relationships, and this observation extended to the parent's relationships as well. In some cases, participants came to recognize their parent was gay

or lesbian before any verbalization from the parent occurred. Although participants did not want to be privy to any details of their parent's love relationships, regardless of sexual orientation, ambiguity and secrecy regarding the changed sexual orientation of their parent drew more than the expected amount of conscious and less conscious attention to parental sexuality.

Object relations theory clarifies why a significant change in a parent would capture participants' attention. Internal mental representations and relational templates established in infancy are based on relationships and interactions with primary others (Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983). Internal representations and relational templates are carried forward throughout life and influence relationships and expectations of self and other.

Participants came to know about their parents via numerous exchanges and being a witness to, among other things, how parents conducted themselves, with whom they interacted, and their object choice. When participants wondered about the nature of their parent's relationship or suspected their parent was gay or lesbian, it drew more attention to the relationship and parental sexuality because they were trying to figure their parent out or to make sense of his or her behavior, changed interests, or new and seemingly strange relationship. This internal relationship to the parent, shaped by the nature of the original object relationship, is modifiable by subsequent experience and relationships (Ogden, 2004). Additional psychic attention is expended both to make sense of their parent's behavior and relationship and to modify the internal relationship to the parent

and, at the same time, to defend against awareness of parental change in sexual orientation and parental sexuality.

Adolescents grapple with the expression and management of their own burgeoning sexual feelings and impulses at the same time being cognizant of and therefore uncomfortable about knowledge of their parent's dating and sexual life (Lebowitz, 1985; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1996). It is well established that children in general are uncomfortable when faced with evidence of parental sexuality. This anxiety is attributed to the idea that awareness of parental sexuality evokes anxiety over childhood sexual fantasies about their parents and may threaten boundaries related to incest taboo.

Adolescent children of divorce and children of stepfamilies are faced with their own sexuality and evidence of their parent's sexuality, resulting from the parent's beginning a new love relationship. Findings of this study suggest there are additional levels of uneasiness regarding parental sexuality for adolescents in same-sex stepfamilies compared to children in heterosexual stepfamilies. A change in sexual orientation of the parent brings additional anxiety compared to parental dating and remarriage without a change in sexual orientation.

Parents and participants did not know how to, nor did they want to, talk about the parent's sexual orientation or love relationships. Furthermore, to talk about gay-centered activities or homosexuality in general was too close to talking about parental sexuality. Anxiety heightened, defenses were strengthened, and parental sexuality remained repressed. The obvious was kept quiet, not discussed with members within the household or with others outside the family.

Finding 5: Participants did not talk about their gay or lesbian parent's or stepfamily's living arrangements.

Many participants went to great efforts to keep their same-sex stepfamily secret from others. They did not mention or talk about their family members, did not bring friends over to their house, and did not verbalize any concerns they had. Although participants did not necessarily feel different from others because their parents were divorced, many felt different from others because they lived in and were a member of a same-sex household and had a gay or lesbian parent. Participants did not know others like themselves and had little awareness or understanding of people who were gay or lesbian (Chapter VII). Participants knew they lived in a different family configuration than the majority culture. They drew on their early familial relational template to define normal, but the same-sex stepfamily configuration was different and unusual. When not familiar with others like themselves, participants felt different. Participants' knowledge of and being with people who had gay or lesbian parents or lived in a same-sex family had not occurred. As they developed, some met and made friends with a diverse group of people. Being in contact with others like themselves expanded internalized guidelines for whom and what constituted a normal family and family structure and helped them begin to feel less different.

Although it is not uncommon for children of gay parents to not bring friends over or keep their living arrangement and their parent's relationship private (Ray & Gregory, 2001; Lewis, 1980; O'Connell, 1993), the severity of participants' silence and the entire family's silence was a distinguishing occurrence among those who transitioned into a

same-sex stepfamily and was not found to this extent in heterosexual stepfamilies or children born into gay or lesbian families.

Participants in this study did not know how to assimilate the uniqueness of their same-sex stepfamily or how to understand or explain the reasons they had new family members and relationships. To think or talk about one's experiences helps bring understanding. Participants' and their family members' way of handling was not through open discussions; this suggested a closing off or suppression. Suppression assisted participants to not think or talk about themselves and their family. This led to their difficulty developing a narrative to understand their experiences and resulted in an inability to integrate changed aspects of their parent and themselves into their thinking. This may be one reason participants did not indicate or describe any radical change in themselves.

Over time, for the most part, participants in this study reported an increased sense of stability and believed their life and mental health improved. Was that the way it was or was there a defensive glossing over? This researcher's difficulty reconnecting with participants who were initially receptive to review study results for member checking and the lack of response from those who were sent written material suggested the latter. Participants may have been reluctant to revisit study results because their participation in this study awakened negative affects previously defended against. Their silence and non-responsiveness was a repetition of ways participants coped with overwhelming affects in their childhood. They did not talk about it. Their silence then and over time, revealed

their need for external stability despite evidence to the contrary and intrapsychic stability despite feeling overwhelmed.

Finding 6: Developmental factors contributed to a relaxation of defenses and led participants to think about their lives and reflect on their experiences. This did not automatically translate into their being more open with family members.

Over time, new experiences and encounters with others helped expand participants' guidelines for how people should act and be. Participants felt less anxious about their living arrangements and recognized their own identity separate from their parents and household living arrangements. Suppression and denial gave way to a desire to understand themselves and their family relationships and circumstances better. They wanted to relate more intimately with others. Significant others outside the family of origin helped them process. Sometimes having their own children and love interests helped participants reflect on their lives in effort to explain their situation to others (Chapter VIII). Meeting and having relationships with new people outside the family helped them open up, especially when they became friends with people who were gay or lesbian. Having contact with others like themselves, whether it is having gay or lesbian parents or being gay or lesbian themselves positively influences children's adjustment and decreases feelings of isolation (Gilgoff, 2004; Lewis, 1980; Ray & Gregory, 2001).

Participants spoke of the relief they felt when they encountered diverse people and family backgrounds, while some wished they knew others like them earlier. Talking and having new experiences with others helped participants integrate a new relational configuration into their beliefs about what constituted a normal relationship and their

anxiety lessened. This allowed blocked psychological attention, previously constricting development, to resume.

Although participants disclosed the nature of their family and living arrangements, many were not open with the full extent of their feelings. This was particularly the case with participants' hesitation to be open with family members about past hurts and upset feelings. Participants were reluctant to talk with their parents about past parental abandonment, neglect, or their unavailability and its devastating impact on them. Wallerstein (2005) noted in families where parents were silent or uncommunicative with their children about the circumstances of their divorce, their adult children felt overburdened by the secrecy and lack of dialogue regarding the divorce. They were angry at their parents for withholding important information about their life and history.

Disavowal, intellectualization, and denial of hurt or angry feelings about their family circumstances or relationships helped participants maintain a relationship, albeit potentially emotionally constricted, with their parents and siblings. Quite possibly participants' avoidance of direct exploration and confrontation of difficult matters revealed their reluctance to open up emotionally laden topics in an effort to preserve the parent and participant relationship as it was, and prevent future changes or loss. Klein and Fairbairn, among various object relational thinkers, described how the child is motivated to try to hold caretakers blameless for disappointments, hurts, or neglect. This is done in an effort to not lose the sense of having a good and reliable caretaker and preserves the relationship with the caretaker. Keeping silent and being avoidant of emotional encounters that might lead to another change in or abandonment by their parent prevented

the potential loss of a parent. Additionally, the fact several participants described an idyllic childhood with their parents despite the presence of conflict in the marital relationship or parental instability may be attributed to idealization of their parents or early life together as a family. Idealization of the intact nuclear family helped participants return to, albeit in a defensive way, an earlier time when they believed they were loved, wanted, and cared for by their parents.

Finding 7: Participants did not wish for return of the parent's heterosexual orientation.

Participants' anguish was somewhat diminished by an ongoing open and caring relationship with their parents post-divorce, especially when participants believed their parents continued to place the participants' well-being and interests first. In those scenarios, continual parental ministrations countered a potential object loss and the loss of what was previously known. Although participants spoke of their hardships post-divorce and some reflected on earlier wishes their parents would reunite, both common reactions for children of divorce (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1979), participants' narratives did not indicate a wish for their gay or lesbian parent return to a heterosexual orientation. Only one participant stated she wished her parent was not gay. Participants were more upset when their parent was emotionally or physically unavailable during his or her coming out process and was entering into a same-sex relationship. These participants wished for a different relationship with their parent, not for his or her return to heterosexual orientation.

The ongoing parent and participant relationship had more meaning and impact on participants than the parent's love relationships. This is consistent with earlier studies of

children of gay parents that identified the quality of family relationships, not parental

sexual orientation, as affecting children's growth and development (Chan et al., 1998;

Mooney-Somers & Golombok, 2000; Patterson, 1992). Participants mourned the loss of

the parental care and the relationship they had or wished they had. A change in parental

sexual orientation did not constitute an object loss. Although participants' reactions

varied on learning their parent was gay or lesbian, their narratives indicated they were

more devastated by news of the divorce, the breakup of the marriage and family home,

and the circumstances of life thereafter than news of their parent's homosexuality.

Curiously absent from the majority of narratives was what impact, if any, the

noncustodial parent's reaction to the news their ex-spouse was gay or lesbian had on

participants. Previous studies indicated the heterosexual parent's reaction had a profound

effect on children's feelings about their gay or lesbian parent (Cramer, 1986); this was

not noted in participants' narratives.

Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1996) noted each family member had his or her own

reaction to the divorce and post-divorce family. They indicated it was erroneous to

assume the parent's contentment with life thereafter automatically benefited the children

as well. Additional factors, such as level of parental anger, quality of life in the new

home, relationship with the parent, and whether their needs were met, influenced

children's level of satisfaction in the post-divorce family (Dunn, 2002; Hetherington &

Stanley-Hagan, 1999; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1979).

While the above factors certainly influenced participants' experiences in their

same-sex stepfamily, there may be some cases where the parent's happiness influenced

children's happiness to a greater extent. In this study, participants who viewed their

parent as benefiting from their disclosure—for example, happier, more open, or more

relaxed, and involved in a caring same-sex relationship—were less negative concerning

their parent's being gay or their new living arrangements. When participants saw their

parent happier, reality testing confirmed they did not have to worry about potential loss

or adverse changes. It may be in instances when a same-sex stepfamily is formed after a

parent comes out, the parent's contentment with the living arrangement and intimate

relationship positively influences children's reactions more so than in situations without a

change in sexual orientation of a parent. Seeing their parent happy brought happiness to

some participants (Chapter VI).

Finding 8: Participants' lives and family relationships did not improve in the same-sex
stepfamily. Destabilization and strains from the immediate period after the divorce
persisted.

For many participants, life in the same-sex stepfamily was riddled with conflict

and unhappiness. Participants experienced numerous economic and relational strains and

losses after the divorce and the end of the intact family. Whereas studies on families of

divorce and stepfamilies indicated the acute distress many parents and children

experienced after divorce dissipated, and the post-divorce family established its own

stability within a few years (Cherlin, 1999; Hetherington, 1993; Wallerstein & Kelly,

1979), that was not the case for participants in this study. The expected destabilization in

the immediate period after the divorce did not lessen as time passed. The structure and

stability of the intact family did not reestablish itself in the majority of the same-sex stepfamilies (Chapter VII).

Participant and parent relationships remained strained and in some cases deteriorated. The family did not bond together and participants did not bond with their stepparents, or if they did, they did it much later. Exceptions to this occurred when participants liked their stepparent and the stepparent supplemented missing parental roles. Most often, participants did not believe their parent protected them from an abusive stepparent.

Although children in a stepfamily often have a more positive and open relationship with their biological parent compared to their stepparent (Dunn et al., 2001), other research indicated the majority of stepchildren had a fairly good relationship with their stepparent and were satisfied with the relationship (Ganong & Coleman, 1994). These studies stand in contrast to participants' familial relationships in this study. Participants reported a better relationship with their parent than stepparent, yet many parent and participant relationships were in turmoil and continued to be so as time passed. The vast majority had an even more problematic relationship with their stepparent, including being terribly unhappy with their stepparent and the quality of their relationship. It was true in participants' lives and consistent with the literature that the stepparent and participant relationship, once established, for better or worse, remained as it was and often did not automatically improve as time passed (Bray & Berger, 1993; Ganong & Coleman, 1994). In some cases it was possible participants may have felt disloyal to their parent if they liked their stepparent. Not wanting to feel disloyal may

have translated into keeping their stepparent at a distance or preventing themselves from getting more emotionally connected over time. In the participants' mind, having or wanting a relationship with their stepparent may threaten the relationship with their biological parent.

Whether it was attributed to stepparents' hostility toward participants, stepparents' efforts to exclude participants, or the private nature of the adult relationship, many participants did not feel accepted or cared about by their stepparent. Participants believed their stepparent either did not want them around or wanted control and influence over the adult relationship. Few stepparents supported or recognized the importance of the parent's relationship to the participants. This conflicted with earlier research findings by Lynch (2000, 2004). Lynch's studies indicated many stepparents in gay or lesbian stepfamilies support their partner's connection to his or her children and believed this to be more important than the adult relationship. Also absent in participants' narratives, yet indicated in previous research by Lynch (2004), was evidence of bonding same-sex stepfamilies experienced when they came together as a family to make decisions on what to disclose to others. For the majority of families in this study the nature of the same-sex household was not acknowledged or discussed with family members or with those outside the family. No efforts were made to support one another regarding the uniqueness of their family or to decide what to disclose to others.

Unlike early life in the intact family, life for many participants in the strained same-sex stepfamily had few growth-promoting routines or opportunities; the same-sex stepfamily did not develop its own routines and norms. In studying children of gay

parents, Ray and Gregory, (2001) identified benefits to living in a same-sex household, such as the children's being tolerant and respectful of differences in others. In this study, benefits specific to living in their same-sex household were mentioned by only a very small number of participants.

Many participants continued to feel inner turmoil because their external environment was in upheaval. Participants' negative experiences were not surprising given previous studies noted the ameliorating factors of a positive parent and child relationship, authoritative parenting, and minimal conflict in the post-divorce family on children's adjustment in the subsequent years (Hetherington, 1999; Wallerstein et al., 2000) and that many of these factors were absent in their same-sex stepfamily.

Not feeling secure or wanted depleted participants. Participants, at worst, regressed in development as they struggled to survive emotionally despite having limited resources or being surrounded by hostile relationships or tenuously maintaining previous developmental achievements. Exceptions occurred for participants who were separated from an abusive parent as a result of the divorce. These participants felt more relaxed in their new living arrangements and their development improved. Their positive reactions and experiences were consistent with previous research indicating non-problematic and occasional beneficial outcomes for children when parents who have high conflict, divorce (Ahrons, 2004; Amato et al., 1995; Wheaton, 1990).

For many this period in time represented losses and few gains, including (a) loss of relationships and care from and communication with parents, siblings, and extended family members; (b) loss of stability, rules, routines, and consistent predictable behavior

by their parent they came to know and count on; and (c) loss of economic and future financial planning and other resources.

Finding 9: Participants questioned the permanency of their relationships or held back from fully engaging with others.

Many participants anticipated future changes and endings to their friendships and intimate relationships. Although some accepted this readily and deemed it a part of life, others were distressed and either held back from fully engaging with others or worried their present relationships would not last (Chapter VIII). Several participants wondered if they would get divorced and did not want to be like their parents in that regard. Participants vowed they were never going to have multiple relationships or get a divorce, a common occurrence for adult children of divorce (Wallerstein, 2005; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1979).

One explanation for participants holding back from engaging in relationships is elucidated by Fairbairn (1941/1952b, 1943/1952a). Participants in this study experienced parental failures and breaks in ministrations pre- and post-divorce. When this occurs, the child internalizes a negative relationship with their parent, a relationship with and to a parent who is expected to be satisfying, but withholding nonetheless. In present day life, unconscious efforts are made to influence relationships to continue connecting to others with this similar emotional essence established in the past.

Although participants spoke of wanting a permanent loving relationship, a fair number did not feel fully equipped or invested to make relationships last or wondered if they were ever going to meet someone with whom they felt compatible. Wallerstein

(2005), in discussing the 25-year follow up of children of divorce she and her colleagues performed, wrote "at adulthood, the experience of having been through parental divorce as a child impacts detrimentally on the capacity to love and be loved within a lasting, committed relationship" (p. 410). Sixty percent of the women and 40% of the men established reasonably gratifying and enduring relationships, but the rest had not. Participants' concerns were not surprising, considering prior object relational anxieties get mobilized in present-day relationships, particularly when current circumstances resonate with the past. Once parental divorce shatters the illusion of relationships lasting forever, then trust, object constancy, and separation anxiety may become problematic in later life for everyone.

Clinical Implications

Participants were overwhelmed and confused regarding the nature of and reasons for the many changes they witnessed and experienced in their household and with their parents. All too often participants attributed their parents' emotional or physical absence as a rejection of them. When children blame themselves for parental neglect and abuse, they take ownership of and thereby internalize bad attributes of the parent. This fosters an illusion of control over their environment and retains the possibility for future care from their parent. The child surmises, If only I can be less bad, my parent will love me. This idea and the anxiety mobilized by this moral defense, may be understood by turning to Fairbairn's work.

Many participants were left alone to make sense of the changes they experienced. They had little guidance from others and few people to turn to for support or understanding. At the same time, participants did not readily seek out people with whom to talk, often due to being embarrassed and apprehensive about being open with others. Therapists working with people who have transitioned or are currently transitioning from a heterosexual household to a same-sex stepfamily due to a change in sexual orientation of their parent, should explore the meanings clients ascribed to their parent's behaviors and how they felt living in their new family composition. Assisting clients to construct a narrative about their family history is important; it allows clients to examine their core beliefs about what constitutes, in their mind, a normal household arrangement and intimate relationship and addresses any feelings of being different from the dominant culture.

Because many participants felt abandoned and neglected by their parents in the post-divorce years, grieving this loss may be another necessary component of treatment. Resolution of clients' grief could lead to more freedom and a desire to invest in relationships with others. Fairbairn's recasting of libido as object-seeking, recognizes the primary importance of connections with others and provides a framework to understand the complexity of this task. Clients' ongoing relationships with others, especially parents, despite intense disappointment in the relationships are explained as an unconscious tie to the alluring parent who is believed to be full of promise to satisfy but is withholding nevertheless. If the client were to sever this tie without belief or hope in the possibility of future satisfying relationships with others, he or she would be left alone and abandoned

again and is staunchly defended against. Therapists need to recognize a client's maintaining allegiance to the bad object is one explanation for why people remain locked in unsatisfying relationships with others.

Therapists need to be aware of any angst or protectiveness these clients may feel in revealing the nature of their same-sex stepfamily living arrangements, as this means disclosing their parent's homosexuality, which is something the parent or client may not feel comfortable doing. Participants' loyalty to and identification with their parent was evident when hurtful comments made about the parent was felt as a narcissistic wound to participants. Clients may be less open with others, including the therapist, in order to avoid these wounds.

<div align="center">Areas for Future Research</div>

Selection criteria for this study required participants to have experienced their parents' divorce, to have had one parent disclose his or her homosexuality, and to have lived at least 3 years in each family household. Participants in this study went through the divorce and lived in a same-sex household at various ages and in varying timeframes. These developmental and chronological factors did not exclude eligibility. Likewise, participants' gender and age and the gender of the custodial, noncustodial, or gay parent were not stipulated. This broad guideline was developed to provide a beginning point for exploration into the intrapsychic and interpersonal factors involved in these situations. Future studies should take into consideration the impact of gender, age, developmental factors, and timeframes.

Participants ultimately moved into a same-sex stepfamily after several transitions. Some moved directly after the divorce, some after living in a single-parent household, and some after living in another heterosexual stepfamily. Select participants fared better with these transitions whereas others were destabilized. Data analysis did not provide a complete explanation why some participants coped better than others. Some believed their present-day ability to manage stress and uncertainty stemmed from dealing with these changes and conflicts in their past. Although participants spoke of ongoing family relationships as buffering negative aspects of these changes, future studies should address intrapersonal attributes of those better able to manage disruptions.

Sometimes participants' close friends drew their attention to their parent's same-sex relationship by commenting or asking about the nature of the relationship. Other times friends were silent. More information is needed to understand why the nature of the relationship and household was denied or not talked about by others outside the family.

APPENDIXES

APPENDIX A

RECRUITMENT FLYER

Adult Children of Gay Parents Research Participants Requested

LGBT

Adults (age 18 and older) who have lived with their heterosexual parents and now live (or lived) in a lesbian or gay stepfamily.

For a research study to fulfill requirements for a Doctoral Dissertation
ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA FOR PARTICIPATION:

- You must be at least eighteen years of age.
- You must have lived with your heterosexual biological parents at least three years.
- One of your biological parents announced she is lesbian or he is gay and therefore divorced.
- You must have subsequently lived or are currently living with your lesbian or gay parent and her or his same-sex partner at least three years.
- You must be available for an interview, approximately 90 minutes in length, with possibility of a follow-up interview if additional information or clarification is needed. Participants will receive a $10 gift card per interview.

If you are interested in signing up or finding out more about this study, contact Debbie Barrett, LCSW, CADC by telephone at (630) 217-7754 or debbiebar3@aol.com. All information will be kept completely confidential.

APPENDIX B

TELEPHONE SCRIPT

INTRODUCTION—Hello, my name is Debbie Barrett. Thank you for your interest in my study entitled: Living in a Same-Sex Stepfamily Post Parental Divorce. Is this a convenient time to talk, or would you prefer I call you at another time? I need about fifteen minutes of your time.

This study is a research project that is part of the requirements for fulfilling a Ph.D. program at the Institute for Clinical Social Work in Chicago, Illinois.

How did you hear about this study? Have you seen the criteria required for participation? I would like to go over them with you to determine eligibility. Are you:

- At least eighteen years of age?
- Have you first lived with your mom and dad at least three years?
- Did your mom or dad announce she is lesbian or he is gay and subsequently divorce?
- Next have you lived or currently live with your now lesbian or gay parent and her or his same-sex partner at least three years?
- Are you available for one interview approximately one and one-half hour in length, with a possible follow-up interview if additional information or clarification is needed?

Now that it is determined you meet the criteria to participate in this study, do you have any questions before I continue?

PURPOSE— The purpose of this study is to research the experience of children transitioning from one household structure to another, resulting from the parent's changed sexual orientation and subsequent divorce. Results may be used to educate the mental health field and provide more effective clinical services, while also helpful in expanding the current literature.

PROCEDURES USED IN THE STUDY AND THE DURATION—Participation in this study will involve being interviewed for approximately one and one-half hour in length, with potential for another interview if additional information or clarification is needed. The time frame for completing the interviews will depend on your availability and our ability to coordinate scheduled times. If you agree to participate in this study, we will do the following:

- Sign a consent form.
- Schedule and participate in a one and one-half hour interview, and potentially another interview if additional information or clarification is needed, at a location and time convenient for us.
- Agree to have the interview audiotape recorded.
- Understand you will receive a monetary incentive of a ten dollar gift card following each interview.

Please note your participation in this research is voluntary and you may stop the interview at any time. The location of the interview will be your choice of in your home, the private practice office space provided by me or an agreed location.

BENEFITS—If you choose to participate in this study, there are no direct benefits for participation in this research project. However, you may experience positive feelings, such as a sense of relief in being able to talk about your experience. You will receive a monetary incentive of a ten dollar gift card following each interview. Your story will help the

mental health field better serve those in family transitions such as yours, and will add to the clinical literature. It is hoped benefits to greater society will result with exposure and knowledge about these types of family transitions.

COSTS—There is no monetary cost associated with participation in this study. Any expenses incurred due to travel costs will be paid by me. There will be a time cost of up to two one and one-half hour interviews.

POSSIBLE RISKS/SIDE EFFECTS—It is possible you may be asked about sensitive issues that could evoke negative emotional responses. If you are observably upset to the point of not being able to continue the interview, I will stop the interview to ask and assess how you are feeling. If additional support is needed, I will provide you with the names of mental health centers that can help you sort out some of the feelings you may be having.

PRIVACY/CONFIDENTIALITY—The information you provide is confidential. Your identity and the identity of any persons to whom you refer to during these interviews will not appear or be used in this research project. However, phases and/or sentences you say may be used anonymously as data in this study. Do you give your consent to have this data published? The audio tapes used in this study will be destroyed immediately after they are transcribed. Raw data, such as transcriptions and notes will be secured in a locked filing cabinet for a maximum of five years after I graduate. At the end of the five year period the raw data will be destroyed.

SUBJECT ASSURANCES—By signing the consent form at our first meeting, you agree to take part in this study. You will not give up any of your rights or release me from responsibility for carelessness. You may cancel your consent to continue in this study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. You have the right to terminate participation in this study at any time.

APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Informed Consent for Participation in Research

INSTITUTE FOR CLINICAL SOCIAL WORK

I, _____, acting for myself, agree to participate in the research study entitled: Living in a Same-Sex Stepfamily Post Parental Divorce. This work will be carried out by Debbie Barrett, LCSW, CADC under the supervision of Joan DiLeonardi, Ph.D., the Dissertation Chair. This study is conducted under the auspices of the Institute for Clinical Social Work, 200 N. Michigan Ave., Suite 407, Chicago, IL 60601, (312) 726-8480, as part of the requirements for fulfilling the Ph.D. program.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study is to research the experience of children transitioning from one household structure to another, resulting from the parent's changed sexual orientation and subsequent divorce. Results may be used to educate the mental health field and provide more effective clinical services, while also helpful in expanding the current literature.

PROCEDURES USED IN THE STUDY AND THE DURATION

Participation in this study will involve being interviewed for one and one-half hour in length, with a follow-up interview if additional information or clarification is needed. The time frame for completing the interviews will depend on the availability of the participant, and the ability to coordinate scheduled times with this researcher. If you agree to participate in this study, we will do the following:

- Sign a consent form.
- Schedule and participate in a one and one-half hour interview, and potentially another interview if additional information or clarification is needed, at a time and location convenient for both of us.
- Agree the interview will be audiotape recorded.
- Understand you will receive a monetary incentive of a ten dollar gift card following each interview.

It is important you are aware participation in this research is voluntary and you may stop the interview at any time. The location of the interview will be your choice of in your home, in the private practice office space provided by this researcher or an agreed location.

BENEFITS

There are no direct benefits for participation in this research project. However, you may experience positive feelings, such as a sense of relief in being able to talk about your experience. You will receive a monetary incentive of a ten dollar gift card following each interview. Your story will help the mental health field better serve those in family transitions such as yours, and will add to the clinical literature. It is hoped benefits to greater society will result with exposure and knowledge about these types of family transitions.

COSTS

There is no monetary cost associated with participation in this study. Any expenses incurred due to travel costs will be paid by this researcher. There will be a time cost of at most two one and one-half hour interviews.

POSSIBLE RISKS/SIDE EFFECTS

It is possible you may be asked about sensitive issues that could evoke negative emotional responses. If you are observably upset to the point of not being able to continue the interview, I will stop the interview to ask and assess how you are feeling. If additional support is needed, I will provide you with the names of mental health centers that can help you sort out some of the feelings you may be having.

PRIVACY/CONFIDENTIALITY

The information you provide is confidential. Your identity and the identity of any persons to whom you refer to during these interviews will not appear or be used in this research project. However, phases and/or sentences you say may be used anonymously as data in this study. You give your consent to have this data published. The audio tapes used in this study will be destroyed immediately after they are transcribed. Raw data, such as transcriptions and notes will be secured in a locked filing cabinet for a maximum of five years after this researcher graduates. At the end of the five year period the raw data will be destroyed.

SUBJECT ASSURANCES

By signing this consent form, you agree to take part in this study. You have not given up any of your rights or released this institution from responsibility for carelessness.
You may cancel your consent to continue in this study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. You have the right to terminate participation in this study at any time. Your relationship with this researcher or staff of the ICSW will not be affected in any way, now or in the future, if you refuse to take part, or if you begin the study and then withdraw. If you have any questions about the research methods, you can call Debbie Barrett at (630) 217-7754 or Joan DiLeonardi, Ph.D., Dissertation Chair at (312) 726-8480. If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may call Daniel Rosenfeld, M.A., Chair of Institutional Review Board, ICSW, 200 N. Michigan Ave., Suite 407, Chicago, IL 60601, (312) 726-8480.

SIGNATURES

I have read this consent form and agree to take part in this study as it is explained in this consent form.

_____   _____

Signature of Participant   Date

I certify I have explained the research to _____ and believe she/he understands and has agreed to participate freely. I agree to answer any additional questions when they arise during the research or afterward.

_____   _____

Signature of Researcher   Date

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