

FAMILY CONVERSATIONS ABOUT SEXUAL ORIENTATION:  
INTERVIEWS WITH HETEROSEXUALLY MARRIED PARENTS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

It was so interesting when you called us. Probably the most interesting conversation that we've had so far had just occurred very recently....With Sean [oldest son, age 14] the issue has come up and he has generated it. Probably just 2 weeks ago he asked me how I felt about the issue with gay marriage. It was during the news and was in terms of, "What do you think about that?"....We had a lengthy conversation about it....I told him what both sides of the issue were about. And we talked about knowing people and having friends who we thought would probably be married if they were legally able to be married and it seemed ridiculous that they would be denied that right. So we had a really good conversation about it. (Beth)

I think at school somebody called somebody "gay." Lisa [single child, then age 9] came home and asked me what that meant. I said, "Well, it means when two people of the same gender prefer to marry or fall in love with, or whatever, each other instead of a boy/girl thing that you see as the norm. And she thought for a minute, and she said, "Well, I think I'm gay because I really hate boys and I really love Amy. And I said, "Well, at this age it's usually too early to tell. I mean, you'll probably go through some changes before you really decide or maybe you'll always go through changes." (Cindy)

Throughout the past decade, research illuminating the lives of lesbians, gay men, and their families has emerged. Laird (1993, 1994) has called for movement beyond the deficit--"we're as normal as everyone else"--literature and has provided rich descriptions of the resiliency and creativity of gay and lesbian headed families. In her book, *Reinventing the Family*, Benkov (1994) weaves the history of the gay and lesbian civil rights movement with the narratives of lesbians and gay men about the purposeful construction of their families. Focusing on the nature of

interactions regarding sexual orientation in these families, the specific communication of parents coming out to their children has also begun to receive scholarly attention (West & Turner, 1995).

Embedded in the gay parenting movement (Martin, 1993), however, lies another question: How are the issues of sexual orientation being discussed in heterosexual-headed families, particularly families headed by parents who try to promote a climate of acceptance of sexual orientation diversity? The words "gay," "lesbian," and "homosexual" are often stated in evening news reports and are the routine content of television programs and feature films. Are children gaining an early awareness of the diversity in sexual orientations? It is estimated that one in every four American families has a gay or lesbian member (Goodman, 1991). Are families talking about sexual orientation at home? What are they saying?

#### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore constructive family conversations about sexual orientation. I invited heterosexually married couples with children under the age of 18 to discuss their family's conversations about sexual orientation diversity. The introductory quotations reflect the content of those conversations. The following table (Table 1) previews the parenting couples in a narrative demographic description. I chose to represent the couples with alliterative first name pseudonyms, not for the purpose of assuming similarity between spouses' comments, but for the ease of recognition of parenting couples when reading the findings.

Table 1

Narrative Descriptions of the Families

**Ann, 47, and Alan, 42,** have been married for 13 years. Ann has a doctoral degree and is an educator. Alan has a bachelors degree and is a manager. Their daughter is 5 years old. This is Ann's second marriage.

**Beth, 41, and Ben, 43,** have been married for 17 years. Beth has a doctoral degree and Ben has a masters degree. Both are educators. They have 3 sons, ages 10, 12, and 14.

**Cindy, 50, and Carl, 52,** have been married for 30 years. Cindy has a bachelors degree and is an entrepreneur. Carl has a doctoral degree and is an educator. Their daughter is 14 years old.

**Donna and Dan, both 35,** have been married for 12 years. Donna has a masters degree and is an educator. Dan has completed 2 years of college and is an entrepreneur. They have an 11-year-old daughter and are expecting a second child.

**Ellen and Eric, both 48,** have been married for 23 years. Ellen has a bachelors degree and works in public relations. Eric has a doctoral degree and is an educator. They have a 10-year-old daughter and 7-year-old son.

**Fran, 44, and Fred, 60,** have been married for 21 years. Both have doctoral degrees. Fran is an educator and Fred is an entrepreneur. Their 2 sons are ages 7 and 11. This is Fred's second marriage.

**Gail, 43, and Gary, 40,** have been married for 13 years. Gail has a masters degree and is an educator. Gary has a doctoral degree and provides health care. They have 3 daughters, ages 7, 9, and 11. Both Gail and Gary identify their religion as Jewish.

**Holly and Hank, both 42,** have been married for 18 years. They both have bachelors degrees. Holly provides health care and Hank works in public relations. They have 2 daughters, ages 11 and 16, and a 5-year-old son. Both Holly and Hank identify their religion as Protestant.

**Irene, 45, and Ivan, 44,** have been married for 14 years. Irene has a doctoral degree and provides legal services. Ivan has a masters degree and works in a management position. They have a 12-year-old daughter and 10-year-old son.

**Joan, 49, and John, 40,** have been married for 15 years. Both have doctoral degrees and are educators. Their daughter is 13 years old. This is Joan's second marriage.

What kinds of questions are children asking? The following children's questions were reported by parents in this study:

Can boys marry boys? (Ann and Alan's 5-year-old daughter)

Is Ru Paul gay? (Donna and Dan's 11-year-old daughter)

Will Uncle Brian [gay uncle] ever get married? (Irene and Ivan's 10-year-old son)

Why did Sharon Bottoms lose custody of her son? (Ellen and Eric's 10-year-old daughter)

Why would she [adult lesbian friend] hide that she's gay from her parents? (Fran and Fred's 11-year-old son)

Why are teenage boys so homophobic? (Cindy and Carl's 14-year-old daughter)

Why do some people want *Daddy's Roommate* off the library shelves? (Gail and Gary's daughters, then ages 6 and 8)

Why aren't we going to Cracker Barrel anymore? (Holly and Hank's daughters, then ages 8 and 13)

Do people have a choice about being gay? (Joan and John's 13-year-old daughter)

Clearly, children ask their parents questions about what they notice around them. They ask about family, friends, public personalities, and cultural and historical events. Most of their questions reflect issues related to everyday life in their near environments.

#### Rationale for the Study

The study was informed by human ecology theory and a narrative approach. These frameworks are described in Chapter 2. Results of this research informs current understandings of family communication patterns specifically surrounding sexual orientation and indirectly related to controversial subject matter. Also, results generate implications for both educators and clinicians. Four justifications serve as rationale for the study.

First, the current social and political climate provides a ready context for collecting information about sexual orientation in the content of family conversations. In the decade of the 1990s, issues such as "gays in the military," "AIDS in the gay community," "AIDS among heterosexuals," "Defense of Marriage Act," and "lesbian mother loses custody of son" are prevalent in the news. Outside exposure to this topic is high (Stacey, 1996). The three major television networks portray regular lesbian or gay characters. Families of all kinds are faced with rising amounts of information regarding sexual orientation. I wondered: How do children perceive these issues and what do they want to know more about?

Second, lesbians and gay men are becoming increasingly more visible as individuals, parents, partners, and members of families (Patterson, 1992). It is likely that any given person will know a lesbian, gay, or bisexual family member, co-worker, or friend. Children are more likely now to know a child being raised in a family headed by lesbians or gay men. Understanding issues of diversity in sexual orientation is not only a task for lesbians and gay men. While maintaining various friend, family, and professional relationships, heterosexuals and their families are becoming more aware of sexual orientation diversity.

Third, inaccurate information often exists in the absence of accurate information (Derman-Sparks, 1989). This project provides insight into the information children do have regarding sexual orientation. In the state of Virginia's *Family Life Education* (1988) curriculum, for example, the word "homosexuality" is

mentioned once and then as a risk factor for contracting AIDS. I wondered: If larger environments ignore diversity in the identities and relationships among people or remain silent to the taunts of "faggot," "queer," and "lesbo," how do families provide more compassionate, accurate information?

Finally, the sexual orientation of one's children is not known in the early years of these conversations. Sexual identity will reveal itself sometime later and may change throughout the lifespan (Klein, 1990). Most lesbians and gay men were raised in heterosexual-headed households. With families being the earliest learning environment, the tone and content of such conversations have lasting impressions. This affects all children, but for children who become lesbian, gay, or bisexual adults, this could have deleterious consequences (Savin-Williams & Rodriguez, 1992). Homophobic rhetoric negatively affects the self-esteem of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth and, therefore, increases the chances of self-destructive behavior (Uribe & Harbeck, 1992). Suicide has become the third leading cause of death among youth ages 15 to 19 years and an estimated 30% of those deaths are attributable to issues of sexual orientation and consequential rejection or fear of rejection (Kourany, 1987). This study focused on families who promote acceptance of diversity in hopes of learning how constructive discourse is triggered and carried out in family conversations.

In summary, parents were unlikely to have been exposed to accurate and fair information about sexual orientation diversity as they were growing up. This study explored the content of their

knowledge, the influences on that knowledge, and the attitudes with which they transmit that knowledge. These are private family conversations with lasting and public ramifications.

#### Definition of Concepts

*Sexual orientation* refers to "affectional and sexual relationships of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and heterosexual people" (Committee on Lesbian and Gay Concerns, American Psychological Association, 1991). Klein's (1990) description of sexual orientation includes dimensions of emotional and social preferences, as well as sexual attractions. In this study, children's understanding of sexual orientation was described by the parents and reflected a knowledge of "two men loving each other," "a child having two moms," and other such constructions of family structure.

*Family conversations* refers to the communication between parents and children. This includes actual spoken communication, as well as that which is ignored or avoided. In a chapter describing an intersubjective methodology for studying children and families, Davilla (1995) states, "Conversations within daily life frequently concern family occurrences, images, and stories that create the basis from which people learn their roles within families. From this talk, families create a discourse that is used to shape, understand, and transform their roles and expectations in the practice of family living" (p. 89).

*Narrative* refers to one's "story" as "a symbolized account of actions...that has a temporal dimension" (Sarbin, 1986, p. 3). In this study, narrative describes both the stories within the

families and the stories told by the parents (to the researcher) about family conversations.

*Values* are defined as a temporal abstraction of generalized principles to which most individuals of specific subgroups emotionally relate" (Dilworth-Anderson, Burton, & Turner, 1993, p. 238). Of concern to this research were the ways in which values, specifically related to diversity of sexual orientations, are transmitted from parents to children within family conversations. Although communication patterns and values transmission about sexuality are similar in content, it is important to note that this project is about the conversations relating to sexual orientation, namely identities and relationships, rather than sexual behaviors.

*Homophobia* is defined as "the irrational fear and hatred of those who love and sexually desire those of the same sex" (Pharr, 1988, p. 1)

*Heterosexism* is defined by Herek, Kimmel, Amaro, and Melton (1991) as "an ideological system that denies, denigrates, or stigmatizes homosexual behaviors and gay, lesbian, and bisexual identities, relationships, and communities" (p. 957).

### Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What is the content and meaning of family conversations about sexual orientation?
2. How do parents attempt to answer children's questions or inform them about the topic of sexual orientation?
3. How does gender organize family conversations about sexual orientation?
4. What other factors influence parents' attitudes about sexual orientation?
5. What values do parents want their children to have regarding sexual orientation?

## CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

## Theoretical Perspective

Human Ecology Theory

Human ecology theory views humans as both "biological organisms and social beings in interaction with their environment" (Bubolz & Sontag, 1993, p. 419). Specific tenets of the theory are focused on the family system, the interdependent transactions that link people and environments, and the decisions that families make to adapt creatively and foster human development.

Bubolz and Sontag (1993) enumerate 10 core premises of the human ecology theory. Four premises are most closely relevant to this study:

1. The properties of families and the environment, the structure of environmental settings, and the processes taking place within and between them must be viewed as interdependent and analyzed as a system.

2. Families are semiopen, goal directed, dynamic, adaptive systems. They can respond, change, develop, and act on and modify their environments. Adaptation is a continuing process in family ecosystems.

3. Families interact with multiple environments.

4. Decision making is the central control process in families that directs actions for attaining individual and family goals. Collectively, decisions and actions of families impact society, culture, and the natural environment (pp. 425-426).

Because of its focus on the interdependence of systems in understanding family behavior, an ecological perspective is appropriate for research on family communication. The recognition that one-way linear research is inadequate for the complex study of family interaction is in keeping with both feminist perspectives on the family (Osmond & Thorne, 1993) and family communications theory (Stafford & Dainton, 1995).

General systems theory. Ludwig von Bertalanffy, the pioneer credited with articulating general systems theory, urged scientists to "think interaction" rather than to examine the basic elements of a system independently (Nichols & Schwartz, 1995). Used carefully, without dehumanizing or ignoring issues of responsibility, a systems perspective provides a framework for conducting research that examines the multiple relationships inherent in family communication.

Most relevant to this study are the concepts of influence and change. In a review of early therapy models, Nichols and Schwartz (1995) described an advantage of systemic thinking as the "recognition that people's lives are linked together such that behavior in families becomes a product of mutual influence" (p. 195). Families are also self-organizing and self-stabilizing systems that can "change values, goals, and rules in response to internal or environmental changes. They can also take action to change environments to serve human purposes" (Bubolz & Sontag, 1993, p. 425).

Bronfenbrenner's nested structures. Bronfenbrenner (1979), a developmental psychologist, described an individual or family's environment through the illustration of a set of "nested structures, each inside the next, like a set of Russian dolls" (p. 3). Briefly, the structures are (a) *microsystem*, the family, (b) *mesosystem*, the relationships between the family and other settings for development such as schools, (c) *exosystem*, the external environments, such as work and extended family, in which others (e.g., parents) participate and thereby affect the child, (d) *macrosystem*, the broad ideological values, norms, and institutional patterns of a particular culture that make up the "blueprints" for the culture's ecology of human development, and (e) *chronosystem*, the influence on the person's development of changes and continuities over time in the environments in which the person lives. The identification of the latter system was more recently developed by Bronfenbrenner (1986) to facilitate the analysis of normative and nonnormative transitions throughout the life course.

In an article describing the family as a context for human development, Bronfenbrenner (1986) asked, "How are intrafamilial processes affected by extrafamilial conditions?" He has recently referred to such interactions within the immediate environment as "proximal processes" (Bronfenbrenner, 1995, p. 620). Following the work of Bronfenbrenner, Garbarino and Abramowitz (1992) define families as "the central microsystem, the 'headquarters' for human development" (p. 72). A purpose of this research was to learn from the parenting team of this "headquarters" about the interaction

among its adults and children and about the influences of its surrounding systems. Applying Bronfenbrenner's nested structures to the families in this project yields the following descriptions: (a) the *microsystem* of a family, (b) the *mesosystem* of school settings and peer relationships, (c) the *exosystem* of work settings, adult friendship networks, families of origin, extended kin, and the media (d) the *macrosystem* of political climates, school policies, and religious beliefs, and (e) the *chronosystem* of individual developmental stages and histories of participants, such as attending college during the 1960s and 1970s.

#### Narrative Approach

Sarbin (1986) described the narrative approach as a way of "organizing episodes, actions, and accounts of actions; it is an achievement that brings together mundane facts and fantastic creations; time and place are incorporated. The narrative allows for the inclusion of actors' reasons for their acts, as well as the causes of happening" (p. 9). In addition to the telling of events, narrative also involves a storyteller and intended audience (Witherell, 1991).

In this study, the narrative element, as well as the identified storyteller and audience, exist within three contexts. First, each parent brings a narrative, characterized primarily by family of origin messages and personal philosophy, to the family they helped to create. This narrative clearly influences the second narrative--parent-child communication, specifically, the parent-to-child communication. Researchers are rarely privy to this type of narrative. Although it will be impossible to verify

the "narrative truth," Tappan and Brown (1991) point out "we have no other choice" (p. 177). Furthermore, of interest to this research, was the *meaning* attached to the actual stories. This leads to the third context, the narrative retelling of family conversations from parent participants to researcher. By using conjoint interviews, participants were simultaneously engaged in both telling and listening--a narrative in conversation. Particular attention was paid to shared and contradictory narratives, as well as to each parent's thoughts about the future. "Events are rendered socially visible through narratives, and they are typically used to establish expectations for future events" (Gergen & Gergen, 1988, p. 18).

When considering the specific topic of this research, it is important to recognize the existence of a dominant narrative in American society. Families are surrounded by systems that view human behavior through the lens of heterosexual experience (Brown, 1989). "Heterosexism creates the climate for homophobia with its assumption that the world is and must be heterosexual and its display of power and privilege as the norm" (Pharr, 1988, p. 16). Through the eyes of young children, this narrative is reduced to the sexist notions of "girls should not act like boys" and "boys certainly should not act like girls!"

Weingarten (1995) cautions that some stories become dominant stories, and it "becomes exceedingly difficult to tell tales that diverge. Cultures select versions of stories to legitimate and ones to deny, repress, trivialize, marginalize and obscure" (p. 9). In describing storytelling as a strategy for social control, Langellier and Peterson (1993) stated that storytelling can legitimate "meanings and power relations that privilege, for example, parents over children, males over females, and the white, middle-class family over alternative family structures" (p. 51). They continue to propose, however, that family narratives can also "foster resistance and tactics that contest dominant meanings and power relations" (p. 51). By viewing family storytelling as a strategic practice of social control rather than folklore, various influences on family conversations can be more clearly examined.

In conclusion, it is important to note that "narratives" and "stories" that are exchanged in families may be long, historically based tales of moral choices or very brief utterances such as, "Oh, my God," "Don't," or "I love you," (Weingarten, 1995). Most fall somewhere in between. Laughing about the "homos" down the street, stating disapproval of an unmarried aunt's desire to bring her "friend" to Thanksgiving dinner, proposing a heartfelt toast at a lesbian couple's union, or ignoring children's chides of "fag" are all part of a family's conversations about sexual orientation.

## Literature Related to the Research Questions

### Content of Family Conversations

Although family conversation about sexual orientation is unchartered research territory, recent attention has been given to family communication in general. In their edited book, Socha and Stamp (1995) provide chapters related to research and theory in family communication. The authors discuss the importance of understanding the role of communication within the integral human relationship of parents and children. In addition to clearly affecting the family members themselves, communication between parents and children impacts the future of the society in which the communication is embedded.

Some of the empirical research examining the content of family conversations includes studies on family conversation and learning to remember (Edwards & Middleton, 1988), parent-child communication about sex (Warren, 1995), conversations between siblings about feelings (Brown & Dunn, 1992), and coming out communication in lesbian and gay headed families (West & Turner, 1995). A particularly relevant study found that 86% of parents who had completed a college human sexuality course had begun discussions with their own children about sex (King, Parisi, & O'Dwyer, 1993). Only 18% of parents who had not completed the course had such discussions with their children. Three-fourths of the "sexuality-educated parents" (p. 289) who had children aged 12 and older had discussed menstruation, sexual intercourse and reproduction, birth control, sexually transmitted diseases, homosexuality, and sexual abuse.

### Parental Responses to Children's Questions

In an article conceptualizing parent development as an outcome of parent education, Thomas (1996) proposed six "interpersonal interaction themes" (p. 191). These themes are also appropriate for classifying parents' response styles when engaging in conversations with their children about sexual orientation. The first three are referred to as *encourage development themes*: (a) sensitivity and responsiveness, (b) reciprocity, and (c) support. The final three are referred to as *constrain development themes*: (d) insensitivity and unresponsiveness, (e) intrusiveness, and (f) domination.

When examining parents' ability to interact effectively with and educate their children on topics such as sex, researchers have strongly suggested that parents need education first (King et al., 1993; Kyman, 1995). Interacting with children specifically on the topic of sexual orientation has received little attention, but would be assumed to benefit from parent education as well. Lay parenting "handbooks" are beginning to address this topic. Schaefer and DiGeronimo's (1994) book, entitled *How to Talk to Your Kids About Really Important Things*, includes a chapter on "homosexuality." Parents are advised to first examine their own opinions and to allow their children the development of a tolerant attitude. The utilization of the media, of teachable moments, and of everyday experiences is encouraged by the authors since "homosexuality is not a subject that lends itself to long lectures out of the blue" (p. 193). A 1992 issue of *Mothering* magazine contains an article with suggestions for talking to children about

"being gay" (Berger, 1992). Specific recommendations for children ages 6 to 12 include treating homophobic slurs as inappropriate and clarifying the confusion between gender roles and sexual orientation.

There is a cluster of related literature in the area of teacher education. Two relevant articles appear in the premier applied journal for practitioners, *Young Children*, a publication of the National Association for the Education of Young Children. The first article, "Penny's Question: I Will Have a Child in My Class With Two Moms--What Do You Know About This?" (Wickens, 1993) addresses the responsibility of early childhood educators to create an environment of tolerance. The second article, "A Complicated Bias" (Corbett, 1993), stresses the need for all children to see themselves and their families reflected in the classroom atmosphere. More scholarly contributions include the work of Casper and Schultz (1996) in which the attitudes and experiences of educators were explored through in-depth interviews. Educators generally reported clashes between their early family-of-origin attitudes and their actual experiences with lesbian or gay people.

#### Issues of Gender

Current research indicates that gender of both the parent and the child influences the amount and type of parent-child interaction. Not surprisingly, mothers are found to spend more time with children (Meyers, 1993; Stafford & Dainton, 1995). Even in dual earner marriages and in interactions with adolescents, mothers spend as much as twice the amount of time with children

than do fathers. As reported in a review by Stafford and Dainton (1995), "mothers talk more and talk about a wider variety of topics, especially about social and personal issues. Fathers talk about fewer topics, and often focus on rules, academic achievement, and instrumental tasks" (p. 6).

The research of Reese and Fivush (1993) found that parents display two distinctively different narrative styles with their 3-year-old children. The differing styles, however, were found to be related to the gender of the child, rather than the gender of the parent. Daughters received more elaborative discourse from their parents than sons. They were provided with more narrative structure and were talked to longer. In turn, daughters engaged in conversations with parents to a greater extent than sons.

In a review of literature on topic avoidance by adolescents in parent-child relationships, Guerrero and Afifi (1995) state that, in general, sons report avoiding communication with their parents more than daughters. Both daughters and sons report avoiding communication with fathers more than with mothers. When the topic is sexual in nature, daughters are typically more inclined to talk with their mothers, and sons are more inclined to talk to their fathers.

#### Other Influences

In addition to gender, other influences on parents' behaviors and thoughts about talking to their children about sexual orientation were examined. As previously discussed, parenting handbooks are beginning to include chapters that encourage parents to have meaningful conversations with children about sexual

orientation (Schaefer & DiGeronimo, 1994). The increase in media exposure to issues relating to lesbians and gay men may allow for an increase in conversation between parents. Identification of major influences was, prior to this study, speculative due to the lack of empirical research on parental behaviors or beliefs about sexual orientation. In this study, participants were invited to respond to questions about their own early learning about sexual orientation, their perceived influences (family of origin, friendships, ethnic culture, religion, media), and their knowledge about the lives of lesbians or gay men. "Narratives about influence establish a connection for the individual between past events and present or future events" (Young, Friesen, & Borycki, 1994, p. 174).

#### Transmission of Values

Finally, the participants in this study were asked to describe their wishes regarding their children's attitudes and understanding about sexual orientation. Parents are in the position of mediating between the "collective culture at large," their own sets of beliefs, and the developing "personal cultures" of their children (Lightfoot & Valsiner, 1992, p. 408). In a chapter on African-American parent-child communication, Socha, Sanchez-Hucles, Bromley, and Kelly (1995) refer to parents as "cultural advisors" (p. 135) to their children.

The knowledge, as well as the values, parents have about particular populations are transmitted to their children through communication, particularly through the practice of advice-giving. Given that parents are usually considered to be the primary

"conveyors of cultural values" for young children (King et al., 1993), a closer look at the transmission of values illuminates the current understanding of the development of and/or resistance to homophobia and other fears that indicate intolerance.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

## Overview

The purpose of this study was to explore successful, constructive family conversations about sexual orientation. This qualitative exploration was conducted through conjoint parent interviews, that is, with both parents present. Qualitative methods are well suited for understanding the "meanings, interpretations, and subjective experiences of family members" (Daly, 1992a, p. 3). In this project, I sought to understand parents' verbal communications with their children. Who talks to whom? Who asks the questions? Who answers them? What questions are asked and answered? How are feelings and meanings communicated?

Particular to this study was the investigation of what many families would consider private information. Entering the "relatively closed and highly protected boundaries of families' experiences" (Daly, 1992a, p. 4) is a challenge for qualitative researchers. Open-ended interviews facilitate the possibility of developing a relationship between researcher and participants in which the level of comfort with which participants may disclose increases (Daly, 1992a; Marshall & Rossman, 1989). In-depth interviews allowed time for parents to reflect upon and recollect the conversations they have with their children about sexual orientation.

Although guided by semi-structured questions, I conducted the conjoint interviews with parents as conversations. It is important to note that some researchers warn against conjoint interviews because of the power differences between men and women (Reinharz,

1992). Women, it is feared, will be less likely to disclose freely, especially when they are wanting to assert an opinion that differs from their husbands'. Daly (1992b) argues, however, that parenting often encourages a more shared construction of reality; therefore, conjoint interviewing of parents is advantageous. Daly (1992b) further observes that with "two accounts, a more reliable picture can emerge in that the bias in one version may be balanced by that in the other; spouses can jog one another's memory; and most important for reliability and validity, spouses tend to keep each other honest" (p. 108). During the interviews for this study, parents engaged in active conversation as they questioned and clarified each other's statements and values.

#### Sample Selection

Ten heterosexually married couples, 20 individual parents, were located for the study. This sample size enabled greater care to be taken with the treatment of the respondents and the research process. When McCracken (1988) stated that eight respondents is "perfectly sufficient" (p. 17) for many research projects, he explained the goals of qualitative research:

The purpose of the qualitative interview is not to discover how many, and what kinds of people share a certain characteristic. It is to gain access to the cultural categories and assumptions according to which one culture construes the world....In other words, qualitative research does not survey the terrain, it mines it (p. 17).

Participant couples were invited to participate based upon their affirmative responses to the following questions: (a) Does

your family currently engage in constructive conversations about sexual orientation? (b) Do these conversations promote acceptance of diversity in sexual orientations? (c) Are all of the children in your family under 18 years of age?

I selected participants based upon my knowledge of them through children's schools, extracurricular activities, or family organizations. The first 10 couples contacted agreed to participate. I knew at least one parent in each couple that I contacted. I knew 2 mothers from activities connected to my participation in the university. In these cases I did not know the fathers. I knew 2 couples through community experiences and mutual friendships. The remaining 6 families I knew from the school that my oldest son attends and for which I had previously been a classroom teacher. I was the first-grade teacher for children in 4 of those 6 families. My embeddedness in the community that I shared with my participants crossed gender and sexual orientation lines and facilitated an enhanced rapport. Further reflections on my connections with the people I interviewed are included in Chapter 5.

#### Sample Description

All of the participants resided in a small college town in Southwest Virginia. All 20 of the parents were white. They ranged in age from 35 to 60, with 16 of the 20 participants ranging in age from 40 to 50. In four of the marriages, the wife was older than the husband. In three of the marriages, the spouses were the same age. Husbands were older in three of the marriages. Marriages ranged in length from 12 to 30 years.

Fifteen of the participants reported no current specific religious affiliation nor regular church attendance. One father identified as Protestant, one couple each identified as Jewish, and one couple each identified as Protestant.

All of the respondents were employed, at least part-time, outside the home on a regular basis. Six mothers and 4 fathers were employed in the field of education. One mother and 2 fathers were entrepreneurs. Two fathers had jobs related to management. One mother and 1 father worked in public relations. One mother and 1 father provided health care. One mother provided legal services.

Educational backgrounds of all of the participants extended past high school. One father completed 2 years of college. Three mothers and 2 fathers had bachelors degrees. Two mothers and 2 fathers had masters degrees. Five mothers and 5 fathers had doctoral degrees. Wives, in 4 of the marriages, had more education than their husbands. Educational level was equivalent in 3 of the marriages. Husbands had more education in 3 of the marriages.

Families had 1 to 3 children. There were a total of 11 daughters and 8 sons. Four families had 1 daughter. One family had 3 daughters. One family had 2 daughters and 1 son. Two families had 1 daughter and 1 son. One family had 2 sons. And 1 family had 3 sons. The participants were the only parents of the children. Three parents, 2 mothers and 1 father, had been previously married once before, but had no children from those relationships. The 19 children ranged in age from 5 to 16, with 13 children being 10 years or older. Although referred to as "children" throughout the

document, many of the children were in or approaching their adolescent years.

#### Data Collection

Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with the participants. This methodology was concerned with meaning and with the perspectives of the participants (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). The retelling of a car ride home after seeing the movie, *The Bird Cage*, the shared pride in a couple as they remembered saying it was fine for two women to get married, the strength in a parent's voice as she recalled her anger at the humiliation endured by her gay relative, or the disagreement in a couple's interpretation of a child's question were of key interest in this research. Again, these were private conversations with long-term public ramifications.

The semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix A), included a demographic section (see Appendix B) and was derivative of the research questions, the theoretical framework, and the nested systems of family life. The interviews lasted between one and two hours in length and were conducted at a time and place convenient for both the participants and the researcher. Four interviews took place at the participants' homes; one interview took place at a women's center; and five took place at a university therapy clinic. Each parent signed an Informed Consent Form (see Appendix C). All interviews were audiotaped. Each couple was offered \$10 to pay for the possible expense of child care at the time of the interview. Two couples accepted compensation. Most of the families had children old enough to care for themselves,

and many children played in other rooms of their homes at the time of the interview. Parents will also be given a summary of the findings.

Approximately 3 weeks after the interview, participants were given a copy of the transcript. They were invited to make clarifications and report subsequent conversations (see Appendix D). Seven of the 10 couples returned forms (see Appendix E) with clarifications, such as missed words, or additions, such as a memory about an old friend. Although offered, no one requested a follow-up interview.

#### Data Analysis

The audiotaped interviews were transcribed and served as the raw data for this study. The analysis of the data included a synthesis of systematic approaches developed by qualitative researchers (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). The data were read first while listening to the audiotapes in order to check for transcription accuracy. The data were then read four more times to reveal an organization of patterns, concepts, processes, and themes (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). A coding scheme was developed from the themes and sub-themes (see Appendix F). The major coding families are: Location and Timing of the Conversations, Wondering about Relationships, Choosing to Converse, Families of Origin, Knowing People, Personal Feelings of Difference, Overt Values Transmission, Future Projections, and It Would Be Okay for My Child to Be Gay. Conclusions were drawn from the content of the coding scheme, the research questions, the theoretical framework of human ecology theory, a narrative

approach to understanding conversations, and the participants' recollected experiences of family conversations about sexual orientation.

The following example illustrates the emergence of a coding scheme and its role in drawing conclusions. The comment, "Well, you see, we think about this in a real way because my brother is gay," became an important code, especially since such comments reemerged from various interviews. The coding category *Gay relative* was used to distinguish this type of information. This category was included under the larger coding family of "Knowing People," which was a part of the major theme concerning Influences on Parents' Attitudes. A careful analysis examined the statement within the context of the narrative in which it was told and within the influences of the nested exosystem of extended kin. Conclusions were drawn from linking the analysis of this code to the research question: What other factors influence parents' attitudes about sexual orientation?

### Participant Responses

In addition to inviting participants to provide clarifications, I asked them for feedback about the interview process. I was curious about their reactions to having an opportunity to read and clarify their transcripts. I was also curious about the ways in which their knowing me and knowing my sexual orientation might have affected their comfort with the interview process. I asked participants to reflect anonymously upon these questions. Seven mothers and 6 fathers returned the Anonymous Mail-Back Forms (see Appendix G).

In response to the question about the interview process in general, participants responded positively overall: "great," "no problem," "comfortable," "nicely organized," "fun." When asked how they felt about having the opportunity to read the transcripts, 7 participants reported some discomfort with reading their "incoherent," "inadequate," "less than brilliant" statements. Although the participants also stated pleasure in reliving the interviews, this reported discomfort with their disjointed or incomplete sentences informed me of the need to prepare participants for the way their conversations may look on paper.

When considering how they thought the interview was affected by their knowing the interviewer, participants responded that they were, "more open," "not affected," "more relaxed." More specifically, some participants explained,

If anything, I was more at ease than I would have been not knowing the interviewer. I already felt a certain amount of trust. (mother)

I felt very comfortable with the interviewer. Maybe I would have taken longer to warm up to someone else. (mother)

It made the process a little more relaxed. Responses may have been both more guarded and explained in greater detail if dealing with an unfamiliar interviewer. (father)

No one who returned the anonymous form reported discomfort about knowing the interviewer.

When asked how they thought the interview was affected by knowing my sexual orientation, 9 respondents replied "no," "not affected," or "not at all." The remaining 4 respondents made more specific statements. Two mothers reported feelings of being understood by me:

I knew that she understood my point of view and knowledge base. (mother)

I don't think it affected my responses except that I felt okay with being very honest. (mother)

Two other parents, spouses in a married couple, also wondered how things might have been different with another interviewer:

It also allowed responses to be more at ease and spontaneous, for better or for worse. There is the possibility that knowing (or thinking one knew) what was being looked for affected the responses somewhat. (father)

Made me unafraid to present feelings which were accepting of same sex relationships. However, I might have been less likely to say anything not in support of that. (mother)

#### Position of the Researcher

All perspectives are limited by the subjective positions of the researcher. Mine include my experiences as a former teacher, a mother, a woman who identifies herself as lesbian, and a family therapist. As a former preschool and first-grade teacher, I am familiar with the kinds of questions children are capable of asking. As a parent of two young children, I am part of a parenting partnership that values and creates an environment that

encourages questions. Family conversations, both structured and spontaneous, are routine aspects of my daily family life. As a lesbian, I am acutely aware of the layers of heterosexism and homophobia that shape the lives of lesbians and gay men, as well as the lives of non-gay people and of all children. I am also aware of the impact of these early words spoken in families about sexual orientation. As a family therapist, I communicate with a variety of adults and families who bring in many issues related to family interaction. I am trained to lay aside personal biases as I help families develop constructive means of communication.

These identities have both constrained and strengthened the research process. All of them informed my role as researcher. By conducting a study that pulled from a sample of parents who were known to me as being successfully engaged in these family conversations, I have more fully answered my research questions. All of my identities were known by the participants. I was legitimately positioned in the center of the research. Less energy was spent managing my identities, and more energy was given to the task of examining my research questions and generating new knowledge.

## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

### Overview of the Findings

As I collected this data and began the analysis, I realized I had found something for which I was not necessarily looking: 10 strong, solid marriages. As illustrated by the quotations provided in this chapter, the adults in these families are alert and committed to their spouses and children. They are physically and emotionally present for their families. During the interviews, the spouses checked each other for opinions and explanations. They were kind to each other. As co-parents together, they have created household climates in which the children are free to ask questions and expect accurate, fair, and thoughtful responses. Parents described days filled with education, work, conversation, and action. Family members take themselves and each other seriously. They are energized by one another.

This study is based upon in-depth interviews with 10 couples who are parenting children from 5 to 16 years of age. I designed the research to explore the content and process of conversations among parents and their children about sexual orientation. Wondering how such a topic was being discussed in families not headed by lesbians or gay men, I attempted to broaden knowledge about how parents converse with children about sexual orientation by incorporating a sample of heterosexually married couples.

Couples were chosen for the study based upon an affirmation that they (a) engage in constructive conversations with their children about sexual orientation and (b) promote tolerance of diversity in sexual orientations. I knew at least one of the

parents in each of the 10 couples, and for 7 couples, I knew both of the parents and their children. There are times in which I am referred to by the parents and am, therefore, part of the data. I reflect upon my reactions to this process in the concluding chapter. The interview process felt comfortable for me. In a follow up response, parents later reported feeling comfortable, as well. Although I had interacted with most of the parents at some level, I had never talked with any of them about their families' conversations about sexual orientation prior to this research project. The couples openly shared their stories, their struggles, and their determination to raise their children with a value of fairness toward all people.

Listening to the tapes and reading the interviews several times allowed me to recognize themes, coding families, and coding categories. Nine coding families were grouped into three major research themes. The three coding families under "Content and Process of the Conversations" were titled Location and Timing of the Conversations, Wondering about Relationships, and Choosing to Converse. The three coding families under "Influences on Parents' Attitudes" were titled Families of Origin, Knowing People, and Personal Feelings of Difference. Finally, the three coding families under "Attitudes and Values" were titled Overt Values Transmission, Future Projections, and It Would Be Okay for My Child to Be Gay. The remainder of this chapter describes these themes and coding families along with the more specific coding categories.

## Content and Process of the Conversations

I asked parents to relate, as descriptively as possible, the nature of their family's conversations about sexual orientation. I was curious about the location of conversations, the nature of the questions children asked, triggers for conversations, and terminology used by the children.

### Location and Timing of Conversations

Parents reported that family conversations happened at various times in their days. Four couples referred specifically to dinner time conversations, 5 couples referred to bedtime, and, interestingly, all 10 couples identified traveling in the car as a prime location for conversations, particularly serious

conversations:

Wendy [age 5] and I have some fairly interesting conversations. Like I said, we talk about religion, homosexuality, I don't know, different things about life. A lot of times that's in the car on the way to school. Sometimes she'll ask me something at home, sometimes in the evening we'll lay down or go to read a bedtime story and they just always seem to just pop up and it's rather interesting when they do. But the car seems to be a good place for conversations. (Ann)

Being in the car often meant having one-on-one time:

The most intimate conversations, and I'm thinking about Sean [age 14] now because he and I talk more than my other two kids and it has almost always been when we were alone. We're rarely alone. So, if I'm taking him somewhere, picking him up, then that's--and it hadn't occurred to me that that's why it happens then but,--that's when we're alone. (Beth)

The most common place for intimate, one-on-one, conversations is the car. Going from one place to another. Captive audience. (Fran)

One couple remembered using time in the car as a deliberate method for communication:

The car has been a good place for us. When we are all not moving. No phone, no TV. Before we allowed Walk-Mans in the

car....It was a good place. In fact, we used to take family drives just to be able to talk. (Hank)

Yeah, sometimes everybody else [all 3 children] would go to sleep and we could talk. (Holly)

### Wondering About Relationships

Each of the parents stated that their children's questions or comments about sexual orientation emerged from a curiosity about relationships. Their wonderings were related to couple and family structures rather than to physical sexuality. As one father noted, "It's not a sex thing. It's a people thing."

Who can get married? Questions about the rules of marriage were the central trigger for conversations about sexual orientation. For Ann's daughter [age 5] this came up at school:

The first one [conversation] was when "boys could marry boys." And I said, "Yeah, boys can marry boys and girls could marry girls and boys could marry girls and girls could marry boys"....I thought about trying to explain the technicalities [legal issues], but I thought, right now just use "marry" and I said, "And it's all okay." (Ann)

Irene remembered her daughter [now 14] coming home from preschool with the following question:

"Can women marry each other?" And [I remember] saying yes. And I remember her saying something about, "Then Rachel can marry somebody [a girl]"....And my saying, coming off as a professional, "Well, no one is going to let her, but that doesn't mean that she can't. And maybe by the time she grows up she can do this." And...she felt real comfortable with that. (Irene)

Beth's oldest son's [age 14] question was triggered by watching the news:

Probably just two weeks ago he asked me how I felt about the issue with gay marriage. And it was during the news in terms of "What do you think about that?"....That was one of those surprising moments....And we had a lengthy conversation about it....I told him what both sides of the issue were about. And we talked about knowing people and having friends who we

thought would probably be married if they were legally able to be married and it seemed ridiculous that they would be denied that right. (Beth)

Gail, the mother of three girls [ages 7, 9, and 11] described very deliberate use of the word "marry." She wanted to model the application of the word "marry" and "marriage" to all couples, yet wished to be careful about prescribing marriage, of any kind, to her daughters:

You get married to somebody because you care about them and they care about you. I don't think it ever gets...to the physical component of it....It just has come to the fact that you can be a couple, a married couple. The term "married"....But always when we talk about them growing up I would always say, "If you choose to get married." Because also with girls you don't want to make them feel like getting married is the be all and end all. You know, the Cinderella thing....And I'm not even sure that I might not have said very loosely, but left it open that you don't necessarily have to always pair off with a person of the opposite sex. (Gail)

Sometimes children's questions were triggered by people or events profiled in the media.

Media as trigger. Although children's questions and comments were typically initiated by relationships between people, the media was a trigger for children in 7 families. Donna reported that her daughter [age 11] was continually curious about the images she noticed in the media:

We watched "The Birdcage" together....She loved that movie. And it's something we watched as a family...and she doesn't even question it. She, for somehow or another, thinks it's okay....One time she asked about some guy on MTV, a

transvestite...Ru Paul...I think she said, "Is that guy gay?" And I said, "Not necessarily." (Donna)

A couple, Eric and Ellen, discussed the probable influence of listening to National Public Radio during the morning:

I sort of keep thinking that it's [an awareness of homophobia] because we have NPR on at almost all times in the morning. And things like the situation with Sharon Bottoms [a lesbian mother in Virginia who was denied custody of her child], I sort of was thinking that Laura [age 10] might pick that up and start asking about that. But I don't know whether they just tune it out. (Eric)

She did ask about that once. I think she was up in her room, but she just wondered what it was all about. Basically, "what is going on here?" And to explain something like that you have to say, "Well, this isn't generally accepted as something that everyone can live with." She listened to the answer, but I don't think she really... That was something just too remote for her. (Ellen)

Another couple recalled their reading of the book *Daddy's Roommate*, a book for children, written by Michael Willhoite, that depicts the daily life of a gay couple through the eyes of one partner's son. In the story, the son is conversing with his mother, and she explains that his father and partner "are gay." This book was the object of local controversy when a parent tried to have it removed from the children's section of the public library.

So we did talk a little bit about that. Just how, Michelle [now age 9] liked that book. (Gary)

She was young. It was three years ago. (Gail)

So we talked a little bit about the controversy about that and that it's not really people's business it's just how you like each other....We also went a little bit into censorship in general. (Gary)

Joan, the mother of a 14-year-old daughter, referred to a magazine cover:

There was that recent *Newsweek* cover and...she read a lot of the pieces of that and we talked about that....the one about couples raising children. (Joan)

Joan also remembered her daughter's awareness of the previous year's schedule of women's events, compiled by a local university:

Well, I think the...controversy last year....Of course, we got really roped into all that in so many different ways. I mean, the president's office was calling....And, of course, I'm discussing at home this title, "Thank God I'm a Lesbian" and the pros and cons of having that in the [printed schedule]. (Joan)

Beth was particularly concerned with the media images of gay men. She is the mother of three sons ages 10, 12, and 14:

I think the media images of gay men are very different from the media images of lesbian women. And I think they are more often derogatory and more often stereotypical....I think it's probably difficult for boys to figure out that this is really okay....And those are the kinds of images that you have to balance and you have to say "that's a cartoon image. That's not how people really are. So, you don't make judgments about people based on those images." (Beth)

Finally, Fred and Fran's response to the question about media reaffirmed their desire to center conversations around the lives of real people:

No. Very little. That stuff will come up, but we never... Very rarely have those experiences led to any... I think the more in-depth experiences that the kids have had have to do with the actual interactions with real people. (Fred)

Which is fine with me. It's so much healthier, I think. (Fran)

Emergent vocabulary. All the families described the emergence of a new vocabulary or, sometimes, the reapplication of already familiar words as they discussed sexual orientation. The mother of a 5-year-old daughter used the familiar word "like" to describe the essence of same gender couples:

I just think that she knows that it's okay for girls to like girls and for boys to like boys. (Ann).

This parent also described the introduction of a new word:

Like, you know, [our friend] Bonnie. They call those women lesbians. (Ann)

Beth described having a conversation with her children about

using derogatory vocabulary. Beth's second son has a developmental disability:

I think he [oldest son, age 14] came home and told me one time somebody had called him or somebody had called somebody else... I don't remember what term it was...it was "queer" or "gay" or "fag" or something. But it was written in the school. What we did at that time was have a conversation about how that's like calling a black person "nigger" or calling Alex [second son] a "retard" or that kind of thing....I think Mark [youngest son] was in on that, too....Sean was around 10, like in the fifth grade. (Beth)

Cindy also remembers her daughter [now age 14] coming home from school with a new word:

Somebody had called somebody "gay." And she came home and asked me what that meant. And I said, "Well it means when two people of the same gender prefer to marry or fall in love with or whatever, each other instead of a boy/girl thing that you see as the norm." And she thought for a minute, and she said, "Well, I think I'm gay because I really hate boys and I really love Amy. And I said, "Well, at this age it's usually too early to tell. I mean, you'll probably go through some changes before you really decide or maybe you'll always go through changes." (Cindy)

"Two moms" was a phrase used by Ellen's children [ages 7 and 10] to describe lesbian-headed families:

As far as gay couples...it's just been questions like, "Matt has two moms. Elise has two moms." And it always seemed to be more like a comment than a question. (Ellen)

Another mother described a similar vocabulary that was emerging in conversations with her sons [ages 7 and 11]:

Actually, I remember conversations about you guys....There was no confusion, there were some questions about parents and moms and dads or moms and moms or whatever. And so I just explained very briefly what the arrangements were and that these were different arrangements that people have. And it was totally non-judgmental, just factual....The kids just see this as the world, these various options. This is just like male and female, and it's just the way the world is. (Fran)

Parents reported that all of their children [except for the two youngest, who were 5 years old] understood the meaning of and

appropriately used the word "gay." At least 5 of the children understood and used the word "lesbian." Two adolescents used the word "homophobic." One used the word "bigot." Most parents reported rarely using the term "homosexual" in their conversations and, therefore, never heard their children use that word.

#### Choosing to Converse

Parents viewed family conversations as both naturally occurring and purposefully initiated. They often remarked upon their thought processes before, during, and after conversations. They took themselves seriously as parents and valued interactions with their children and co-parents.

Fluidity in parents' definitions. I asked the parents to briefly define the term "sexual orientation." Their definitions were usually brief and fluid:

Sexual orientation just means, to me, who you like as a sexual partner. (Donna)

Sexual orientation means heterosexuals or gay, whatever. (Ellen)

Sexual orientation: Which way do you go? (Hank)

The sense of who it is that you shower affection on, I guess, in a loving and consistent manner. (John)

One couple, Ann and Alan, had more complex descriptions in their conversation:

I don't see sexual orientation as sort of you're either here or you're there. I see it as a continuum....There are many different levels. Some involve intimacy...sexual intimacy, and others involve emotional intimacy, mental intimacy,...I don't think that it's either/or. I think everybody is bisexual. (Ann)

I agree with that....It's just a matter of degrees. I think that sexual orientation must be one of the great mysteries of the world. (Alan)

Mothers as the "social talkers." In 7 of the families, mothers were viewed by both partners as the parent who most often engaged in conversations with the children about social issues. This echoes the findings of other research conducted in the field of family communication (Meyers, 1993; Stafford & Dainton, 1995). When discussing the possible influence of their gender, fathers often tried to explain the lack of such conversations:

Most of the time I talk to her in the car, but I don't take her to school. I go the other way. She [child] goes that way [to school]. I don't take her very often, so I don't talk to her very much. (Alan)

It's like "Okay guys, you can ask me anything," and they'll turn around and go ask Beth the real serious question....I guess they think...I'll give them a wise-crack answer. (Ben)

I attempt to talk with her [daughter] in the car on the way to school. She doesn't like that much....I guess I like to do stuff with her more....Like skiing or build a tree house or go biking...I don't think that we usually just sit around and talk. (Carl)

I don't know if it's because they're both female, or Donna probably talks more with her, period. (Dan)

With Alison [age 11], she talks a lot and is very interested in information, so we have more conversations...on philosophy and physics....Whereas Gail has more conversations with her about social kinds of things. (Gary)

It's not a gender thing. I just don't want to talk about it. Holly is more, she can listen better than I do. It's not because of gender, though, she just does. (Hank)

Mothers expressed pride and enjoyment of long, thoughtful conversations:

I won't say it's all gender. Part gender, but I think part of it is my approach and the fact that I encourage her to talk about things, like serious things....And so I think she's used to us having conversations along those lines. (Ann)

We get with the nieces, my sister's kids, one of them is 23 and one of them just turned 21. We're all really close. And

we just talk way into the night about everything under the sun [sexual harassment, homophobia, name-calling]. (Cindy)

Parents in only 3 of the families reported that social talk was experienced equally by fathers:

I think that most of the time it is probably the context, like whichever one of us is there....I'm the one with her to talk to her after school. (John)

I feel like either one of the kids would talk to either one of us pretty much the same way. (Ellen)

I have talked to Billy [age 11] about prejudices out in the world that he might be aware of....So I made it my business to, if there was an occasion or opportunity in terms of what was happening between us or their experiences, to make a comment about that. (Fred)

Joan and John proudly described the comfort they believe their child feels by having two parents actively involved in social conversations:

I do think that she talks to both of us and sometimes I think it is comforting to her to have one of us alone and tell the story and get a response and then tell the other one. (Joan)

And we only know that because later at night after she has gone to bed we have said, "Julie was talking about this today." "Oh, yeah. She asked me the same thing." (John)

The remaining three themes in the "Choosing to Converse" coding family illustrate the ways in which parents approached conversations about sexual orientation. All of the couples described at least one parent as being "open" to all questions. Four couples expressed curiosity regarding a balance of not providing "too much" information. Three couples described a "non-issue" strategy for normalizing sexual orientation diversity and promoting tolerance and acceptance.

Providing answers/Being askable parents. Providing answers and being known to their children as parents who would talk about "anything" was a source of pride for most couples. Although most of these conversations actually occurred with mothers, fathers, too, enjoyed the feeling of being "askable parents." The following examples illustrate parents' desires to be "open" to conversations:

I feel like I'm a pretty open person, and when people ask me questions, I answer. (Ann)

I guess we're open in terms of what our conversations are like, so that he can ask anything about it. (Beth)

We have always, from the beginning, there's nothing taboo to talk about. We've always encouraged, we talk about everything. (Ben)

Essentially Fred and my strategy, and I think we agree pretty strongly on this, is to be perfectly straight. So none of "the stork comes" sort of stuff. We just give it to them. And our feeling also is that we "age it and stage it" to some degree. But my feeling is if you tell them 500 words and they are only ready to hear the first 25, then they will only hear the first 25 and a year later they ask the question and you give them the 500 and they absorb it. (Fran)

How much is too much information? Four families voiced concerns regarding providing too much information at particular ages. Parents struggle to maintain a balance of honesty and understanding:

I never know how much to push because I know you're supposed to keep it at their level in terms of: Should I continue to ask things and say things? Have I said too much? And that type of thing. (Ann)

So I want to be real careful that I explain things to them in a way that they understand. But also,...I don't want to come across as the authority when I don't have all of the answers. (Beth)

We answer the questions to the point of where they stop asking, and trying in as natural a way as possible. But I

guess, for me anyway, I'm sort of reluctant to bring in this sort of heavy artillery language, and rather deal with it in a sort of everyday way. (Eric)

Well now she is bombarded [with various information, especially regarding gender inequity] and I sometimes wonder "Does this 13-year-old have too much information?" (Joan)

Non-issue strategy. Five parents described a purposeful strategy of "not making too much of an issue" about sexual orientation. They wanted their children to be able to regard a same-gender orientation as natural and within their lived experiences.

It's almost like a non-conversation. Like when people say the black man or the white man. It's like we don't....It's not really an issue....It's part of the fabric. (Carl)

It's not like we go around saying, "Well, this couple, you know, they're man and wife. And this couple are not, you know, they're same sex." I mean, it's not like we point anybody out. We just kind of talk about Ted and Don, because Ted and Don are a couple. (Donna)

They knew with Chip [babysitter] right away,...and this was very young. And there was never any issue that this was strange, because this was their buddy. (Fran)

I've never sat down and said, "Listen." You know, I've answered her questions and she's seen it around her. (Cindy)

I guess there is always the issue about whether or not you choose to make an issue out of it. That itself makes it, or brings it to a level that the kid may say, "Well this is something that the parents have an issue with or else they wouldn't have brought it up with me." (Ivan)

#### Influences on Parents' Attitudes

Parents were primarily influenced by knowing lesbian, gay, or bisexual people and by identifying with their own feelings of difference. Families of origin, although rarely open and accepting, were also influential in certain aspects of attitude development.

### Families of Origin

Parents first became aware of sexual orientation as they were growing up in their own families of origin or as they entered early adulthood. Many parents heard only disparaging remarks made by their families about gay or lesbian people and few have ever had conversations with their parents about the topic.

First awareness of diversity in sexual orientation. Aside from one father, all of the parents reported no awareness of the diversity in sexual orientation until sometime during high school or college:

I think I was well into my teenage years. Even maybe like, this is scary, 16 or 17 that I really understood that people of the same sex could have sex with each other. (Beth)

The only thing I can remember was when we were in school there was a gay guy in our town, it was a small town. And I don't know how old he was at the time, maybe 20, and people used to make fun of him because he was real flamboyant.

That's, I'm sure I knew about gay before that, but that's the first thing I can remember. (Dan)

I can't really remember, but I went to an all-girls school from 7th grade on. And before that I don't even remember anything, but the word "queer" was about the worst thing you could say to someone. And I doubt anyone knew what it could possibly mean. You always had the feeling it was something really bad. (Ellen)

I don't remember any specific thing, but like reading some psychology book...and [watching] "All in the Family," for instance. (Gary)

I didn't even know about heterosexual stuff. It was all new to me. Just all this stuff. I had no idea. I was sort of innocent. Really, I thought the world was great and everything. And I still think the world is great. But everything was just rosy. And Vietnam was way over there, it wasn't ever going to affect me at all. And everything was just going to be smooth sailing. (Hank)

I guess in high school. I remember one girl I dated, her sister was gay. That was it. So I know I was at least aware of it at that time in high school. (Ivan)

I think that I was clueless through high school. And in college didn't really know much more either. I think I can remember a conversation about two peers of mine who lived together in the dorm and really sort of not being very interested. Sort of having my own things that I was doing. I don't think I felt judgmental, I just sort of didn't.... Maybe even disbelief or disinterest at the point. I think a real turning point to me was living in Provincetown. (Joan)

The one father who learned of this diversity at an earlier age was an adolescent when he overheard family conversations:

I had an uncle on my mother's side who, it was confusing to me growing up because I remember first they used all of the wonderful [sarcastic] slang terms that you can imagine about him. I remember it was especially confusing because once I figured this out, and he was also married....I don't know how old I was, 10 to 12 maybe...[I remember] thinking, "Well, this seems strange" and coming to think about this as a marriage of convenience or something. I was reading a lot of books then, of course, so you were always trying to say, "Which novel does this fit in?" (John)

Early knowledge of lesbian or gay people. Many parents'

early recollections about sexual orientation were more connected to their earliest knowledge of gay or lesbian people:

A friend of mine, we would have been 16, 17, something like that, he was a classmate and a friend, and he moved into the neighborhood so we spent a lot of time together. And he told me at one point that he didn't think he was particularly interested in girls. You know, that he thought boys were more attractive. This was something that he was trying to figure out how to deal with. And my response at that point was "it will probably go away"... "do what you want to do, and I'll do what I want to do." So, about 20 years later he got married, and then he got divorced, then he moved in with a boyfriend. Yeah, so I guess he wasn't firmly convinced of his own orientation at the time. Probably would have saved him a lot of heartache. (Alan)

Well, I had a friend in high school that I suspected was a lesbian. And maybe that made me think about it more. She never did anything that substantiated that, but I kind of assumed that she was. And maybe I thought about it or paid

more attention to reading about things....I still think that was when I started thinking about it. (Beth)

We lived on a farm with a lesbian. Dan and I had just met. And I think maybe she was like the first person that I ever lived with that had a different sexual orientation. I... learned more about what it was being a lesbian. (Donna)

Hank and Holly remembered Hank's anxiety about a gay man in the town where they lived and attended college:

In college, you just reminded me of something, in college there was a fellow that cut hair. I don't remember his name. (Hank)

Kevin. (Holly)

Kevin. And everybody told me he was the best person to cut hair. (Hank)

But he was gay. (Holly)

But he was gay. And this scared me because I said, "Am I going to go there and is he going to try something with me?"....Everything I had always heard was how they'll try to "get you." So when I walked in to get my hair cut I was really nervous about the whole thing. Also, it was cheap, a cheap haircut, but good. And I wanted to get a good hair cut so I go there. And the first thing he offers me is, "Do you want to read a *Playboy*?" And I said, "No, no"....I went there, but I didn't go back. But, you know, I didn't know what he was trying to tell me...."Yeah, give me ten of them." I don't know what I said, but I got really nervous about Kevin. (Hank)

So did Kevin cut your hair? (Holly)

I think he did cut my hair. Once I was already there, I wasn't coming back again, I didn't go back again that I can remember....I only went once....it scared me. It scared me because I really didn't know. Like I said, I had grown up with pretty much a mild lifestyle. Nothing really exciting going on that I knew about. I was sort of sheltered, I guess. (Hank)

Lack of childhood conversations with parents. Aside from hearing disparaging remarks about relatives, neighbors, or opposing athletic team members, only one parent, Holly, reported having had constructive conversations with her parents. Parents

frequently responded like Ben did during the interview, "We have no role models for how to have these kinds of conversations." One father, Alan, proclaimed that his parents "are convinced the whole world is straight." Beth said, "Oh! I remember comments being made, but conversations? No."

Interestingly, Fran described the lack of communication as a "basis for tolerance," because, at least, it was not exposure to intolerance:

I grew up in Minnesota, which is very homogeneous, and so I have no memory of creating prejudices because it was never an issue....There's a song. Is it in Oklahoma?...which is "You've got to be taught, you've got to be taught to hate all the people your relatives hate. You've got to be carefully taught before you're six, or seven, or eight." I remember crying in that because I thought that something was wrong with me because I hadn't been taught. I didn't see it as "Gee,..." I read it completely as, "I haven't been taught. There's something wrong with me. I haven't been taught." And sitting and saying, "I'm past six, or seven, or eight, and I haven't been taught." And being in tears and being really afraid that I hadn't been taught to hate other people. And I didn't know who my relatives hated. Which is a very bizarre twist when you go back and hear it [crying]. And I can still sing this song, you know, which is bizarre. At that point there was a feeling that I didn't know who I was supposed to hate. (Fran)

Holly, the one parent who remembered having constructive conversations with her parents recalled two particular memories:

I remember my mom and dad talking about a missionary. And I remember him being married, and I remember his kids. I was pretty young. I remember him and his wife getting divorced. Then...I remember Mom sharing with me a letter that Don had written to her about how, with everything that he had been through he had always been accepted by my parents and that he always knew the coffee pot was ready at their house. So I knew that Mom and Dad were okay....I also remember...at some point my father was approached by another man who hugged him and made some...I don't know if it was when he was in New York studying pastoral counseling or before that. At some point, somebody that he was in some program with somewhere approached him and Daddy told him no. But I remember Mom relating that. I think it might have been that and the

incident with Don were the first [times] that my dad had really faced some of these issues. And then he ended up in counselling and suicide prevention and all that kind of thing in his later years as a missionary and, of course, that kind of thing would come up. (Holly)

Current conversations with parents. Seven of the 20 parents described some type of current communication with their own parents. They often referred to a desire to enlighten their parents:

I guess I have said [to mother], "Well, you know, he's [gay friend] just a person, just happens to have different feelings about different things." I don't know what she said back, but she, ...seems to me, she tried to understand. She tries real hard to understand things that I present to her, but it's hard for her to accept certain things. (Cindy)

My mom knows my friend Bonnie. My mom knows Bonnie's gay. Sometimes I think she's still uncomfortable with it and stuff so I don't even talk to her about it. (Ann)

Dan and Donna recalled Dan's mother's trepidation at recognizing her neighbors' relationship:

When we visit my mom, her neighbors are gay, ..they've been living there for 10 years, ...and my mom says, "I'm still not sure if they're gay." And we're like, "Yeah, come on." I mean, she knows they are. (Dan)

There's still this part of her that's just like, "I'm really not sure if I accept this or not," but she does. (Donna)

Two mothers recognized their own parents' struggle to accept their adult bisexual or gay children:

There's been a lot of compassionate discussion, I would say, about those relationships [with patients living with and dying from AIDS]. And certainly my mother is fully aware of my sister's continued bisexuality. (Fran)

Well, it's different with my two parents, but with my mother it was always something that she didn't want to be judgmental about. My father theoretically not wanting to be judgmental about it, but having to deal with it with his own son was something that he had a lot of problems with. Whereas I don't think my mother really did. (Irene)

Two other parents remembered their sexual orientation being

fearfully questioned by their parents due to life changes:

I went to college and I was an engineering major and I discovered differential equations and then said, "This isn't my life's work." I switched to English and I remember there being some concern on my parents' part that I might be gay--having switched to be an English major. (John)

When I split from my [first] husband my mother was a wreck. I found out, like 10 years later, that the reason she was a wreck was because she thought I was gay, because I was doing all this stuff with Bonnie [lesbian friend]. But she never brought it up to me. She never said anything. (Ann)

Finally, Holly recalled the acceptance in her mother's words:

Mom has always said, "What are all of these people going to do when they find out that God created these people this way? What are they going to say then?" Mom has said that for years and, yeah, that has been a big influence on me. It's always been, "Gosh, if my mom thinks it's okay, then..." (Holly)

### Knowing People

Parents reported knowing people as the most influential aspect of their attitude formations. Parents reported being influenced by gay friends, gay relatives, and each other as partners. Often raised with inaccurate and stereotyped ideas about lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals, parents cited "getting to know real people" as the key to their shift in attitudes.

Gay friends. Eight of the couples reported currently having lesbian or gay friends. No one referred to having bisexual friends. Five of those couples reported having "close" friends with whom they vacationed, worked, attended commitment celebrations, and shared meals. These friends were known by the children as being lesbian or gay. Furthermore, children in 4 families have had a lesbian or gay teacher or caregiver or have had friends that live in lesbian-headed households. The following

examples illustrate the influential relationship between these families and their lesbian or gay friends:

I think it was kind of neat for the girls because they knew Ted and they knew he was Daddy's friend and everything. And then we could say, "Do you remember Ted that visited us?" And they knew that he was a nice person. (Holly)

When he [oldest son, age 14] asked me about gay marriage we talked about our friends and we had just seen you at a party. So it was real concrete. That's what I try to do. Not try to think about it in terms of philosophy, but think about it in terms of the people you know and you care about who are good people. (Beth)

Among the people they [sons] admire, almost more than anybody else, is a friend of ours who is like an aunt to them. She is in a lesbian relationship and it's interesting because the boys are jealous, but not judgmental. They're jealous because "She loves her more than me." But there's never any impression that this is weird. (Fran)

I think Kathy [oldest daughter], probably the first time she realized it was at [school]. I think that she just accepted everything so well. She has always been that way, accepting things and all like that because I think she knew you and it helped a lot. Which was surprising to me. (Hank)

You know, they weren't these weird people that fit these labels that my dad would say. (Beth)

I did not used to be accepting of that and it was not until I actu

When you were his [son, now age 11] teacher he was clearly aware of you. At [child care center] there were a number of two-mom families. (Fran)

Ellen remembered a friendship with a woman who was struggling to accept her gay son:

I remember that the first gay person I was truly aware of was the son of an older woman friend of mine when I lived in D.C. She was stunned when she found out he was gay....I think my conversations with my woman friend over those several years were a very comprehensive study on the range of reactions to a gay family member. Of course, what she knew all along was that he was still the same person she had always known. Her reaction as a person I knew well and whose intelligence I respected, probably went a long way towards un-doing any prejudices I had acquired in growing up in a very conservative, mid-West, environment. (Ellen)

For Hank, having close friends come out as gay caused him to

wonder about his own sexual orientation:

And all of a sudden I'm thinking, "Am I gay?" Then I had it really down deep thinking, "All my friends are. Maybe I am, too." Here I am married. I think we had Kathy at that time. "Am I gay?" You're not laughing, and neither is she [spouse] now, but at the time I was telling people this and people were laughing at me. "Ha, ha, ha!" I really had a problem... And by the time Ted [gay friend] came around I said, "Well, maybe I am. Maybe I just didn't know any better. Maybe I'm not so sure about myself." What kind of questions do you ask yourself whether you're gay or not? How do you know? How do you know if it's just a thing that you are going through or not? What questions do you ask if you're heterosexual? (Hank)

Gay relatives. Four families reported having lesbian, gay, or bisexual relatives. Donna recalled family discussions regarding a cousin's coming out:

I know this summer she [daughter, age 11] heard a lot because we had a cousin come out. She was never an active part of these conversations, but she was in the room or in the next room when conversations about this woman were going on. She never questioned that. She never in any way negatively or positively. She kind of accepted it. (Donna)

Fran remembered her experience of living with her bisexual sister as influential in her attitude development:

Then I went to Stanford, which is like being into the mix of earth. At which point I was living part of the time with my sister who is bisexual and one of the first boyfriends I had was also bisexual....In that one year I interacted with every possible lifestyle interaction, religion, ethnic background you could ever believe and...that first year at Stanford was sort of the blitzkrieg of exposure. (Fran)

Holly and Hank described the confusing sexual identities of men in Holly's family:

It's mumbled about in the family a lot. When we are all together it's mentioned. Nobody is quite sure. There is no proof either way that we know of. (Hank)

There's one from a long time ago and there's one more recent. (Holly)

Irene has a gay brother and recalled his influence in her family:

We also have the situation where one of my brothers is gay. And I don't know how well aware the kids are, both consciously and unconsciously, of that, although Jason [son, age 10] and I did have a conversation about it a couple of weeks ago...His significant other comes to family occasions... He's been together with this person for at least 10 years. (Irene)

Influencing each other. Several couples reported ways in which they influenced each other with regard to attitudes about diversity in general, as well as diversity in sexual orientation:

Actually, the whole thing is that she [spouse] has changed my life. That is absolutely true. She, when we got married, I knew, or even before, when we were dating--Chinese food: "Oh, that's bad, bad stuff." She made me eat it. I grew to like it. Indian food: "Who would ever eat that stuff?" I eat it now. Different kinds of people I was never around. It was always white, heterosexual, church-going, Bible-preaching people. Everything was smooth sailing. Everything was easy. We were all the same kind. I was always surrounded by the same kind of people. And then Holly kind of broke me into: "Hey, we have some Malaysian friends over here." Malaysia? Where is that from? And all of a sudden I was brought into a whole new world of accepting other people which I never, ever did before....So anyway, she's been my brain expander. (Hank)

Hank struggles with assimilating his desire for fairness, his loyalty to his friends that he now knows are gay, and "the guys" in his Bible study. Holly is his sounding board, and she described an appreciation for that role:

I think Hank makes me...It's real easy for me to read something like *Stranger at the Gate* [by gay activist Mel White] and go, "Okay, sure." But it's good to have someone who's kind of struggling and coming back from Bible study and saying, "These guys said this." And you have to think, "What would I say there?" and "What are some answers there?" So, kind of the back and forth part of it. (Holly)

Cindy credits Carl with bringing a "worldly" view to the family:

I think you've [spouse] influenced me a lot. Just supportive of the view....He had lived in cities and things when we met and I had never lived anywhere but here. I just always thought he was more worldly in his tolerant views and his

sort of orneriness about anything that was prejudiced.  
(Cindy)

One couple had a conversation about mutual influence. They were interested in telling and hearing about their respect for each other:

I remember at one point, after I met Gary. Actually I became, in general, a lot more socially accepting of diversity. I don't know if you know that. (Gail)

Yeah? (Gary)

Yeah. You were always so, of other races and cultures and stuff, you were always interested in the way other people lived and accepting of them and that probably has influenced me a lot, actually....And that has allowed me to then open my mind and my eyes and see things in a more broad way. (Gail)

Did I influence you in any way? (Gail)

Yeah, probably. You were more cognizant of--I mean, how you say to the girls, "If you choose to get married." (Gary)

### Personal Feelings of Difference

As described in the previous chapter, participants in this study were white, middle class, heterosexual, and well-educated. Still, many of the parents referred to a personal feeling of difference and a pride in that difference. They referred to this difference in themselves or in their children as a test of genuineness for their own accepting attitudes.

Being a Jewish boy. Four of the 10 fathers were raised Jewish. Three of them recalled feelings of difference. The following quotations illustrate the difference and, oftentimes, isolation that was experienced through this identity:

So, I grew up, we were the only Jewish family in Christiansburg, Virginia, okay. So, I mean like, "You're diverse." You know? You stand out. So, I grew up as an outcast. I have always been an advocate of the outcast. I have always felt a little bit out of kilter. And I've grown

accustomed to it. And I kind of like it....I knew that the circles that I was supposed to fit it, the Jewish community, was a zero, a complete and total downer. So, whenever you enter a situation where you know you're an outcast I think you naturally gravitate to others who are outcasts. There comes a time when just about everybody is an outcast in some manner, whether it's race or sexuality or whatever it might be. (Alan)

I can identify with [being Jewish], but not...you know, I never personally felt very strongly about that, other than being taunted at school by certain groups. (Carl)

Fred and Fran discussed Fred's experience of feeling "odd:"

So I've had that whole experience of being....We had Jewish relatives within the context of the Jewish groups so I got exposed to all the different problems, if you will, or experiences of, you know. (Fred)

But, you carry around a lot of the consequences of being... (Fran)

Yeah, separate. Different. Yeah, yeah. I really do....I have a stronger sense than Fran of being different. That's part of my heritage and that's an important part of my heritage. (Fred)

It gives him a greater sensitivity toward perceiving....I mean, he's often the one that points out to me when something that was said was sexist. Where I just sort of "dah-ta-dah" and he'll say, "Wait a minute. Think about it." So it's given him a real sensitivity to reading and hearing and seeing prejudice. (Fran)

Being a woman. Two women referred to their sense of difference of being female in male-dominated work or family environments. Beth, the mother of three sons, felt responsible for educating the family about the exploitation of women, particularly in the media:

Because there are no other women in the house I feel strongly that it is my responsibility to help them all get in touch with their feminine side just a little bit....I've told them explicitly about respecting women and I've talked to them about sexual situations. (Beth)

Fran recalled being female in a male-dominated science discipline:

I would say that 90% of the time that I am the only female on any committee that I'm on at [university]. (Fran)

Having a child with a difference. Three couples referred to having a child or children with some type of difference or potential difference. Parents try to make the most of this by helping their children relate it to a broader understanding of diversity.

Beth and Ben conversed about the impact of having a child with Down's Syndrome:

I think we may do more of that, talking about respecting other people and the differences in other people, because we have Alex. And I think our awareness has been very much heightened by the fact that we have someone in our family who runs a risk of being horribly discriminated against. (Beth)

And Sean [age 14] [has become] much more aware now in terms of really noticing what other people think about people with Down's Syndrome....We're in a unique role. Unless you have a brother or a kid, you don't think about it. Most people just blurt it [offensive comments about people with developmental disabilities] out. My students blurt it out. (Ben)

Ann projected a *potential* difference by realizing that her child could grow up to be gay. This created a space for her to take seriously the kind of social environment she wants for her child:

So that's what I think with Wendy [age 5]. I often think, "Well, what if she is gay?" I don't want her to grow up thinking, "I'm weird or strange or something." So, I think it's important to say, "It's all natural." (Ann)

Gail and Gary, whose family is Jewish, first described some prejudice that the children have encountered, then described the impact of being Jewish on their children:

The Dodsons. They were the ones that said that Jews were...wrong and needed to be saved or something along those lines. (Gail)

That was a teacher. (Gary)

No, oh, that was just recently. That was awful. That was in Michelle's dance class. She mentioned that she was Jewish and this other girl said her teacher said that Virginia is mostly Christians and that Jewish people should go back to where they came from. (Gail)

That we shouldn't be in Virginia. At that point I almost, it was third hand, still I almost called the school to find out about that. (Gary)

We still should call the school. (Gail)

It does give them more sensitivity to being different because they aren't mainstream. (Gail)

Pride in being different. The above quotation was followed by the statement, "We wouldn't let them be mainstream anyway" (Gail). All of the couples asserted, in one way or another, a sense of pride in being different, being rebels, being creative in the ways they were raising their children:

My perception of...what I think you are going to hear from everybody else and not from us is "The Lord says" and "The Bible says" and we don't pay much attention, because we don't read the Bible and we don't believe in God. So pitch all that aside and then you say, "What's right for humanity? What is right for the world? What is right for the human species?" (Alan)

Our influences are our own! (Ben)

I'm just ornery, I think. I grew up in Georgia, where it was like whites seat from the front, blacks seat from the rear. Colored water fountains. And it just always sort of pissed me off, generally. I don't know why. When I was a kid...I would get on the bus and go right to the back seat. (Carl)

Fred and Fran discussed their sons' future sexual orientations:

I guess the continuous thought is that it is easier to be a heterosexual. So I would... (Fred)

Yeah, you always want the easier pain. The most painless route. (Fran)

Yeah. You want what is best for your kids. (Fred)

On the other hand, there's part of us that are both sort of rebels anyway. (Fran)

Additionally, one father reported that he himself had a "homosexual experience." The following conversation between us illustrates the continued influence this experience has on his life:

That was kind of an eye-opening experience, too. It was just very fleeting, but it sort of confirmed to me... , you know, you always think I haven't had an experience, maybe I'm missing whatever. So I had an experience. It sort of confirmed to me what my preferences were. But also, the experience opened to me, a lot of me, to have a feeling of what a positive experience--I mean, it was a positive experience.

And it doesn't sound like it was surrounded by guilt? (T.J.)

No, well, there's always a little bit of that hanging around.

Sure. So, that certainly does add to your perspective on it not being "other?" (T.J.)

Exactly. Right. Like having friends and actually having an experience. It gives you more experience in which to understand yourself and who you are.

#### Attitudes and Values

This final section describes the values held by the parents. The descriptions reflect a deep sense of thought and purpose. The section also includes thoughts about the future, parents' predictions regarding the ways in which conversations and values will change as their children age. Finally, the section concludes with parents' basic, yet powerful assertions that "it would be okay for their child to be gay."

#### Overt Values Transmission

Parents thought deliberately about the values they want to transmit to their children. They take seriously their responsibility, as parents, to assist their children in value

formation and are forthright in owning up to the areas in which this formation is "in process" for them, as well.

Parental statements of values. I asked parents to state their values directly, particularly about sexual orientation diversity. The following quotations reflect value statements that emerged within the interview conversations--specifically stated values about sexual orientation, as well as life values in general:

People are who they are. Let them do what they do. They're not hurting anybody. We're all living here together, let's do the best we can for each other. (Alan)

What matters is that people are good to each other in the world. And that kind of thing [sexual orientation] has nothing to do with what's important....I hear all this junk on the news about people making laws and worrying about who's going to marry who. What the hell does it matter? Put your energy into the important things! (Gail)

Beth and Ben discussed the importance of respect for self and others in the values they wish to transmit to their sons:

No matter which path he [their oldest son] took I would want to make sure that he wasn't promiscuous, that he didn't take sexual activity lightly with anyone....But the point is that you are respectful of people and you are respectful of yourself. That's what I want to get across to them no matter what: There are basic ways to be a good person. (Beth)

I guess what we want to put into the boys is: You are yourself and whatever you become you accept everybody else in your own security. You secure your own feelings about who you are and what you are going to be. And that's yours. But that doesn't mean that is the way it is. You don't shut out the rest of the world. It doesn't work that way. (Ben)

Membership in a group does not imply anything. You can't make any judgments because of someone's membership in a group. (Beth)

Dan and Donna stated their values regarding people being unfairly judged:

[I want her to understand] that it isn't that big of a deal, and it's not necessarily wrong like some people might say, like she may read or hear. That everybody is different and

that's just the way it is....To be accepting and open-minded and not prejudge people. (Dan)

Yeah. I just feel that we don't have the right to judge anybody. And we don't have the right to tell anybody who they can love. You know, love is a pretty personal, intense thing. And whoever you fall in love with--that's who you fall in love with. We don't have a right to judge that. (Donna)

Irene and Ivan also stated the importance of being respectful and non-judgmental:

This is just a part of life and everybody is different, but everybody is the same. You just respect that people make choices and you have to understand that for some people these choices are made hard by the world. And don't judge them....I hate to see what I regard as artificial divisions between peoples. And I really have a terrible hatred of intolerance. (Irene)

Open-mindedness and respect are values that I would like to communicate. (Ivan)

One mother stated that it is what she and her spouse do rather than what they say that has the greatest influence on the children:

I think the most powerful thing in my mind is the fact that we're open and clearly support both the gay men and the lesbian women that we know. And there's no effort to hide that relationship or to put it in...a light that is judgmental at all. (Fran)

In a conversation with Carl, Cindy adds advocacy to the values she wishes to communicate:

I want her to think this is in the "normal" range of human stuff. I don't want her to think it's weird, or over there, or something. It's just a different way that's part of everything....Bisexuals, group marriages, I think all that is within normal range. Not pedophiles... (Cindy)

I think just to have acceptance and tolerance for human beings. (Carl)

And to lobby for it. To realize that there's an edge to be pushed, a big fat edge....You know, my group of friends have been taking their daughters to the gay and lesbian marches in Washington for quite a while now. They're all older and in

college, so the next time they get a bunch to go I'm going to take Lisa. (Cindy)

Religion as value organizer--or not. One of the 10 families referred to religion as a value organizer. Hank spoke of "struggling hard" to find space for his new accepting attitudes within the framework of his religious community:

That's where I have problems, myself, is with church and how the church is accepting or not accepting of gays....The biggest thing is Bible study. We're reading the Bible and you're looking at Romans. Chapter 10 or 9, maybe even 11, says that these people went off and started doing "vulgar things:" men with men, women with women, and shouldn't be doing that stuff. Everybody is saying, "Okay, guys, this is the way it should be." And I said, "Wait a minute. Something is wrong here and maybe we're just not reading it the right way."....The church I have problems with right now on that particular issue. I also have problems in my mind on that issue. That's happened in Bible study. We've talked about it. I feel like a lot of churches are preaching hate out there and I don't like that about anybody....My problem comes back to promiscuity. When people are not willing to commit their life to one person. That's where I have a problem. But marriage, I think that's great. I think that's wonderful. I think that's the only way to get the most out of a relationship--is to become married and to grow together. And why we choose to have rules that a man has to marry a woman, I'm not so sure. The guys in the Bible study say, "It's in the Bible." It might be, but that's one thing that God and I are going to have to talk about when I get there. (Hank)

The remaining families either did not refer to religion at all, spoke of anger toward former religious upbringings, or described the challenges and creativity they face while not relying upon a religion to structure their values:

See, I was brought up Catholic and I think the one thing that tripped me off to the religion was the hypocrisy about supposedly loving everyone, but yet being racist and prejudiced and all this stuff. And I can remember in high school just giving up on Catholicism because I just felt I saw too much hypocrisy and I took it to heart to love everyone, and that you shouldn't discriminate against people. And I think it started at that point in terms of I wasn't going to discriminate against someone because they were gay. I think also somewhere along there I developed the attitude

that we all go through this life once, why not make it easy on each other? (Ann)

So we don't have the prejudice imposed by a strong religious base, but on the other hand it means that when issues like truth or telling lies, come at us, you can't fall back on "Thou shalt not lie." You have to couch it in very real terms. So you can't use the religion to create ethical lines to feel as a family....You can't fall back on "God said this." You have to say, "This is the consequence of lying. This is the way that we have to interact and the establishment of trust. We don't lie to you." We really face these issues, where you can see that having strong religious laws makes it easier. (Fran)

Well, if you're the kind of family that sees things as black and white and you say, "You don't take drugs. You don't smoke. You don't get blah, blah, blah." Whatever it is, it's a lot easier in a lot of ways than if you are a parent who sees all of the gray issues. And who discusses things and says, "You make a choice, etcetera." That really is much more difficult. (Gail)

Whenever anybody asks me my religion it really irritates me because that's the main reason that I don't go to church is I can't stand the fact that this world has spent half of its life fighting over who is a Christian and who isn't. (Irene)

Fred and Fran had a lengthy conversation about the issue of same sex marriage. Their differences in degree of religious influence became evident:

There is one thing that I am not certain about how society should deal with and that is the concept of marriage. There's a strong historical and religious relationship in terms of heterosexual procreation and the religious concept, and the movement to plug homosexual relationships into that...I think is probably not worthwhile...because it's beside the point in a way. I think there ought to be an expansion of the formal stated acceptance of homosexual as well as heterosexual...and within that context they ought to give all of the rights to everybody. But I think there's some real historical and biologically based [issues] in the concept of "marriage" and how it's come up to us in terms of cultural history. (Fred)

See, I'd be more radical in that response. That's very Judeo-Christian. (Fran)

I sort of think it's a waste of time, myself. The real value is in other directions and this is just a symbolic thing. But the symbol is bucking up against such absolutely basic origins of culture. (Fred)

But historically the one male, one female definition of a relationship is fairly recent and restrictive. (Fran)

Yeah. (Fred)

Look at ancient Greeks. Look at polygamy. Look at the harem set-ups. Look at... (Fran)

Clearly, couples are engaged in working through their changing values. Many parents reported having other support networks of friends and relatives. All parents reported most often discussing issues surrounding family values with their spouse.

### Future Projections

During the interviews, I asked concluding questions about the future. Parents discussed possible future conversations with their children, their children's everchanging peer groups, additional resources and topics of conversation that are or would be more challenging.

Children will ask more as they age. Parents predicted that their families will engage in more, rather than less, conversations as their children age. They envision their children asking more questions and seeking multiple resources:

I would think that she'd want more detail. I'd be a little bit more sophisticated in explaining. I would think that there's going to be more conflict with what she hears and her wanting to be faithful to us. (Ann)

I think there will not be as many questions as there will be discuss

I might be more prone to talking to her about getting involved, getting socially active. (Cindy)

I would like to think that the issues would get more personal and less theoretical. That they would come to us and just say that so-and-so thinks that they are gay. They would personalize the subject or individualize it as more of a statement than as a question, but really looking for us to say that this is okay, in the hopes that we would say this is okay. I think, again, they will be becoming aware of some of

these other issues once they get older and my guess is they will ask about them. (Irene)

Three parents recognized dilemmas about their children's future attitudes, social safety, or participation in family conversations:

I have this terrifying feeling that Susan's going to go to high school and just completely become a different person....I really hope that she goes on, as she gets older, thinking the same way that she does. Right now she's pretty open to everything....I hope it's the little things that will have to change. I hope these issues stay the same. (Donna)

It's like they're on a little boat on a huge sea and anything and everything can go wrong and it seems you get increasingly helpless as a parent. (Eric)

It [having conversations] doesn't work that easily. It's not like they're going to say, "From 6 to 7, Mom, I want to have a talk..." You need to have the hanging out time because that's when it happens. And between adults' and kids' lives, where is the hanging out time? (Gail)

Children's gendered peer groups. When discussing their children's peer groups, parents noticed gender differences. They often predicted girls and female peer groups to be more accepting than boys and male peer groups:

I think what she [spouse] was saying earlier about all the boys being homophobic. I don't think the girls, generally...I don't hear tales like, "Girls are homophobic," that sort of thing. (Carl)

I would say boys might tend to be less tolerant. (Dan)

My guess is that girls would be more tolerant because there is less definition of macho. To be a tom-boy is still considered to be okay, but to be a sissy is not. (Fran)

She hangs out with kids who have parents who are relatively highly educated and hopefully, therefore, aware. And that would probably be more of a factor than gender. (Gail)

One mother noticed gender playing out in a different way with her children:

Linda [age 12] is in that teenage, cliquy, peer group type stuff where they wouldn't be accepting of anything in this stage of the game. Whereas, Jason [age 10] I see this in the context of...men or boys who are very sports oriented, do tend to accept anything of everybody else because they have been thrown together for a long time. I think as long as someone has the athletic ability they don't question anything else. (Irene)

A father had a similar speculation:

I suppose you get both ends of the spectrum with the girls. They are either going to be nurturing and circle the wagons or they are going to ostracize you. The boys are kind of like, "Do whatever, but let's go out and play ball." (John)

Other resources children will seek. Parents predicted other resources their children might consult for more information about sexual orientation:

Mark [youngest son, age 10] is such a researcher, looker, investigative guy, makes up his own mind. I think he's to the point where he would ask Sean [oldest son, age 14]. (Ben)

Our adult friends. (Ann)

At this point they would probably be most likely to talk to friend

I'm sure it's their peer group, which is terrifying. I think that if Chip [former caregiver] were still around and close that he would be very easy to talk to for the boys. Having a male gay role model, it would be easier if they needed to address some of these things. (Fran)

Her grandmother...her peers...books...the internet, probably...I don't think there are other adult figures that they would turn to, which is both bad and good. (Irene)

Beth and Ben discuss the internet as a resource for their children:

Sean's [age 14] to the point that anything he wants to know he knows he can go to the internet and get it. (Beth)

Mark [age 10] is too. Mark is right there behind him. There's so many scribble sheets around the house with dot-this [referring to internet addresses]. (Ben)

I know. And we've said, "This is what the expectations are for your behavior on the Web." But, they have free range. (Beth)

That's probably going to be their answers to their questions. It's going to be, "I'm not asking Mom. I'm punching it on the computer and I'm going to find out." (Ben)

The tougher topics. Sexual orientation was not described by any of the parents as a particularly difficult or controversial topic to discuss with their children. They recalled and predicted "much tougher topics:"

She's thoroughly confused about religion. She doesn't have a clue. The funny part about it is that we're thoroughly confused about religion. (Alan)

It's this media thing with violent images and sex being portrayed as violent. I don't want to say, "I don't want you watching sex," but sex always seems to be coupled with violence and power. I just flat out oppose such a violent image. That's really hard for me. And they get angry because I harp all the time on it. I walk into the room and say, "O.K..." and I launch into a litany of what they're watching. So that's a tough issue. (Beth)

I think when she starts asking about the house drug behavior. (Ann)

Academic expectations are hard. (Hank)

If she were to get pregnant...Maybe drug use. (Carl)

There might be something difficult for me in talking to her about my past and having some abuse growing up. I think abortion would be another issue. (Donna)

Certain aspects of religion,...sexual assault...domestic violence. (Joan)

In many ways religion is somewhat hard to talk about. Fred is Jewish, I was raised Christian. We're not very religious and so they come home and say, "These guys all go to church. What do they do at church?" (Fran)

Death. (John)

I think that this issue will get more difficult to talk about when it becomes sexual orientation rather than family diversity. (Irene)

It Would Be Okay for My Child to Be Gay

Although not asked directly to project about their child's sexual orientation, one parent in every couple alluded to the possibility that one of their children might "grow up to be gay," and most said it would be okay.

Ann initiated a conversation with Alan about their daughter's [now age 5] sexual orientation:

I can't imagine there would be tension, Alan, if Wendy would turn out to be gay. I can't imagine us falling apart over that? (Ann)

[Shaking head] I mean, I'd be disappointed, I think. (Alan)

Would you? (Ann)

Yeah, I think more from the standpoint that the rest of the world still has problems and that, you know, little girls--and for that matter little boys, as well--have plenty of problems to begin with, with their own sexuality and their own making their identity in life, and making their way in the world. And to throw a road block like that where you are automatically going to face some problems, some prejudice, it'd be a drag....But, it's not like you're going to talk somebody out of it....I'm not going to tell her that she shouldn't have sexual relationships with a woman, with another girl. It wouldn't stop her. She's going to do what she's going to do. (Alan)

I guess I'm more afraid of her getting pregnant before she wants to. (Ann)

Well, [she's] not going to get pregnant with a woman. (Alan)

I know....What I was thinking is that I never think to myself, "Oh, I'd be really scared to think she might be gay." I think more to myself, "Oh, my god, I hope she makes it through without being raped. Oh, my god, I hope she makes it through without being a teenager pregnant. How would I deal with that?" I think there are worse things in terms of sexuality...than anything to do with her sexual orientation. I mean, to me, that's minor in terms of all the things that could happen. (Ann)

Furthermore, Ann described her struggle with heterosexual terminology:

How do you explain what making love is so that it's not just heterosexual terminology? It's really easy [to say] the "when a mommy and a daddy get together" type of thing.... That's what I try to be real careful about when I talk to her, to keep from getting into that kind of verbiage. (Ann)

Beth referred to an agreement she and her partner have regarding their acceptance of a gay child:

I don't know if you're [to Ben] going to remember this, and I don't remember the specifics, but we've had conversations about "How would you feel if one of the boys grew up gay?" And I think we've, we kind of agreed that we would be cool. Nobody's going to flip out if that's the direction they go. We're going to be really cool about it. Because you think about your extended family, "What would my father say?" "What would my brother say?" that kind of thing. And I think we kind of acknowledge with each other that we're going to support them whatever they do. It's almost like a check. (Beth)

[Nodding] If that's the way it ends up. (Ben)

Cindy relayed a conversation she had with her 14-year-old daughter:

I said, "It's [societal prejudice regarding interracial coupling] the same thing as if you wanted to marry another woman. Certain people in this society see it as not a good thing, not a normal thing." And we talked about that it would be fine with us, but she would have to know she wouldn't have approval from certain people....And I also told her that if she were dating a girl she wouldn't have to worry about getting pregnant. (Cindy)

The following two fathers stated a preference for heterosexual children, but explained that it was not out of homophobic fears:

On one level you wish for them, on a general, more political sense, to be tolerant of diverse sexual orientations. But then the other question is, "Do you want to, or do you think you could direct them in their sexual orientation?" I mean, I guess all things considered, I would prefer that my kids were heterosexual. But it's more like I would prefer Chris [son] liked certain things that I liked to do as a boy growing up. And it's kind of on no bigger level than that. (Eric)

Yeah, I would be upset [responding to spouse's what-if

question]. But it wouldn't be so much a negative....I think I have certain sets of values, okay, in terms of family and this kind of thing. I would have to, it would cause me to do some soul searching. I mean, I would accept it, but it would, I would have to...in terms of understanding myself and my sons, who they are. So it would be a task. And so, from that point of view, I don't mean "upset equals negativeness," but it would be something that I would have to deal with. (Fred)

Fred's spouse, on the other hand, described less struggle in her feelings about this issue:

A couple of years ago, he [oldest son, Bob] was probably 9 and asked--one of the many times when he had been asking--to get his ear pierced. And this was not really to address..., this was trying to come up with a good way to postpone this decision and so I said, "I really like men with ears pierced and men with jewelry. I think that's a really cool idea. But, you know, there's some business about whether your right or your left ear is pierced has certain communications as to whether you're gay or straight. And since we don't know yet whether you're gay or straight, maybe we should just postpone this decision"....So he said, "Well, Mom, when will I know?" And I said, "Well, I'm not really sure, but my guess is that when you go into puberty and your hormones kick in it will be very clear to you whether you are attracted to men or attracted to women. So that's just a few years away, so let's just put it off." (Fran)

Gail compared herself to her mother in her prediction of her own acceptance:

Whereas I would be able, probably, to accept if one of the girls chose an alternate lifestyle, I don't know that my mother would have accepted it so easily. (Gail)

Holly expressed an acceptance of her children, yet some grief and a concern for their welfare if they were gay:

I think there is still that feeling, "Gosh, if it was one of them, how tolerant...?" I don't think I'd go crazy or anything like that, but I think there might be some grief that things would be different. I mean, Hank's parents have friends who have two daughters who are lesbian and they have the grief in their situation of no grandchildren. And just knowing that your child is going to go through some really tough stuff if this is what the choice is...even though you may have a family that would enfold you, the world out there...Kathy was talking about a kid at the high school who has come out and his car has been keyed and the redneck kids

are really giving him a hard time. And it's really, really tough. (Holly)

Both Irene and Joan made references to "if this becomes a personal issue" (Irene) and "as this picture unfolds" (Joan). They matter-of-factly predicted what resources might be helpful for their daughters in the future (books, adult friends), yet made no value-based statements about their children's futures.

Given the range of feelings expressed concerning the possibility of having a gay child, Donna's statement reflects a bottom-line message for all the parents:

As far as our daughter, if her sexual preference...I mean, I guess you deal with those feelings when they arise, but we've always kind of been like, "She's Susan," and I don't feel like she's ever going to change in my mind as far as who she is as my daughter. (Donna)

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND DIRECTIONS

This study reflects the perspectives of 10 couples who reported engaging with their children in thoughtful and constructive conversations. Parents described their conversations about sexual orientation, conversations from which they hope their children gain accurate information and a sensitivity to difference.

### Discussion in Relation to Theory

Qualitative interviews with each couple yielded rich, informative conversations about the content, influence, and transmission of values about sexual orientation. The findings reflect the guiding theoretical frameworks--ecological and narrative, the research questions, and the lived experiences of both the participants and the researcher.

#### Ecological Theory

The image of nested systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) is useful in illustrating the extending influences upon a family's conversations about sexual orientation. In this particular study the systems can be described as follows. The family *microsystems* consisted of 2 parents (1 mother and 1 father) and 1 to 3 children. Two families also had grandmothers who lived with them part time.

*Mesosystems* included the children's school environments, teachers, babysitters, and peers. Six couples reported that their children had been in private child care and elementary schools that promoted an understanding of diversity in sexual orientation. I had been the first-grade teacher for children in four of the

families. These children knew that I was lesbian, or rather, knew, as one student said, that I was "married to a girl." Parents reported values being most strongly influenced by knowing gay people--influences of both the *meso-* and *exosystems*.

*Exosystems* included parents' work environments, friends, and families of origin. Parents described gay co-workers and homophobic co-workers. Five families reported having close lesbian or gay friends. Most parents spoke of developing accepting attitudes about sexual orientation in spite of the attitudes expressed in their families of origin. Exosystems also included a focus on lesbians and gay men in the media and the availability of the internet. Parents reported conversations initiated by their children's questions regarding media publicized personalities such as Ru Paul or Sharon Bottoms. They also answered questions about the movie *The Bird Cage* and news reports regarding "same sex marriage." Two parents reported that their children regularly used the World Wide Web as an avenue for gaining information.

*Macrosystems*, the broad ideological values or "blueprints" of a culture, were characterized by religious histories. Parents recalled early exposure to religious-based characterizations of lesbians and gay men. The teachings, by both religious environments and families of origin, largely reflected the dominant narrative of heterosexism.

*Chronosystems*, the individual changes and continuities of a person's development and self-discovery over time in response to her or his environment, varied according to the age of the participants. Parents referred to "wide open experiences from 1969

on," a 1972 summer in Provincetown, "being in college at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s," and being exposed to "the mix of the earth" while attending a prestigious university.

#### Narrative Approach

I asked the parents in this project to reflect upon the meaning of the stories they told about sexual orientation: "What does sexual orientation mean to you?" "What feelings and ideas do you want to communicate to your child?" "In what ways does gender affect your family's conversations about sexual orientation?" "How do you think these conversations will change as your child ages?" Not only did the parents retell their family's past conversations, but they also engaged in current conversations with each other during the interview--such as Fran and Fred's discussion about the cultural rules of marriage. As the researcher, I was privy to their active, constructive conversations as they explored and clarified their values. Clearly, these families had two involved parents who talked openly with each other.

Additionally, these parents expressed pride and pleasure at their desire to live, in certain respects, outside the mainstream. Often, at the beginning or close of the interview, when the tape recorder was off, parents made statements suggesting *they* were probably the most liberal parents I had interviewed. Many enjoyed a "rebellious" or "not mainstream" image. Upon being contacted for the interview, one mother stated, "Oh, I'm so glad you're doing this study. I want people to know there are some straight parents out here trying to do the right thing." And yet, even they sometimes caught themselves operating from the dominant narrative

of heterosexism, which is to assume their children will become heterosexual:

It's interesting because you think, "Well, how do you really influence?" But one of the things that I've been aware of and I sort of tease Brian about it because he hasn't made the next step. I've said, "Are there any girls you like?" And it hadn't occurred to me, "Are there any boys you like?" in that same way....All the friends he discusses are all boys at this point, and he hasn't shown any interest in the next step. But it's interesting that I never really thought about it, but clearly I was giving a message there already....Those sort of messages probably come across all of the time. Our only hope, I think, as parents is that we stay totally open." (Fran)

#### Conclusions in Relation to Research Questions

In this section, I will draw conclusions from the study in response to the research questions. Five research questions guided this project:

1. What is the content and meaning of family conversations about sexual orientation?
2. How do parents attempt to answer children's questions or inform them about the topic of sexual orientation?
3. How does gender organize family conversations about sexual orientation?
4. What other factors influence parents' attitudes about sexual orientation?
5. What values do parents want their children to have regarding sexual orientation?

The following five conclusions correspond to the five research questions listed above, respectively.

#### Families Talk About Real People

For the families in this study, the content of family conversations were focused primarily on real people. Parents

usually referred to friends or relatives as they talked about issues relating to sexual orientation. Children's wonderings were based primarily upon questions about marriage rules and coupleness, rather than upon physical sexual relations. Parents hoped that their "openness" now would lead to even more honest conversations as their children got older. The children in these families currently shared their parents' accepting attitudes, and parents stated a desire for that to continue. As the children age and interact increasingly more with outside systems, these early family communications have the possibility, through children's advocacy of accuracy and fairness, of impacting the future of the society in which the communication is embedded (Socha & Stamp, 1995).

#### Parents Respond Proactively to Children's Questions

Parents reported taking seriously their children's questions. Wanting to create a climate for open discussion, parents reported answering questions honestly and extending conversation when possible. Parents were careful, however, to recognize when no conversation might be more effective, such as choosing not to point out that a child's teacher for the next year is a lesbian. In such situations, two parents reported using a "non-issue" strategy and letting their child develop a sense of knowing the teacher as a person first.

The parents expressed confidence in their ability to provide or direct their children to accurate, fair, and sensitive information about sexual orientation. None of them referred to consulting parenting handbooks or other printed materials for help

with these conversations. When asked what resources they wished to have on hand, most parents indicated not wanting or needing anything in particular. One parent suggested that it would be helpful to have information about specific state laws that address sexual orientation, and two parents felt they would utilize appropriate children's books and youth novels that incorporated lesbian or gay characters.

When applying Thomas' (1996) conceptualization of parent development, the parents in this study would be most appropriately characterized by the *encourage development*, rather than *constrain development*, themes of (a) sensitivity and responsiveness, (b) reciprocity, and (c) support. Parents continually reported "open" and "honest" responses to their children's questions. They stated a desire for conversation with their children, rather than having children merely listen to lectures. Cindy said, "I don't want to block conversation by being didactic." Other parents indicated attempts to use analogies in order to connect the information to something their children could understand.

#### Mothers Do Most of the Social Talking

In seven of the families interviewed, both the mothers and the fathers reported that the mothers talked to the children more about social topics. This echoes the findings reported in a review by Stafford and Dainton (1995): "mothers talk more and talk about a wider variety of topics, especially about social and personal issues. Fathers talk about fewer topics, and often focus on rules, academic achievement, and instrumental tasks" (p. 6). Also, parents' descriptions of longer conversations were usually linked

to conversations with daughters, possibly supporting the findings of Reese and Fivush (1993). In their research, daughters were found to receive more elaborative discourse, more narrative structure, and longer conversations than sons. Although this is reflected in my research as well, it may be more appropriately accounted for by the fact that, of the families who had daughters (8 of 10 families), the girls were either the only child or the oldest child(ren). Additionally, 11 of the 19 children were girls.

#### Knowing Gay People is the Most Influential Factor

All parents reported that their attitudes were most influenced by knowing gay or lesbian people. Despite having heard mostly derogatory statements about gays and lesbians in their families of origin, parents reported changing their attitudes to fit their knowledge of real lesbian or gay people. Beth remarked as she remembered first meeting lesbians and gay men, "You know, they weren't these weird people that fit the labels that my dad would say."

This supports the belief behind the National Coming Out Day campaign every October 11. Leaders of this campaign assert that the single most important factor in combating homophobia is for people to know gay people: "We're a visibility campaign that encourages people to tell the truth about their lives--to come out of the closet, so we can put to rest the myths that people have used against us" (Marcus, 1993, p. 48). Lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals are encouraged to come out on this day and every day to be known by those around them--family members, friends, co-workers, and communities.

### Parents Want Children to be Accepting and Fair

Parents reported wanting their children to be "accepting," "respectful," "responsible," "tolerant," "open-minded," and "fair." Many parents indicated an awareness that they may be raising a child with beliefs that will clash with their peers at some point. Donna described how she addressed this issue with her daughter:

We've said stuff like, "If anybody [at school] says anything negative about a Black person, you know that's not okay. If anybody says anything negative about a gay person, you know that's not okay. And you can walk away. You can defend yourself, but if you feel uncomfortable or whatever, just walk away. Don't acknowledge it." (Donna)

Lightfoot and Valsiner (1992) refer to this process for parents as the mediation between the "collective culture at large," their own sets of beliefs, and the developing "personal cultures" of their children (p. 408).

### Reflections on the Research Process

It is customary to describe the limitations of the study. The narrow range of diversity in ethnicity, class, and education greatly limits the findings of this study. I regret not having greater diversity, but at the same time, I recognize the necessity of taking the first step to attain baseline information about a neglected research topic. At the suggestion of my dissertation committee, I interviewed people I know. I interviewed friends. At first, I was uncomfortable with this suggestion, yet, considering the sensitive and private nature of the topic, I came to understand that I would have been unable to gain this kind of data without a personal connection. Our knowledge of each other, and

our history of working together in various contexts such as school and community groups, allowed me to go beyond the superficial veneer that occurs in polite social situations when individuals cross master statuses. In this case, I refer to sexual orientation as a status that differentiated me from my participants. The anonymous responses concerning the research process indicate that parents felt unaffected by knowing my identity. The question remains, however, whether or not parents neglected to discuss a lack of confidence in engaging in conversations, or even destructive or homophobic conversations, because of their knowledge and respect for me and my sexual orientation.

I would like to reflect further on my connections with the people I interviewed and on my connections with the research topic. I knew almost all of the people I interviewed. Almost all of them knew me. All of them knew that I identified as lesbian and most knew my partner and children. Our differences in sexual orientation seemed muted by my connections to them, to their children, to their children's school environments. I am an insider in their community. They report having felt comfortable sharing information during the interview, more comfortable than if they had been interviewed by an unknown researcher. Personal history with each other, according to my participants, facilitated more honest sharing in the interviews.

Like other researchers who study phenomena close to their own experiences (e.g., Krieger, 1996; Stacey, 1990), I have struggled with letting myself into the research. On the one hand, it is comfortable and easy to see myself referred to in the data itself.

On the other, it feels cumbersome and foreign in a scholarly research project. I have reported the findings that are the parents' references to me personally, as an influence on their attitudes, alongside the data that are references to other friends or caregivers. As I approach the end of writing the dissertation, I have come to understand the benefit of allowing personal experience to take a central place in the research process. I kept a research journal throughout the data collection and analysis. I have selected four excerpts to illustrate how I processed myself in the research process:

**January, 1997:**

As I conduct the interviews, I am struck by the parents' pride in the level of conversations they have with their children. I am acutely aware, as well, of the conversations that have occurred with Matthew [my older son] at home where we deal with difference every day--a household without heterosexual privilege. We have wanted Matt to enjoy our creativity in household roles and responsibilities and also understand the nature of our difference from many of the families in which his friends live. At 4, he could classify "different kinds of love" and spoke boldly about having two mothers. Now, at 9, he speaks fluently about having lesbian parents and about homophobia, bisexuality, and transgendered issues. He understands race, class, and gender privilege, as well, and knows which environments, are "gay-friendly" (Provincetown, his grandparents homes, his school) and which are not (too much of Southwest Virginia). He is never

apologetic about his family. He is secure in his family's love and he trusts the information we convey. I have this in common with the parents I am interviewing--the provision of security and honest information. I know that children are capable of these kinds of conversations and much more. Matthew and my identity as a parent are on my mind constantly as I collect the data.

**February, 1997:**

As I am in the midst of data analysis, I find myself wanting to answer my own interview questions. My family's conversations are many and varied. Some issue relating to sexual orientation is probably discussed weekly. My partner and I give guest lectures and lead discussions about this topic regularly and processing such events are a part of dinner time conversation. I want my children to have accurate information about sexual orientation. And I want them to know that I am not invested in their own future sexual orientation(s). I do not communicate that gay people are better than straight people or vice-versa. Gender is expressed in interesting ways given the constitution of our family. Basically, the parents are women and the children are boys. We are creative about household roles and responsibilities for both the parents and the children. Differences in roles are probably more related to age and work responsibilities.

**February, 1997:**

I think that I first became aware of "gay" people when I met a friend of my aunt and uncle. I was probably 10. Layne was a young gay man whose partner had died in a car crash. His subsequent limp was a constant reminder to me of how sad it must be to lose someone you love so much. I also remember reading parts of *Ms.* magazine in third grade (1973), but don't think I put it together then. As a grade schooler I remember my father bringing us inside and telling us it wasn't okay to play a game called "smear the queer." He explained that it was a mean word, "like nigger," and that he didn't want us to use it. I also remember us all giggling in the car as we passed a farm with a sign that read, "Gay Acres." While in high school, I remember sitting in the back seat of the car on a trip to my grandparents and listening to my parents process a conversation that my father had recently had with his sister about her lesbian daughter. She had asked him how he would feel if his daughter were gay. My ears perked up. His response was something like, "I told her it wouldn't really matter. She would still be my daughter." My mother nodded in agreement. I exhaled a sigh of relief.

**March, 1997:**

I have completed both the data collection and the analysis and can't help but reflect upon the changes and developments in my own family during the past few months. In the Fall, my mother came out. She said she realized that she is lesbian. After 35 years of marriage, my parents divorced in January. I am building new relationships with the two of them and my

younger brother. My partner, Katherine, and Matthew and I continue to have conversations about difference, oppression, and liberation. I have always felt proud of our willingness to have these "bold" conversations, yet as I watched Matthew glance over the front page of the paper the other day (he was interested in the cloned sheep) I found myself trying to hide an article about the bombing of the lesbian night club. He doesn't need to know everything all the time, does he? Finally, Zack, our 2-year-old, used the phrase "other mother" for the first time last month. He knows he has two mothers, and he also knows that Matt grew from "Tata's" body and that he grew from mine. I marvel at my children's understanding and acceptance of their own diversity.

#### Suggestions for Further Research

Based upon the interviews and my own reflections, I have four suggestions for further research. First, the voices and experiences of working class families, ethnic minorities, or less educated families would provide insight into the similarities and differences among families who promote acceptance within their conversations about sexual orientation.

Second, several parents, while trying to make educated guesses about their children's understanding of sexual orientation, remarked, "You know, you should interview our kids." Children's perceptions of their families conversations, as well as their further questions, would provide an additional level of data. If interviewed with the parents, children's voices would add to the observations of family conversations in action.

Third, the attitudes of most of the parents in this sample have not yet been tested. Follow-up interviews with the same participants in the future would provide information about the parents' values, as well as conversations, after the children have begun to explore their own sexual orientation. For a few parents, the issue of accepting a gay child was a struggle against their own homophobia. Statistically, it could be predicted that one or two of the children in this study will identify as lesbian or gay or bisexual in later years.

Finally, part of the idea for conducting this research came from a recurring message I have heard from a few lesbian and gay friends who grew up in "liberal" households: "It was discussed that it was okay for *people* to be gay, yet I never heard that it would be okay for *me* to be gay." I would be interested in comparing the messages that most of the children in this study are receiving from their parents to the messages adult lesbians, gay men, or bisexuals remember hearing as children.

#### Implications for Practitioners

This research has implications for both educators and clinicians. Children have questions about sexual orientation diversity. Parents report their strongest source of knowledge is knowing gay people. An ecological perspective suggests that parents are only one source of information for children. Schools, media, and other societal institutions play a role in educating children. Educators need to be prepared to provide accurate information to children about sexual orientation. Schools and other contexts that address the education of children have a

responsibility to provide experiences that destigmatize people who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual as well as the family forms they encompass (Casper & Schultz, 1996). A documentary film, *It's Elementary: Talking About Gay Issues in School* by Debra Chasnoff and Helen Cohen (1997), is an excellent and provocative example of responsible media in this area. The film asserts that schools are a place to open the conversation about sexual orientation.

Teaching about gays and lesbians in the schools is not about their sexuality or their sexual behavior. It is about the community of gay and lesbian people, their relationships, the biases and discrimination they face, and the need to teach children from an early age to be tolerant and accepting of others.

Clinical implications are found in the nature of these parents' conversations with each other, particularly conversations held during the interview. Parents clarified their stories and their values in collaboration with each other. They talked to each other, checked out ideas with each other, challenged each other, and shared their own feelings of difference. I sensed that they enjoyed this process, yet did not do it often. They often seemed to be sharing new ideas for the first time during the interview. Parenting couples would benefit from more time spent on such conversations. Gender implications were also important. The mothers did most of the social talking in families, yet it was the fathers who most often articulated pride in how "open and honest" their family conversations were. Do fathers serve as the mouthpiece for the mother-led processes that go on inside families? Listening to parents' narratives about their family's

conversations can provide clinical insight into the level of collaboration between parents, the processes of gender, and their commitment to honest interactions.

#### Final Comment

In closing, I remember the statement by Gergen and Gergen (1988), "Events are rendered socially visible through narratives, and they are typically used to establish expectations for future events" (p. 18). Several parents in this study remarked that they had not needed to challenge their previously held beliefs about sexual orientation before they had children. They may have made exceptions to those beliefs as they met lesbians or gay men, yet it was the process of having children that created the space for looking to the future and reevaluating past beliefs:

Having kids makes you have to evaluate what your feelings are and what is important....That's what happens with kids, you are more likely to fall into the old parenting styles and just say things that all parents have said historically. That's when it's really hard to catch yourself, but you have to make sure you do. And that goes on forever, doesn't it?  
(Gail)

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## Appendix A

### Interview Guide

The following questions are organized around the research questions. Probes were used, when needed, to extend the participants' conversations. The order of the questions varied.

#### Initial Questions:

To begin, tell me about a typical week day for your family.  
What about a typical weekend? (warm up discussion)

Tell me about your family's conversations in general.  
(Probes: topics, which child talks to which parent, location of conversations, length, structure)

What questions from your children have surprised you?

What does "sexual orientation" mean to you?

#### **1. What is the content of family conversations about sexual orientation?**

#### Interview Questions:

Tell me about conversations you have had with your children about sexual orientation.  
(Probes: What questions have the children asked? What comments?)

What were the triggers to such questions or comments?

What conversations have the two of you had about sexual orientation?

#### **2. How do parents attempt to answer children's questions or inform them about the topic of sexual orientation?**

#### Interview Questions:

During these conversations, what feelings and ideas do you want to communicate to your child?

What do you think your child understands about "sexual orientation?" What words do they use?

#### **3. How does gender organize family conversations about sexual orientation?**

#### Interview Questions:

How is gender expressed in your family roles and responsibilities?

In what ways does your gender affect your family's conversations about sexual orientation?

(Probes: Preferred parent(s)? Available parent(s)?)

In what ways does the gender of your child affect your interactions with her or him about sexual orientation?

In what ways do you think your child's gender and the gender of her or his peers matters in their own acceptance of sexual orientation diversity?

#### **4. What other factors influence parents' attitudes about sexual orientation?**

##### Interview Questions:

Tell me about when you first learned about sexual orientation.

Have you had any conversations about sexual orientation with your own parents?

What has influenced your attitudes regarding sexual orientation?  
(Probes: family of origin, media, friends, religious community)

In what ways do you influence each other?

Tell me what you know about the lives of lesbians or gay men.  
(Probes: Do you know any gay people? What is their relationship to you? Do your children know them?)

Describe your feelings regarding some of the politicized issues surrounding sexual orientation diversity.  
(Probes: sexual orientation education in schools, right to marry)

#### **5. What values do parents want their children to have regarding sexual orientation?**

##### Interview Questions:

As parents, what values do you want your children to learn about sexual orientation?

As your children get older, in what ways do you anticipate your family's conversations about sexual orientation will change?

What information do you wish you had at your fingertips as you have these conversations with your children?

What other resources might your children consult to learn more about this topic?

What other conversation topics have you found or would you find more difficult than that of sexual orientation?

Appendix B  
Demographic Data Sheet

**Participant: Mother**

Name of Participant:

Date of Birth:

Age:

Race/Ethnicity:

Education:

Occupation:

Previous Marriage(s):

Home Town:

Religion:

**Participant: Father**

Name of Participant:

Date of Birth:

Age:

Race/Ethnicity:

Education:

Occupation:

Previous Marriage(s):

Home Town:

Religion:

**Conjoint Data:**

Date of Current Marriage:

Length of Current Relationship:

Names and Ages of Children:

## Appendix C

**Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University****Application for Approval of Research Involving  
Human Subjects****Project Title:**

Family Conversations About Sexual Orientation:  
Parental Narratives and Transmission of Values

**Investigator:**

Tamara J. Stone, M.S.  
Doctoral Candidate  
Department of Family and Child Development  
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

**Research Protocol****Justification of Project**

The purpose of this research is to explore constructive, successful family conversations about sexual orientation. Heterosexually married couples who parent the same children together will be interviewed jointly. Parents who identify themselves as having such conversations will be invited to discuss the content of and major influences on their family's conversations about sexual orientation and family diversity. Research in this area has been focused almost exclusively on families headed by gay or lesbian parents. This research will provide a closer look into heterosexual-headed families' knowledge about sexual orientation and the attitudes with which that knowledge is transmitted to children. These are private family conversations with very public ramifications. Parents are their children's earliest and most influential teachers. As children grow into adulthood, beliefs about sexual orientation may transfer to behaviors, including such activities as voting and policy making, as well as personal and social behaviors. Results of this study will inform curriculum planning, parenting education, and current understanding of family communication patterns.

**Procedures**

In-depth interviews will be conducted by the investigator with 10 couples. Interviews will be approximately 2 hours in

length and will take place at locations and times convenient for both the participants and the interviewer. Participants will be offered \$10 to pay for child care at the time of the interview. Follow-up interviews may be conducted with some or all of the participants as needed. A family, for example, may have additional conversations as a result of being interviewed and giving additional thought to the topic. The sample will consist of couples who are known to the investigator as having constructive, successful conversations with their children about sexual orientation. Possible participants will be asked if they have conversations with their children about sexual orientation and family diversity. They will also be asked if these conversations promote tolerance for diversity in sexual orientations. Participants will answer "yes" to these questions and will be identified through children's schools, extracurricular activities, and family organizations. Initially, families known to the interviewer will be personally approached with the above questions to learn about their qualification for the project and their interest in being participants. Friends of located participants will also be included, as in a snowball sample. All participants will complete a demographic data sheet (Appendix B). Interviews will be audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. The interview guide is included as Appendix A.

### **Risks and Benefits**

Volunteers for this project will be assured of their right to withdraw from the research at any time, before or during the time of the interview. Interview questions are not intended to cause risk. Benefits include the involvement in a study that will provide information about families conversations about sexual orientation, the opportunity to talk about personal experiences and beliefs about children's understanding of sexual orientation, and the possibility of the participant's greater understanding of self, family, and personal family values.

### **Confidentiality/Anonymity**

The interviews will be conducted by the investigator (Tamara J. Stone). The list of names and telephone numbers of the participants, as well as audiotapes, will be kept by the investigator in a locked file cabinet and will be erased after the tapes have been transcribed. The investigator will have access to the audiotapes and transcripts in order to collaborate with her advisor and committee on conducting data analysis throughout the research project. Audiotapes and transcripts will be coded with numbers to replace identifying information. Reports and presentations of the results and conclusions of this study will use pseudonyms only.

### **Informed Consent**

An Informed Consent for Participation of Investigative Projects is attached. Each participant will receive a copy.

**Biographical Sketch: Tamara J. Stone, M.S.**

The investigator is a doctoral candidate in Marriage and Family Therapy in the Department for Family and Child Development. She successfully completed the following graduate coursework pertaining to research statistics, methodology, and family interaction:

FCS	5533	Parenting Education
FCS	5253	Gender Role Development
FCS	5123	Advanced Family Theory
FCS	5693	Research Methods in FCS
NFS	6803	Statistical Methods
FCD	6404	Systems Family Therapy
EDRE	6604	Behavioral Science Methodology
FCD	5974	Methodology and Applications
FCD	6454	Assessment Techniques in MFT

The investigator designed and implemented a research project using qualitative methods with interviews for her Master's degree. Throughout the past 10 years, the investigator has been employed as a teacher (Pre-Kindergarten and First Grade) and has served in practicum and internship sites as an outpatient clinician in family therapy. She has developed sensitivities to diversity in parenting styles and family communication. She is skilled at listening, clarifying, questioning, and communicating respect for people's views, and recognizes the nature of confidential conversations.

**Faculty Advisor: Victoria R. Fu, Ph.D.**

Dr. Fu is a Professor of Child Development in the department of Family and Child Development. She is the investigator's dissertation advisor. She has considerable experience conducting family focused research and is currently the principle investigator for the Quality of Life/Partners for Readiness Project providing service to UDAD/USMC to meet the Marine Corps staff training and quality of life initiatives.

**Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University**  
**Informed Consent for Participants**  
**of Investigative Projects**

Title of Project: Family Conversations About Sexual Orientation

Investigator: Tamara J. Stone, M.S.

**I. The Purpose of the Research/Project**

You are invited participate in a study about the conversations families have about sexual orientation. The purpose of the research project is to explore parents' descriptions of the conversations they have with their children about sexual orientation and family diversity. Since the participants of this project will be parents in families that engage in constructive, successful conversation about sexual orientation, results of this study will inform curriculum planning, parenting education, and current understanding of family communication patterns. Interviews with 10 heterosexually married couples will be conducted.

**II. Procedures**

I will be asking some general questions about your background, such as age, occupation, education, children, and length of marriage. I will also talk to you about the conversations you have with your children about sexual orientation: content, influences, and values. The interviews will take place at a mutually convenient location and time and will require approximately two hours of your time. You will be given a copy of the transcript of this interview. I welcome follow-up interviews if you find there are clarifications you would like to make. Also, if you find that your participation in this study sparks additional family conversations, I would like to conduct follow-up interviews.

**III. Risks**

The questions are not intended to cause any discomfort.

**IV. Benefits of this Project**

Your participation in the project will provide the following information that may be helpful to other parents, educators, and counselors. First, this study will provide information about families' conversations about sexual orientation. Second, the project will give you an opportunity to talk about your personal experiences and beliefs about children's understanding of sexual orientation. Third, hearing about your family's conversations will allow us to better understand how families communicate. Fourth, you may come to a better understanding of yourself, your family, and your family's values.

No guarantee of benefits has been made to encourage you to participate.

**V. Extent of Anonymity and Confidentiality**

Your responses in this study will be kept strictly confidential. At no time will I release the results of the study to anyone other than my faculty advisor, Dr. Victoria Fu, and members of my dissertation committee, Drs. Scott Johnson, Jerry Niles, Howard Protinsky, and Andrew Stremmel, without your written consent. The information you provide will have your name removed and only a subject number or pseudonym will identify you during analyses and any written reports of the research.

The interview will be audiotaped. The tapes will be transcribed by the investigator or a professional transcription service. They will be secured, coded by numbers, and stored in a locked personal file. They will be erased following transcription.

Exceptions to confidentiality exist in the following circumstances: child abuse is disclosed or strongly suspected, harm to self is disclosed, harm to another is disclosed. In such cases the investigator would notify appropriate authorities.

**VI. Compensation**

You will be offered \$10 to pay for child care at the time of the interview.

**VII. Freedom to Withdraw**

You are free to withdraw from this study at any time without penalty. You are free not to answer any question(s) that you choose without penalty.

**VIII. Approval of Research**

This research project has been approved, as required, by the Institutional Review Board for Research Involving Human Subjects at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, and by the Department of Family and Child Development.

**IX. Your Participant Responsibilities**

I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I have the following responsibilities: to engage in the interview in the ways I feel most comfortable; and to state if I do not wish to answer a question or if I desire to withdraw and cease the interview.

**X. Participant's Permission**

I have read and understand the Informed Consent and conditions of this project. I have had all my questions answered. I hereby acknowledge the above and give my voluntary consent for participation in this project.

If I participate, I may withdraw at any time without penalty. I agree to abide by the rules of this project.

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Signature

---

Date

Should I have any questions about this research or its conduct, I may contact:

Tamara J. Stone, M.S. 540-552-6947  
Investigator

Victoria R. Fu, Ph.D. 540-231-4796  
Faculty Advisor

H. Thomas Hurd, Ph.D. 540-231-9359  
Chair, Institutional Review Board  
Research Division

## Appendix D

## Follow Up Letter

TO: Participants of my dissertation research  
FROM: T.J. Stone, 552-6947  
DATE: March 5, 1997  
RE: Follow-Up

First, let me thank each of you again for participating in my dissertation project. I have the richest, most thoughtful data! The transcripts are complete and I am now in the midst of the analysis. The final document goes to my committee on April 2.

As I mentioned before, I would very much appreciate your reviewing the transcript. "H"="He" and "S"="She." Mother/Father and Male/Female made "M" and "F" too confusing. ["T"=T.J.] Very soft statements were often "inaudible." In some cases I was able to understand the words and write them in. Also, as I listened to the tapes and read the transcripts, I caught a few mistakes in the transcription process. Occasionally you will see a (?) which means "I'm not sure what was said." I'm not worried about a missed word here or there. I am concerned, however, with understanding any explanations, clarifications, or additions you would like to make. Please make these comments on the form I have enclosed (there is one for "mother" and one for "father") and use page numbers as a reference. Please note: I am not interested in having the transcript returned to me, just your clarifications. Also note that although real names are used throughout the transcripts, I will use pseudonyms in the reporting of the data and in any presentations or publications.

In addition to these comments, I would also like to know about any subsequent conversations your family may have had about sexual orientation. Again, please describe these on the form provided. For many of you, I have enclosed additional question(s) on the bottom part of the form. Typically, these are questions that emerged during the process and may not have been asked of everyone (particularly the earliest couples interviewed). Please feel free to use the back of the form or additional pages if needed and mail together in the envelope provided. If you feel you need to schedule a follow-up interview, just give me a call.

Finally, I have also enclosed an "anonymous mail-back" that asks for your feedback about the interview process. This form (again, there is one for "mother" and one for "father") is to be mailed separately from the clarification form (two envelopes are provided). You may wish to mail your forms on different days to assure anonymity.

Since your feedback is vital to my data analysis, I would like to get the information as soon as possible. **Please mail both sets of forms by Wednesday, March 12.** I realize this is a tight turn-around and I greatly appreciate your willingness to provide follow-up clarifications. Again, thank you all for making this such a unique study.

With Great Appreciation,

T.J. Stone

## Appendix E

Clarifications Form  
(Parent's Name)

1. Please list or describe any explanations, clarifications or additions. Please refer to transcript page numbers as a reference.

2. Please describe any subsequent family conversations (or comments) about sexual orientation.

## Appendix F

Coding Scheme  
Major Themes, Coding Families, and Coding Categories

## A. CONTENT AND PROCESS OF THE CONVERSATIONS

**100 Location and Timing of Conversations**

101 Description of time and place for conversations

**200 Wondering About Relationships**

202 Who can get married

203 Media as trigger

204 Emergent vocabulary

**300 Choosing to Converse**

305 Fluidity in parents' definitions

306 Mothers as the "social talkers"

307 Providing answers/Being askable parents

308 How much is too much information

309 Non-issue strategy

## B. INFLUENCES ON PARENTS' ATTITUDES

**400 Families of Origin**

410 First awareness of diversity in sexual orientation

411 Early knowledge of gay or lesbian people

412 Lack of childhood conversations with parents

413 Current conversations with parents

**500 Knowing People**

514 Gay friends

515 Gay relatives

516 Influencing each other

**600 Personal Feelings of Difference**

617 Being a Jewish boy

618 Being a woman

619 Having a child with a difference

620 Pride in being different

## C. ATTITUDES AND VALUES

**700 Overt Values Transmission**

721 Parents' statements of values

722 Religion as value organizer--or not

**800 Future Projections**

823 Children will ask more as they age

824 Children's gendered peer groups

825 Other sources children will seek

826 The tougher topics

**900 It Would Be Okay For My Child to Be Gay**

927 Parents' statements of acceptance of future gay child



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 Department of Family and Child Development  
 Major Area: Marriage and Family Therapy
- M.S. 1989 Texas Woman's University  
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 Major Area: Child Development
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 Psychology Department  
 Major Area: Psychology  
 Elementary Education Teaching Certification

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- 1995- Outpatient Therapist, Child and Family Unit,  
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**REFEREED PUBLICATIONS:**

Stone, T. J., & Allen, K. R. (in press). Parenthood and pregnancy: The journey of a lesbian couple and their children. In V. R. Fu & A. Stremmel (Eds.), *Affirming diversity through democratic conversation*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Stone, T. J. (1993). Whole-language reading processes: Vygotskian theory in action. *Child and Youth Care Forum*, 22, 361-373.

**REFEREED CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS:**

Stone, T. J. (1996, November). *Using personal stories to explore issues of diversity*. Panelist for seminar at the annual meeting of the National Association for the Education of Young Children, Dallas, TX.

Stone, T. J. (1995, November). *Affirming diversity through democratic conversations*. Panelist for seminar at the annual meeting of the National Association for the Education of Young Children, Washington, D.C.

Stone, T. J. (1992, March). *Vygotskian theory and multicultural education*. Paper presented at annual meeting of the Virginia Association of Early Childhood Education, Norfolk, VA.

Stone, T. J. (1991, November). *Multicultural education in any classroom*. Paper presented at the Preconference Workshop, "Exploring multicultural education in a culturally diverse society: A sociocultural perspective," organized by V. R. Fu, at the annual meeting of the National Association for the Education of Young Children, Denver, CO.

Stone, T. J. (1991, November) *Vygotskian theory and whole-language reading processes*. Paper presented at seminar, "Implications of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory for developmentally appropriate curriculum and assessment," organized by A. J. Stremmel, at the annual meeting of the National Association for the Education of Young Children, Denver, CO.

Allen, K. R., & Stone, T. J. (1991, March). *Lesbian co-mothering*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Southeastern Women's Studies Association, Charlotte, NC.

Stone, T. J., & Engelbrecht, J. (1990, November). *Morning transitions to routine child care*. Poster presented at the annual meeting of the National Council on Family Relations, Seattle, WA.

Stone, T. J. (1990, March). *The environment for early learning: A cooperative approach*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of Southeastern Women's Studies Association, Roanoke, VA.

**PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS:**

American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy  
(student membership)

National Association for the Education of Young Children

National Council on Family Relations

Southeastern Women's Studies Association

**COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP:**

Blacksburg New School Board of Directors (1993-present)

Enrollment Coordinator (1994-97)

President (1997-98)

**COMMUNITY SERVICE:**

Lesbian Mom's Group of the New River Valley, co-founder  
(1993-present)

Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, co-founder  
(1994-present)

**FREQUENT AUDIENCES FOR PRESENTATIONS RELATED TO FAMILIES AND SEXUAL ORIENTATION:**

American Association of University Women

Family and Child Development undergraduate students

Marriage and Family Therapy graduate students

Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG)  
local, regional, and national meetings

Rainbow Riders Child Care Center Parent-Teacher Association

Women's Month audiences, Virginia Tech