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# The Happiest Place on Earth: A Grounded Theory of Fulfillment in Mixed-Orientation Marriages

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## ABSTRACT

Mixed-orientation marriages (MOMs) are often misunderstood. There is a general cynicism in research literature and in the broader culture regarding the relational viability of same sex attracted (SSA) individuals who marry someone of the opposite sex. However, there exist couples in MOMs that are resilient and attain satisfaction. The purpose of this study is to better understand how MOMs might become successful. By interviewing maritally satisfied mixed-orientation couples, the *Model of Relational Self-Determination in Mixed-Orientation Marriages* was developed. This model is separated into five stages that are organized around the experience of disclosure of the SSA spouse's sexuality. Depending on what meaning and perceptions are constructed by the couple regarding this disclosure, they may gain the ability to *suspend disbelief* regarding the viability of their marriage, which informs their attitudes and actions going forward. Mixed-orientation couples who practice *relational self-determination*—or make consistent, intentional, and self-motivated choices to believe and behave in ways that benefit the relationship—may develop the fruits of those beliefs and choices in the form of a mutually fulfilling relationship.

The Happiest Place on Earth:  
A Grounded Theory of Fulfillment in Mixed-Orientation Marriages

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Marriage and Family Therapy  
Abilene Christian University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Masters of Marriage and Family Therapy

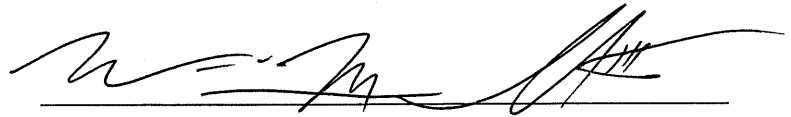
By

Isadora Ferreira De Melo

May 2022

This thesis, directed and approved by the committee for the thesis candidate, Isadora Ferreira De Melo, has been accepted by the Office of Graduate Programs of Abilene Christian University in partial fulfillments of the requirements for the degree

Master of Marriage and Family Therapy

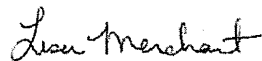


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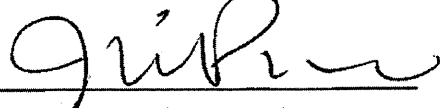
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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Being in a mixed-orientation marriage is like going to Disneyland and having some people tell you you'd be better off at Six Flags. Six Flags may have more roller coasters, but it'll never beat the happiest place on earth. (Sorenson, 2020a)

In an age of unprecedented sexual freedom and relationship diversity, at least one form of romantic pairing still carries the burden of secrecy, controversy, and a frankly complicated constitution. This pairing is known in research, and to a lesser extent in the public domain, as the mixed-orientation marriage. For the purposes of this grounded theory study, and what seems to be the general consensus in the literature, a *mixed-orientation marriage* (MOM) is defined as a marriage between a man and a woman, in which either one or even both partners experience same-sex attraction (Buxton, 2006; Corley & Kort, 2006). For simplicity, the gay, lesbian, and bisexual partners of these pairings will be represented in this study as the *same sex attracted* (SSA) spouse or partner, unless when otherwise referencing one of these specific sexual identities in previous research. This study will also utilize the terms *mixed-orientation couple* (MOC) and *mixed-orientation relationship* (MOR) to describe these pairings interchangeably.

It is important to acknowledge that, because the level of attraction towards one's spouse is potentially a significant contributing factor for overall marital satisfaction

(Lefevor et al., 2019), there exist some significant constructional differences between MOMs in which the SSA spouse is bisexual, and those where the SSA spouse is mostly or exclusively same-sex attracted. It is possible that bisexual-straight couples wouldn't necessarily identify with the MOM construct, due to the implication that bisexual-straight spouses are assumed to be attracted to each other; as opposed to gay or lesbian partners in MORs, where their attraction for their straight spouses is perceived to be more of an anomaly or an exception to the rule. However, because sexuality exists on a spectrum, and potentially a fluid spectrum (Diamond, 2016), this study, as well as the general literature, does not exclude bisexual MORs from the MOM construct, but does acknowledge the differences between and significance of attraction levels in MOMs, and will be mindful of this point when reporting results.

The existence of and case for MOMs is nothing if not emotionally charged. Research and countless stories attest the often heartbreaking experiences of these couples as they navigate through the complexities of sexuality, familial responsibilities, religious implications, and the coming out process. A study by Buxton (2001) points out that for many MOMs, the SSA spouse does not disclose, does not personally acknowledge, or may not even always be aware of their sexual orientation before marriage. Once the SSA spouse does come out, it is common for the straight spouse to feel confused and blindsided and to question what this disclosure means for the future of the marriage (Buxton, 2001). Many MOCs separate quickly, while others take time to try to preserve the marriage, the majority of which divorce within a few years (Buxton, 2001). Despite these sobering realities, there is also evidence to contradict the assumption that mixed-orientation marriages are doomed to failure. Though they may be the minority, there are

MOCs whose marriages do weather the emotional, relational, and social storms of such unions, and even go on to thrive (Lefevor et al., 2019; North Star, 2020).

The existence of potentially enduring and fulfilling mixed-orientation marriages suggests that MOMs are often misunderstood. There is a generally negative perception in the literature, and in the broader culture as a whole, of the relational experiences of same-sex attracted individuals who marry someone of the opposite sex, which can be summarized as the belief that MORs will inevitably fail, and should not be attempted (Sorenson, 2020b). Certainly, many MOMs do end in divorce or are characterized by low levels of satisfaction. However, there exist many MOCs whose marital experiences defy the norm (North Star, 2020). There are couples whose mixed-orientation marriages not only last, but are characterized by moderate to high levels of fulfillment and satisfaction (Lefevor et al., 2019). These successful MOMs are generally overlooked, both culturally and in the literature. Subsequently, as a demographic, MOMs are often deprived of hopeful narratives, successful role models, and clinical resources to help them navigate the nuanced dynamics of their relationships.

The purpose of this grounded theory study is to understand the process by which enduring and fulfilling mixed-orientation marriages become successful. Certainly, every couple's experience is unique, but grounded theory research may identify potential common factors amongst successful MOMs, such as sexual fluidity, timing of disclosure, commitment, religiosity, and the like. In addition to reviewing the existing literature on the subject of MOMs, this study will bring to light the underrepresented experiences of MOCs who have cultivated and maintained a healthy and fulfilling marriage, notwithstanding their mixed-orientation status.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW OF MIXED-ORIENTATION MARRIAGES

#### **Prevalence of Mixed-Orientation Marriages**

Unlike same-sex couples or interracial couples, MOCs are not immediately recognizable to the public eye. Unless privy to the to the knowledge of their mixed-orientation status, the outsider would likely be unable to point out a MOM amidst a crowd of what appears to be heterosexual couples (Adler & Ben-Ari, 2017; Buxton, 2001; Yarhouse et al., 2003). Perhaps because of its underrepresentation, it may be surprising that there are an estimated 2 million marriages—between men and women—in the United States for which one of the spouses identifies as bisexual, gay, or lesbian (Buxton, 2006). Another statistic approximates the rate of gay or bisexual men that marry women at some point during their lives to be as high as 20% (Janus & Janus, 1993); historically, that rate may have been closer to 40% (Harry, 1990). Research shows that MOMs have been found amongst all demographics in the United States, including most adult age groups, educational and socio-economic levels, geographic regions, races, ethnicities, occupations, and religions (Buxton, 2001). On the international level, an Israeli study that focused on married SSA men (Adler & Ben-Ari, 2017) cautiously estimated that, due to social and cultural attitudes in Israel regarding familial values, the number of gay and bisexual men who choose to marry women in Israel may be significant.

In addition to what has been identified and studied by means of research, other cases of MOMs can be found in certain cultural and religious pockets and especially on the internet. One such example is the non-profit organization called North Star International. North Star is an organized support community whose mission is to provide resources for those who are “exploring the complexities of sexual orientation and gender identity within the context of faith” (North Star, 2020). This organization is primarily made up of members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS), including many couples in mixed-orientation marriages. In this community, it is far more common to find MOMs who have maintained marital stability since disclosure, and even couples who knowingly and willingly have entered into a mixed-orientation relationship while aware of their mixed-orientation status (North Star, 2020). In these cases, it is possible that religious doctrines such as those found in the LDS church, which suggest that marriage between a man and a woman is ordained of God (The Family: A Proclamation to the World, 1995), provide sufficient motivation for some same sex attracted men and women to marry individuals of the opposite sex (Dehlin et al., 2019; Hernandez et al., 2011; Hoff, 2020).

### **Need for Representation and Understanding of Mixed-Orientation Marriages**

If same-sex attraction has always existed, it stands to reason that mixed-orientation marriages have also been around as long as the institution of marriage (Corley & Kort, 2006). Whether any particular MOM attains success and fulfillment or ends in divorce depends on any number of factors, one of which may be the lack of or access to accurate information and resources. Scant literature on spouses in mixed-orientation marriages reinforces the idea that MOMs do not last. Studies most often focus on SSA

husbands who are closeted, but only a few look at SSA wives, heterosexual spouses, or couples who maintain their marriages after disclosure (Buxton, 2004). Other deficiencies include a lack of research on sexual satisfaction in MORs (Bridges et al., 2019) and no model or message of how to navigate these marriages (Buxton, 2001).

However, there are cases where these marriages persist, and for these hopeful couples, there is often little to no aid or guidance on how to do so. In one study, 28% of SSA spouses reported being very satisfied in their MOR, and 80% reported at least some level of satisfaction, leading the researchers to caution that not necessarily all SSA individuals will be satisfied exclusively by a same-sex relationship (Lefevor et al., 2019). Yarhouse and colleagues (2003) claim that because MOMs have been underrepresented in research, it may be beneficial for marriage and family therapists (MFTs) to familiarize themselves with the struggles of MOMs when working with this population, and Lefevor and colleagues (2019) claim that the need for more empirical support to inform sexual minorities faced with relationship decisions cannot be overstated.

As MOMs become increasingly more visible in society and in the therapy room, it is paramount that family therapists and educators become familiar with the literature and the narratives regarding these couples (Hernandez, 2011). Corley and Kort (2006), after interviewing wives of gay husbands who had disclosed their SSA and extramarital behaviors with men, emphasized the importance of providing therapeutic support for the straight spouse after disclosure, who is often found to be at a higher risk of suicide or dissociation during that difficult time. Hernandez (2011) also asserts that therapists working with MOMs will require careful self-examination to avoid imposing their own ideas upon clients, and found that in some cases, therapy was reported unhelpful because

of the therapist's lack of knowledge regarding MOMs. One study suggests that the potential for repair of these complex relationships may be higher than generally assumed (Amato & Hohmann-Marriott, 2007), and considering that a divorce is not always a reliable path to psychological well-being (Dollahite et al., 2012), it may be beneficial to take a patient approach without necessarily assuming that divorce is inevitable or even the best decision.

### **Challenges of Mixed-Orientation Marriages**

#### **Infidelity**

Regardless if MOCs find themselves in a longer-lasting and generally satisfied relationship or are facing the crisis of disillusionment and possible divorce, MOMs experience nuances and complexities that may set them apart from heterosexual and even same-sex pairings. One such complexity is the presence of homoerotic feelings, or dual attraction (Buxton, 2004), while attempting to maintain a marriage and taking into account the needs of both SSA and straight spouses (Hernandez, 2011). This can become especially complicated and delicate with the presence of extramarital sexual activities, which occur in many MORs. In a study (Dew & Chaney, 2005) of 508 heterosexually married participants that frequented chat rooms oriented towards married men, nearly 78% of respondents reported at least one sexual encounter outside the marriage within the past year, and 40% had had sexual encounters in the past month (Corley & Kort, 2006). Similarly, in a study that focused on 38 married, same-sex attracted, Israeli men (Adler & Ben-Ari, 2017), all the men in the sample, with the exception of one gay man, reported having extramarital relationships with other men. This sample's especially high rate of extramarital activity might be explained by the fact that most of the participants were



recruited through a gay dating website, which automatically populates the sample with married men who were seeking out and involved in extramarital relationships (Adler & Ben-Ari, 2017).

Wives of gay husbands have also been found to often struggle with concerns about monogamy and fidelity, questioning their husband's honesty and possible same-sex social or sexual activity (Buxton, 2001; Hernandez et al., 2011). In a study by Corley and Kort (2006), wives of gay men expressed that one of the most difficult parts of discovering their husband's same-sex attraction was the disclosure of their having had sex with other men. These women reported a loss of sense of self, a fear that nothing was safe anymore, and questioning whether their marriage had been a lie all along (Corley & Kort, 2006). Though certainly common, not all couples in MOMs experience infidelity because, in reality, discrepancies among attraction, behavior, and identity are widespread (Diamond, 2016). When they do, it can be helpful to seek out the underlying cause of the sexual acting out, which may include orientation, opportunity, sexual abuse, or even addiction as reported by Corley and Kort (2006). Doing so could be beneficial to creating a sound treatment plan for both individuals and the couple (Corley & Kort, 2006).

### **Coming Out**

One of the more challenging experiences that MOCs go through is that of coming out. The coming out process for MOMs often has two tiers: the SSA spouse's disclosure of their attraction to their straight spouse, and then the couple's disclosure of their mixed-orientation status to their family, community, or society at large. Both disclosures can be very difficult. For the first kind, it is common that married men who have extramarital relations with other men have kept this behavior a secret from their wives, and it is often

the discovery of this secret that brings these couples to therapy (Corley & Kort, 2006). Communication during and after coming out can be difficult (Buxton, 1994, 2004), especially because, at this stage, both spouses often feel humiliated (Corley & Kort, 2006). In a study by Corley and Kort (2006) wives of gay husbands described the following themes regarding the time of their spouse's disclosure: feeling blindsided, self-blame for not being "woman enough" to keep their husband interested, questioning how someone becomes same-sex attracted and if he will ever feel attraction for her again, and wondering why she did not recognize the SSA before disclosure. Hernandez and colleagues (2011) describes shattered dreams of a life-long, monogamous marriage, and that wives often feel deceived, including those who were at least somewhat aware of their husband's homoerotic feelings before marriage. For the SSA spouse, coming out to one's straight partner was reported to be an extremely stressful event (Hernandez, 2011), compounded by the stress and depression that may have been previously occurring because of their closeted status (Binger, 2013).

### **Lack of Support**

After coming out to one's spouse, the second layer of disclosure follows. That second layer includes disclosure of the couple's mixed-orientation status to children, parents, in-laws, friends, and often other significant individuals such as ecclesiastical leaders. The reactions and subsequent support of these people, or lack thereof, is an integral part of the coming out process (Corley & Kort, 2006). It is inevitable that MOCs coming out for the first time will expose themselves to the potential judgment of others, regardless of what decisions or paths the couple chooses to pursue after disclosure.

On one hand, if an MOC faces potential for non-monogamy, same-gender relationships, or divorce, they will likely struggle with the disapproval of their families of origin (Buxton, 2006), and stigma for being a sexual minority in religiously conservative communities (Hernandez et al., 2011; Lefevor et al., 2019; Legerski et al., 2017). Hernandez (2011) and Buxton (2004) report that one of the greatest challenges these couples face is finding peer support, with wives of gay husbands being especially concerned about a lack of support from friends because of a fear of stigma (Hays & Samuels, 1989).

On the other hand, MOCs often experience stigma from the LGBTQ+ community for being an SSA individual in a relationship with a heterosexual partner (Hernandez et al., 2011; Lefevor et al., 2019a; Legerski et al., 2017). For example, in one woman's experience, her lesbian therapist/pastor encouraged her to get a divorce (Buxton, 2004), and several lesbian and bisexual participants of the same study reported that they experienced just as much negativity from members of gay and lesbian communities as from their straight family members regarding the validity or sustainability of their marriage (Buxton, 2001, 2004, 2006). This negativity is described by Buxton (2004) as a threat to marital stability, which may be compounded by the observation that several participants sought and could not find a therapist who was knowledgeable about MOMs.

In consideration of the significant struggles that couples in MOMs face, regardless of their desire to maintain the marriage or seek separation, it is imperative to increase more nuanced therapeutic and cultural understandings of MORs in order to help reduce stigma and identify possible common factors that contribute to satisfaction and

health in these relationships (Hernandez et al., 2011; Lefevor et al., 2019; Legerski et al., 2017).

### **Evidence of Successful Mixed-Orientation Marriages**

#### **Reasons to Marry, Reasons to Stay**

As previously mentioned, though they may not be the majority, there exist MOCs whose relationships not only endure past the turbulence of disclosure, but who go on to thrive. Once the decision is made about staying in the marriage, and decisions regarding sexual fidelity, and disclosure to children, family, and important others is made, then resolution is possible. Problems may still arise, but approximately 15% of couples do stay together past the first three years (Corley & Kort, 2006; Grever, 2001).

In some studies, MOCs gave some of the following reasons for marrying and choosing to keep the marriage intact: a desire for children and family life, fundamental religious beliefs, not identifying with a “gay” identity label, pressure from family or future spouse, seeking to hide SSA, love for spouse, love for children, desire to obey God, commitment to family, etc (Edser & Shea, 2002; Higgins, 2002, 2004). Despite its limited representation in the literature, resilient MOCs were observed to be characterized by friendship and love between spouses, community integration (Hernandez, 2011), candid communication, honesty, peer support, effective counseling, and care for children (Buxton, 2004). Hernandez (2011) reports that these characteristics helped to deter couples from separating and enhanced their general life satisfaction, and Buxton (2004) asserts that findings regarding these characteristics disprove the assumption that SSA spouses, (specifically lesbian wives, according to his study), inevitably leave their marriages after disclosure.

## **Marital Satisfaction**

Despite the scarcity of research on the topic of MOMs, one study in particular has made significant observations regarding the relational satisfaction experienced by couples in mixed-orientation marriages. This study, by Lefevor and colleagues (2019), examined SSA individuals across four different relationship types: (a) single and celibate, (b) single and not celibate, (c) in a mixed-orientation relationship; or (d) in a same-sex relationship (Lefevor et al., 2019). Specifically, this study's authors sought to know what variables are important to satisfaction in each of these four relationship types. Some interesting findings indicated that sexual attraction and behavior significantly predicted sexual satisfaction, and subsequently that bisexually identified partners reported the highest sexual satisfaction when compared to lesbian and gay counterparts (Lefevor et al., 2019). Results also indicated that participants in same-sex relationships reported the highest satisfaction overall, followed by participants in MORs, with participants in the single categories reporting the lowest satisfaction of the four relationship types (Lefevor et al., 2019). Interestingly, participants in MORs reported the least same-sex attraction across the four relationship groups (Lefevor et al., 2019), indicating either potentially under-reported levels of same-sex attraction due to internalized homophobia or shame, a possible higher rate of bisexuality amongst that relationship type, or, for those participants who identify as gay or reject any orientation label, this finding could potentially be a result of sexual fluidity (Diamond, 2016).

## **Successful Anecdotes and Potential Factors**

Though they are certainly the minority, at least some MOCs experience enduring stability and moderate to high satisfaction in their relationships (North Star, 2020).

Certainly, not enough representation of these resilient MOMs has been captured by the literature, but that does not mean that evidence of these couples does not exist. One Christian MOM, by the names of Laurie and Matt Krieg, wrote a book about their experience entitled *An Impossible Marriage: What Our Mixed-Orientation Marriage Has Taught Us About Love and the Gospel* (Krieg & Krieg, 2020). Another couple, Becky and Bennet Borden, who are prominent leaders in the North Star community, have shared their experience on a number of different platforms and forums, including in a keynote address at the 2017 annual conference of North Star International (North Star, 2017). Ty and Danielle Mansfield shared their experience through an *LDS Living* magazine article entitled “Living with Same-Sex Attraction: Our story” (Mansfield, 2016). Many others have shared their stories in the form of interviews on North Star’s official website (North Star, 2020), while others still have commented on the realities of their relationship through social media (Alldredge, 2021; Christensen, 2019, 2020; Mansfield, 2020; Sorenson, 2020a). Through observation and synthesis of these publicized experiences, potential thematic similarities begin to emerge that may prove to be significant considerations for understanding the experiences of MOMs.

### ***Timing of Disclosure***

One factor that varies significantly amongst MOMs, even resilient ones, is the timing of when the SSA attracted spouse discloses to their partner the truth regarding their same-sex attraction. For many, disclosure occurs years, even decades into marriage (North Star, 2020), while others disclose earlier on in the marriage, and some disclose even earlier, during the dating stage. One study claims that in a comparison of couples for which the same-sex attraction is acknowledged, contrasted to those in which it is a secret,

findings suggested that more positive outcomes are more likely to occur in the acknowledged situation (Matteson, 1985). Logically, there are many reasons why this might be the case. Premarital knowledge of the SSA spouse's orientation is likely to prevent feelings of broken trust and betrayal that may occur at later disclosure as compared to when two individuals enter into an MOR fully aware of their mixed-orientation status. One SSA husband described the initiation of his and his wife's marriage as having their "eyes open" to the situation, including the "... statistics, the arguments against [them], and the all-too-real stories of suffering within similar relationships in the past." (Christensen, 2019, para. 3), and that despite those sobering realities, they were confident in their decision to willingly enter into an MOR. It seems that, for this couple at least, foreknowledge of the nuances of their situation was a beneficial experience for their marriage.

### ***Sexual Fluidity***

One of the more common similarities often observed in MOMs, especially when the SSA spouse does not identify as bisexual, is the idea that the SSA individual's other-sex spouse is somehow an "exception" to the rule regarding that individual's overall same-sex orientation. One SSA husband described this phenomenon with this statement:

I'm not attracted to women. It's just never been a part of me. But I don't see [my wife] as just a "woman". She's something else. Something unique. Something special. She's [my wife] ... we have a healthy love life... some people say this makes me bisexual... but it's literally just her. She is the only exception.

(Alldredge, 2021, para. 7 & 8)

Another SSA husband made a very similar statement in a Facebook post a few weeks

before his wedding to his wife, addressing, in his view, the false belief that marriage would “cure” his SSA:

I have no delusion or desire that my attraction to men will be removed or reversed... but I have been blessed with love and desire for a woman. Does that make me bisexual? I don't subscribe to that category of identity. Though my love for Heather has a sexual and physical aspect to it, it is qualitatively different than the love/attraction I have for men. (Christensen, 2019, para. 4 & 5)

One possible explanation for this concept that someone can be an “exception” to an individual's overall sexual orientation, is that of *sexual fluidity*, as described by the research of Dr. Lisa Diamond (2016) out of the University of Utah. Sexual fluidity is defined as a capacity for situation-dependent flexibility in sexual responsiveness, allowing for fluctuations in same-sex or other-sex erotic desire (Diamond, 2016). Though many people experience varying levels of physical and emotional attraction over the course of their relationships, or even their lives, potential causes of sexual fluidity remain a mystery. One MOC claimed that the sexual attraction in their relationship “came from... trial-and error and a lot of practice” (Sparks, 2020, para. 3). The SSA husband in this particular case stated that the term “demisexual”, meaning an individual who develops a sexual attraction to another only after the formation of an emotional bond, is perhaps a more fitting label for him (Sparks, 2020). In one study, the majority of SSA participants had undergone multiple changes in sexual identity, with 82% of lesbian/bisexual women and 78% of gay/bisexual men reporting having switched their sexual identity label at least once after having first come out (Diamond et al., 2017). Of course, there are many people who do not experience sexual fluidity, but rather a



consistent pattern of attraction throughout their lives – which may contribute to the reason why so many MOMs do end in divorce. However, be it through practice, an emotional bond, or perhaps just random shifts over time, the occurrence of sexual fluidity is far from an anomaly, and has the potential to inform the understanding of MOMs, especially in regards to marital intimacy.

### ***Marital Friendship***

Another common theme found amongst especially resilient MOCs is the presence of a strong marital friendship. This is often described by MOCs by ideas reflecting trust, vulnerability, and safety. In a Facebook post, one SSA husband described his wife as “someone who isn’t afraid to be seen and isn’t afraid of seeing [him]...” and that he feels empty when she is not around (Christensen, 2020, para. 3). For the couples studied by Buxton (2001), the quality of their relationship provided the main support for staying married after disclosure. This “quality” was made up of factors such as love, shared history and friendship, and the couple’s efforts to maintain the marriage. Buxton claims that when couples experienced this close bond of friendship, the relationship could not be easily dissolved (2001). One SSA husband described this emotional bond with his wife, and the protection it affords their relationship, with the following statement:

If you saw how we are together and how much we smile and laugh, it would make sense to you too... And because of how close we are with complete honesty and open hearts to each other’s feelings... including those occasional hard discussions where I wonder “what if?”, her compassion and openness to hear my thoughts and feelings, no matter what they are, makes those boundaries that so many people

seem to wonder and worry about in our relationship melt away. (Alldredge, 2021, para. 6)

### ***Religiosity***

Perhaps the most common similarity between MOCs who chose to stay together after disclosure, both in the literature and otherwise, is the presence of some sort of religious belief system. In a study that focused on SSA, married, Jewish men (Zack & Ben-Ari, 2017) a recurring motif that arose from the data was the commitment to marry a woman, strongly informed by the identification with and internalization of the values of their religion and community. This study's findings suggest that for many SSA men, their religious beliefs provide for them enough meaning and significance in their sense of family and community to motivate them to marry women rather than live according to their sexual orientation (Zack & Ben-Ari, 2017). Some anecdotes not only report religion and spirituality as a motivation to enter into a MOM, but describe spiritual transcendence as a result of doing so. One SSA husband described his relationship with his wife as a "...celestial love like [he'd] never experienced before" and expressed certainty that their marriage "... will stand forever as long as God is a part of [their] relationship" (Christensen, 2019, p.1). Another religious, SSA husband wrote that, while he was still single, and at a time when he had resigned himself to the probability of never getting married, he one day went through a spiritual experience in which he was overcome by a transcendent feeling of "pure, celestial love and desire to be with a daughter of God..." (Mansfield, 2016). This experience, and others, eventually led him to date and marry his wife.

Overall, these anecdotes and research findings suggest that religious affiliation

and beliefs play a significant role in the decision to enter an MOM, or to maintain an MOR after disclosure (Zack & Ben-Ari, 2017). Because of the influence of strong cultural and religious narratives around heterosexuality, religious affiliation and activity are likely to encourage the formation of MORs, and may be important determinants of marital satisfaction and health amongst these relationships (Legerski et al., 2017). Conversely, the loss of faith amongst partners in MOCs may potentially contribute to the failure of MOMs as well.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODS

#### **Grounded Theory**

Grounded Theory is one of five common approaches of qualitative research. The purpose of a grounded theory study is to “generate or discover a theory” for a process or an action (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 82). Corbin and Strauss (2007) called this form of research a “unified theoretical explanation” of a specific phenomenon (p. 107).

Essentially, in order to understand a specific phenomenon, the researcher generates a theory “grounded” in data from individuals who experience the phenomenon itself (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), thus allowing the researcher to create a generalized explanation of the process of that phenomenon, informed and shaped by the collective experience of a large number of participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The goal and purpose of this grounded theory is to better understand the process by which successful and lasting mixed-orientation marriages achieve their stable and satisfied status. The unit of analysis in this study is the couple, and I intend for the final model to represent couple-level processes of MOMs. Because of the scarcity of research on the topic, a qualitative, grounded theory approach is an appropriate and beneficial method to flesh out the possible shared themes, transitions, and milestones that may characterize the development of such relationships. Throughout the process of data collection and analysis, I will bracket my past knowledge of MOMs in order to better

approach the data with impartial eyes, and ask questions that will flesh out accurate themes, rather than my own assumptions of what their experiences would be.

## **Participants**

### **Recruitment**

Participants were recruited purposely through two avenues. First, I recruited participants through North Star International, a nonprofit organization and support community for people who find themselves at the crossroads of sexuality/gender identity and faith (North Star, 2020). North Star is not officially affiliated with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, but it is primarily organized by and made up of LDS church members, and it is a faith-affirming organization. North Star provides resources such as community events, conferences, and private access to demographic-specific social media groups, one of which is directed to couples in MOMs. With North Star's approval, I posted a virtual flier advertising this study on their Facebook and Instagram social media pages. Second, because I am connected to several MOCs via social media, I posted this same flier on my private Facebook and Instagram pages. By advertising this study on my personal social media pages instead of directly inviting couples to participate, I eliminated any risk of coercion.

The flier advertising this study included a link leading to a Qualtrics form in which I screened potential couples to see if they met criteria for the study. The Qualtrics form presented couples with an overview of the study's purposes and a statement of informed consent. At the end of the form, I asked couples to provide their names and contact information as indication that they consented to participate in the study. This was followed by three screening questions to ascertain whether the couples who responded

met the study's criteria (married and in a MOR, committed to a monogamous relationship with their spouse, and at least moderately satisfied with their relationship). Also, the following demographic information was collected: each participant's age, gender, sexual attraction/orientation/identity, socio-economic status, religion, relationship length, and number of children.

### **Demographics**

For grounded theory, saturation generally requires 20-40 interviews. However, due to the limited time frame of this thesis-level study, I interviewed 12 couples. Participating couples met the definition for a mixed-orientation relationship: a relationship between a man and a woman, in which either one or both partners experience same-sex attraction. In order to maintain thematic integrity for this study's "successful MOM" construct, participants additionally met the following criteria: being civilly married, being currently committed to a monogamous relationship with their spouse, and reporting a generally moderate to high level of marital satisfaction. Participants indicated their satisfaction with their relationship by responding to "How satisfied are you overall in your relationship?" on a seven-point scale from "very dissatisfied" to "very satisfied" (Lefevor et. al, 2019).

Participants' demographic information was as follows: Of the twelve couples interviewed, ten couples identified as members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, or Mormon/LDS. One couple identified as Protestant, and one couple identified themselves as Muslim. The length of marriage in years for each couple ranged from 2 years to 36 years, for an overall average of 12.5 years of marriage. The number of children for these couples ranged from 0 to 6, with an overall average of about 3 children

per couple. When questioned about their personal level of marital satisfaction, nine of the wives reported feeling “very satisfied”, one wife reported feeling “mostly satisfied”, one wife reported feeling “moderately satisfied”, and one wife reported feeling “neither satisfied nor dissatisfied.” Of the husbands, seven reported feeling “very satisfied” with their marriage, four reported feeling “mostly satisfied,” and one reported feeling “moderately satisfied.” Seven of the couples reported the same level of satisfaction as their spouse, while the other five couples differed from their spouse by only one satisfaction level. Participants indicated their sexual orientation on a scale from zero to ten, where zero represents “exclusively other-sex attracted” and ten represents “exclusively same-sex attracted.” All of the wives identified on the “other-sex attracted” end of the spectrum with an average score of .25, while the husbands identified on the “same-sex attracted” end of the spectrum with an average score of 8.83.

### **Interviews**

Upon receiving the completed Qualtrics forms, I reached out to qualifying couples via the contact information they provided in order to set up a time for the interview. At the beginning of each interview, I verbally reviewed for the participants the consent waiver outlining the purpose and procedures of the study, including the assurance of confidentiality, in that participant information would be de-identified from their responses. I also informed the participants of my intention to retain the collected data from the interviews for possible future secondary analysis. Participation was voluntary, and the couples were free to choose to end the interview at any time. Participants were not compensated.

I interviewed participating couples via Zoom and recorded the interviews using the recording feature provided by the Zoom software. Sound files were downloaded and saved on a flash drive and stored at the Marriage and Family Institute at Abilene Christian University. Interview questions included open-ended questions about the process and development of their relationship, as well as follow-up questions that further explored the participants' responses to the initial questions. Grand tour questions included: 1) How did you decide to get married? 2) When did you (the SSA spouse) know that you were attracted to the same sex? 3) At what point were you both aware of the SSA, and what was the disclosure/coming out process like? 4) How has your relationship developed and changed before and since disclosure of the SSA? 5) What role does attraction (sexual, emotional, intellectual, etc.) play in your relationship? 6) What makes your marriage work? 7) Have you ever considered divorce, and if so, what has stopped you from getting divorced? I reserved a few possible follow-up questions in the case that certain themes had not yet been discussed up to this point in the interview, including: "What factors (habits, decisions, personality traits, circumstances, etc.) contribute to the stability and satisfaction of your relationship, and how did those factors come to exist in your marriage?", "What struggles have there been in your relationship, and how did you manage, learn from, or overcome those struggles?", and, "To what extent have the following themes (commitment, religiosity, sexual fluidity) played a role in your relationship?".

After completion of each MOC's interview, I personally transcribed the interview, de-identified the data, and stored identifying information separately from the data in a USB flash drive that was stored at the Marriage and Family Institute, thereby ensuring



the protection of each participant's confidentiality. All the transcription and coding were done in Microsoft Word documents.

### **Data Analysis**

Due to time constraints, only seven of the twelve interviews were utilized for current analysis for this paper. However, data from all twelve interviews will be retained for future analysis and research publications. Of the interviews not chosen for current analysis, one was not chosen due to the wife reporting a "neither satisfied nor dissatisfied" level of satisfaction, a response which fell outside the criteria for inclusion in this study. Another interview was not chosen because the wife was unable to attend the interview, and only the husband was able to provide responses to the survey questions. Though the data provided by this husband will be useful for future research, the wife's absence rendered the method of data collection sufficiently different from the rest of the sample to justify not including it for this paper. The other three interviews not utilized for current analysis were chosen at random.

Following transcription, I familiarized myself with the data by reading through each interview's transcript thoroughly and noting my initial reactions before initiating any coding. I then coded the data several times, beginning with initial coding. I coded each transcript line by line, focusing on identifying thematic actions that are occurring in each line. Initial coding was based on gerunds (-ing verbs) and participants' language to describe these actions or patterns. Second, I utilized focused coding, meaning that I grouped the initial codes into thematic categories, and then re-coded the data according to those categories. Third, I utilized axial coding, meaning that I organized the data in order to thicken or enrich the descriptions of the previous categories. During this phase, some

existing categories were phased together, while others became more separate and distinct, depending on what made the most sense thematically. Finally, after having developed these enriched thematic categories, I coded theoretically, meaning that I assembled the categories into a flowing, cohesive model that explains the process of how resilient MOMs develop stability and satisfaction in their marriages.

### **Validation and Reliability of the Study**

Because of the personal and deeply subjective nature of qualitative research, it is natural to question whether that research is “right” or if the interpretation of the data represents an “accurate” account (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In order to ensure a competent analysis and to diminish the risk of bias, I utilized a number of different validation strategies, including reflexivity, prolonged engagement and observation, collaboration with participants/members of the target population, external audits, peer review, and thick descriptions of data constructs. Reliability strategies included recording demographic data, acknowledging process and limitations of recruitment, following established methods, and keeping track of the research process through extensive memo writing.

I ensured external auditing and peer review by frequently consulting with my thesis chair advisor, Dr. Lisa Merchant, throughout the data analysis process. In order to prolong engagement and observation, I have spent and will continue to spend time in the field before, during, and post-data collection. I have done this in the past by attending North Star conferences and having many informal conversations with couples in MOMs about their marital experiences. This previous engagement also allowed me to collaborate with members of my target population about the formation of this study, including eliciting feedback from members of the North Star community such as Jeff Case (Senior

Vice President of North Star, psychologist, and husband in a MOM himself), as well as Joseph Shephard, who identifies as part of the LGBTQ+ community and is a student of the Marriage, Family and Human Development master's program at Brigham Young University. Their academic and personal feedback and expertise, as well as that of others in the community, helped to inform the formation and direction of this study, and to keep potential bias in check.

### **Researcher Bias**

As a researcher, it is my ethical responsibility to acknowledge my personal connection to the study of mixed-orientation marriages. To begin with, my father is gay, and the marriage of my parents ended a few months after my father had come out to my mother. In the literal and familial sense, I am a product of a mixed-orientation marriage. Also, through my experiences with North Star International, I have made connections and friendships with many couples in MOMs, and have subsequently been exposed to many of their stories and struggles. These experiences have largely motivated my desire to better understand MOCs, and to cultivate research that better represents the unique phenomena of resilient MOMs.

I acknowledge and am well aware that MOMs are more often than not unsuccessful and that this particular type of romantic relationship is not for everyone. My research is by no means intended to promote the practice of MOMs as superior or preferable to same-sex relationships, or any other type of relational formation. Rather, the purpose and intent of my research is to bring to light the underrepresented experiences of a very marginalized and misunderstood population; to normalize MOMs as a valid, albeit complex, relationship option; and to eventually develop more abundant resources,

therapeutic and otherwise, for couples and individuals who are currently in or may be considering a mixed-orientation marriage, as well as for individuals who are struggling with the process of the disintegration of their marriage.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

As previously stated, the purpose of this grounded theory study is to develop a theory or model (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) that explains the process by which stable and satisfied MOCs become successful. The interview questions in this case were designed to look into the relationship development of MOMs, including important milestone moments, protective or risk factors that influenced couple resilience, and any other socio-cultural or relational factors that contributed to marital success. The question “what makes MOMs work?” is nearly as broad as asking “what makes marriage work?”, and so the interviewed couples provided an abundance of experiences and insights they deemed important to the survival and flourishing of these seemingly unconventional unions.

#### **Achieving Fulfillment in Mixed-Orientation Marriages via a Model of Relational Self-Determination**

Throughout data analysis, one particularly poignant concept that permeated much of each couple’s explanation of their marital success was that of *relational self-determination*. Self-determination speaks to a person’s or group’s capacity for autonomy or decision-making power to control their own lives. The MOCs in this sample practice self-determination relationally as they deliberately choose to pursue attitudes and behaviors that benefit their relationship. Collectively, couples described the ways in which they choose to nurture their marriages and consequently reported experiencing positive relational outcomes as a result of their efforts. Despite the differences in the

details of each couple's relationship development, the relational self-determination exhibited by these MOCs seemed generally dependent upon the internalized meaning, assumptions, and implications each couple constructed in response to the revealed knowledge of the SSA spouse's sexuality and their status as an MOC. By working backwards from marital outcomes, through self-determined action and the meaning that informs that action, a model began to emerge to potentially explain, at least in part, the process by which successful MOMs become so.

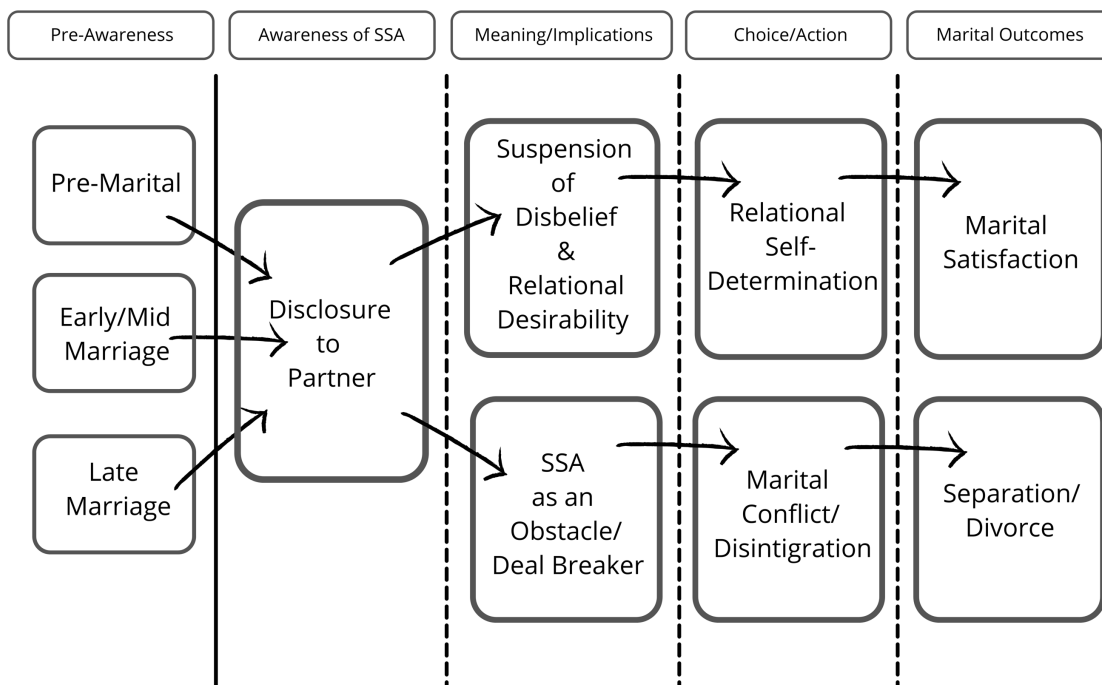
The following model, depicted in Figure 1, is a simplified representation of that process. This model of relational self-determination is separated into five stages organized around the experience of disclosure: *Pre-Awareness of SSA*, *Awareness of SSA*, *Meaning/Implications*, *Meaning-Informed Choice and Action*, and *Marital Outcomes*. In this visual representation of the model, the first and second stages are separated by a solid line, which represents the irreversibility of the disclosure process. Once the SSA spouse comes out to their partner, there is no erasing that knowledge or reversing its effects on the relationship. However, whether those effects ultimately turn out to be of detriment or benefit to the relationship is relative, changeable, and even predictable. The next stages are separated by dotted lines because—although they can be discussed theoretically as separate experiences—in reality, deriving meaning from disclosure, acting upon that meaning, and experiencing outcomes as a result of that action, are all very fluid and overlapping processes that may occur chronologically, out of order, or even simultaneously.

It is also important to address that the topmost path depicted in Figure 1, the process of *Suspension of Disbelief* → *Relational Self-Determination* → *Marital*

*Satisfaction, or Path A, is far more thoroughly discussed and theoretically supported within the data provided by this study’s participants, as compared to Path B: Viewing SSA as an Obstacle/Dealbreaker → Marital Conflict/Disintegration → Separation/Divorce.* This is due to the fact that recruitment for this study specifically focused on moderately to highly satisfied MOCs, or in other words, couples who are experiencing marital satisfaction within their MOR. Consequently, the process depicted by *Path B* was mostly constructed by descriptions of what these couples choose *not* to do in their marriages, and also by examples of other unsuccessful MOMs that the participating MOCs personally knew and learned from. Therefore, within this work, discussion of the processes occurring in *Path B* will be limited, and further research is needed to adequately describe and uncover the process MOCs undergo when disclosure eventually leads to marital dissolution as opposed to stability and satisfaction.

**Figure 1**

*A Model of Relational Self-Determination in Mixed-Orientation Relationships*



## **Stage 1: Pre-Awareness of SSA**

The first stage of this model, *Pre-Awareness of SSA*, speaks to the reality that there is great variability in the timing of disclosure experienced by MOMs. For some, that disclosure or coming out process occurs before marriage, during the dating stage. For others, disclosure occurs a few years into marriage, and for others still, the SSA spouse comes out to their partner many years, even decades, after the altar. Although MOMs can experience success amongst all three of these categories, their experiences often differ significantly depending on how and when disclosure occurs, with somewhat of a general consensus that earlier disclosures may be better or provide an advantage to couples who choose to enter into MOMs fully aware of the SSA partner's sexual orientation.

### ***Premarital***

Of this sample, several of the couples experienced disclosure before ever tying the knot. This means that the SSA partner made their sexuality known to their partner while still in the dating stage of their relationship, a risk that could very well have brought about the end of their courtship. Premarital disclosure afforded these couples honesty and transparency and made it possible for a truly informed, consensual decision to be made to pursue a mixed-orientation relationship. The MOCs who had fully disclosed and entered marriage with their eyes open to the realities of a mixed-orientation relationship expressed how glad they were to have done so. Referring to her husband's disclosure, one wife expressed that she was grateful for "the fact that he had enough respect for [her] and for himself to have these conversations early. And in [their] community, in [their] realm, that is not always the case." Another couple, one who did not experience disclosure before marriage, expressed their wish that if ever their same-sex-attracted daughter chose



to marry a man one day, that she would go into it “with her eyes open, discussing it up front.” By knowing the truth before marriage, premarital-disclosure couples avoided potential years of secrecy and shame on the part of the SSA partner, and possible feelings of being hurt and blindsided on the part of the straight partner, once the truth is eventually revealed.

Because of the disclosure process, premarital-disclosure MOCs often experienced a relatively uncommon courtship. Often, the SSA partner’s disclosure served to accelerate or enhance the couple’s emotional connection and communication skills as they worked together to navigate this unconventional relationship. One wife described their relationship development in this way:

I feel like those conversations progressed our relationship faster than maybe some other relationships because it was heavy from the beginning. And so it was like, well, we can talk about parenting styles, we can talk about finances. Those things are not a big deal, because we’ve already kind of breached this topic.

Without the luxury of being able to rely on cultural norms or milestones that heterosexual couples may take for granted, these MOCs were challenged to be more intentional about their communication and relationship development, which of course had its challenges. Even so, several of these premarital-disclosure MOCs described their marriages as being the healthiest relationships they had ever experienced, romantic or otherwise. Ultimately, these couples experience the comfort and validation that comes with the knowledge that their partners *chose* them, and continue to *choose* to be with them, even in the face of the challenging realities, internal and external, of being in a mixed-orientation marriage.

### *Early/Mid Marriage*

Of the seven couples whose interviews were utilized for current analysis in this work, only one MOC experienced disclosure in the early years of their marriage. This couple's courtship experience consisted of meeting each other in college, becoming best friends for a couple of years, and then fairly quickly becoming engaged and married soon after the husband expressed his romantic feelings for her, despite the presence of his undisclosed same-sex attraction.

Before ever becoming romantically involved with the woman who is now his wife, this husband had attempted to date other women, but never with any real success. However, after a year and a half of friendship, this man had begun considering the possibility of dating and even marrying this woman, especially since she had already expressed romantic feelings for him. So then one day, he experienced for the first time the cognitive and emotional sensation of romantic attraction for a woman:

So I just kind of had my mind and my heart open to that experience of, "what if this could work?" And I remember just sitting in the library together one day studying, and just noticing how beautiful she was, and her eyes and our hair . . . I was just kind of caught up looking at her. And she noticed me looking at her as well, and may have tossed her hair a bit to turn the heat up on the situation. And I'm like, "Oh, well, that's interesting." Now I actually do feel romantic feelings . . . Before that, I could tell you her style of clothes and how she did her hair and her mascara. I knew all about her physical features. But I didn't feel attracted until that moment, then I thought, "oh, there's an attraction here. I think I might be falling for her."

At the same time, this husband had long been aware of his attractions for men, but was still deeply in the closet and did not claim a gay identity. He expressed that though there had been opportunities for him to come out to her before marriage, he ultimately chose not to. His hesitation to disclose was in part out of fear of rejection but also because, at the time, he believed that getting married would “fix” or “cure” his same-sex attraction. Believing that it “would just go away,” he assumed that there would never be any real need for disclosure.

Of course, getting married did not eliminate this husband’s same-sex attraction. In fact, becoming sexually active only intensified that reality. Distressed and unsure what to do, this husband confided his secret to a college professor who was also married and in a mixed-orientation relationship. With encouragement from this mentor, the husband was eventually able to disclose his SSA to his wife:

It was one night, we were laying in bed, and I told her about my attractions . . .

And I told her, because we were both college students, we were poor, we had nothing, we had no kids . . . So if she wanted out, she could go and it wouldn’t be messy.

Despite his offering to let her go, his wife responded in this way: “he told me and I asked, ‘Are you leaving me?’ And he was like, ‘No, but you can leave me, if you want. But I’m committed. I want to be married to you for eternity. This is what I want.’” This wife decided that if her husband was still committed to their relationship, then so was she. After this point of disclosure, this couple, along with the other MOCs in this sample, were now faced with the process of making meaning of their situation, and the everyday choices that would contribute to their long-term marital stability and satisfaction.

### *Late Marriage*

According to the SSA men who disclosed their sexuality to their wives later in marriage, disclosure was a deeply emotional and vulnerable release for these husbands who had been deeply in the closet for decades, usually “buried in secrecy and shame.” Finally coming out brought these couples clarity and relief but also pain, as they now had to confront shattered illusions of the marriage they thought they had. These men claim to have been aware of, or at least to have begun to recognize, their same-sex attraction very early in life, usually in adolescence or earlier. Even so, they had not typically accepted their SSA, often believing or wishing it to be a “just a phase.” Several of these husbands claimed that for many years, they had no intention of ever disclosing, and planned to take the secret of their sexual orientation “to the grave.” Considering that late-disclosure MOCs married at least a couple decades ago, when homosexuality was significantly less culturally accepted, this determination to remain in the closet seems a logical attempt at self-preservation and relationship stability.

Despite harboring secret feelings of attraction for the same sex, these husbands still described their dating and courtship experiences with their wives with positivity, tenderness, and even confidence. Despite his initial trepidation at the prospect of marrying a woman, one husband described his wife as “the [person] God wanted [him] to meet and live with and do life with” and said that he and his wife loved each other, so they made the decision to get married. Another couple described each other as being best friends through high school and college, and that one day after she called him on his birthday, he realized that she made him so happy that he broke off his courtship with his girlfriend at the time in order to propose to her. This husband explained that he felt

strongly enough for her that “they were either gonna get married or not be able to be friends anymore.” Likewise, his wife described her husband as her “standard” for dating and that she had compared every man she ever dated to him, and so the decision to marry him was natural and just made sense. Another couple described their relationship as beginning with a sweet and comfortable friendship that grew into a deeper intimacy, leading the husband to realize that he wanted to marry his best friend:

I had kind of this epiphany. I always felt like I would marry someone that I knew, and that would be a familiar person, a friend, and that I would find myself in love with that person . . . and then all of a sudden, that’s kind of what happened. I kind of went, “Wow, she’s so awesome!” She’s my best friend and we had to get married. I had to marry her!

In large part, it seems that these late-disclosure MOCs experienced genuinely happy and loving relationships, alongside the normal marital stressors of parenting, finances, and other conjugal challenges. Certainly, these MOMs often looked “idyllic” on the exterior, paragons of heterosexual, traditional marriage. These couples raised children together and served in positions of authority and influence within their religious communities.

However, unbeknownst to the world and even their spouses, over time some of these husbands began to “waste away” under the pressure of years of secrecy and shame, or as one husband described, the weight of carrying around “a bomb ready to go off.” To these husbands, remaining in the closet was terribly isolating. Male friendships were off limits because they were deemed “unsafe,” and even being fully honest with their wives seemed a terrifying impossibility. One husband in particular described living under the torturous

weight of false narratives he used to believe about what it meant to be gay, and the fear of his sexuality ever being discovered:

If anybody knew about this, they would hate me. She would leave me, my children would never want to talk to me again, I would lose my employment. I would crush the life and ruin the testimony of all 500 missionaries that we had in three years. I would be thrown out of the church and excommunicated. And all of this, just for the fact that I was gay.

Years passed on in this way. Believing they needed to hide, carefully maintaining the facade, believing that they were protecting their wives or their marriage. Another husband described his motivation for secrecy due to the fact that he did not intend on changing his life in any way: “I was very happy with the life I was leading. . . . [Wife] and I had a great relationship . . . I love my kids . . . and everything’s great. . . . So why mess with it?”

Whether the secret of being in the closet had become an unbearable burden, or a milder but still potent resignation to a life of never being truly known or understood, late-disclosure husbands eventually found themselves in a position where they could no longer remain closeted without further risking the quality of their relationships or their mental health. For one husband, the pressure of keeping this secret had overwhelmed him beyond the point of being able to hide its effects. Recognizing his suffering and concerned for his well-being, this man’s wife one day told him, “I just want my best friend back,” so he revealed the truth to her the very next day. For some, the prospect of disclosing the truth to their wives was terrifying, but with encouragement from supportive friends and family, mental health professionals, or even spiritual promptings,

each of these husbands eventually mustered the courage to share what had been their darkest and longest kept secret.

## **Stage 2: Awareness of SSA**

### ***Timing and Experience of Disclosure***

Regardless of timing and the level of pre-disclosure relationship development, every acknowledged MOM has in common the experience in which the SSA spouse comes out to their partner, a moment that in many ways changes the nature of the relationship. First of all, as previously mentioned and symbolized by the solid line separating stages 1 and 2 of this model in Figure 1, *Pre-Awareness* and *Awareness of SSA*, there is no going back after a disclosure. One husband described the finality of that disclosure in this way:

It was now true. I said it. I admitted it. Someone *knew*. I couldn't go back to where I had been for 40 years of denial. I couldn't go back into the closet, I couldn't go back and say, "not really!" or "maybe just a little!" I couldn't. None of that coping, or denial—things that I had spent years perfecting, and really the way I had managed my life. . . . It all just disappeared.

For premarital-disclosure couples, coming out to one's partner was not necessarily so much the bearing of this great secret, but simply the authentic sharing of a part of themselves that would affect the relationship, but not necessarily define it. For two of the husbands who came out to their wives before marriage, disclosure occurred on their second date, allowing for transparency on the subject from the very beginning of their courtship. Both of these husbands had been publicly out of the closet for several years, and had undergone the personal psychological work of accepting their sexuality and

deconstructing shame. One husband had actually been in several previous same-sex relationships before meeting and dating his wife. He described disclosure as a relatively “easy and comfortable” experience because he “was secure with [himself]” and was capable of “owning” that part of himself. For the wife of another couple, her husband’s early disclosure was a first step that set the pattern for what communication and vulnerability would look like in their relationship.

It started off very deep and heavy, right? I knew that he had same-sex attraction before we ever started going on dates. But then that second day, when he just kind of opened up and told me everything, it was a little shocking at first, because this was all on the table. But it gave me the reassurance that nothing is off limits, no conversation. We can talk about anything. We can talk about hard things.

Other wives also described the disclosure process as opening up space for questions and conversations that had previously been impossible, and that their spouse’s willingness to be vulnerable with them was incredibly important to the continuation of their relationship. During these conversations, they were able to gain insight into their husbands’ experiences with same-sex attraction, know their history, and come to an understanding about what they each wanted and what the future of their relationship could be.

### ***Spouse’s Reaction to Disclosure***

For each of these couples, the other side of the disclosure coin was the often anxiously anticipated reaction of the straight partner. Fortunately for most of the couples in this sample, the wives who found themselves on the receiving end of this disclosure responded to their husbands with love, support, and—if not with perfect understanding—



at least the desire to “figure things out.” For the wives who received this information during early courtship, their primary reaction was that of curiosity about relationship goals and what they could expect out of a relationship with a same-sex attracted man.

One wife described one such interaction in this way:

That was one of the first things we talked about once he came out to me. I said, “what is your plan with that?” Because I have a lot of other gay friends . . . who just live true to that part of [their] identity. And so I just asked him, “what does that mean to you? What does that look like for you?” And he said, “Really, my goal is to get married in the temple to a woman.” And I told him “Okay, cool. If you need any help with that, let me know.”

For the wives whose husbands disclosed to them years into marriage, their positive reactions were not only essential to the stability of their relationship, but also a psychological lifeline for these men who, for so many years, had feared rejection and punishment upon coming out. Not only was the wife’s reaction significant in the moment but her continued patience and acceptance in the weeks and months to come also. One wife in particular expressed her feeling that, right before the moment of her husband’s disclosure, she was spiritually prompted to listen to and accept whatever it was he had to share with her. This wife’s husband described her compassion and encouragement as a “game changer” for his healing and their continued relationship:

She just gave me the space and . . . every night, or two or three or four times a week, I would just wake up at three in the morning and sit on the couch and cry. And she would just come and sit and hold my hand and let me cry. There wasn’t

anything to talk about, there wasn't anything to fix. She never needed to fix anything. She just listened.

Fortunately for the MOCs in this sample, each husband's disclosure and his wife's reaction to it, though not unpainful, seemed positive and constructive enough to weather that initial, life-altering moment and allow them to look forward into their future and ask each other, "what now?"

### **Stage 3: Meaning and Implications**

Once each MOC had undergone the initial coming out process and its immediate effects on the relationship, couples began to enter the next stage of this model, which could arguably be the most important stage in predicting whether or not a couple will eventually arrive at a place of marital stability and satisfaction or eventual dissolution and separation. At this point, spouses in MOMs are constructing and deriving *meaning* from their situation, and whatever conclusions they come to will inform their beliefs and actions going forward. At this stage, the meaning derived will begin to lead MOCs down either one of two paths, *relational self-determination* or *marital disintegration*. Of course, it is important to remember that these last three stages of this model—meaning, action, and outcomes—in reality are not separately confined experiences but overlapping, cyclical, and systemic processes. It is not a one-time event, nor is there necessarily a "point of no return" where couples could not come back from and choose to pursue a different path. Even so, it is theoretically helpful to discuss these concepts individually in order to make sense of the process that is occurring.

### *Suspension of Disbelief*

In the process of making meaning of disclosure, the MOCs in this sample were able to suspend their disbelief regarding the viability of being in a mixed-orientation relationship. In other words, successful MOMs were able to perceive their relationship as something that wasn't necessarily impossible. One wife whose husband disclosed to her early in their courtship expressed that she never viewed her partner's SSA as an obstacle, red flag, or deal-breaker. She didn't feel like she had to run away, but that she and her partner could move forward together:

"I think for me, it was like, "okay, I hear you." And I'm not hearing problems here. I'm not hearing anything that I'm afraid of. I may have some questions; I may not fully understand . . . but I just loved him for who he was. And that was part of who he was. And the things that led up to him being in front of me that day, when he told me, made him who he was, and who he continues to be. . . .

And for me, I was never afraid of it. I was never, like, "Oh my gosh, I can't marry this guy because he's gay!" For me it wasn't like that.

Another interesting observation is that several of the wives in this sample credited their ability to suspend disbelief in regards to their marriage to their somehow having been emotionally prepared to be in a mixed-orientation marriage. For one wife, this preparation came from having in the past dated or almost dated men whom she later discovered experienced same-sex attraction:

So, looking back on my previous relationships, the guy I liked in junior high turned out to be gay. The guy I liked in high school turned out to be gay. One of my best friends after high school was gay. One of my friends on the mission and

then post mission, who I kind of, sort of, quasi-dated, was gay. So it's taken me over a decade to be acclimated, and it helped me get into a mental spot where I was like, "You know what, I think I could be okay with this," as long as there is [openness], and I can trust the person . . . and we'll figure it out. If it leads to marriage, then that's great.

For other wives, this preparation came in the form of spiritual and educational experiences. For one wife whose husband came out to her nearly twenty years into marriage, she described how being exposed to issues of faith and sexuality while in graduate school helped her to consider her own beliefs and feelings regarding mixed-orientation marriages:

I felt really prepared for it too, because I'd had an impression to go back to school, and through that experience, I had to really dive into homosexuality and think about how am I going to handle clients struggling with their faith and sexuality? And what are my beliefs here? I did a lot of thinking, praying, researching, studying . . . and I received an answer in the temple, that if God is going to command us to get married . . . he's going to provide a way for us to do that. And so I think, "how amazing is it that God prepared me?" He essentially gave me a testimony of mixed-orientation marriages before I knew I was living in one.

For another wife, she was able to suspend disbelief because she did not view her husband's same-sex attraction as necessarily different from any other struggle that could have come up in their marriage. Especially during the tumultuous months immediately following disclosure, this wife comforted her husband by reassuring him of her belief that

“whatever comes up in marriage, comes up in marriage.” In the game of chance that is life, couples do not get to pick if one of them were to get cancer, lose a child, or any number of other excruciatingly difficult experiences. Similarly, this wife interpreted her husband’s disclosure as simply another experience that they would endure and grow from together.

Some MOCs were also able to suspend disbelief as they reached out to other couples in MOMs for guidance and advice. One wife described meeting other MOMs via a conference held by North Star International, a nonprofit organization and support community for people who find themselves at the crossroads of sexuality and faith (North Star, 2014). As she and her husband, who were still dating at the time, spent time with other MOCs, they learned that in many ways, MOMs are not necessarily all that different from heterosexual couples:

When we went to the North Star conference, I was able to talk with and meet some couples that were in a similar situation, that had been doing it for years, and really just listened to their experiences. They reassured me of this pattern, that about 99% of [their] problems in marriage have to do with finances, raising kids, jobs, and different everyday, normal things. That the majority of the things . . . were normal, right? Communication, finances, you know, connection, those types of things that are normal in a marriage. Those are the things that are the issues, and same-sex attraction or mixed-orientations is a just a small portion of that.

Whether because of a sense of prior preparation, or simply the willingness to try to figure things out, the MOCs in this sample were able to perceive their marriages as valid and having potential for success. Premarital-disclosure couples were able to take a chance on

what is often considered an “impossible relationship.” Post-marital-disclosure couples avoided the premature disintegration of their marriage as they faced the aftermath of disclosure with hope and perseverance, an attitude demonstrated by one wife to her husband when she stated, “I texted him this really long text about how I loved him and I knew we could make it work, and I just felt really strongly that we just need to keep going and keep trying.”

### ***Marital Desirability***

Beyond the ability to suspend disbelief regarding their potential for success, these MOCs were resilient past the point of disclosure because they highly valued their partner and their relationship. These successful MOCs described various strengths or benefits of their union that, in their eyes, made their relationships worth pursuing, prioritizing, and fighting for.

**High Esteem for Partner/Relationship.** When describing their reasons for getting or staying married post-disclosure, the MOCs in this sample unanimously reported that, above everything, they actually love their spouses. One husband claimed, “I genuinely love [Wife], and I want to do life with this lady.” Others discussed being attracted to their spouse’s qualities of “responsibility and trustworthiness,” their “soul,” their “mind,” and their “deep personality.” One wife spoke of her SSA husband’s passion for life and for their relationship, and how attractive those qualities are to her:

He’s incredibly intelligent. And he’s incredibly passionate. And I’m not talking just passionate in the sheets—because that helps too, and he is very much so—but passionate with life, with everything that he puts his mind to. He’s very creative, he’s an artist by nature . . . how much he loves people, loves that connection and

craves that connection with others, and will move mountains for people . . . is very attractive to me. His desire to drive our marriage forward and have it be successful in all aspects, financially and intimacy-wise, and in everything that we do . . . he's incredibly attractive to me, because he's driven us to where we are now.

Others described their partner as being “worth it,” and that they “have always been worth it, no matter what we went through or experienced.” One husband described himself and his wife as always having “very common goals, and [working] well together.” Overall, MOCs in this sample held their spouses and relationships in high esteem, claiming “we love our marriage”, and that despite the marital challenges and frustrations they face, they “wouldn't trade [it] for anything.”

**Sexual Relationship and Fluidity.** Although premarital same-sex relationships, or even prior infidelity, had been a reality for some of these MOCs, all of the couples in this sample reported that they are currently committed to being monogamous with their spouses, so there are currently no extramarital sexual relationships. Even so, another element that helped these MOCs perceive their relationships as worth pursuing, was the presence of some form of a sexual relationship or attraction between the partners, even while the husbands of these unions claimed a mostly same-sex-attracted orientation.

Each of these couples described having an active and generally fulfilling sexual relationship. One husband claimed that “the sexual intimacy in our relationship has always been great . . . it's never been a problem for us and it's not a problem for us today” and that he “feel[s] very happy and fulfilled in that.” Another husband expressed that “my attractions to my wife are very emotional, very relational—even sexual,” and

they have “no problem” in that intimate realm of their relationship. Some MOCs described their sexual relationship as “strong and significant,” but also described their experience of intimacy in marriage as being about more than just sex:

And so I think people get so caught up in the fact that they have this orientation, and that it has to be fulfilled, and there’s no way to be happy outside of that. And I just think that if they really understood intimacy—which I’m sure I still have a lot to understand—they wouldn’t be so tied up into that, they would find that they could have successful relationships like ours.

One couple described early conversations about what attraction would be like for them, when the husband was able to express his belief that attraction “grew from commitment and from love and decisions,” rather than just an immediate visual or physical connection. When questioned about their experiences with *sexual fluidity* (Diamond, 2016), most of the husbands described their opposite sex spouse as an “exception to the rule” regarding their general orientation, which was succinctly described by one husband who claimed, “I’m a gay man who fell in love with a woman.” In fact, there was a shared sentiment amongst the husbands in this sample that they generally did not identify with a *bisexual* orientation. One husband described his attraction to his wife within the context of his overall sexual orientation in this way:

When somebody’s questioning a mixed-orientation relationship, the logic for me, and why I identify as gay or queer, and not necessarily bisexual, is that, if you take a random sample of 100 people that I’m attracted to, and 99% of them are male, and then you find one that is female, I am *genuinely* attracted to that female. But does that make me any less gay? Out of that fact? . . . I identify with the



bisexual experience to a degree because I am married to a woman and find my wife attractive, and the larger scope of my sexuality is defined by that relationship. But when it comes to just random people that I see on the street . . . for me, it's a fairly constant experience of mostly attraction to males.

Another husband described a very similar concept, claiming that his sexuality is more fluid at times in terms of intensity or “focus,” as opposed to being fluid in orientation. He claims that his orientation has never really changed, and that he would describe himself as being “exclusively attracted to men, *and* my wife.”

Along with the presence of an attraction between partners, premarital-disclosure couples claimed that openly discussing sexual expectations in marriage was helpful in motivating their decision to continue to pursue the relationship. One wife explained how she wanted to understand what her husband thought a sexual and intimate relationship would be like for them: “how would that even be possible? Would he ever even be sexually aroused by me?” As they intentionally discussed what a sexual relationship in their marriage could look like, this husband was able to reassure his wife that “I had always pictured my marriage, and my intimate married life, being very normal” and that “I don't see our sex life being significantly different than any other couple.” Like most heterosexual couples, the sexual relationships of the MOCs in this sample weren't necessarily perfect or effortless from the beginning but required intentional communication and work. One husband described his and his wife's early sexual experiences as “messy” due to their both feeling “anxiety and pressure” in their attempts to “figure things out.” This husband also attributed a lot of their early sexual struggles to his taking a libido-reducing anxiety medication at the time, and claimed that things

improved when he eventually switched to a different medical regiment. Even so, as this couple worked through their own insecurities around sex, they were able to build each other's confidence in the bedroom through communication and enough "trial and error." Over time, their sexual relationship improved to the point that they can now claim "we both feel that we are fulfilled."

**Marital Friendship.** Another significant factor that informed each MOC's desire to pursue or maintain their relationship was their marital friendship. Almost unanimously, the couples described the friendship they have with their spouses as "foundational" to the success of their marriage. For these MOCs, friendship was often their first form of connection with their spouses, as well as a strength that they can "fall back on" during hard times. One late-disclosure husband described his friendship to his wife in this way:

I like being married to [Wife]. We've traveled the world together, we've lived overseas. We can talk till the sun goes down and comes back up and goes down again. We just connect, we click. And we always have! We have always had a very, very good relationship. We're like a killer team. We work well together. I can honestly say our friendship has always been very, very, deep.

The friendship these couples share is evident in the way they feel "heard," "accepted," and "respected" by their spouses, and are able to be vulnerable and authentic with each other. One couple expressed that the closeness of their marital friendship has always been an advantage to their relationship, even potentially above that of some heterosexual couples who may have a strong physical draw, but lack as strong an emotional connection:

Like, I thought [Wife] was cute too, right? I knew she was attractive; it just wasn't the driving factor. Our marriage was definitely based on friendship and emotional attraction and connection first—which I always thought was a huge blessing, right? Because I see all these friends who got married and then a year or two later, they have to figure out how to get along with each other and like each other. And we never had those problems! People act like they're so surprised about who they married, and there were really no surprises for us.

Overall, the couples in this sample shared deep and fulfilling friendships with their spouses that, in many ways, brought joy and fulfillment into their relationship, and also served as the “glue” that held them together during times of struggle. Especially in the often-messy aftermath of disclosure, the friendship these MOCs shared was an essential part of their ability to suspend disbelief and continue to pursue their relationships.

**Faith.** For perhaps more than any other motivating factor, it seems to be a general perception in public opinion and previous literature (Zack & Ben-Ari, 2017) that same-sex attracted individuals choose to enter into mixed-orientation relationships because of religious values and beliefs. Though all of the MOCs in this sample claimed a religious identity, there was actually some variability in their responses about the role of faith in their decision to pursue or maintain their mixed-orientation relationships. For some couples, they claimed that “faith has to be at the center” of their relationship, and that without faith, their marriage “would not work.” For the MOC in this sample that identified as Protestant Christians, their religious beliefs about the sanctity of heterosexual marriage provided deep meaning and motivation to their efforts to stay married after this husband's disclosure:

To choose to walk away from this marriage, I don't think would damn me . . . but I think it would be a forsaking of my faith. For me, it would require walking away from my trust in Christ. So while I don't have the same views as Latter-Day Saints do with regard to the eternal state of my family, I do believe in the temporal family as being of significant value. Marriage is this picture of Christ and the Church, and I think there's a huge value and significance in our marriage displaying the glory of God and the love of God for the people of God.

For other couples, they expressed a more balanced view that encompassed both the influence of their religious beliefs, as well as that of their own agency and desires. One husband claimed that he would be "insincere" if he didn't recognize the impact of being raised in the faith, and that his religious beliefs, including his understanding of "what marriage should be," are informed by his upbringing and are "a part of who [he is]." Even so, this husband also claimed that his faith was not the only motivating factor in his relationship:

I actually believe that, even absent faith, I would want to maintain our relationship as it is today. . . . I value our relationship, and I value our family and our kids and I'm very happy here. So yeah, I don't think it's all faith. And it's not out of fear. I'm not here because I'm afraid that I'm going to be damned if I choose to go live with a guy. So that is not necessarily what motivates me to stay.

Similarly, this husband's wife also expressed the sentiment that, regardless of their faith, she would choose to marry him all over again, even knowing now about his same-sex attraction.

On the other hand, some couples were adamant that religion is not the primary motivator for their marriage. One MOC that identified as members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, expressed that, though they are active in their faith, to say that “the whole reason why we got married was because the church told us to, or because we were afraid of God” is just not true. They did not marry to please the “church” or the “community” or because it was a social “expectation” but because it was what they wanted to do. Another husband who disclosed to his wife early in their courtship described his desire in this way:

I had always had this vision. . . . I had dreams when I was in junior high about getting married to a woman, having our first baby. . . . My vision for that family that I wanted really helped me through adversities in my own family of origin . . . and it really helped me get through a lot of the depression and anxiety that I had felt before getting married. That vision of the family that I wanted had been beneficial to me independent of the church, because I wanted to have a family that looked different and better than what I grew up with. And that was getting married to a woman. And it was hard for me to conceive of how to have that family apart from that. . . . So I can’t say that I got married in the temple because that’s what was expected of me. I did it because that’s what I wanted.

Other than viewing religion as a potential motivator for marriage, several of the couples described their faith as a protective and strengthening element of their marriage. One wife derived comfort from her religious belief that marriage has the potential of lasting long past death. This belief in an eternal marriage attracted her to her SSA husband, who shared her beliefs. To her, he was “committed to me and to our relationship, and to this

idea of an eternal family.” She described his willingness to “preserve our marriage and to let it continue to grow and become something amazing, not just for 30, 40, or 50 years, . . . but as something that we want to last for eternity.” Another wife described how her faith strengthens her desire to fight for her and her husband’s relationship:

I don’t want to get to Heavenly Father at the end of the day and have to tell Him I didn’t fight hard enough. I didn’t put it all in there. I didn’t give it everything that I have. And that I didn’t love him hard enough. I don’t ever want to get to that judgment day and say, “I didn’t try hard enough, I didn’t put enough into it.” That was never going to be something I ever said.

Overall, though religiosity certainly informed the identities and choices of the MOCs in this sample, most of these couples attributed their motivation for getting and staying married to their own desires, and not to the expectations of their faith traditions alone.

#### **Stage 4: Meaning Informed Choice and Action**

##### ***Relational Self-Determination***

At this point in the model, the MOCs in this sample have gone through the experience of disclosure, and have formulated perceptions about what disclosure means for their relationship. They have been able to *suspend disbelief* about the viability of their marriage, and are motivated to fight for their relationship due to the *marital desirability* evident in their friendship, sexual attraction/relationship, shared faith, and general esteem for each other. The next stage necessary to arriving at a place of marital stability and satisfaction is *relational self-determination*, or in other words, *choosing to act* in ways that benefit the relationship. One wife described her and her husband’s relational self-determination in this way:

We get to decide how our marriage is gonna look. We define the parameters. We have figured out how it's gonna work for us. And it makes us unique. . . . Our marriage is so different by design, by purpose, because we made it that way. We decided actively to make it that way . . . we've just kind of sat back and asked, "Look, what is it that we want?" You know, we get to create the rules here.

There are a lot of attitudes and behaviors that are encompassed by relational self-determination, and the following are just some of the ways in which these MOCs choose to prioritize the well-being of their relationships.

**Relational Autonomy.** Because of a general "lack of role models," couples in successful mixed-orientation marriages are in many ways "pioneers" of this specific relationship formation, and are often left to their own devices to figure out how to make their relationships work. In this seemingly uncharted endeavor, MOCs often have to challenge their own perceptions of "what is possible," and realize that they are "only limited by [their] own thinking." One MOC in this sample emphasized the empowerment that comes from recognizing the individual autonomy each couple has to either strengthen or weaken their own relationship, independent of what others may think, or even independent of the successes or failures of other MOCs around them. One wife, who refers to other seemingly enduring MOCs in her community as "mainstays" described her husband's and her reaction versus that of other MOCs when the marriages of some of those mainstays have not lasted:

I've noticed that as some of those mainstays have broken apart . . . for certain [other MOCs], it's that "straw that broke the camel's back" kind of thing. And they've been crushed by it. It's like you're being held together by the illusions of

that couple. And because that couple didn't make it, therefore, you're not going to make it . . . but I never really did that. I saw them as mainstays. And I saw them as opportunities to grow, things that I could learn from these people to apply to our marriage that worked. . . . But I didn't look at those as, "oh my gosh, they didn't make it. So we're not going to!" . . . Every time that friends of ours . . . have divorced, it doesn't shake us. It basically gives us the opportunity to come back and reevaluate *our* marriage, reevaluate *our* relationship. . . . It just brings us closer together as a result, whereas other relationships . . . they don't make it and they crumble.

Another couple who experienced disclosure early in their dating experience described their relationship as being very "individualized." The wife of this MOC attributed a lot of their marital success to certain specific elements of her husband's personality and his own "journey of spiritual self-reflection" before they ever even met each other. This husband had already done much of the personal work of exploring and understanding his sexuality, and of reconciling his SSA with his religious beliefs, so when the time came that they met and began dating, he was not trying to "figure out a relationship and his sexual orientation at the same time." As these couples navigated the complexities of being in a mixed-orientation relationship, they benefited from being able to learn about and take influence from other MOCs around them, *while also* recognizing and being empowered by the individuality of their own experience, and choosing not to become dependent on the success or failure of those around them.

**Effort and Commitment.** Another way that MOCs in this sample practiced *relational self-determination* was through the commitment and effort they put into their



relationships. For several husbands, commitment meant choosing to focus their romantic and sexual energy into their relationships with his wives, especially when moments of attraction towards men do arise:

Because I'm married to her, I often just choose not to entertain those ideas, right? It's not that I don't see men that are really attractive, and can't appreciate their attractiveness, but I'm also not fantasizing, you know? I don't choose to be engaged in the fantasy, or whatever. . . . Sometimes that might happen and sometimes those thoughts come, right? But we can choose to entertain them or we can choose to move on from them. . . . You make choices of those attractions on a daily basis, no matter what your sexuality is.

This need to be intentional about acting or not acting on attractions and committing to focus one's sexual energy towards one's spouse is not unique to MOMs. Even for heterosexual couples or same-sex couples, getting married does not guarantee that people will only ever feel sexual attraction for the person they are married to. Rather, commitment to fidelity is a series of choices that spouses make every day to prioritize their relationship and their partner, sexually and otherwise. Another husband also made the point that choosing to have a monogamous sexual relationship with his wife does not impede him from having meaningful relationships with men in other ways. When asked if he had ever considered divorce, this husband explained some of his reasons for staying married in this way:

If the thoughts ever came, they were fleeting. And they often came in the form of, well, "what are you missing out on?" And I sat with that question, "what do I not have?" . . . Well, I have men in my life that I love deeply, who love me, and that I

feel connected to. I have great associations in the church. I have a wonderful wife who is my number one fan. And I'm her number one fan. And why would I do anything to not have that, right? On a gamble of what might be greener on the other side? I love raising my kids in an intact home. And I wouldn't want to do that in a split home. The only thing I don't have is a sexual relationship with a man. So I am giving up that part. But I'm not giving up sex entirely. And I'm not even giving up men entirely. In fact, I have great associations and great friends, people that I really love and who love me back.

For other MOCs, commitment is a willingness to “work through struggles”; it is “giving and receiving”; it is “setting goals, and seeing the fruits of our labor” together. One wife described commitment as “working on things because it's important for us to succeed as a couple, because we *decided* it's important for us to succeed as a couple.” One couple described what they learned about commitment from seeing other MORs around them dissolve, and from having to defend their relationship to those who question the viability of their MOM:

You just have not done any of the work, you know, to really qualify for the level of trust that you're wanting to get out of this relationship. You just haven't invested the collateral, you haven't paid your dues, you haven't paid the price. . . . For us, it's more, it's more purposeful. What we do, what we say, how we act, how we treat one another is more purposeful. As a result, because we're invested in this—and I'm not saying that other relationships are not invested—I'm just saying that we've put in the sweat equity to be this invested.

The husband of one MOC in this sample described commitment as “these minor little choices that I make throughout my day” and that for him, “commitment is love.” Another couple described commitment as making the best choice that you can, and then “striving to be happy with your choice” and not “dwelling on what might have been.” This couple argued that, regardless of what type of relationship one is in, success does not come by “having one foot in the door, thinking that you might have had something else,” but that it is essential “to be all in.” Overall, by being committed to their spouses, these MOCs benefited from putting in the work it takes for marriage to thrive.

**Communication.** As arguably the skill most highly perceived as important to the functioning of any relationship, it was of no surprise that the MOCs in this sample cited *communication* as a significant contributor to their marital success. For one premarital-disclosure MOC, creating a safe environment for engaging in hard conversations allowed this couple to develop “trust and openness” during that early, vulnerable period following disclosure. They did this by attending to each other’s physical and emotional needs, which could be as simple as making sure neither of them were tired or hungry before beginning an important conversation. They also emphasized the importance of being able to address any relational concerns early on, and “trusting that, if anything were to come up . . . that they would tell [each other]”. Another couple expressed that communication wasn’t something they had always been good at, but they had to “learn to build” together:

There was a lot of mess involved in that. A lot of tears, a lot of frustrations . . . a lot of extended conversations and sleepless nights to get to this point. You know, I kind of feel like we’ve been blessed, in the sense that we’ve had a lot of that conflict. We’ve had a lot of that resistance . . . externally, sometimes internally,

but we've also been able to resolve conflict and embrace it, because it's a process. And it's not because we experience conflict that that means something is wrong. . . . So how are we going to focus on the process of moving through that? There's a choice with how you respond and how you're resilient with conflict. It is definitely going to give you an opportunity to grow and to change, and become stronger, when you're embracing it, or it will crush you if you do nothing.

When utilizing communication as a tool for the betterment of their relationships, MOCs in this sample were able focus on exerting intentional effort in the areas of their relationship that they can control, as opposed to those they cannot. MOMs, not unlike heterosexual couples, cannot necessarily control their “attractions and sexual drive” — which “ebb and flow” in any marriage—or external stressors such as the criticism of others outside their relationship, but “we can work on making sure we are always communicating. We can work to make sure we are trustworthy, and that we are trusting each other.” Overall, when asked to consider the things that couples in MOMs can *do* to benefit their relationships, these MOCs focused on “having good communication, creating a safe environment, and addressing conflicts early and with kindness, directness, and honesty.”

**Nurturing Intimacy.** Another way in which the MOCs in this sample practice *relational self-determination* was in being intentional about nurturing their marital intimacy, both sexually and emotionally. One husband expressed that their sexual relationship improved as he felt his wife's desire to “be vulnerable” and to “build the relationship.” He described their intimate relationship as having “less to do with

sexuality, and more to do with trust.” Another couple described their sexual intimacy as something that grew over time as they learned from one another:

First we were friends and then we became lovers. We learned how to be sexual, I learned about attraction, I learned how to express those feelings with a woman. . . . At first, we were just immature, but we still had varying levels of deep attraction and connection with each other, including our sexual experiences together. And they’ve only gotten better.

Each couple’s ability to grow and improve their marital intimacy depended largely upon open communication about their sexual relationship. These couples were intentional about making sure that each partner’s needs are being met, and prioritized the “fulfillment and satisfaction of their partner” as well as their own. One husband reported that his wife’s openness to “trying new things” and being “adventurous” in the bedroom was very helpful to him, as well as her willingness to initiate sexual experiences and conversations, so that it was not something that was solely driven by him.

Another husband found it helpful to be realistic about expectations of romanticism within their relationship. This husband expressed that romance was difficult because “it didn’t come naturally” to him. However, as a marriage therapist himself, this husband learned that “there are lots of couples where the guy sucks at romance . . . they’re really good at the dating part, they can woo, and then they just think that it’s no longer important once they’re married.” By putting these expectations into context, this husband was able to be more “aware of his weaknesses, and work on them,” while also appreciating the strengths he did bring to the table. What’s more, this couple was

intentional about not using the husband's SSA as an excuse to not put effort into nurturing their relationship:

We noticed that when we are drifting apart, that's because we're not doing the things that good married couples need to do to stay together. We weren't dating enough, for example. And so that piece of our life was feeling separated. Now, I think one of the things that has helped us stay together for the 24 years that we have, is that when stuff like that comes up, we're not quick to say, "oh, it's because you're gay and we're not compatible." It's just that any couple that isn't dating and is not attending to the relationship will drift apart. But it would be easy to say "oh, it's because I'm gay."

Along with the sexual and romantic elements of their marriages, it was just as important for these MOCs to be intentional about nurturing the emotional intimacy in their relationships. One husband described emotional connection as "one of my biggest love languages," and that it was very important for him "to feel heard, seen, and to experience empathy" with his wife. This husband also claimed that being concerned about the "quality of our connection" improved their resiliency as a couple. For another couple, nurturing intimacy meant being able to lovingly call each other out whenever they felt that their connection was lacking:

We're constantly aware of when we are both on our phones and just kind of next to each other. And that's not necessarily a bad thing all the time. Sometimes it's nice to just be with each other, alone together. And it's just nice to have the quiet time. But also we're very aware of when we feel disconnected, when we haven't had a good talk in a while. And I feel like there's different aspects of our

relationship where, if we didn't have that mindfulness or that attention, they could very easily become problems and challenges. So there's the intentional checking in with one another . . . "I feel like you're not present. I feel like you're distant and I'm concerned" And it's in those moments . . . there's kind of this light bulb or light switch moment where we realize, "okay, you're right, I haven't been paying attention..."

Overall, not unlike other couples, MOCs in this sample worked to nurture their marital intimacy as they continued to date each other, spend time together, prioritize each their partner's needs, and respond to each other's "bids for connection." As they did this, they found that their intimacy and attraction could grow as an "outcome of our commitment, mutuality and reciprocity."

**Meeting Needs Outside the Relationship.** Another way in which MOCs actively chose to nurture and prioritize their relationships was by attending to their own and each other's needs that can only be fulfilled outside of the relationship. Some of these needs include the need for community, connection with friends and family, academic and career pursuits, hobbies and interests, etc. Several of these couples expressed the importance of getting to know each other's needs, and being able to communicate those needs to one another. For one wife, it is important to her that she be able to visit her mother and sisters whenever she is struggling emotionally, because of the unique familial energy and comfort they bring to her. This wife's husband described the importance of recognizing those needs in this way:

There are a lot of things that I'm not able to supply [Wife]. I can't be her sisters, I can't be her mother. I can't replicate the kind of connection that she gets from her

family, and that she really, really needs. . . . And there's a lot of aspects of learning to take responsibility for my own needs, and then figure out how to communicate those with her and talk about what I need. Apart from our relationship, I need a creative outlet, I need a social outlet with my friends.

This husband also addressed the unrealistic marital expectations that

the person you commit to, is supposed to be the end all, be all fulfillment of your needs. That's an idea that affects straight and gay couples. I could be in a marriage with a man and I would still have to address the falseness behind that idea.

Another husband expressed that he and his wife tried hard to be supportive of each other's interests. He was supportive of her when she chose to go back to grad school while they were still raising children, and claimed that he never felt "restricted" by her whenever he needed to spend time with friends, or pursue any recreational activity or interest.

What's more, this couple had to trust and communicate with each other in order to meet this husband's need for social interaction with other men:

It's really important in our relationship that he has guy friends that he can hang out with, and not worry that I'm going to be jealous or angry all the time. And that was the thing we really had to kind of talk about in the beginning, but I have a lot of trust for him because he's very honest with me. And I know that he's aware of, if he were to have feelings for someone in that way . . . he would tell me.



The husband in this MOR further explained why he believes having thriving male friendships is so important to the continued success of his marriage with his wife:

If I had no close guy friends, it would be really hard for me. I think it would be this huge void in my life. I think I would inaccurately assume that in order to fulfill that need, I would have to leave and go pursue a same-sex relationship. But by having those friendships, I do find that that need is fulfilled. I have a lot of great friends that I hang out with and do things with and they're really, really important to me. And I think without that, I would struggle.

Other than balancing “individual,” “family,” and “relationship” needs, another thing that came up as an important need for these couples was the presence of a community, specifically a community of other MOMs—or at least a healthy community that was supportive of their mixed-orientation relationship. This was helpful in part because having a community means that these couples no longer felt like they were entirely alone in their situation. For several of these couples, there was a time where they believed themselves to be the only people experiencing SSA in marriage between a man and a woman. That belief was incredibly “isolating,” so discovering other similar couples and becoming a part of a community that was experiencing similar things was “very helpful” to them.

**Utilizing Resources.** Following disclosure, several MOCs in this sample engaged in *relational self-determination* by utilizing resources that could aid their relationships. For several couples, those resources turned out to be some form of therapy. Some MOCs described going through various therapists, for various reasons. Some of these therapists turned out to be very supportive and helpful, while others seemed confused or even

“clueless as to why we were staying together.” However, even without necessarily having therapists that were competent in treating MORs specifically, these MOCs usually still derived benefit from having to improve communication and process through core relationship needs. Some couples discovered resources as they found and engaged with organized support communities for MOMs, online and otherwise, such as North Star (2014) and Brothers Road (2022). These organizations provided these couples with community and therapeutic support via conferences and retreats. For one wife, she was able to derive support after disclosure through reading books and blogs and otherwise educating herself about MOMs, while another husband found significant relief when he joined a gay men’s support group that he has been attending over the last five years.

Overall, those MOCs who were able to find and utilize resources seemed to benefit from the social and therapeutic support that they provided. More than anything, utilizing resources helped these couples to realize that they were not alone in their struggle. Of course, more accessibility to resources is still greatly needed for MOCs, whether they have experienced disclosure yet or not.

## **Stage 5: Marital Outcomes**

### ***Marital Satisfaction***

The final stage of this model, *Marital Outcomes*, describes the end goal of the process that this grounded theory study set out to explain, namely, how couples in successful mixed-orientation marriages achieve stability and satisfaction. Each MOC in this sample rated themselves as at least “moderately satisfied” with their marriage before ever being interviewed for this study, with most of the spouses rating themselves as “highly satisfied.” For these couples, marital satisfaction developed after disclosure as

they perceived their relationships to be sustainable and worth pursuing, and then chose, every day, to act in ways that would grow and benefit the relationship. Many of these couples described the ways in which their relationship changed and improved because of their spouse's courage to disclose. One wife, whose husband disclosed to her just a couple of years prior, described their current relationship in this way:

I just felt like I was one of the lucky ones who got to experience second level intimacy. And I think it's actually pretty rare to be able to do that. And since those walls came down . . . like, there's something about being fully known and truly loved, right? To be loved, but not known is comforting, but superficial, right? To be known and not loved is our biggest fear, but to be fully known and truly loved is a bit like being loved by God. And I really think that's what we've been able to experience in this.

Another husband described the relief he has experienced since disclosure in this way:

For me, now, I have great friendships, many with other SSA guys. I have an open and honest relationship with my wife. There are no secrets anymore. . . . I'm comfortable sharing the truth of my struggle, and I trust God's grace, whereas before, I didn't feel like I was worthy of any grace or mercy. I was the one who was preaching grace, but could never receive grace. And so it has really transformed, for me, our marriage, my relationships with people, my relationship with God. It's just a much happier, more peaceful place to be.

One wife described her marital satisfaction as feeling very "secure" in her marriage, even in the face of criticism from others. Another wife claimed that her relationship with her gay husband is by far the healthiest relationship she has ever been in, and that if one day

it were to ever dissolve, it would not be because of her husband's same-sex attraction. Others expressed gratitude for the mentors and friends that encouraged disclosure, while another husband claimed that, while he was "oriented" towards men, he was also very "fulfilled here," with his wife. Overall, as the MOCs in this sample suspended disbelief and practiced relational self-determination, they have been able to achieve and maintain fulfillment in their mixed-orientation relationships.

### **Path B**

By not having interviewed individuals whose mixed-orientation marriages ended in separation or divorce, it is not possible in this current work to thoroughly discuss the processes occurring in *Path B* of this model, namely, *Viewing SSA as an Obstacle/Dealbreaker* → *Marital Conflict/Disintegration* → *Separation/Divorce*. However, the MOCs in this sample were able to provide some insight into the sort of meaning, perceptions, and actions that could have led them towards marital dissolution and separation, and so the following is an attempt at a limited explanation of the processes occurring in *Path B* of this model.

During this model's second stage, *Awareness of SSA*, it is normal that couples will experience doubt and anxiety regarding the viability of their relationships, especially under the pressure of a culture that tells them that being gay in a structurally heterosexual relationship is impossible. MOCs in this sample shared about their initial fears and trepidations, and the early perceptions that could have undermined the stability of their relationship:

So have I considered divorce? I think yes. In the sense that you know, there's a lot of feelings of, well, "am I limiting her happiness? Am I limiting her growth? Am

I the cause of pain and frustration? Am I the problem in terms of her long-term happiness?" So you know, that's something that has gone through my mind. For one wife whose husband disclosed to her over 20 years into their marriage, she described disclosure as a "shattering" of the illusion of the perfect marriage she believed them to have. This experience was certainly painful, and she described having to combat significant grief and sadness in the initial months after disclosure. Had this couple not sought therapeutic resources and turned to each other for support at that time, it is possible that that grief could have grown and become a significant obstacle to their marital stability.

Beyond their own considerations for divorce, these MOCs were able to provide some insight into *Path B* as they discussed the examples of other MOMs around them whose marriages did not last. For some, marital dissolution occurred if the straight spouse did not feel sufficiently "sexually pursued" by the SSA partner. One husband in this sample observed that nearly half of the thirty mixed-orientation couples of his acquaintance experienced marital dissolution or crisis due to triggering events such as the discovery of infidelity. Another husband expressed his belief that marital strife will occur if there is not freedom for open discussion in the relationship:

In my own observations of other mixed-orientation relationships, the couples who feel like they have to hide this aspect of the queer spouse, or if the queer spouse feels like they can't talk about things freely, either within the relationship or outside of it. . . . They don't feel free to express themselves. I feel like a big factor of this is if that queer spouse doesn't feel acceptance and love and freedom to be who they are.

Another significant struggle that could potentially contribute to the failure of MOMs is the criticism of their relationship from outsiders. Several of the MOCs in this sample have been questioned about the validity or viability of their marriage, and some have even been explicitly told that their eventual separation is inevitable. Not only do outsiders often expect MOCs to fail, but some even go as far as advising partners in MOMs to just “cut their losses” and leave. One husband described how even his brother, someone who knew him and his wife intimately, was quick to advise him to leave behind his marriage in pursuit of a same-sex relationship. Others described having received the same advice from therapists, friends, and community leaders, and one wife attributed this cynical view of MOMs as arising from generally pessimistic narratives about mixed-orientation relationships:

It is stunning how deeply people believe certain things about a mixed-orientation, marriage . . . but they are always surfacy things, their opinions and narratives that have formed, are not substantiated, and not based on anything other than culture. And they’ll pick it up as if it were real.

Another potential reason that marital dissolution so often occurs amongst MOMs was explained by one wife in this sample who emphasized the significance of nurturing intimacy in the relationship:

When these relationships start breaking down, like they often do, I would assume that oftentimes, it’s a breakdown in intimacy within their relationship. And not just sexual. I mean, that can be part of it, yes. But I actually think sexual intimacy usually breaks down after other types of intimacy start breaking down, right? It

starts breaking down after there's a breach of emotional intimacy of some sort.

Some distance has been created for some reason.

Overall, there seems to be a variety of factors that could potentially contribute to the disintegration of mixed-orientation relationships, in much the same way that there are many working parts that contribute to their continued success. Some of these factors include pressure or criticism from external sources, narratives that portray MOMs as doomed to fail, lack of trust and open communication, and a breakdown of emotional and sexual intimacy. Though the couples in this sample do not fit the demographic of a dissolved or failed MOM, their insight on what could have occurred in their own relationships, as well as having learned from observing the collapse of other MORs around them, is at least a starting point for future analysis of *Path B*.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

#### **Main Findings**

Having come to a better-informed understanding of the experience of resilient mixed-orientation marriages in this grounded theory study, several main conclusions can be drawn from this work. Primarily, even though it may not be common, it is possible for couples to have success in mixed-orientation marriages. Although this type of relationship certainly faces some unique challenges, mixed-orientation couples often experience many of the same marital struggles that non-MOCs do, and in fact, MOCs do not necessarily claim that the same-sex attraction/mixed-orientation element of their relationships is the greatest challenge in their marriages. What's more, the strengths and qualities that contribute to the success of MOMs are generally the same qualities that make any healthy relationship, regardless of orientation.

Additionally, successful MOMs generally experience some level of sexual fluidity or adaptability, and usually, an attraction/sexual relationship between spouses does exist. However, resilient MOCs interpret their sexual relationship as only a small part of their overall marital compatibility, and place much more significance on other elements of their relationship, such as emotional intimacy and friendship. Also, successful MOMs exhibit confidence in their own relational autonomy independent of the opinions of others. Overall, stable and fulfilled couples in MOMs have the ability to perceive their



relationship as something that is functional and sustainable, and are very active and intentional in their efforts to cultivate a safe, satisfying, loving, and resilient relationship.

### **Contribution to Existing Knowledge of Mixed-Orientation Marriages**

This study's findings are groundbreaking in the way that they expand upon previous research and even contradict current cultural narratives regarding mixed-orientation marriages. Before now, no specific model of how to achieve stability and fulfillment in mixed-orientation relationships has ever been proposed. One potentially significant explanation for this is that previous studies have mostly focused on the marital struggles and potential dissolution faced by MOCs (Hernandez et al., 2011). One example of this is the model of *Ambiguous Loss in Mixed-Orientation Marriage Dissolution* by Hernandez and Wilson (2007), which walks through a process of marital dissolution when the SSA spouse's sexuality is not so much "disclosed" as it is "found out" by the straight partner, including themes of confusion, preoccupation, despair, disorientation about the future, and eventual turning away from the relationship.

Another contribution to the mainly negative perspective of MOMs in previous literature is due to sampling methods that seem to target SSA husbands who are closeted or relationships that are dissolved, as opposed to couples who maintain their marriages after disclosure (Buxton, 2004). For example, this is evident in a previously mentioned study which recruited 38 married, same-sex attracted, Israeli men through a gay dating website, which automatically populated the sample with married men who were seeking out and involved in extramarital relationships (Adler & Ben-Ari, 2017). In contrast, this current study set out to specifically understand the process by which stable and satisfied mixed-orientation couples become successful, which is reflected in its sampling and

theoretical focus. In other words, by recruiting satisfied MOCs and interviewing them about the success of their marriage, this study has been able to shed light on a phenomenon that has thus far gone mostly unacknowledged—not because achieving fulfillment in MORs is impossible, but simply because successful MOMs are woefully underrepresented in research.

Perhaps even greater than the often-one-sided representation of MOMs within the literature, are the dismissive and cynical cultural narratives that, if not challenged, can potentially undermine the efforts of MOCs trying to navigate their relationships post-disclosure. In the previous literature review, it was mentioned that many MOCs often experience stigma from the LGBTQ+ community for being an SSA individual in a relationship with a heterosexual partner (Hernandez et al., 2011; Lefevor et al., 2019; Legerski et al., 2017). In one study, lesbian and bisexual participants reported experiencing much negativity from members of gay and lesbian communities—as well as from their straight family members – regarding the validity or sustainability of their marriage (Buxton, 2001, 2004, 2006).

In a recent article entitled “Why ‘All-In’ LGBT+/SSA Saints Are So Reluctant to Speak Up” (Fisher, 2022), the author describes some of the cynical and negative cultural narratives surrounding couples who choose to pursue or maintain mixed-orientation relationships. This article’s author, Fisher, works as an advisor for the Office of Student Success and Inclusion at Brigham Young University, and also serves on the LGBT working group committee for the Department of Priesthood and Family of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. In his daily work, Fisher is uniquely positioned to work and speak with hundreds of individuals who are navigating the complexities of sexuality

and faith, and consequently can provide significant insight into the struggles these individuals face. According to Fisher (2022), SSA individuals who are choosing to pursue MORs have been engaging less and less in public conversations about their experiences, in part due to the criticism they receive when attempting to share their stories. This often leads to feelings of isolation from the community, and also further discourages individuals in MOCs from speaking up for fear of becoming vulnerable to the criticism of others. Fisher claims that when these stories “aren’t represented in news articles, academic studies, podcasts, books, on social media, or even in religious settings, we don’t get a full picture of the diversity [of choice] within the community” (2022, para. 1).

Fisher describes how when SSA individuals share about their experiences in mixed-orientation relationships, they are often met with “patronizing” reactions that assume that their choice is “less enlightened” or “healthy” than the choice to pursue same-sex relationships:

I’ve seen this dynamic play out during classroom panels when students who are exploring paths outside of church teachings [same-sex relationships] are met with encouragement, smiles, and “good for you’s,” (all in the name of authentic self-expression and brave authenticity), while the all-in students [mixed-orientation relationships] are met with sad expressions and “are you sure?” (Fisher, 2022, Patronizing Pushback From “Allies” section, para. 2)

Fisher goes on to describe how it is common for LGBTQ+ “allies” to describe celibate SSA individuals and mixed-orientation couples with “a very discernable tone of pity, judgment, and expected failure” and that as a result, “some allies are only hearing one

particular narrative and only know how to advocate for those peoples whose lives and beliefs fit that one narrative” (2022, Patronizing Pushback From “Allies” section, para. 3).

In this current study, one element of the *Model of Relational Self-Determination in Mixed-Orientation Marriages* includes the concept that successful MOCs are empowered by their own relational autonomy and are very deliberate and intentional about the effort and commitment they put into their relationships. The concept of *relational self-determination* directly contradicts the assumption that individuals who choose to pursue MORs “haven’t thought as deeply about their options as those on different paths” or that their choice is “temporary and doomed to fail” (Fisher, 2022, “Weaponization” and “Poster People” section, para. 4). Fisher goes on to describe that assumption in this way:

For some, it seems almost impossible to comprehend that an LGBT+/SSA person could be a rational, well-informed, shame-free, and mentally well adult and still freely choose a life fully committed to a [mixed-orientation relationship]. Many people essentially believe that if an LGBT+ person is happy in [an MOR], there must be something wrong with them. (2022, Patronizing Pushback From “Allies” section, para. 6)

Part of the importance of this research is in bringing more awareness to the public discourse regarding MORs in order to better inform allies and others that—although MORs do not always work out and are not superior to any other relationship formation—they are *valid*, and should not be immediately dismissed as anomalies or assumed to be the lesser choice of closeted individuals suffering from internalized homophobia.

Especially with a lack of current public visibility, Fisher claims that it is important for those pursuing mixed-orientation relationships “to know that they are not alone on their paths and that more people are thriving in [MOMs] than they’ll ever hear about” (2022, para. 1).

When considering the cultural and historical context of mixed-orientation marriages within the larger umbrella of the LGBTQ+ community, an imperfect yet useful comparison can be made to the position of bisexual individuals amongst gay and lesbian communities just a couple decades ago. According to the LGBT Advisory Committee of the San Francisco Human Rights Commission (2011), bisexuality has often been considered merely a “phase” en route to a stable gay or lesbian orientation as opposed to a stable sexual orientation in itself. In the past, it was common for bisexual individuals to be considered as “too afraid to come all the way out of the closet” or that bisexual people just “haven’t made up their minds.” They go on to say:

Bisexuals experience high rates of being ignored, discriminated against, demonized, or rendered invisible by both the heterosexual world and the lesbian and gay communities. Often, the entire sexual orientation is branded as invalid, immoral, or irrelevant. Despite years of activism and the largest population within the LGBT community, the needs of bisexuals still go unaddressed and their very existence is still called into question. This erasure has serious consequences on bisexuals’ health, economic well-being, and funding for bi organizations and programs. (San Francisco Human Rights Commission, 2011, p. 1)

Although not a perfect comparison, successful MOCs currently occupy a very similar position within the LGBTQ+ community. Mixed-orientation relationships are similarly

ignored, discriminated against, branded as invalid, or seen as a lesser choice en route to a more “enlightened” or “authentic” expression of “who they really are.” Contrary to this line of thinking, the MOCs interviewed for this study hold the belief that their relationships are valid in their own right. By honoring all elements of their identities, including both the sexual *and* the spiritual, the decision made by the couples in this study to pursue and maintain their mixed-orientation relationships is in fact the most authentic expression of “their truth.”

### **Implications for Therapeutic Practice**

As aforementioned, whenever MOCs have reached out to therapeutic resources for aid in navigating their relationships, they have been met with mixed, and often unhelpful, clinical responses. As previously discussed in the literature review, MOCs have reported seeking and struggling to find therapists who are knowledgeable about MOMs (Buxton, 2004), and this lack of competent therapeutic support can be a threat to marital stability. In another study, the author claimed that it is essential for mental health professionals to “challenge client beliefs based upon homophobia and heterosexism” (Schwartz, 2012, Establishing Safety section, para. 1). While it is important to advocate against attitudes of “sexual prejudice” (Schwartz, 2012, Establishing Safety section, para. 1), it is also true that for therapists to automatically assume that MOCs are only motivated to maintain their marriages due to internalized homophobia is its own form of prejudice and fails to honor the client’s values and autonomy in therapy. Whenever working with MOCs, it is important for clinicians to not automatically assume that it is impossible for mixed-orientation relationships to be successful. Just as these couples have had to do for themselves, therapists working with MOCs must *suspend their disbelief*

regarding the viability of mixed-orientation marriages. This of course does not mean that therapists should push for MOC's to stay together—just as they wouldn't do so for any other couple coming in for marital counseling. As any marriage and family therapist knows, not all marriages can, or even should, be saved via therapy. The point is to collaboratively help couples navigate their relationships according to their own needs and beliefs. Regardless of whether MOCs who seek help through counseling are able to persevere and find fulfillment in their marriages, or ultimately choose to part ways and seek that fulfillment separately, that choice should be a product of the values and desires of the couple and not due to the therapist's personal bias regarding whether or not MOMs are capable of success.

For clinicians working with mixed-orientation couples, utilizing this *Model of Relational Self-Determination* might look like focusing on processes of meaning and action in the therapy room, as well as capitalizing on already existing relationship strengths. For example, when an MOC first presents for therapy after disclosure has occurred, the clinician would first assess the couple's overall level of *marital desirability* by questioning: how effective is this couple's communication? What is the quality of their intimacy? Do they have a strong friendship? Do they respect and admire each other? Working on these elements of the couple relationship will help in determining the couple's ability to *suspend disbelief* regarding the viability of their relationship.

Overall, the significance of this research lies in its ability to empower MOMs—and individuals who may consider pursuing an MOR—in their efforts to make the best relational decisions for themselves. Through the use of this model in clinical settings, it is possible that there are couples in MOMs that will choose to stay together after disclosure,

when they otherwise might have been quick to divorce; likewise, there may be MOCs who ultimately do separate, but do so with a better understanding of the choices they are making and with greater therapeutic support during that separation process. Regardless of their ultimate choice, mixed-orientation couples will be empowered by being better informed about their relationship options and by better understanding the emotional and relational processes necessary to the success of mixed-orientation relationships.

### **Implications for Future Research**

When considering the thematic diversity provided by these couples, it seems possible that multiple models or processes can be and are occurring within these marriages at once, and that it is unlikely that one grounded theory model alone could logically and adequately address all the factors relevant to the success of MOMs. It is important to acknowledge that the previously proposed model is but one of many potentially occurring processes within the phenomenon of mixed-orientation marriages, and that further analysis and thematic exploration is necessary to flesh out a thoroughly descriptive theoretical framework.

Some of the more prevalent thematic concepts that could be more thoroughly explored and addressed in future research include: the development of intimacy in MOMs, mental health issues for individuals in MORs, the impact of religious and cultural narratives on the development of MOMs, the impact of infidelity/non-monogamy in MORs, and the development of therapeutic resources for MORs. All of the data provided by the participants, including the interviews thus far un-analyzed, will be retained for future secondary analysis.



The grounded theory proposed in this work, a *Model of Relational Self-Determination in Mixed-Orientation Marriages*, is but the beginning of a greater understanding of mixed-orientation marriages via academic research. The continuation of this work should see this model questioned, adapted, and expanded by further research, qualitative and quantitative, into a thorough understanding and theoretical framework of the experience of finding fulfillment in mixed-orientation marriages.

### **Limitations**

As a qualitative study with a fairly small sample size, the results of this grounded theory are not generalizable to all people in the LGBTQ+ community, nor even all couples in mixed-orientation marriages. As it was set out to explain, the *Model of Relational Self-Determination in Mixed-Orientation Marriages* is at best a fairly accurate, albeit simplified, representation of the process by which successful mixed-orientation couples have arrived at a stable and satisfied marital state after the SSA partner has come out to their spouse.

Some limitations of this present work are found in the demographics of the interviewed participants: First, all of the couples interviewed consisted of an SSA husband and a straight wife, meaning there was no representation of MOMs in which the *woman* is the same-sex attracted spouse. Also, all the couples interviewed were actively religious, and of those, most couples identified as members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, one couple identified as Protestant Christian, and one as Muslim. This means there was little representation for MOMs in other non-LDS religious denominations and no representation for MOMs who may not be religious. Additionally, because all interviewed couples self-reported as *moderately satisfied* to *highly satisfied*

on a marital satisfaction scale, as previously mentioned, there was no significant representation of the processes occurring in *Path B* of this model, in which MORs do not achieve satisfaction, but rather dissolve and end in separation and divorce.

Other limitations of this present work are due to the time constraints of this thesis-level, grounded theory, qualitative study. Of the twelve participant interviews, only seven were utilized for current analysis and contributed to the previously presented grounded theory model. What's more, the couples whose interviews were utilized provided such an abundance of thematic data pertaining to their relational experiences that it was impossible for every topic they discussed to be included in the final presentation of this model.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

Mixed-orientation marriages are often misunderstood. Even now, in what is probably the era of greatest acceptance of diverse romantic relationships, there is still a generally negative connotation in research literature and in the broader culture as a whole regarding the relational experiences of same-sex attracted individuals who marry someone of the opposite sex. However, there exist couples in MOMs that are resilient and attain satisfaction. The purpose of this study has been to better understand how stable and fulfilling MOMs become successful.

By interviewing intact and maritally satisfied mixed-orientation couples, the *Model of Relational Self-Determination in Mixed-Orientation Marriages* was developed. This model is separated into five stages that describe the development of satisfaction in these relationships, and is organized around the experience of disclosure. In summary, regardless of the level of relational development prior to disclosure, every mixed-orientation couple comes to the moment where both partners are aware of the SSA individual's sexuality, after which they will develop beliefs and implications about the meaning of that disclosure for their relationship. Depending on what meaning and perceptions are constructed by the couple, they may gain the ability to *suspend disbelief* regarding the viability of their marriage, which informs their attitudes and actions going forward. Mixed-orientation couples who practice *relational self-determination*—or make consistent, intentional, and self-motivated choices to believe and behave in ways that

benefit the relationship—are able to develop the fruits of those beliefs and choices in the form of a mutually fulfilling relationship.

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## APPENDIX

### Institutional Review Board Approval Letter

#### ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY

*Educating Students for Christian Service and Leadership Throughout the World*

Office of Research and Sponsored Programs  
320 Hardin Administration Building, ACU Box 29103, Abilene, Texas 79699-9103  
325-674-2885



August 25, 2021

Isadora Ferreira de Melo  
Department of Marriage and Family Therapy  
Abilene Christian University

Dear Isadora,

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board, I am pleased to inform you that your project titled "The Happiest Place on Earth: A Grounded Theory of Fulfillment in Mixed-Orientation Marriages.",

(IRB# 21-090 ) is exempt from review under Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects.

If at any time the details of this project change, please resubmit to the IRB so the committee can determine whether or not the exempt status is still applicable.

I wish you well with your work.

Sincerely,

*Megan Roth*

Megan Roth, Ph.D.  
Director of Research and Sponsored Programs