

# Characteristics of Mixed Orientation Couples: An Empirical Study

Mark A. Yarhouse  
*Regent University*

Heather Poma  
*Regent University*

Jennifer S. Ripley  
*Regent University*

Jill L. Kays  
*Regent University*

Audrey N. Atkinson  
*Regent University*

*This study looks at couples in mixed sexual orientation marriages. A mixed sexual orientation marriage is one in which one partner is heterosexual and the other partner is a sexual minority by virtue of experiencing same-sex attraction. Participants were contacted through a number of organizations that provide resources to couples in such relationships, as well as through advertisements on the internet. Two hundred and sixty seven participants (106 sexual minorities, 161 spouses) completed an online survey that consisted of a questionnaire with both quantitative and qualitative components. Analysis suggested a number of themes related to how spouses learned about their partners' experiences of same-sex attraction, motivations for keeping the marriage intact, and coping activities.*

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## CHARACTERISTICS OF MIXED ORIENTATION COUPLES

The most recent national probability study in the U.S. reported that 4.2% of men identified themselves as gay (and 2.6% as bisexual), while 0.9% of women identified themselves as lesbian (and 3.6% as bisexual) (Herbenick, Reece, Schick, Sanders, Dodge, & Fortenberry, 2010). Previous studies have reported that 2% of men and 0.9% of women identified themselves as homosexual (and an additional 0.8% of men and 0.5% of women identified themselves as bisexual) (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994). In the Laumann et al. (1994) study, a higher percentage of men and women reported having engaged in same-sex behavior in the past five years (4.1% of males; 2.2% of females), and an even higher percentage reported same-sex behavior in their lifetime (9.1% of males; 4.3% of females). Many of these individuals are or have been heterosexually married, that is, they are publicly heterosexual, married, and may engage in sex with their partner of the opposite sex, despite past and/or current experiences of same-sex attraction. It is unknown how many men and women who experience same-sex attraction or identify privately as homosexual or bisexual are married, though Buxton (2001) estimated that upward of 2 million sexual minorities are currently or have been heterosexually married (cf., Harry, 1990).

Although relatively little research exists on the

experiences of mixed orientation couples, there has been some research on the experience of “coming out” to one’s partner and the difficult decision to renegotiate expectations for marriage in light of a desire to integrate experiences of same-sex attraction into a gay identity (Hill, 1987; Matthews & Lease, 2000). What research does exist on this topic indicates that the process of disclosure is often difficult for both partners, and can shake a marriage to its core (Buxton, 2001). Further, some research suggests religious motivations for remaining married that are of relevance to Christian psychology (e.g., Yarhouse, Pawlowski & Tan, 2003; Yarhouse & Seymore, 2006; Yarhouse, Hull & Davis, 2009). The research suggests, however, that many mixed orientation relationships do not survive. It has been estimated that only about a third of couples even attempt to stay together after disclosure (Buxton, 2004). Of that third that attempt to stay together, only about half remain intact for three or more years (Buxton).

Yet some mixed orientation relationships do stay together. In a series of studies of mixed orientation relationships in which both partners reported marital satisfaction, we identified several themes that appeared to be related to the decision to stay together, including religious commitments, love for their spouse and children, trust, and a desire to remain committed to their partner (see Yarhouse et al., 2003; Yarhouse & Seymore, 2006; Yarhouse, et al., 2009).

Religious commitments, in particular, may be important to Christian psychology, and it may impact decisions and recommendations offered to couples in these unique relationships. There is an opportunity present to develop responses to sexual identity concerns that is more respectful to religious and spiritual considerations. Mixed orientation marriages reflect but one expression of sexual identity concerns. Unfortunately, little research has been conducted on mixed orientation relationships, let alone research that reflects uniquely Christian or even broader religious considerations. This study did not examine a Christian population specifically, but sought to understand the broad experiences of mixed-orientation couples in general and consider faith and religious coping as an important variable in understanding their overall functioning. Past research has suggested religious coping is an important factor in some mixed orientation relationships, providing support for this consideration (Brownfain, 1985; Yarhouse et al., 2009; Yarhouse et al., 2003; Yarhouse & Seymore, 2006).

In an effort to explore this largely unstudied population, information was obtained in an attempt to learn about the perceptions and experiences of mixed orientation couples. The information gleaned from this research may expand our understanding of the diverse ways in which couples negotiate and respond to various constraints facing the marital dyad when one of the two persons experiences same-sex attractions or identifies as gay, lesbian, or bisexual.

## METHOD

### Participants

This study was part of a larger study examining various aspects of mixed orientation couples. Participants were collected primarily from a sample within the continental U.S.; however, some participants were from other countries, including Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom. Multiple organizations with a relationship to this population notified their contacts of the study. However, a large number of participants were not affiliated with any organization and discovered the survey through online searching or other contacts. A number of participants logged into the survey (sexual minorities  $n=201$ ; spouses  $n=297$ ); however, only participants that completed at least sixty percent of the survey were kept in the final sample, resulting in an  $N$  of 267 participants. The final sample consisted of 106 sexual minorities (i.e., the spouse who experiences same-sex attractions) and 161 spouses (i.e., heterosexual spouses). This included both individuals who were currently in a mixed orientation marriage at the time of the study or who were previously in a mixed orientation marriage (i.e., separated, widowed, or divorced). Those who were previously in a mixed-ori-

entation marriage but were not currently at the time of the study (e.g., divorced, widowed, separated, etc.) were asked to answer the questions based on their experience in the relationship. For example, when assessing relationship satisfaction, individuals who were no longer in the mixed-orientation marriage were asked to answer the questions based on their level of satisfaction in the relationship. Also, the two groups were collected independently; therefore, they are not necessarily from the same mixed orientation relationship. Out of the 267 participants, 178 (66.7%) indicated they were currently married to their mixed orientation spouse at the time of the study. Twenty-seven (10.1%) were married but separated, 40 participants (15.0%) were divorced from their mixed orientation spouse, and 4 individuals (1.5%) indicated they were currently in a same sex union. Eighteen individuals (6.7%) did not respond to the relationship status question.

Two-hundred and thirty-three of the participants (87.3%) of the participants were Caucasian, 5 (1.9%) identified as Latino/Hispanic, 2 (.7%) identified as African American, 1 (.4%) participant identified as Asian/Pacific Islander, and 7 participants (2.6%) identified their ethnicity as "Other." Nineteen participants (7.1%) did not identify their race/ethnicity. This sample is clearly not representative of the typical population in regards to race/ethnicity; however, it may be representative of this population in particular. Previous studies of mixed orientation relationships have also suggested a primarily Caucasian sample (Matteson, 1985; Yarhouse et al., 2001), while many other studies do not clearly describe the ethnicity of their sample. In regards to gender, 91 participants (34.1%) were male, and 159 (59.6 %) were female, while 17 (6.4%) did not indicate their gender. The average age was 45.13 years. The average length of marriage was 16.21 years, including those were still married and those who separated or divorced. For the individuals who were no longer in their mixed orientation marriage, the average length of time since their separation or divorce to the time of the study was 4.74 years.

The majority of the participants indicated they earned an income between \$20,000- \$80,000 ( $n=126$ ; 47.2%); however, a large number of participants ( $n=82$ ; 30.7%) indicated they earned greater than \$100,000. Three percent ( $n=8$ ) of the participants indicated earning \$20,000 or less a year, 9.4 % ( $n=82$ ) stated they earned between \$80,000 - \$100,000, and 9.7% ( $n=26$ ) did not indicate their income level. The sample was largely highly educated, with 28.1 % ( $n=75$ ) having earned a Bachelor's degree and 37.8% ( $n=101$ ) having earned a graduate degree. The rest of the sample identified their education level as follows: seven (2.6%) had a GED or High school diploma, 42 (15.7%) had some college education, and 23 (8.6%)

had an Associate's degree. Nineteen individuals (7.1%) did not indicate their level of education.

When asked about their religious affiliation, 111 individuals (41.6%) identified as Protestant Christian, 31 individuals (11.6%) identified as Roman Catholic, 5 participants (1.9%) identified as Jewish, 3 participants (1.1%) identified as Buddhist, 2 individuals (.7%) identified as Hindu, 49 individuals (18.4%) chose "Other" as their religious affiliation, while 42 individuals (15.7%) indicated having no religious affiliation. Twenty-four participants (9.0%) did not identify their religious affiliation.

The sexual minority participants were specifically asked about their sexual identity. Out of the 106 participants in this group, 31 (29.2%) identified as *Bisexual*, 38 individuals (35.8%) identified as *Gay/Lesbian*, three participants (2.8%) identified themselves as *Queer*, 4 participants (3.8%) identified themselves as *Questioning*, one participant (.9%) identified themselves as *Bicurious*, and 9 participants (8.5%) identified themselves as *Straight*. Nine participants (8.5%) chose *Other* as their sexual identity, 9 participants (8.5%) chose *No Label*, and 2 participants did not respond at all.

All individuals were asked whether they had ever had other marriages apart from their mixed orientation marriage. Out of the 106 total sexual minority participants, 99 responded to this item, with 86.9 percent (n=86) indicating No and 13.1 percent (n=13) indicating Yes. Out of the 161 heterosexual spouse participants, 152 responded to the item, with 73.7 percent (n=112) indicating "Yes" and 26.3 percent (n=40) indicating "No." The majority of individuals indicated the other marriage occurred before their mixed orientation marriage.

## Measures

A questionnaire was developed by the researchers that assessed various areas, including relationship history, relationship dynamics, sexual functioning, relationship satisfaction, coping skills, sexuality orientation and identity, as well as other factors. The items were developed primarily using previous research to determine key research questions and variables salient to mixed-orientation relationships. Some items were adapted from previous studies when the items were public domain or permission was gained from the author. Finally, in addition to the questionnaire developed by the researchers, some specific measures were used, such as the Religious commitment Inventory (RCI-10) and the Kinsey Scale.

*RCI-10.* The RCI-10 was used as a general assessment of religiosity (Worthington et al., 2003). Test-retest reliability has been reported at .87 and coefficient alpha is .93. It has also demonstrated good construct,

criterion-related, and discriminate validity (Worthington et. al., 2003). The RCI-10 asks about various aspects of religious commitment, including personal acts of worship (e.g., prayer), behaviors (e.g., church attendance), as well as the perception of the importance of religion and faith in the individual's life. The measure has 10 items on a 5-point Likert scale from "Not at all true of me" to "Totally true of me." Scores can range from 10 to 50.

*Kinsey scale.* The Kinsey scale was used as a general measure of sexual orientation. The original measure asks individuals to rate aspects of their sexuality on a continuum from exclusively heterosexual (0) to exclusively homosexual (6); the categories were scaled from 1 to 7 to get a quantitative value. There are four versions of the scale, each assessing a different domain: sexual behavior, sexual attractions, emotional attachments, and sexual fantasy. All versions use the same rating scale, but applied to the respective domains. Participants were asked to give a rating for their experience prior to their marriage and again for their current experience.

## Procedure

Participants completed the survey online using a secure online survey program. There were two separate versions of the survey, one for sexual minority participants and one for the heterosexual spouses. The surveys were identical, except the version for sexual minorities included additional questions specifically related to sexual orientation and identity. The complete questionnaires were a compilation of multiple measures and individual questions, including those used for this specific study. The links to the surveys were housed at an independent website solely used for the study, where individuals were given a brief description of the study and instructions on how to participate. The link to the study's website was posted on various websites, blogs, and newsletters where individuals in mixed orientation relationships may visit. The link to the website was also emailed to individuals involved in various organizations who had specific affiliations to this population. Individuals searching online for information regarding mixed orientation relationships could also find the study, as the website would come up in search engines. Only participants who were at least 18 years old and were currently or had been previously in a mixed orientation marriage could participate. Qualifying questions at the beginning of the survey eliminated any participants who did not meet these requirements.

## Data Analysis

Due to the relative under-representation of research on mixed orientation couples, a mixed quantitative

and qualitative research methodology was employed. Methodologies that are more descriptive or qualitative in nature are deemed appropriate for analyzing relatively unexplored research questions (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). Such a methodology allowed participants to share multiple aspects of their experiences in mixed orientation relationships. Data collection was designed to provide frequency counts and other descriptive calculations along with free-writing options that allow an initial step toward a grounded theory (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Past and current experiences of motivations for marrying and staying married, coping strategies, and many other factors could all be engaged with less influence from *a priori* assumptions.

Qualitative responses were organized into themes and subthemes, and the first author worked with the other authors to organize this information inductively with the hope of identifying “multiple realities” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) that might be represented among the perspectives of participants. If needed, each reviewer was available to re-review the data independently until consensus was reached on all items.

## RESULTS

### Disclosure

*Time of disclosure.* Both groups were asked to indicate the time in their relationship at which disclosure took place. They were asked to select from specific time periods, which included “when we first met,” “prior to engagement,” “before you married,” “after you married,” “after separation,” and “never.” Out of the sexual minorities who responded (n=104), the largest group reported disclosure took place after they were married (n = 50; 48.1%). The next largest group indicated disclosure took place prior to engagement (n= 25; 24 %). Twelve individuals (11.5%) indicated disclosure took place when they first met their spouse, 10 individuals (9.6%) indicated disclosure took place after engagement but prior to marriage, 1 individual (1%) indicated disclosure took place after they were separated from their spouse, and 6 individuals (5.8%) stated that they never disclosed their same-sex attractions.

From the heterosexual spouse group, the frequencies were similar but not identical. Out of the 155 individuals that responded to the item, the highest percentage (n= 94; 60.6%) stated disclosure took place after they were married. The next largest percentage (n=23; 14.8%) indicated that their spouse never actually disclosed their same-sex attractions. Eighteen individuals (11.6%) stated disclosure took place prior to engagement, 8 (5.2%) stated it occurred when they first met, 7 (4.5%) stated it occurred after their engagement but prior to marriage, and five individuals (3.2%) stated it occurred after they were separated. Six individuals did not respond to this item.

*Method of disclosure.* Both groups were asked to indicate how disclosure occurred; 102 sexual minorities and 154 spouses responded. For both groups, the largest number of respondents indicated disclosure was totally voluntary; however, a larger percentage of sexual minorities responded this way than spouses (sexual minorities n=75, 73.5%; spouses n=65, 42.2%). For the sexual minority group, the rest of the respondents answered as follows: *Because of question from spouse* (n=11; 10.8%), *Discovery/various circumstances* (i.e., unintentionally) (n=11; 10.8%), and *Encouraged by others* (n=5; 4.9%). The rest of the spouses group responded with a similar distribution, but with different percentage levels: *Discovery/various circumstances* (i.e., unintentionally) (n=46; 29.9%), *Because of questions from spouse* (n=37; 24%), and *Encouraged by others* (n=6; 3.9%).

*Reactions to disclosure.* Both groups were asked about their reaction to the disclosure of the sexual minority spouse’s same-sex attraction. The heterosexual spouses were asked about their reaction to disclosure, and the sexual minority spouses were asked about their own reaction as well as their spouses’ reaction. They were given a number of choices and were asked to choose all that applied to them (see Table 1).

For the heterosexual spouses, the five most frequently identified responses for their own reaction to their spouses’ disclosure of same-sex attractions were: *Devastation* (n=99); *Shock* (n=95); *Anxiety* (n=93); *Confusion* (n=93); and *Betrayal* (n=85). When the sexual minority group was asked about their spouses’ reaction to their disclosure they indicated: *Confusion* (n=45); *Understanding* (n=43); *Acceptance* (n=43); *Other* (n=29); *Anger* (n=28); and *Disappointment* (n=28) as the top responses. Finally, the sexual minority spouses were asked about their own experience and reactions to disclosing to their spouse about their same-sex attractions. They identified *Relief* (n=58); *Anxiety* (n=49); *Peace* (n=37); *Other* (n=32); and *Confusion* (n=27) as the most prevalent reactions. It is interesting to note the differences among the groups both in their own reactions and in their perception of their spouses’ reactions.

### Motivations to Marry

Both groups were asked various questions about their relationship history and their motivations to marry into the mixed orientation marriage. The group of sexual minority respondents indicated they dated for an average of approximately two years before deciding to marry. The group of heterosexual spouses responded similarly, with an average length of dating of approximately 2.62 years before deciding to marry.

Both groups were asked to describe their motivations for marrying into their mixed orientation mar-

Table 1

*Reactions to Disclosure (Frequency of Response)*

	Heterosexual spouses' response to sexual minority spouses' disclosure	Sexual minority spouses' account of their spouses' reaction	Sexual minority spouses' account of their own response
Disbelief	64	19	5
Anger	71	28*	3
Disgust	35	18	5
Understanding	58	43*	10
Confusion	93*	45*	27*
Shock	95*	34	8
Disappointment	60	28*	13
Approval	8	10	6
Acceptance	37	43*	17
Betrayal	85*	25	4
Devastation	99*	20	14
Tolerance	30	22	4
Relief	39	8	58*
Peace	13	16	37*
Anxiety	93*	32	49*
Other	50	29*	32*

Note. \*One of the top five most frequent responses for that group

riage. Respondents were given a list of possible motivations, and they were asked to rate each one on a Likert scale from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly Agree*) based on the degree to which it applied to them. Both groups reported similar motivations. Out of the individuals that answered the questions, the most popular motivations of the sexual minority group were “*Wanted children and a family*” (n=86; 79.8%), “*Seemed like the natural or right thing to do*” (n=77; 74.8%), “*We were in love*” (n=84; 80.9%), and “*Wanted a Companion*” (n=86; 84.3%). The responses that the sexual minority group most rejected as motivations to marry, were “*Pressure from Family*” (n=68; 66.7%), “*Pressure from future spouse*” (n=79; 77.5%), “*Advice from someone else*” (n=78; 76.5%), and “*Wanted to hide same-sex attractions*” (n=64; 63.4%) (see Table 2).

The motivations for marrying were similar for the group of heterosexual spouses with “*Wanted children and a family*” (n=109; 71.7%), “*Seemed like the natural or right thing to do*” (n=132; 85.1%), “*We were in love*” (n=147; 93%), and “*Wanted a companion*”

(n=114; 80.9%) as the motivations they agreed with the most and responded as *Strongly Agree* or *Agree*. On the other hand, the spouses group responded as *Strongly Disagree* or *Disagree* most frequently to “*Relief from loneliness*” (n=100; 65.8%), “*Pressure from family*” (n=132; 86.8%), “*Pressure from future spouse*” (n=118; 77.6%), “*Everyone else was getting married*” (n=115; 75.7%), “*Thought spouse’s same-sex attraction would go away*” (n=92; 75.4%), and “*Advice from someone else*” (n=124; 86.7%) as motivations for marrying (see Table 3).

### Motivations to Maintain Marriage after Disclosure

In terms of qualitative analyses, both groups were asked about the reasons why they maintained their marriage after disclosure. For sexual minorities, the most frequently cited reasons were *love* (n = 51), *children/family* (n = 44), and that they felt their marriage was a *good marriage* (n = 36), which incorporated statements reflecting happiness, shared values, and an emotional bond. The theme of *faith/religion* was cited

Table 2

*Motivations to Marry for Sexual Minorities by Percentage*

Reasons for marrying...	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Not Sure	Agree	Strongly Agree	Did not answer
Relief from loneliness	18.4 (n=19)	17.5 (n=18)	8.7 (n=9)	42.7 (n=44)	12.6 (n=13)	n=3
Pressure from family	41.2 (n=42)	25.5 (n=26)	7.8 (n=8)	20.6 (n=21)	4.9 (n=5)	n=4
Pressure from future spouse	39.2 (n=40)	38.2 (n=39)	6.9 (n=7)	10.8 (n=11)	4.9 (n=5)	n=4
Everyone else was getting married	28.4 (n=29)	26.5 (n=27)	10.8 (n=11)	26.5 (n=27)	7.8 (n=8)	n=4
I thought my same-sex attraction would go away	25.7 (n=27)	14.3 (n=15)	15.2 (n=16)	23.8 (n=25)	21.0 (n=22)	n=1
Advice from someone else	36.3 (n=37)	40.2 (n=41)	5.9 (n=6)	14.7 (n=15)	2.9 (n=3)	n=4
I wanted to hide my attraction for same-sex individuals	39.6 (n=40)	23.8 (n=24)	12.9 (n=13)	11.9 (n=12)	11.9 (n=12)	n=5
I wanted children and a family life	8.7 (n=9)	4.8 (n=5)	6.7 (n=7)	34.6 (n=36)	45.2 (n=47)	n=2
It seemed the natural and “right” thing	7.8 (n=8)	5.8 (n=6)	11.7 (n=12)	46.6 (n=48)	28.2 (n=29)	n=3
We were “in love”	3.8 (n=4)	5.8 (n=6)	9.6 (n=10)	43.3 (n=45)	37.5 (n=39)	n=2
I wanted a companion	4.9 (n=5)	4.9 (n=5)	5.9 (n=6)	46.1 (n=47)	38.2 (n=39)	n=4

explicitly as a reason for maintaining the marriage by nineteen sexual minority participants.

Spouses of sexual minorities were asked the same question, and the most frequently cited themes for

spouses were *children/family* (n = 52), *love* (n = 46), with other themes also noted by fewer participants, such as *good marriage* (n = 27), *financial reasons* (n = 23), and *companionship/friendship* (n = 21). The theme

Table 3

*Motivations to Marry for Spouses by Percentage*

Reasons for marrying...	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Not Sure	Agree	Strongly Agree	Did not answer
Relief from loneliness	38.2 (n=58)	27.6 (n=42)	12.5 (n=19)	17.8 (n=27)	3.9 (n=6)	n=9
Pressure from family	59.2 (n=90)	27.6 (n=42)	5.9 (n=9)	5.3 (n=8)	2.0 (n=3)	n=9
Pressure from future spouse	51.3 (n=78)	26.3 (n=40)	7.2 (n=11)	10.5 (n=16)	4.6 (n=7)	n=9
Everyone else was getting married	50.0 (n=76)	25.7 (n=39)	11.2 (n=17)	9.2 (n=14)	3.9 (n=6)	n=9
I thought my spouse's same-sex attraction would go away	63.9 (n=78)	11.5 (n=14)	13.9 (n=17)	8.2 (n=10)	2.5 (n=3)	n=39
Advice from someone else	63.6 (n=91)	23.1 (n=33)	4.2 (n=6)	7.0 (n=10)	2.1 (n=3)	n=18
I wanted children and a family life	16.4 (n=25)	9.2 (n=14)	2.6 (n=4)	40.8 (n=62)	30.9 (n=47)	n=9
It seemed the natural and "right" thing	5.8 (n=9)	3.9 (n=6)	5.2 (n=8)	43.2 (n=67)	41.9 (n=65)	n=6
We were "in love"	1.9 (n=3)	1.3 (n=2)	3.8 (n=6)	32.9 (n=52)	60.1 (n=95)	n=3
I wanted a companion	3.5 (n=5)	6.4 (n=9)	9.2 (n=13)	53.9 (n=76)	27.0 (n=38)	n=20

of *faith/religion* as a reason to maintain the marriage was cited explicitly by 9 spouses.

### Motivations and Process of Ending Marriage

When asked about the motivations and process of ending the marriage, 8 sexual minorities discussed being *unhappy in the marriage*, while 4 expressed that they *wanted something more*. Three sexual minorities indicated that they *could not lie/cheat anymore*, while 2 realized that they were *not going to change*.

When asked about the motivations and process of ending the marriage, 14 spouses shared that their *partner left/moved on*, while 11 indicated *infidelity on*

the part of their spouse. Nine referenced *lies/deception/no trust*, while 8 spouses cited *no intimacy* as the motivation for ending the marriage.

### Coping Strategies

Participants were asked about how they coped with the experience of same-sex attraction. The most frequently cited themes among sexual minorities were *communication* (n = 32), *social support* (n = 22), *boundaries* (n = 15), *denial/avoidance* (n = 11), *religious/spiritual* (n = 11), *redefining the relationship* (n = 11), and *therapy/counseling* (n = 10). Examples of *communication* were: "I am honest with her about my feelings. I confess/

apologize to her when I slipped up.” Another person shared: “Have open and honest conversations.” In terms of *social support*, one participant shared: “We talk to people about it (participate in online discussion groups, have other people over who struggle).”

Spouses of sexual minorities also provided information on coping strategies. The most frequently cited themes were *communication* (n = 26), *denial/avoidance* (n = 25), *social support* (n = 16), *boundaries* (n = 15), *redefine relationship* (n = 15), *sexual aids* (n = 11), and *positive focus* (n = 10). One spouse discussed *communication* this way: “We try to talk openly about it.” Another shared: “We openly and honestly discuss it.” On the theme of *denial/avoidance*, one spouse wrote: “My husband pretends that it isn’t there.” Another wrote: “I have him keep pornography out of the house. If he does his thing, I am not aware of it.” Still another wrote: “Nothing. It’s the big giant elephant in the room that we don’t talk about much.”

Both sexual minorities and spouses were also asked about religious coping activities. The most common themes cited by sexual minorities were *commitment/keep together* (n = 24), *religion as core* (n = 13), *specific religious practices* (e.g., prayer, church attendance) (n = 8), and *God’s will* (n = 7). On the theme of *commitment/keep together*, one sexual minority shared: “My religious upbringing certainly has laid the groundwork that ending a marriage is not an option. Even so, it’s just not an option for either of us because we are committed to each other.” Another wrote: “It is critical to my commitment to deal with the SSA [same-sex attraction]. Our religious faith means that we have a covenant marriage.” On the theme of *religion as core*, one sexual minority wrote: “Our marriage would have not survived if not for our faith, our church, and our relationship with Jesus Christ.” Another shared the following: “IT is the key. Without Jesus we would never have made it. He is the super glue that has held us together when we were both so broken.”

Spouses shared several themes as well. These included *being spiritual but not religious* (n = 17), *commitment/keep together* (n = 16), *religious practices* (n = 11), and *strength* (n = 11). As an example of *spiritual not religious*, one spouse shared: “More my personal spiritual belief. I don’t belong to a formal religion/Church at present.” Another shared: “I am spiritual but not institutionally religious.” On the themes of *commitment*, one spouse wrote: “We strongly believe in our marriage commitment to each other and to God.”

### Quality and Characteristics of Marital Relationship

*Relationship satisfaction.* Both groups were asked various questions about their relationship satisfaction and feelings about their mixed orientation marriage,

as well as questions detailing the dynamics of their relationship. Ninety-five individuals from the sexual minority group responded, with the highest number stating they felt *Extremely Positive* about their relationship’s future (n=37; 38.8%). The remaining individuals responded in the following manner: *Positive* (n=21; 22.1%), *Neither positive or negative* (n=18; 18.9%), *Negative* (n=12; 12.6%), and *Extremely negative* (n=7; 7.4%). The spouses group was asked the same question, and 113 individuals responded. The majority of individuals stated they felt *Positive* about their relationship’s future (n=29; 25.7%). The remaining individuals responded in the following manner: *Extremely Positive* (n=23; 20.4%), *Neither positive or negative* (n=23; 20.4%), *Extremely negative* (n=22; 19.5), and *Negative* (n=16; 14.2%). Therefore, the majority of people in both groups stated they felt *Positive* or *Extremely Positive* about the future of relationship. At the same time, while the majority of individuals reported feeling positive, it is interesting to note that a larger distribution of spouses reported negative feelings about the relationship’s future than did individuals from the sexual minority group, shining light on one possible area of discrepancy.

Both groups were specifically asked to describe the level of “happiness” in their mixed orientation marriage, using a Likert scale from 0 (*Extremely Unhappy*) to 6 (*Perfect*). The mean level of satisfaction for the sexual minority group was 2.9 which fell closest to the *Happy* label on the Likert scale. The mean score for the heterosexual spouses group was 2.1, which fell closest to the *A Little Unhappy* label. These scores, as well as those from the previously described item, suggest that relationship satisfaction might be slightly higher for the sexual minority spouses than it is for the heterosexual spouse in the relationship.

*Best and most difficult aspects of marriage.* Both groups were asked to indicate the best aspects of their mixed orientation marriage, as well as those factors that were most difficult in their relationship. A list of possible choices was given and respondents were asked to choose all that applied. If there was an option not listed, participants were given an option of “Other” with a qualitative component for them to describe their choice. The frequencies of the responses are summarized in Table 4.

For the question asking about the best aspects of their relationship, the heterosexual spouses most frequently chose *Friendship* (n=86); *Companionship* (n=72); *Affection for each other* (n=65); *Ability to Persevere* (n=64); *Shared Values* (n=63) and *Support* (n=63) as the best aspects of their relationship. The sexual minority spouses chose: *Friendship* (n=76); *Support* (n=73); *Companionship* (n=69); *Love* (n=65); and *Affection for each other* as the best aspects of their rela-



Table 4.

*Best and most difficult aspects of the relationship*

Best Factors	Heterosexual Spouses	Sexual Minority Spouses	Most Difficult Factors	Heterosexual Spouses	Sexual Minority Spouses
Support	63*	73*	SSA	58	55*
Friendship	86*	76*	Lack of trust	87*	28
Love	62	65*	Finances	68*	46*
Authenticity	38	43	Sex	101*	45*
Shared Values	63*	60	Parenting	34	28
Affection for each other	65*	61*	Lack of time	43	34*
Ability to persevere	64*	58	Intimacy	91*	45*
Mutual religious faith	40	48	Communication	68	33
Openness	45	47	Frequent Arguing	34	25
Companionship	72*	69*	Infidelity	39	15
Sex	28	42	Lack of Affections	72*	27
Other	16	6	Other	10	8

Note. \*One of the top five most frequent responses for that group

tionship.

When asked about the most difficult things about their relationship, the heterosexual spouses most frequently chose *Sex* (n=101); *Intimacy* (n=91); *Lack of Trust* (n=87); *Lack of Affections* (n=72); and *Finances* (n=68). The individuals in the sexual minority group most frequently chose *Same-sex attractions* (n=55); *Finances* (n=46); *Intimacy* (n=45); *Sex* (n=45); and *Lack of time* (n=34) as the most difficult aspects of their relationship. For both groups, sex and intimacy were cited as some of the most difficult variables in their marriage, as well as finances. The heterosexual spouses' remaining responses centered on emotional aspects of their relationship, particularly a lack of trust and affection. The group of sexual minority spouses indicated their same-sex attractions were the most difficult aspect of their relationship, while also identifying lack of time as a challenge.

*Sexual functioning.* Both spouses were asked various questions about the sexual functioning in their marriage. Those who were no longer in the marriage were asked to answer the question based on the last year or two of their marriage. This was an important

question since this can be a particularly salient and sensitive area for these couples. When asked how often they have had any type of sexual relations with their spouse in the past month, the sexual minority group responded with a mean of 4.88 (SD=6.68). The heterosexual spouse group had a mean of 2.83 (SD=5.59), highlighting another possible area of discrepancy.

Both groups were asked to indicate their frequency of sexual intercourse using a categorical question. The highest percentage of sexual minority respondents stated they had sexual intercourse *1-3 times a week* (n=43; 41.3%). The remaining individuals answered in the following manner, in order from greatest frequency to least: *Never* (n=21; 20.2%), *Less than once a month* (n=20; 19.2%), *About one time a month* (n=15; 14.4%). Two individuals did not respond. In contrast, the highest percentage of spouses indicated that they *Never* had sexual intercourse with their partner (n=69; 44.5%). The remaining frequencies of responses were: *1-3 times a week* (n=30; 19.4%), *Less than once a month* (n=25; 16.1%), *About one time a month* (n=23; 14.8%) and *greater than 4 times a week* (n=8; 5.2%). Six individuals did not respond.

Respondents were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with the sexual relationship in the marriage on a Likert scale from 1=*Terrible* to 9=*Great*. The mean score for the sexual minority group was 6.02 (SD=2.53), which falls in between the two labels *Not pleasant, not unpleasant* and *More pleasant than unpleasant*. The mean level of satisfaction for the group of spouses was 4.62 (SD=2.88), which falls closest to the *Not pleasant, not unpleasant* label. This again suggests there is slight discrepancy in satisfaction level in regards to sexual functioning, with sexual minority spouses reporting greater levels of satisfaction than the heterosexual spouses.

In looking at the qualitative data, sexual minorities and spouses were asked how their sexual relationship changed following disclosure. The most frequently cited response described *negative change* (n = 77), with subthemes of *decreased frequency/stoppage* (n = 47), *decreased desire* (n = 28) and *insecurity/emotional difficulties* (n = 11) as most common. Twenty-one sexual minorities reported that their sexual relationship *improved* following disclosure. Subthemes identified here included *increased/broadened* sexual activity (n = 12), *improved relationship/emotionally* (n = 9), and *increased frequency* (n = 7). Other themes included *no change* (N = 31).

Spouses of sexual minorities also answered this question. The most frequently cited theme was *no change* (n = 38), followed by *negative change* (n = 29), and *improved* (n = 20). Among those who reported negative change, subthemes included *decreased frequency* (n = 11), *decreased desire* (n = 7), and *emotionally difficulty* (n = 7). Those who reported improvement discussed their relationship as *improved/emotionally close* (n = 9), *increased exploration/broadened sexual activity* (n = 8), and *increased desire* (n = 4), and *increased frequency* (n = 3).

**Extramarital relationships.** Both groups were asked about relationships occurring outside of their marriage. The large majority of respondents from both groups indicated their marriage was not open, or one in which spouses have mutually agreed that either spouse is allowed to have sexual relations outside their relationship. More specifically, 89 participants (84.8%) from the sexual minority group indicated their marriage was not open while 16 participants (15.1%) stated their marriage was. Similarly, 124 respondents (78%) from the spouse group described their marriage as not being open, while 35 participants (22%) stated theirs was.

If their marriage was not considered open, respondents were asked about the incidence and prevalence of extramarital affairs. When asked directly if they had ever been sexually involved with someone outside of their marriage, 95 total sexual minorities responded and 130 spouses responded. Out of the sexual minor-

ity respondents, 42 (44.2%) indicated that had been involved in at least one extramarital relationship, and 53 (55.8%) stated they had not. Out of the group of spouses that responded, 25 (19.2%) indicated they had been involved in an extramarital relationship, and 105 (80.8%) stated they had not.

Again, if the marriage was not considered open, respondents were asked to indicate the number of extramarital relationships they had with the same sex and the opposite sex and how long into their marriage the affairs began. The mean number of same-sex extramarital affairs was 3.14 (SD=4.98, range=25). There were four outliers deleted from this group that were substantially larger than the average for the remainder of the sample.<sup>2</sup> The mean number of opposite-sex extramarital affairs was 1.33 (SD=.58, range=1). The sexual minority group indicated that the extramarital affairs began on average 7.43 years into their marriage (SD= 7.72, range= 25). For spouses, the mean number of same-sex extramarital relationships was 2.20 (SD=1.64, range=3), and the mean number of opposite-sex relationships was 2.32 (SD=2.06, range=7). They indicated the affairs began on average 6.78 years (SD=7.84, range= 27) into their marriage.

**Use of same-sex fantasy.** The group of sexual minority respondents was asked about the need for and use of same-sex fantasy to achieve arousal during sexual intercourse with their spouse. Approximately 102 individuals responded. During the initial stages of love-making, 54 (52.9%) indicated the use of same-sex fantasy was *Not necessary* to become aroused, 30 (29.4%) stated it was *A little necessary*, and 18 (17.6%) stated it was *Absolutely necessary*. Individuals were also asked if they ever fantasized about the same-sex while further along in the act of love-making; 102 individuals responded. The results were relatively evenly distributed. Thirty-two (31.4%) stated they *frequently* fantasized about the same-sex, 20 (19.6%) indicated they did *occasionally*, 25 (24.5%) stated *Yes, but not often*, and 25 (24.5%) stated they never fantasized about the same sex while having intercourse with their spouse. Most individuals (n = 60; 64.5%) indicated their spouse was not aware of their same-sex fantasies, while 33 (35.5%) indicated their spouse was aware. Thirteen individuals did not respond to this item.

### Religious/Spiritual Values and Practice

Participants were asked various questions to assess their level of religiosity and spirituality. On the RCI-10, a measure of religious values and practices, sexual minority participants had a mean of 32.42 (SD= 14.16), and spouses had a mean of 27.52 (SD= 13.88). Spouses were at about average religious commitment, with sexual minorities reporting relatively higher religious commitment but would not be considered high on re-

ligious commitment (a score of 37 is considered high religious commitment; Worthington et al., 2003). Out of 103 respondents in the group of sexual minorities, 76 (73.8%) stated they attended religious services, with the majority of individuals stating they attended services *Nearly every week* (n=37, 38.1%) or *More than once a week* (n=24, 24.7%). Twelve individuals stated they *Never* attended religious services (12.4%), 3 individuals (3.1%) indicated they attended *Less than once a year*; 9 individuals (9.3%) stated they attended *Several times a year*, 1 individual (1.0%) indicated their attendance was *About once a month*, 5 participants (5.2%) indicated they attended *2-3 times a month*, and 6 individuals (6.2%) chose *N/A*. When asked about their use of prayer and/or meditation, 103 participants responded. A large majority (n=88; 85.4%) indicated they did pray or meditate while 15 participants (14.6%) stated they did not. When asked about frequency, the highest percentage of individuals who responded (n=101) indicated they used prayer or meditation *Daily* (n=28; 27.7%) or *Several times a day* (n=24; 23.8%). Five participants (5.0%) indicated they *Rarely* used prayer or meditation, 11 individuals (10.9%) stated they used it *Occasionally*, 6 individuals stated their frequency was *Weekly* (5.9%), 16 individuals indicated using prayer or meditation *Several times a week* (15.8%), and 11 participants (10.9%) chose *N/A*.

The group of heterosexual spouses was asked the same questions about religious/spiritual practices. Sixty-two percent of the respondents (n=100) indicated they did attend religious services while 36.3 percent (n=57) stated they did not; 4 individuals did not respond. In terms of frequency, 23 participants (16.2%) indicated they *Rarely* attended services, 12 individuals (8.5%) stated their frequency was *Less than once a year*, 20 individuals (14.1%) indicated they attended *Several times a year*, seven individuals (4.9%) stated their frequency was *About once a month*, 11 participants (7.7%) indicated they attended services *2-3 times a month*, thirty participants (24.6%) stated their frequency was *Nearly every week*, 24 individuals (16.9%) described their frequency as *More than once a week*, and 10 individuals (7.0%) chose *N/A*. Nineteen individuals did not respond.

When asked about the use of prayer and/or meditation, 127 (81.4%) spouses indicated they did pray or meditate, while 29 (18.6%) indicated they did not. Five individuals did not respond. The largest number of individuals in this group indicated they used prayer or meditation *Daily* (n=45; 31.3%). The remaining respondents were relatively evenly distributed, with the following frequencies: *Rarely* (n=4; 2.8%), *Occasionally* (n=21; 14.6%), *Weekly* (n=8; 5.6%), *Several times a week* (n=21; 14.6%), *Several times a day* (n=27;

18.8%), and *N/A* (n=18; 12.5%).

The demographic description of all the respondents' religious affiliation was described previously in the *Participants* section. As indicated in that section, the majority of individuals identified as Protestant/Christian. Individuals were also asked whether they considered themselves "Born Again," which is a common protestant evangelical Christian description. Seventy-nine sexual minority participants responded to this item, with 52 (65.1%) responding *Yes*, 18 (22.8%) responded *No*, and 9 (11.4%) stating they were *Unsure*. When asked the age at which they had this "Born Again" experience, 35 individuals responded with a mean of 14.61 (SD=6.59; range= 35). Out of the group of heterosexual spouses, 105 individuals responded to the initial question, with 46 (43.8%) stating *Yes* they considered themselves "Born Again," 52 (49.5%) stating *No*, and 7 (6.7%) indicating they were *Unsure*. Thirty-one individuals from this group responded to the item asking for the age at which they had their "Born Again" experience with a mean of 19.45 (SD=12.56; range=52).

### **Self-Report of Same and Opposite-Sex Attractions and Self-Identification**

The sexual minority participants were asked various questions about their sexual identity and orientation. Individuals were specifically asked to rate their subjective experience of same-sex attraction prior to marriage and currently on a 1-10 scale in which 1 represented no same-sex attraction and 10 represented strong same-sex attraction. Concerning same-sex attraction, the mean was 7.60 (SD = 2.48) prior to marriage and 8.02 (SD = 2.49) currently.

Individuals were also asked to complete a rating of heterosexual or opposite-sex attractions in keeping with the current thinking in the field that homosexual orientation/attraction and heterosexual orientation/attraction are best measured on independent scales (e.g., see Shidlo & Schroeder, 1999). Regarding heterosexual attraction, the mean rating was 5.02 (SD = 2.80) prior to marriage and 4.49 (SD = 2.92) currently.

The group of sexual minority participants was asked to indicate what sexual identity label they took both privately and publicly. In other words, individuals were asked how they describe themselves to others in terms of their sexual identity and then how they actually would describe and label themselves in terms of their sexual identity. As indicated previously, the highest percentage of individuals indicated they personally described themselves as *Bisexual* (n=31; 29.8%) or *Gay/Lesbian* (n=38; 36.5%). See the previous section, *Participants*, for further breakdown of the remaining identity labels.

In regards to how they identify themselves public-

ly, or how others would describe them, the majority of individuals chose *Straight* (n=67; 64.4%). The remaining distribution was as follows: *Bisexual* (n=5; 4.8%), *Gay/Lesbian* (n=11; 10.6%), *Queer* (n=1; 1.0%), *Questioning* (n=4; 3.8%), *Bicurious* (n=1; 1.0%), *No label* (n=8; 7.7%), and *Other* (n=7; 6.7%). All but two participants responded to this item. These results suggest there is a discrepancy in how the sexual minority participants describe themselves and identify publicly and how they actually consider themselves.

**Kinsey scale.** Individuals in the sexual minority group were given multiple versions of the Kinsey Scale, which is a general measure of sexual orientation. Participants were asked to complete four versions of the scale, assessing sexual behavior, attractions, emotional attachment, and sexual fantasy. They were asked to assess these domains both before they were married and currently, thus creating eight separate assessments. The mean score for the behavior Kinsey scale was calculated independently for the both time frames (“before marriage” and “currently”). All four versions of the Kinsey scale were averaged to create a Kinsey Expanded version that assesses all four domains of sexuality (behavior, attractions, emotional attachment, and fantasy). The results are summarized in Table 5.

The mean score of the Kinsey behavior scale before marriage was 3.60, which falls in between the *Largely heterosexual, but more than incidental homosexual* and *Equal amounts of heterosexual and homosexual* categories. The mean score of the Kinsey behavior scale currently was 2.80, which falls in between the *Largely heterosexual, but incidental homosexual* and *Largely heterosexual, but more than incidental homosexual* categories.

On the Kinsey Expanded version, the mean score for both before marriage and the current assessment were 4.33 and 4.57 respectively. Both of these scores fall in between the *Equal amounts of heterosexual and homosexual* and *Largely homosexual, but more than incidental heterosexual* categories.

A paired-sample t-test was conducted to determine if there was a significant difference in their Kinsey scores before marriage and currently. There was a

significant difference in their Kinsey behavior scale scores, indicating the sample’s sexual behavior significantly shifted *toward* the exclusively heterosexual side of the continuum since they have been married. This is likely simply a result of the fact that most of the participants were in a heterosexual marriage, thus decreasing the frequency of same-sex behavior. On the Kinsey Expanded scale, there was not a significant difference between their ratings before marriage and currently, suggesting there has been little change in their degree of overall sexual orientation (attractions, behavior, emotional attachment, and fantasy).

**Sexual identity developmental milestones.** Participants in the sexual minority group were asked to indicate the age at which they experienced specific sexual identity developmental milestones. The results are described in Table 6.

Additionally, individuals from the group of sexual minorities were asked whether they had ever been sexually active with someone of the opposite sex prior to marriage. One-hundred and four participants responded, with 58 (55.8%) responding *No* and 46 (44.2%) responding *Yes*.

## DISCUSSION

This study sought to add to the current research base on mixed orientation couples. These data expanded upon previously researched areas while also examining new areas, broadening our understanding of these complex and unique relationships. Special consideration was given to the role of religion and faith in these relationships and the application of these findings to faith communities.

Mixed orientation couples in this study presented as heterogeneous, reflecting in their responses a wide range of experiences. For example, both sexual minorities and heterosexual spouses identified diverse reasons for marrying including that it felt natural to do so, that they were in love, the desire for a companion, family and children, and so on. They were less likely to report feeling pressured by family or from their future spouse than individuals critical of such marriages might have assumed. Sexual minorities and heterosexual spouses

Table 5. Kinsey Scores (scaled 1 [exclusively heterosexual] to 7 [exclusively homosexual])

Kinsey Scale (N)	Before Marriage M (SD)	Currently M (SD)	Mean Diff.	t-score	2-tailed sig.
Kinsey Behavior Scale (93)	3.60 (SD=2.39)	2.80 (SD=2.37)	0.8	2.32	.02*
Kinsey Expanded Version (103)	4.33 (SD=1.69)	4.57 (SD=1.67)	-0.24	-1.09	.28

\*p<.05

Table 6

*Sexual Identity Developmental Milestones*

Developmental Milestone	N	Mean Age (SD)	Range
Awareness of same-sex feelings	99	14.08 (SD=7.10)	2-45
Confusion about same-sex feelings	86	16.12 (SD=7.39)	4-45
Intimately/romantically kissed by someone of same-sex	77	22.16 (SD=8.58)	8-45
Been fondled (breasts or genitals) of someone by the same-sex without orgasm	80	18.12 (SD=9.62)	4-45
Fondled (breasts or genitals) someone of the same-sex without orgasm	79	19.01 (SD=9.81)	4-51
Same-sex sexual behavior (to orgasm)	78	21.49 (SD=9.94)	8-51
Initial attribution that "I am gay/lesbian/bisexual"	84	25.93 (SD=10.91)	10-49
Took on identity label "gay/lesbian/bisexual"	65	32.98 (SD=11.62)	12-69
First same-sex relationship	70	25.08 (SD=11.50)	9-59
Intimately/romantically kissed by someone of opposite-sex	88	18.40 (SD=7.22)	9-50
Been fondled (breasts or genitals) of someone by the opposite-sex without orgasm	92	18.33 (SD=6.75)	6-41
Fondled (breasts or genitals) someone of the opposite-sex without orgasm	91	19.09 (SD=6.06)	13-41
Opposite-sex sexual behavior (to orgasm)	93	21.13 (SD=5.27)	12-41
First opposite-sex relationship	95	17.85 (SD=5.42)	11-50

also reported a variety of reasons for maintaining their marriage after disclosure. Again, love and children/family were commonly cited themes, as was faith/religion and more practical considerations, such as finances.

When asked about coping strategies, including religious coping strategies, such as commitment, the

centrality of religion, and specific religious practices, both sexual minority spouses and heterosexual spouses identified an array of coping activities, from more constructive strategies (e.g., communication, social support, and boundaries) to less healthy strategies (e.g., avoidance/denial). These findings seem consistent with recent reviews of literature (e.g., Kays & Yar-

house, 2010) on resilient factors in mixed orientation marriages.

The marriages themselves seemed to be characterized by satisfaction and positive feelings about the future of the marriage, although, again, a range of experiences were reported. Sexual minorities, on average, reported more positive satisfaction and a more positive view of the future of their marriage, which was also seen in the self-report of happiness. These findings are consistent with what has been reported in other studies of mixed orientation couples (e.g., Yarhouse et al., 2003), although, again, there have been a range of experiences reported. Further research would help clarify the interesting contrast between the experiences of sexual minorities and the heterosexual spouses.

In the area of sexual fidelity, sexual minority spouses reported a higher than average number of extramarital relationships (44.2% indicating an extramarital relationship), whereas national averages are at about 10% of women and under 25% of men (Laumann et al., 1994). These higher rates are consistent with previous research (e.g., Yarhouse et al., 2003) and may be more likely earlier in a marriage when a marriage is often viewed as more vulnerable to an affair. As discussed by Yarhouse and Seymore (2006), people often question whether they made the right decision in marrying their spouse, and they may find themselves more open to an extramarital relationship early in marriage. This could be heightened under marital strain. Added to the thought of whether they have married the right person, the complication of questioning one's sexual identity or wondering about the viability of a heterosexual marriage, and that may offer a partial explanation for higher rates of infidelity.

When asked about sexual experiences – frequency and satisfaction – this sample again reported a range of experiences, with about 20% of sexual minorities and 45% of spouses reported not having sexual intercourse with their spouse. In contrast, 41% of sexual minorities and almost 20% of spouses reported sexual intercourse 1-3 times per week. Ratings of satisfaction reflected these diverse experiences as well, with average satisfaction ratings higher among sexual minorities than among heterosexual spouses. A similar range of experiences were noted in the use of same-sex fantasy to achieve arousal; that is, some respondents reported the use of such fantasy, while about half indicated that that was not necessary.

When we look at the sexual minorities specifically, it is noteworthy that the findings from the Kinsey scale suggest that they did report significant behavioral change. This likely reflected the commitment to their heterosexual marriage and the decrease in frequency of same-sex behavior. However, when the Kinsey expanded scale was administered, sexual minorities did

not report a statistically significant change in the combination of behaviors, attraction, fantasy, and emotional attachment – the combination meant to convey sexual orientation rather than just behavior. This is not to say that orientation cannot change (see Jones & Yarhouse, 2007). Rather, the behavioral changes in a mixed orientation marriage should not be taken to signal orientation change as such. This is important to the Christian interested in applied psychology who might be more inclined to view behavioral change as signaling orientation change. These should be understood as separate considerations.

The milestone events in sexual identity formation are interesting to compare to milestone events studied in mainstream GLB studies. For example, the average age of awareness of same-sex attraction (at about age 14) is comparable to other studies (Savin-Williams, 2005); however, the decision to adopt a gay identity label occurred much later in life in this sample (about age 33). This is over twice as old as what most gay and lesbian adults are reporting from their adolescence (in which the average age of labeling self as gay or lesbian is around 15 or 16 years of age; Savin-Williams; Yarhouse, Stratton, Dean & Brooke, 2009), although it is more in keeping with what has been reported in studies of Christian sexual minorities who do not adopt a gay identity (e.g., Yarhouse & Tan, 2004). In our sample, only 65% reported taking on a gay identity label despite 84% of our sample initially attributing their same-sex attractions to a gay identity. Indeed, most of our sample privately thought of themselves as either bisexual or gay/lesbian (a combined 66.3%), while the majority shared that their public identity was straight/heterosexual (64.4%). Future research could look at both public and private sexual identity and how the decision to choose one identity over others is shaped by how a person makes meaning out of their same-sex attractions. Indeed, some research suggests that the beliefs a person holds (their meaning and attributions) may shape their choice of identity label (Wolkomir, 2006; Yarhouse, 2001; Yarhouse & Tan, 2004; Yarhouse et al., 2009).

While a diverse number of experiences, interests, and values were represented, a high number of participants identified as Christian (approximately 50%), and many individuals cited their faith and religious coping activities as important factors in their relationship. Previous research has also highlighted this area as being salient for some couples (Brownfain, 1985; Yarhouse et al., 2009; Yarhouse et al., 2003; Yarhouse & Seymore, 2006). Considering this, it is important to be sensitive to the role that faith may play in some mixed orientation relationships, particularly for individuals who are religious. Clinicians working with mixed orientation couples may want to specifically

consider religion and faith in their assessment of diversity variables and incorporate the couple's values into the treatment plan as indicated. Furthermore, this discussion may be of interest to Christian as well as other faith communities, as they have a special role to play in the service and support of the mixed orientation couples in their communities.

To the readership of *Edification*, it might be noted that Christians are at a unique position at this point in time regarding developing Christian responses to sexual identity concerns. The experience of sexual minorities and heterosexual spouses in mixed orientation marriages is but one expression of sexual identity concerns. Very little has actually been produced for people in mixed orientation relationships that is Christian, psychologically-informed, and culturally competent. While there are some voices in ministry circles discussing sanctification and Christ-likeness (e.g., Comiskey, 2003), there are unique ways in which such concepts might be understood and applied in a mixed orientation marriage, and the issues facing such couples need to be further understood to help make meaningful connections for clinical services and ministry (see Yarhouse & Kays, 2010). While this is admittedly a small sample of the population, research on such couples can provide much needed information that can then be translated into Christian applied psychology, counseling and pastoral care, as it is a unique topic of interest that touches on themes of sexuality, love and sacrifice, marital vows and values, and Christian community response.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>In particular, we would like to acknowledge the assistance of the Straight Spouse Network as one of many organizations that posted information about our study. <sup>2</sup>Respondents who indicated 500, 100, 30, and 40 extra-marital relationships were deleted based on z-scores.

**Mark A. Yarhouse** is Professor of Psychology and the Rosemarie Scotti Hughes Chair of Christian Thought in Mental Health Practice at Regent University, where he also directs the Institute for the Study of Sexual Identity ([www.sexualidentityinstitute.org](http://www.sexualidentityinstitute.org)). **Jill L. Kays**, M.A. is a doctoral candidate in clinical psychology at Regent University in Virginia Beach, VA. Her clinical and research interests include marriage and family, human sexuality, and positive psychology. **Heather Poma**, M.A., is a doctoral candidate in clinical psychology at Regent University in Virginia Beach, VA. Currently living in Youngstown, OH, Heather is pursuing her interests in couples and families, the impact of trauma, and spiritual integration in therapy. **Audrey N. Atkinson**, M.A., is a doctoral candidate in clinical psychology at Regent University in Virginia

Beach, VA. Her research interests include marriage and family, women's issues, and sexual identity. **Jennifer S. Ripley**, Ph.D., is Professor of Psychology at Regent University in Virginia Beach. Her research interests include couples therapy and religion accommodative psychotherapy.

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