

Gay men's experiences of Alaskan society in their coupled relationships

by

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Dedicated to my brother,
Brennan Darrel Christianson
November 8, 1978 – November 5, 2006

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---|-----|
| LIST OF TABLES | v |
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS | vi |
| ABSTRACT | ix |
| CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION | 1 |
| CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW | 6 |
| CHAPTER 3. METHODS | 55 |
| CHAPTER 4. RESULTS | 98 |
| TABLE 1. DEMOGRAPHICS OF COUPLE RELATIONSHIPS | 158 |
| TABLE 2. DEMOGRAPHICS OF PARTICIPANTS | 159 |
| TABLE 3. DEMOGRAPHICS OF PARTICIPANTS' PARTNERS | 160 |
| CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION | 161 |
| CHAPTER 6. CONCLUSION | 198 |
| REFERENCES CITED | 200 |
| APPENDIX A | 223 |
| APPENDIX B | 230 |
| APPENDIX C | 231 |
| APPENDIX D | 232 |
| APPENDIX E | 233 |
| APPENDIX F | 235 |
| APPENDIX G | 237 |
| APPENDIX H | 242 |
| APPENDIX I | 243 |

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

246

LIST OF TABLES

| | |
|---|-----|
| Table 1. Demographics of couple relationships | 158 |
| Table 2. Demographics of participants | 159 |
| Table 3. Demographics of participants' partners | 160 |

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ABSTRACT

Although it is true that male-male couples are more similar to rather than different from female-male couples, there are unique challenges and positive aspects for gay partnerships related to their existence in what continues to be a society of non-support. Little research exists on supportive and non-supportive experiences of gay males in society, particularly how these experiences affect their relationships, and information with regard to this topic is virtually non-existent in the remote state of Alaska. Therefore, this qualitative study, informed by constructionist frameworks, gave voice to eleven gay males currently involved in partnerships with a focus on exploring their experiences as a couple in Alaskan society. Additionally, information on the coping tools utilized by these couples, including their use of professional mental health resources, as they struggle together with societal non-support was also investigated. Themes that emerged from the interviewing process indicated that gay male couples in Alaska generally experience more societal non-support for their relationships than support and that these non-supportive experiences affect both individual and couple identity development. Social support networks, otherwise known as families of choice were identified as the primary coping mechanism for managing these negative experiences. Although the use of therapy was not the most commonly reported means of coping with oppressive societal forces, nonetheless the majority of participants in the current study did report having utilized professional mental health resources for a number of reasons. Furthermore, two themes were identified with regard to how members of the Alaskan dominant society could become more friendly or ideal in terms of their treatment towards gay male partners. These themes included a call for an increase in equality through laws, as well as an increase in societal acceptance leading to the ability for gay male couples to be able to

safely display their relationship in the general public. Findings from this study have implications centered on an increase of social justice practices with regard to gay male couples for individual members of both the therapy field and the dominant society.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

All couples, regardless of the sex of the individuals in the relationship, experience their share of good times and bad. There are universal experiences of satisfaction, stability, love, and affection. In fact, research findings suggest that male-male couples are more similar to rather than different from male-female married couples, particularly in terms of relationship satisfaction and love for one's partner (Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986; Means-Christensen, Snyder, & Negy, 2003). There are also shared experiences of issues with communication, relationship maintenance and quality, developmental stages, infidelity, intimacy, management of resources and time, boundaries, commitment, and in some instances substance abuse (Cabaj & Klinger, 1996; Connolly, 2004; Green, 2004; Haas & Stafford, 1998; Julien, Arellano, & Turgeon, 1997; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986; Means-Christensen et al., 2003). However, there are certain challenges faced by gay male couples that are not universal to all; there are also positive aspects to these relationships that are not common to all couples. These unique challenges and positive aspects of gay male partnerships are related to such relationships existing in what is predominantly a society of non-support. Therefore, one of the primary focuses of the current study was the exploration of such oppressive forces on the experiences of gay men in their romantic relationships.

A study of this nature was needed, particularly in the field to which I belong—marriage and family therapy (MFT) or relationship therapy (RT). After a thorough review of the literature from mental health fields including psychology, counseling, and social work, it was clear that empirical research on same-sex couple relationships in general, not even specifically looking at gay male couples and/or their experience of oppression, remains in a

phase of infancy (Peplau & Spalding, 2003). A specific examination of published works in the MFT field by Clark and Serovich (1997) determined that only .006% of articles in seventeen different journals between the years of 1975 and 1995 had lesbian, gay, and/or bisexual issues as the focus. Additionally, for the current study, an on-line search of the peer-reviewed *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* (JMFT) of the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT) website was conducted by entering key words “gay couples” and “gay male couples.” This database houses all JMFT journal publications from the years of 1974 to the present year of 2008 (American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy, 2008). The search revealed only sixteen articles in total focused on gay couples and gay male couples. To say that literature and research on gay male couples is sparse to non-existent in the field of MFT would be an understatement.

Research and literature on gay male couples in general was strongly needed as evidenced by the limited number of publications and information. Moreover, research examining the attitudes of society as experienced by gay male couples was also needed, especially because they typically experience more negativity towards them in comparison to other same-sex couple forms (Herek, 1999; Herek & Capitano, 1996; Kite & Whitley, 1998). Additionally, there was a demand for more information on the impact of societal oppressions like heterosexism and homophobia on gay male couples’ relationships (Herek, 2004; Means-Christensen et al., 2003; Plummer, 1975). Indeed, studies that are focused on examining antigay behaviors in the societal context are invaluable (Franklin, 1998; Herek, 2004). Additionally, research on the experiences of gay male couples in the location of the current study—the state of Alaska—was needed, as a review of the regional literature revealed only two such studies to date; both of which were of primarily a quantitative nature,

using survey methodology (Brause, 1986; Green & Brause, 1989). In response to these identified needs, the present study made use of qualitative methodology and was focused on providing a better understanding of the experiences of self-defined gay male individuals involved in a couple relationship, with exploration into how influences from society affect these couplings.

Regarding my role as the researcher, I do not and have not claimed to be an expert on gay male relationships, nor have I necessarily believed such expertise to be truly possible on my part. The reasoning for this lack of expertise is twofold. First, I am not a member of the gay male community or a gay male partnership, which has made me an outsider to the direct experience of being a part of this type of coupling and the experience of societal forces on such a relationship. The participants then in the study were the experts on their own experiences. In consideration of their words, voices, and experiences, I first focused on their experiences of society, including instances of support and non-support through forms of oppression like homophobia, heterosexism, and antigay behaviors in both the literature review and the questions asked of participants. I then attended to other variables affecting the couple as they arose during the open ended interviewing process. This later attention included the effect of variables like ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status, education, and age. Additionally, developmental themes emerged centered around experiences with identity development and the coming out process for individuals and couples.

Second, because of the inherent complexity and uniqueness of gay male relationships, it was not possible to make a predication about how society would affect all couples' experiences. Therefore, identification of the unique and varied experiences for couples were explored as they emerged; as a native to the state of Alaska, at the onset of the study I

believed experiences of non-support or oppression were common for gay male couples in this area. Thus, I believed that focusing on experiences of non-support like heterosexism, homophobia, and antigay behaviors was the place to begin, as well as how such experiences affected gay male couples. However, I also planned to examine experiences of support for couples in the region of study.

Overall, it was my hope that a better understanding of gay relationships would be of benefit not only to the system of the gay male couple, but also to society as a whole. Information that was gained in this study has the potential to offer valuable insight and first-hand knowledge about gay men's relationships with the broad hope of exposing some of the possible oppressive experiences faced by these couples in the context of the larger society. Such exposure could have the effect of assisting in the unveiling and demystifying of many prevailing heterosexist and homophobic stereotypes and replace them with realistic portrayals of the couples, which can have the effect of empowering male-male couples through accurate education of their relationships to the public and to professionals who may work with them.

A final place of focus in the current study was also to explore the coping tools, resiliency, therapeutic resources and like experiences of gay male couples, particularly those that assisted the couples as they struggle together with external societal non-support. As a practitioner in the field of MFT, I recognize a need and value of exploring these areas on behalf of potential clientele and for the field in general as it has been noted that research studies of clinical interventions and availability of resources for same-sex couples is virtually non-existent (Means-Christensen et al., 2003). Additionally, although researchers examining Marriage and Family Therapists' (MFTs') feelings of comfort and support in their work with

sexual minority clients in varied client configurations (families, couples, and individuals) has demonstrated that many report they are comfortable working with such clients, the least amount of comfort and support has been expressed in working with gay male families (Green, Murphy, Blumer, & Palmanteer, in press). Therefore, it would seem there may be lingering homonegativity specifically towards gay male families on the part of MFTs. As a result, in this study I reviewed literature related to gay male couples' coping tools, resiliency, therapeutic experiences and resources, as well as oppressive forces present in the therapy field. Furthermore, I briefly touched on gay-friendly forms of and actions in therapy that are available for assistance to gay male couples. Themes that emerged in this content area were then discussed with specific examination into what makes certain therapeutic practices more gay-friendly and ways that therapists can combat oppression for themselves and gay male couples both inside and outside of therapy.

This research can have the potential to be valuable to the subsystem of society of which the researcher is a member—that of the profession of relationship therapy. As has been mentioned, in general, the field of RT has offered very little information about gay male couples and how to offer the best possible therapeutic assistance for gay male partnerships. By gaining and disseminating more information about these relationships, the research and practitioner communities can become better informed and attuned to the needs of gay male couples and how to more effectively meet such couples' needs in therapy, specifically when the needs may pertain more to the part that oppressive forces play in the couples' relationships.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Gay Communities

The rainbow as a symbol in the gay community officially began with the making of the first rainbow flag by Gilbert Baker of San Francisco, California in the year 1978 (Anderson, 1993). Since then, the rainbow has been a symbol of pride in the gay community that represents the movement towards embracing cultural diversity (Anderson, 1993). To some extent this symbol has been effective, as some of society's attitudes towards homosexuality have been changing in terms of greater recognition and inclusion. Many of these changes can be credited to efforts of the gay rights movement and gay activist groups like the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) and the Gay Activist Alliance (GAA; Ariel & McPherson, 2000).

The Second World War brought with it a migration of many diverse individuals into large American cities, including a number of gays (Connell, 1995; Weir, 1999). This migration resulted in the creation of a proximal closeness between gay persons through the building of neighborhoods in urban settings, resulting in the formation of gay communities (Connell, 1995; Weir, 1999). The gay rights movement grew out of these communities composed of gay persons, allies, some biological family members, and many other supportive people (Bepko & Johnson, 2000; Connell, 1995). Gay communities were originally formed to help create a network of support for gay persons from the oppression and marginalization experienced in the dominant society, which can include experiences within their own families of origin (Bepko & Johnson, 2000). These communities continue to be formed today in increasing numbers and for similar reasons and are often known as

families of choice or chosen families (Ariel & McPherson, 2000; Bepko & Johnson, 2000). Families of choice often serve as a survival tool for dealing with societal oppressions towards members of the gay community (Weir, 1999). The GLF is a large scale example of such a coping mechanism by the community.

The gay movement itself and groups like the GLF gained significant speed and attention after the Stonewall riots of 1969 in New York (Bess 1995; Connell, 1995). The Stonewall riots were a display of dramatic resistance by gays to the multiple raidings of a gay bar by the city police (Connell, 1995). The year after Stonewall, the GLF organized the first gay pride day and march. The year was 1970 and approximately 15,000 people participated in so-called "Gay Liberation Day." Since this time, the annual Gay Pride Day is celebrated in many American cities to commemorate Stonewall through marches and activism of all sorts (Bess, 1995).

Early on, activists of the gay rights movement labeled the authoritarian social order of the dominant culture as oppressive towards gays (Connell, 1995). Originally, the GLF was closely associated with the radical feminism movement, which was also growing in the 1960s; as both shared oppression from predominant influences of the society in terms of masculinity and constructions of gender (Connell, 1995). Additionally, in relation to the hegemonic masculinity viewpoint, being gay has often been incorrectly associated with being a woman, and according to some gay theorists there-in lies the heart of homophobic reactions (Connell, 1995). Since these earlier movements, both radical feminism and gay rights activism have undergone some separation in their causes (Connell, 1995). Additionally, according to some theorists, the popularity of both movements has waned in society (Connell, 1995). However, other theorists claim that the gay rights movement has gained in

size and strength since its original stirrings, and that this increase has only generated more knowledge and visibility of gays and the oppression they experience (Ariel & McPherson, 2000).

The evidence of gains in visibility of the gay community can be seen in the ever-growing increase in symbols across society. The rainbow flag, for instance, has been recognized by the International Congress of Flag Makers as a valid representation of the sexual minority community (Anderson, 1993). In addition to this recognition, the symbol has grown in terms of visibility and association with the community. From the initial use of the symbol of pride in San Francisco, it has spread to other cities in the United States and across the globe and is consistently flown at Pride Parades (Anderson, 1993).

With gains in visibility of the gay community it has become clear that this community is a diverse one—composed of people with a variety of individual tastes, preferences, experiences, gender expressions, viewpoints, etc. (Anderson, 1993). This was important for me to keep in mind, because although I was interested in exploring the commonalities of gay males in couple relationships in terms of their experiences with society, I also needed to remain conscious of the fact that despite commonalities, every relationship and the individuals who comprise it are different and unique. It has been noted that the gay community is not monolithic, but is composed of many peoples coming from diverse backgrounds that cut across all spheres of society including culture, race, age, and class (Greene, 1994). This is especially true of male-male couples, in which the partners tend to be more dissimilar from one another than any other couple type, particularly with regard to age, education, and ethnicity (Patterson, 2005a; Simmons & O’Connell, 2003). Diversity amongst gay male couples runs counter to many of the common assumptions made by members of the

dominant society about such couplings. Oftentimes the thinking about gay male couples is that they are all alike in terms of the predominant stereotypes. Such likeness is manifested in the stereotypes that all gay males and male couples are White, well-educated, affluent, and effeminate (Anastas, 2001; Conley, Calhoun, Evett, & Devine, 2001). As a researcher, I was sure to elevate and maintain my sense of awareness of these assumptions and combat them by remembering the diversity amongst gay men and their relationships.

Members of the Gay Community

As our world becomes increasingly diverse, we need to become more aware of the similarities and differences among the diverse beings that make up our society, including members of the gay community. Historically, members of any minority group in the United States have been all but invisible (Craig, 1992). This includes members of the sexual minority group. However, as estimated numbers of sexual minorities increase, so does their visibility (Ariel & McPherson, 2000). A sexual minority includes any person whose sexual orientation is not a part of the dominant majority (i.e., heterosexual). Therefore, the sexual minority group includes, but is not limited to individuals who identify as gay, pansexual, lesbian, bisexual, and queer. Typically, the acronyms LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) and/or LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning) have been used to identify sexual minorities; however, it can be argued that although such acronyms may seem more specific, they may not be precise. For instance, the employment of such acronyms includes both sexual and gender minorities. It is important to note that sexual orientation and gender orientation are not one in the same and each can be defined in a multitude of ways. Sexual orientation refers to fantasies, attachments, and longings that can be predominantly for persons of the same sex (gay, lesbian), other sex (straight,

heterosexual), or both sexes (bisexual), which can be expressed through overt behavior or not (Reiter, 1989). Gender orientation refers to one's awareness of and identification as being male, female, or androgynous (Papalia, Olds, & Feldman, 2007), which may or may not coincide with the appearance of one's genitalia (Blumer & Barbachano, in press).

A current approximation of the total number of sexual minority persons and their family members in the United States is about 50 million (Long & Serovich, 2003). Additionally, according to the 2000 census, it was estimated that roughly 1 in 9 of the 5.5 million cohabiting couples in the country were described as being in a same-sex couple configuration (Kurdek, 2004). However, recent estimates from the 2005 American Community Survey (ACS) indicated that the number of same-sex cohabiting couples has increased by more than 30% since the 2000 estimates (United States Census Bureau, 2006). Furthermore, based on the 2005 data, estimates of same-sex cohabiting couples consisting of two men is approximately 53%; higher than the estimate of cohabiting lesbians (United States Census Bureau, 2006).

Previous estimates of sexual minorities in Alaska range from 10,000 to 33,000 (Brause, 1986) with the most recent estimate being approximately 18,000 persons (Gates, 2006), with an estimated 7,000 to 9,000 of these persons being residents of Anchorage (Green & Brause, 1989). Estimates of same-sex cohabiting individuals in Alaska was more difficult to ascertain; the 2000 Census data indicated that Alaska had the highest percentage of unmarried partners living together per capita, including male-male, female-female, and female-male couples, when compared to rates of other states in the union. The data from 2005 indicated that there were approximately 1,600 same-sex couples within the state, with over 600 of such couple configurations being that of two men (Gates, 2006). Older data

suggested that approximately 30% of gay male individuals in Alaska identified as having a relational status of “living together” (Brause, 1986).

At both national and state levels, however, it was important to keep in mind that because of societal oppression and related harmful experiences, many of the individuals who may define themselves as gay and in same-sex partnerships are not open about their sexual identity, orientation, and relationships. As a result, the numbers of actual partnerships and gay members in society were difficult to ascertain; however the previously stated numbers were probably an under- representation. The apparent underreporting of the numbers of gay males and male-male partnerships being related to how open individuals and couples are is not only related to experiences of or potential issues with societal oppression it is also related to the developmental variables of the individual’s and couple’s identity development.

Gay Identity Development

Gay individuals and couples develop a sense of identity in the context of the gay community, as well as in the dominant society. In the literature primarily two gay identity development models—the Cass Identity Model (Cass, 1979, 1983, 1984) and the D’Augelli Lifespan Model (D’Augelli, 1994a, 1994b) exist. The Cass Identity Model is composed of six stages of linear development. These stages include the following: 1) Identity Confusion, 2) Identity Comparison, 3) Identity Tolerance, 4) Identity Acceptance, 5) Identity Pride, and 6) Identity Synthesis (Cass, 1979, 1983, 1984). D’Augelli’s Lifespan Model of Gay Identity Development is composed of six bi-directional steps that involve an interactive process between the individual and society (D’Augelli, 1994a, 1994b). These six steps are the following: 1) Exiting Heterosexual Identity, 2) Developing a Personal Gay Identity Status, 3)

Developing a Gay Social Identity, 4) Becoming a Gay Offspring, 5) Developing a Gay Intimacy Status, and 6) Entering a Gay Community (D'Augelli, 1994a, 1994b).

Since the focus in the current study was on gay male couples rather than gay male individuals a comprehensive model for gay couple identity development would have been valuable. Since a model such as this was not as readily available in the literature aspects of D'Augelli's (1994a, 1994b) Lifespan Model of Gay Identity Development model were applied to the notion of couple identity development. D'Augelli's model is based on the idea that "sexual and affectional feelings [occur] across the life span, in diverse contexts, and in relationship to culture" (1994a, p. 331). The fifth step of this model can be applied to the development of couples' identities, particularly those that are in the early stages of their relationship. Step Five: Developing a Gay Intimacy Status of the Lifespan Model of Gay Identity Development as posed by D'Augelli (1994a, 1994b) involves the development of a gay partnership, including managing the amount and level of out-ness of the couple in various social contexts—what has been referred to as "invisibility" or "visibility" management. Visibility management when applied to gay male couples can be defined as the dynamic, ongoing process, by which such couples make careful, planned decisions about whether to make known their relationship, and, if they do decide to make the relationship known, to whom and how, as well as how the couple will continue to monitor the presentation of their relationship in varied contexts (D'Augelli, 1994a, 1994b). In the current study there was a clear focus on how couples formed, as well as the couple experience of visibility management; therefore this aspect of the model was particularly helpful.

The Dominant Society

In the current study, the focus was not only on exploring gay male partnerships in the

context of the gay community, but also in the larger societal context. The dominant society in which male-male couples exist has historically viewed these partnerships as being negative, even more negative than the view of lesbians or bisexual women (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 1998). Currently, the dominant social discourse on same-sex partnerships provides a context that is somewhat paradoxical—composed of continual antigay prejudice, public support for benefits, antigay marriage legislative movements, support from civil rights groups and allies, and many other varied yet oftentimes polarized positions (Green, 2004). One thing is certain—gay male partnerships currently exist in what is still a largely oppressive dominant social context (Connolly, 2004). Thus, male-male partnerships are embedded in this oppressive societal context, which affects the couple. In fact, the main danger for gay persons comes from this larger social system (Sanders & Kroll, 2000).

Oppression

Despite advancements of the gay rights movements, there continues to be many forms of oppression towards gay males and their relationships with each other (Adams, Jaques, & May, 2004). Many people in the society are fearful of anyone or any group that practices nonconformity in relation to that of the dominant majority, and who are, therefore, different (Adams et al., 2004). A response to this is to become prejudiced towards sexual minorities in general, resulting in the ongoing practice of oppression (Adams et al., 2004).

Oppression towards gay male couples takes many forms. The use of accurate labels and specific terminology to describe oppressive forces can be cumbersome; however, it is necessary for scholars to use an accurate vocabulary when describing the oppression experienced by gays (Herek, 1999, 2004). In review of the literature, homophobia and heterosexism are the terms commonly used to describe oppression. Through oppression,

antigay behaviors like discrimination are practiced. In the current study, some of these terms may not have fully nor accurately described the oppression faced by gay males and gay male couples, nonetheless some terms had to be utilized and these were chosen primarily because they were some of the most common in past literature. In truth, the experience of oppression was of primary concern regardless of the label/s attached to it.

Homophobia

Perhaps one of the oldest and most well known forms of oppression is homophobia, which is defined as inherently discriminatory, prejudicial, hostile, and phobic actions and thoughts towards homosexuals on a societal level (Connolly, 2004; Granvold & Martin, 1999; Ossana, 2000; Reynolds & Hanjorgiris, 2000). Examples of homophobia include violence, victimization, gay bashing, hate crimes, and discrimination through political, civil, professional, and personal means (Connolly, 2004; Dworkin, 2000; Granvold & Martin, 1999; Ossana, 2000; Sanders & Kroll, 2000).

Some have criticized the term homophobia because it has historically focused upon homophobia as an illness of the individual and not a problem inherent in society as a whole (Herek, 2004). The term has also been associated with a fear of homosexuals. This fear is seen as being caused by general misunderstanding, ignorance, and/or a lack of exposure to homosexual peoples, or resulting from a fear of those that are generally different from oneself. However, research on emotion and prejudicial practices suggests that it is not the emotion of fear that underlies hostility towards minorities on the part of the dominant group, but rather emotions of anger and disgust (Herek, 2004; Mackie, Devos, & Smith, 2000; Smith, 1993). Furthermore the perpetuation and practice of homophobia by individuals and within cultures is taught and learned (Blumenfeld, in press). Despite the controversies

attached to the term, many scholars continue to use the term homophobia. In alignment with common practices in the literature, I decided to use the term in the current study.

Heterosexism

Another form of oppression towards gay males and their relationships is heterosexism, which is a term used to describe the assumption that the world is and must be heterosexual and that female-male relationships are preferable and superior to male-male/female-female partnerships (Bigner, 2000; Burns, Kadlec, & Rexer, 2005; Connolly, 2004). The philosophical underpinning behind heterosexism is the dichotomous belief that people are either heterosexual or homosexual, with a bias towards heterosexuality (Burns et al., 2005). We see heterosexism everywhere, everyday, as expressed through continual heterosexual bias or heteronormativity (Blumenfeld, in press). Through the societal pervasiveness of heterosexism, gay relationships are less valued, invalidated, and denigrated, whereas straight relationships are highly valued, validated, and celebrated (Burns et al., 2005; Herek, Kimmel, Amaro, & Melton, 1991; Long, 2002; Sanders & Kroll, 2000; Twist, Murphy, Green, & Palmanteer, 2006).

Heterosexist assumptions are embedded in our language, laws, institutions, media, policies, and overall culture. As a result, we neglect critical examination of our primarily heterosexually-based impositions and, hence, actions towards all persons. Through these impositions and actions, oftentimes gay couples remain invisible to members of the majority (Sanders & Kroll, 2000). This invisibility can have real, personal consequences like the denial of adoption and foster parent rights to gay couples; lack of recognition of same-sex couples on applications; legal documents; and health care partnership benefits (Sanders & Kroll, 2000). Additionally, heterosexual bias leads people to make incorrect assumptions

about the gay community as a whole, not merely gay individuals or couples. For instance, a common assumption made by straight people is that all gay people know each other (Conley et al., 2001).

Despite the fact that research and current literature on male-male couples points out that the gay male relationship is unique because the unions are comprised of two men who create emotional and affectional bonds (Tunnell & Greenan, 2004), heterosexist bias oftentimes prevents people from seeing gay couples as being their own couple form with their own merits, nuances, expressions, styles, and patterns. This can be seen in the permeation of heterosexist bias through media presentations of gay couples to the general public, which results in misinformation, a general lack of knowledge, and ongoing prejudicial practices (Hart, 2002; Long, 2002; Twist et al., 2006). One of the predominant yet misinformed views of the media and general public is that gay couples are either relatively identical to male-female couples or completely different (Kitzinger & Coyle, 1995; Sanders & Kroll, 2000). In either instance, such conceptualizations involves a comparison of male-female couples to same-sex couples rather than recognizing gay couples as having their own couple identity. This kind of thinking can lead to inappropriate attempts to compare and then assimilate gay couples into heterosexual relational patterns (Kitzinger & Coyle, 1995). For instance, a heterosexist gender-based scripted model that is oftentimes imposed on these couples assumes that within such partnerships there is an assigned masculine *husband* and a corresponding effeminate gay male *wife* (Landolt & Dutton, 1997). However, this model is frequently inaccurate, and in fact there tends to be general consensus in the literature that in actuality such a pattern of interaction in male-male relationships is the exception rather than the norm (Bell & Weinberg, 1978; Peplau, 1993); despite the stereotype that all gay men are

feminine, the majority of gay men are not effeminate (Harry, 1984).

Another example of heterosexist bias through gender stereotyping often applied to gay male couples is the employment of the stereotypes from the dominant majority regarding masculinity. Oftentimes there is an assumption that because both partners share similar biology in terms of sex and socialization processes in terms of gender, the relational configuration between two men must then be one primarily characterized by a pattern of heightened levels of competition, dominance and control (Harry, 1984; Landolt & Dutton, 1997; Symons, 1980). Although it is true that such a pattern may characterize some male-male couplings, it does not appear to be the dominant relational pattern (Landolt & Dutton, 1997).

As a result of inaccurate characterizations, many gay couples and members of the dominant culture are prevented from seeing realistic and accurate portrayals of gay males and their partnerships (Tunnell & Greenan, 2004). For instance, if couples are seen in the media they are typically presented in the stereotypical relational patterns presented above, but more often than not they are excluded from portrayal, and what is more commonly presented of the gay community are gay individuals (Connolly, 2004; Ossana, 2000). The current yet distorted representations of male-male couples affect not only the public's perception of these partnerships, but also the members of such relationships—the implications of which helps to create and maintain oppressive practices towards male-male couples (Bigner, 2000; Connolly, 2004). One implication is that the public, as well as gay couples fail to see happy, satisfied, and successful same-sex couples (Connolly, 2004). Another implication is that there are few to no role models for gay couple relationships (Tunnell & Greenan, 2004). For gay males and male-male partners, not only does a lack of role models exist in the dominant

society, but most gays grow up in families without role models as well. In fact, 98% of gays report being raised by straight parents, meaning that most do not have the opportunity to see real life gay male partnerships in the family context (Drucker, 1998; Martin, 1993).

As a result of a lack of coupling role models, gay couples oftentimes create their own relational patterns, styles of interacting, and configurations. The bonds created through such relationships typically go against the dominant social scripts about men and couples (Tunnell & Greenan, 2004). In place of these socially prescribed relational patterns for couples, what is oftentimes a more realistic vision of gay couples is the relational configuration *best friends* rather than the preferred heterosexist description of *husband* and *wife* or gender-based description of two men being *competitive* and *aggressive* with each other (Harry, 1984; Landolt & Dutton, 1997; Symons, 1980). The most common relationship pattern of gay male couples is that of an egalitarian friendship (Landolt & Dutton, 1997) with passion and affection.

Antigay Behaviors

Homophobia and heterosexism are legitimized through antigay behaviors, discriminatory practices towards sexual minorities, and through the denial of human and civil rights (Bigner, 2000; Twist et al., 2006). Antigay behaviors can be intentional and/or unintentional. Intentional antigay behaviors are those actions that people make with awareness and the intent is to be antigay. Although intentional antigay behaviors are common, more common are unintentional antigay behaviors—those actions that the majority of people make, typically without conscious awareness and recognition. These unintentional antigay behaviors are examples and reinforcers of the status quo of heterosexual bias and heterosexism.

Antigay behaviors are frequently expressed through discriminatory practices. Discrimination is the practice of making distinctions between people based solely upon membership in a certain category rather than on an individual basis or individual merit (American Heritage Dictionary, 2004). Discrimination against sexual minority individuals, then, occurs through the practice of making decisions about such individuals based only on their membership in a sexual minority group (American Heritage Dictionary, 2004). Research has shown that nearly all gay men have some emotional scarring due to experiences of discrimination (Haldeman, 2005). Experiences of discrimination typically come from some social groups more than others and are often exacerbated by changes in society that threaten the traditional gender roles and the power of the patriarchally-based social structure.

Many researchers have documented several ways in which gays and gay male couples are victims of antigay behaviors and discrimination across the United States. Victimization of gays is common. In fact, on a national level, 90% of gays have experienced some kind of victimization at some point in their lifetime due to their sexual orientation (Robinson & Howard-Hamilton, 2000) and according to findings from an Alaskan-based state-wide survey that involved 323 gay males, 73% of gays had experienced some form of discrimination related to sexual orientation (Brause, 1986). Furthermore, in comparison to their lesbian counterparts, gay males in Alaska have more frequently been the ones to experience discrimination, particularly in the forms of violence and harassment, and with greater frequency in numbers of experiences, with a mean of over four experiences reported in a lifetime versus a mean of three experiences for lesbians (Brause, 1986).

There are different types of victimization and discrimination that sexual minorities

experience. For instance, gay men experience wage discrimination and lack many other basic rights related to employment practices and settings (Anastas, 2001). In Alaska, Brause (1986) found that 39% of gay males in the study reported experiences of discrimination related to their occupation, based on sexual orientation, including difficulty getting a job, problems while on the job, and being terminated from a job. Additionally, 22% of participants believed they would be terminated from their job if their employer knew of their sexual orientation (Brause, 1986). In a follow-up study, looking more specifically at these kinds of practices in the urban area of Anchorage, Green and Brause (1989) determined that bias in relation to employment was the single most frequent type of discrimination, with 31% of sexual minorities having had such experiences. These practices could dramatically be changed in the near future, with the passing of federal bill H.R. 3685, The Employee Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA), which would make it illegal to fire, refuse to hire, or refuse to promote employees simply based on sexual orientation. This bill, as of November of 2007, had been passed in the House of Representatives, but must also pass in the Senate and be signed by the President before becoming law. On the state level, it should be noted that Alaska's House Representative voted "nay" on H.R. 3685.

Additionally, many gays experience verbal harassment, abuse, threats, and slurs occurring in everyday conversations (Connolly, 2004; Davison, 2001; Haldeman, 2005). Such practices are so commonplace that as many as 92% of gays have reported being victims of antigay expressions (Greene, 1994). In Alaska, 61% of gays reported that they had experienced verbal abuse related to sexual orientation at some point during their lifespan (Brause, 1986). Additionally, Green and Brause (1989) found that 25% of sexual minorities primarily living in the Anchorage area had experienced some form of harassment during their

lives.

Furthermore, many education- and religious-based institutions continue to fail to recognize gays, and when gays are recognized they are often treated negatively (Haldeman, 2005). For instance, although the largest public university in the state of Alaska, the University of Alaska at Anchorage (UAA), has a non-discrimination policy in place, this policy fails to include sexual and gender minorities. However, the same public university does maintain full coverage and benefits for employees and their same-sex partners, but this was only after a 1997 state court ruling, namely the University of Alaska versus Tumeo case (Bohling, 1997). In the context of religious institutions, often sexual minority persons are ignored as well. For instance, many houses of worship neglect gay families through silence sending stay-away messages by failing to invite, include, discuss, or support such diverse family forms (Bess, 1995). At the other end of the spectrum, when religious institutions do recognize gays, it is often to make their sexual orientation of central importance, at the cost of negating a whole array of other aspects of these persons and their lives (Bess, 1995). At times, the result of these types of practices by religious institutions can be discrimination against gays. For instance, in Alaska, 16% of gays reported that they had experienced some form of religious discrimination in their lives and 21% of gay males reported that they had stopped participating in organized religious practices and associated institutions because they felt that their respective faiths either did not or would not accept their sexual orientation (Brause, 1986).

Social rejection and antigay attitudes can result in some gays falling victim to violent crimes (Ariel & McPherson, 2000; Haldeman, 2005). In fact, in a nationally-based survey, it was determined that approximately 5% of gays reported being the victims of physical abuse

or assault in the previous year alone because of their sexual orientation (Herek, 1991; Shidlo, 1994). In another study, a review of the data on crimes related to bias suggested that about 24% of gays had been the victim of physical attacks and some had even resulted in death (Greene, 1994; Herek, 1989). One well-known example, on the national level, was the death of Matthew Shepard that took place in 1998. Matthew's death occurred as a result of a gay bashing. Matthew Shepard, a gay male and a student at the University of Wyoming, was bound and beaten at least 18 times in the head and facial area as a result of antigay attitudes and behaviors (Ariel & McPherson, 2000). For many gays, then, there exists a very real potential for physical abuse and violent attacks, otherwise known as gay bashings, that can be life threatening (Greene, 1994), and Alaska is no exception. For instance, Brause (1986) found that 16% of gays had experienced actual physical violence and 31% reported threats of violence, both in relation to their sexual orientation during their lifetime. Furthermore, Green and Brause (1989) found that approximately 10% of the discrimination occurring towards sexual minorities, that had taken place primarily in the urban area of Anchorage, was violence related including instances of assault, murder, sexual assault, and attempted sexual assaults.

Gay couples also face antigay behaviors and discrimination as a result of the dominant discourse and by the peoples and social institutions that contribute to it. Oftentimes gay male couples do not receive adequate legal, health, and financial benefits afforded straight couples. For instance, the majority of the public oppose legalizing same-sex marriages (Green et al., in press; Herek, 1999). Many legislators and people in general make the argument that through the legalization of same-sex marriages, the sanctity of such a union between different-sex couples would be violated. Such a statement seems to be a moralistic-

or values-based one, rather than a legal one. In terms of one's professional obligations in the fields of law and politics, sometimes it is necessary to separate personal values and beliefs from professional ones in order to take steps towards greater equality and discontinued practices of discrimination and inequality. Often discrimination is not only rooted in one's personal politics, but also in the legal system. Over time, it has been established that the legal system does not embrace advocacy measures towards protecting gays from discrimination (Dworkin & Yi, 2003).

Legal discrimination is evident in the state of Alaska. In fact, "sexual orientation discrimination is not illegal in Alaska" (Green & Brause, 1989, p. 22). For instance, although Alaska does have hate crime laws these laws do not include those crimes based on sexual orientation or gender identity (National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, 2005). As a result, complaints of discrimination are not considered jurisdictional for any of the state's human rights or equal rights commissions, meaning that it is impossible to know the actual rates in terms of prevalence of sexual orientation discrimination (Green & Brause, 1989). It is within this context that 49% of gay males have reported feeling unsafe living openly in the state (Brause, 1986). For those who do live openly, sanctions are more likely to have been and be experienced than those who hide their orientation; whereas persons who are open about their orientation are more likely to settle for lower-status and lower paying jobs (Green & Brause, 1989). Although those who do hide their sexual orientation are more likely to experience higher-status and higher paying jobs, it is oftentimes at the cost of experiencing alienation, depression, lower levels of self-esteem, a greater potential for internalized conflict about their sexual orientation (Green & Brause, 1989), and difficulty forming friendships and relationships with other gays.

In 1996 the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), which bans federal recognition of same-sex marriages and allows states to ignore gay marriages performed elsewhere, was passed. Two years later, in Alaska, the public voted to approve a measure amending the state constitution to outlaw same-sex marriages and permit the legislative body to pass any legislation it wishes concerning marriage (Robinson, 2005). However, some theorists and researchers contend that a lack of rights for gays to marry legally is not necessarily negative. It has been argued that marriage itself is oppressive, and that such a legal union between peoples needs to be abolished (Auchmuty, 2004; Butler, 1996; Ettelbrick, 1989). Another argument for abolishment of marriage is that true social justice for gays and all people requires recognition of what is different and special about gay couples, without emphasis on how gay couples are similar to straight couples (Auchmuty, 2004).

In place of marriage, legal partnerships for all couple configurations could be better because such partnerships lack an oppressive history and recognize the uniqueness of all relationships in their own right rather than through comparisons to heterosexually-based couples (Auchmuty, 2004; Butler, 1996). Still some theorists disagree with this position, pointing out that as long as different-sex couples are permitted to legally marry and gays are not, the question of whether marriage is relatively good or bad is immaterial because it is still a practice that is permitted for some people and not for all and, thus, is a form of discrimination (Auchmuty, 2004). Said simply, as long as straight couples can get married, gay couples should be able to as well (Auchmuty, 2004).

Rather than focus on what theorists, researchers, politicians, and others in society thought about same-sex marriage, since it involves same-sex couples, I thought it best to hear their voices on the matter. After getting feedback from same-sex couples through social

change initiatives on the part of those supportive of these voices, we can then assist in carrying out their wishes. For instance, in reviewing the literature, it seems that in the United States, gay males, more than lesbian females, dominate the debate in support of legal recognition of same-sex marriages (Auchmuty, 2004; Eskridge, 2002; Mohr, 1994, 1997; Strasser, 1997; Sullivan, 1995). Gay males tend to see psychological and social benefits, as well as support, in the public avowal and approval of their couplings through the institution of marriage (Auchmuty, 2004). Current research has shown that approximately 20% of gay male couples have been united in commitment ceremonies (Patterson, 2005a), and it is believed that if such ceremonies were accorded legal status, the numbers would increase.

The Oppressors

If oppression is taking place in this dominant context, it stands to reason that one would ask, “Who is doing the oppressing?” The answer to *who* is both easy and not so easy. In terms of outward expressions of homophobia or intentional antigay behaviors, there is usually a person or group of persons we can associate with doing harm to gays. The *who* is then relatively clear. For instance, throughout history many prominent conservative religious right leaders, bodies and organizations have fought legislation banning discrimination based on sexual orientation, acceptance of domestic partnerships for same-sex couples, and other legislative actions that help to protect gays and their rights (Mazur, 2002). In fact, there has been research demonstrating a positive relationship between one’s religious practices and negative attitudes towards gays (Berkman & Zinberg, 1997; Eliason 1995; Ellis, Kitzinger, & Wilkinson, 2002; Seltzer, 1992; Vicario, Liddle, & Luzzo, 2005). Additionally, higher levels of negativity towards gays is more likely to come from less educated, older individuals (Vicario et al., 2005). Furthermore, more residents of the southern and midwestern regions of

the United States, and those living in small towns, are more likely to hold negative attitudes towards gays (Vicario et al., 2005). In terms of discriminatory practices, politically conservative rather than liberal people tend to express higher levels of prejudice and hold more pathologizing attitudes towards gays (Herek, 1999; Malley & McCann, 2002).

In addition to the characteristics of those who tend to overtly show antigay behaviors and homophobia, study after study, particularly those involving young adults, have consistently reported that men are significantly more likely to hold negative attitudes towards gays than their female counterparts (Chng & Moore, 1991; D'Augelli, 1989; Ellis et al., 2002; Klamen, Grossman, & Kopacz, 1999; Schellenberg, Hirt, & Sears, 1999; Seltzer, 1992). Furthermore, research has shown that those persons with few gay acquaintances, encounters, and experiences with the gay community, and those people who belong to an ethnic minority group tend to hold more negative attitudes in comparison to those who do not share these characteristics (Ellis et al., 2002; Klamen et al., 1999). Through research, it has been determined that there is a highly significant relationship between those who hold negative attitudes towards gays and lack of support for gay and lesbian human, civil, and legal rights (Ellis et al., 2002).

Based on this literature, examining who is a typical oppressor in society, support or non-support for gay male couples could be projected based on the demographic characteristics of the population in the state of Alaska. For instance, there is a higher rate of men in Alaska than women in comparison to the national average; the average age and ethnic make-up is similar to national rates; the population tends to be slightly more educated than the national average; and the average income is significantly higher when compared to the national average (United States Census Bureau, 2005). In addition to these demographics, it

is also important to note the main political affiliations in the area. According to archival (August, 2003) and current (February 2008) records from the State of Alaska Division of Election (2008) the majority of registered voters in the state are listed as undeclared in terms of party affiliation, followed by being registered as Republican. The potential for experience with heterosexism, homophobia, and antigay behaviors for gay couples seemed likely when based on these demographic characteristics and findings from previously conducted local research.

In examining 42 cases of sexual orientation discrimination primarily from the Anchorage area, Green and Brause (1989, p. ix) found that “discrimination was most likely to originate with agencies, institutions, or business, while harassment and violence was most likely to originate with individuals acting alone or in concert with other individuals.” In this study, when collapsing forms of discrimination, harassment, violence, and verbal abuse into one category of sexual orientation bias, the largest category of agents who had demonstrated this bias, with 36% of the cases coming from this category, were individuals within the community. The second largest category of agents included government or government-sponsored institutions like public schools, universities, municipality establishments, and military institutions. This category comprised 25% of the total cases of bias and did not manifest in the forms of violence or harassment, but most commonly as verbal abuse. Seventeen percent of the cases originated with for-profit businesses, 10% with other organizations (positions that were unpaid or volunteer), and 7% with non-profit agencies. The most commonly practiced form of sexual orientation bias from these agent categories was employment discrimination. Finally, 5% of discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation occurred from the agents of the housing management category, in which instances

related to rental discrimination, eviction and harassment were reported.

Another aspect of the Green and Brause (1989) study involved administering questionnaires randomly to 237 employers, of which 191 respondents participated (81% of the total sample). Through the use of the questionnaire information with regard to demographics, bias towards homosexual employees, personal association with homosexuals, moral and political beliefs, and support for anti-discrimination ordinances and laws was gathered. The researchers also administered the same questionnaires (except for replacement of some questions with issues unique to rental-housing situations rather than employment) to persons in housing management through a cluster-sampling technique to obtain proportional samples from each area of Anchorage. In total, 178 of the 245 managerial persons contacted (73% of the total sample) participated. Demographically, the majority of those in these samples identified as White, adult males who were politically moderate to conservative. As has been previously mentioned, those who hold more politically conservative beliefs tend to express higher levels of prejudice towards sexual minorities (Herek, 1999; Malley & McCann, 2002) and the findings of this study also indicated that those with a more conservative viewpoint were also the ones who expressed the least amount of support for policies like anti-discrimination ordinances to protect gays and lesbians (Green & Brause, 1989). In total, 57% of the respondents, both employers and housing managers, reported that they would oppose these anti-discrimination laws. Furthermore, 31% of Anchorage employers reported that they would either not hire, promote, or terminate someone they knew to be or had reason to believe was homosexual, and 20% of housing managers would either not rent to or would evict someone they knew to be or had reason to believe was homosexual.

When more pervasive and subtle expressions of oppression like unintentional antigay

behaviors (including subtle forms of heterosexism and heterosexual bias) are examined, it is more difficult to ascertain *who* the exact individuals and specific groups of people are that are directly responsible. The *who* then is less clear. In fact, when talking about these more pervasive forms of oppression, the *who* is really everyone—all of us. It is you and me. It is all people regardless of race, ethnicity, age, education, gender, sex, religion, culture, and socioeconomic status. It is all of us, because these practices are inherent in our society and none of us are separate from this larger context. Simply put, our society has historically been a heterosexist and homophobic one and although some individuals are taking steps towards combating such a history and there has been some improvement for gays in the larger societal context, the society remains at the very least heterosexist and in many instances still homophobic.

The reasons for societal homophobia and heterosexism are vast in number, and somewhat uncertain, making it difficult to fully explore, particularly in the current study. Some of the reasons may be attributed to just plain ignorance or lack of understanding about sexual identities and orientations that differ from the societal norm. In addition, when information, particularly as shown by the media, is made available regarding sexual minorities, it is filtered through a heterosexist lens and thus is biased—and the result is the presentation of myths, misinformation, negative attitudes, and stereotypes about gays (Bepko & Johnson, 2000; Long, 2002). These are the messages that we are all constantly bombarded with regarding gays and their partnerships. These messages are passed on in a circular process through society, media, culture, schools, families, relationships, and lastly, to and through the individual (Connolly, 2004). In other words, a process of enculturation of homophobia and heterosexism takes place (Connolly, 2004). None of us is immune from the

effects of this acculturation process, including gays and gay male couples. For instance, many gay men experience a degree of negative feelings toward themselves, members of the gay community, as well as the gay community as a whole, as they enter into their journey of sexual identity development (Herek, Cogan, Gillis & Glunt, 1998). These negative feelings, and in some cases related actions, towards oneself and/or others who have a gay sexual orientation is what is usually referred to as “internalized homophobia” (Herek et al., 1998).

The Effects of Society on Gay Male Couples

Much of what gay male couples and same-sex couples in general experience in society is oppression. Much of what results for sexual minorities as a product of societal oppression has previously been described. However, a more specific look at the effects on male-male couples, specifically, is important to explore. Some of these effects include the negative effects of oppression, the strength of gay couples as they struggle to co-exist in society and with oppression, and the ways that gay couples manage their relationship in society, including their coping skills in handling oppression.

Negative Effects of Society

There are both intra- (within the couple) and inter-relational (outside of the couple) effects of oppression on same-sex couples. Some similarities and differences are the result of whether social pressure has led the couple to be open or closed to the public regarding the nature of their relationship. In the current study, at the onset it was unknown to what extent couples would be out or not. Therefore, I focused on the general experiences of couples in terms of their struggles with oppression, rather than describing specifics about the differences for couples whether they were out or not.

Same-sex couples oftentimes not only feel the effects of societal oppression, they

must also contend with the related challenges and problems associated with these oppressive forces. In general, same-sex couples experience the many faces of oppression and in relation to this a lack of social support (Green, 2004). The strain of oppression on same-sex couples has been documented (Bepko & Johnson, 2000; Herek, 1984; Krestan & Bepko, 1980). In some instances, the oppressive forces of homophobia, including internalized homophobia, and heterosexism are so traumatic for same-sex couples that it prevents these couples from forming at all (Bepko & Johnson, 2000). Oftentimes, prevention of the formation of same-sex partnerships is related to fears of the threat of violence or actual violence resulting from antigay attitudes and behaviors (Bepko & Johnson, 2000). Another hurdle in the formation of same-sex couples is that the gay individuals that comprise them have grown up in a heterosexist society that dictates and perpetuates formal and informal practices of discrimination based on their sexual orientation; therefore, the couple, and individuals have come to be discouraged from entering the couplings (Means-Christensen et al., 2003). Therefore, when same-sex couples are formed, some theorists have argued that the majority of the difficulties faced in these relationships are caused by oppressive forces (Brown, 1995; Means-Christensen et al., 2003).

The effects of homophobia, including internalized homophobia, for gay individuals and same-sex couples can be devastating, resulting in feelings of inadequacy and defect, self-hatred, guilt, and a general lack of optimism about the long-term viability of their partnerships (Connolly, 2004; Ossana, 2000; Schiemann & Smith, 1996). As a result, many same-sex couples make presumptions about the nature of their partnerships, viewing these partnerships as being impermanent, primarily platonic, and/or as merely incidental, which puts the couple's faith in their commitment to each other and the longevity of the partnership

at risk (Connolly, 2004; Slater & Mencher, 1991). Presumptions about the longevity of gay couplings not only put them at risk for early termination, so does the lack of social support and external validation (Connolly, 2004; Slater & Mencher, 1991). Without social support, there is little to no comfort and assistance for the couple during times of crisis or during regular developmental stages in the relationship (Connolly, 2004; Roth, 1985).

An issue for same-sex couples related to heterosexism is the lack of role models available. Instead of appropriate role models, what is available are different-sex pairings that do not display an accurate modeling of how same-sex couples *should* look (Connolly, 2004; Patterson, Ciabattari, & Schwartz, 1999). Many same-sex couples experience conflict in their relationships as they attempt to create a relational pattern and type that fits for them (Connolly, 2004; Patterson et al., 1999). Sometimes feelings of disappointment arise when the couple realizes that they experience problems like all couples, and that they do not have the idealized version of a relationship that they might have anticipated (Greene, 1994). Disappointments can sometimes arise from the coupling not meeting expectations that the individuals comprising the relationship learned through exposure to primarily different-sex couples (Bepko & Johnson, 2000).

Although most same-sex couples experience challenges and problems related to societal oppression, it can be argued that more so than female-female couples, male-male couples experience problems to a greater degree. Indeed, when two men are a couple, validation by both the dominant and gay communities is not automatic, thereby further marginalizing gay male couples (Tunnell & Greenan, 2004). This extreme marginalization often places a tremendous amount of stress on their relationships. In studies, male-male couples have reported feeling stress related to non-support from not only the larger society

but the gay community as well, particularly in relation to their attempts to maintain long-term monogamous relationships (Worth, Reid, & McMillan, 2002).

Another area of concern for gay male couples is related to the fact that pairings are frequently comprised of partners with very different backgrounds (Patterson, 2005a). Diversity in partners is believed to be the result of gay males meeting through more anonymous (i.e., personal ads, online services) or public situations (i.e., bars, events) rather than through families or friends (Patterson, 2005a). These differences in background and, hence, world views might originally attract individuals to each other, but can set the couple up for more experiences of conflict later on in the relationship than couples with more similar backgrounds (Patterson, 2005a).

Demographically, male partners tend to be most dissimilar to one another in terms of age, race, and level of education (Patterson, 2005a). In terms of national data, the 2000 Census showed that 15% of gay male couples are of mixed race, which was more than that of any other couple type (Simmons & O'Connell, 2003). There exists no data on the racial make-up of male couples in Alaska. When racial differences exist within a gay couple it can be difficult for the individual members of the dyad to understand, be empathic towards, and be supportive of the other member of the dyad; each person may struggle with a myriad of potential difficulties like differential societal treatment related to race or problems associated with the intersection between identities—gay identity versus ethnic identity, for example. A struggle between identities can be difficult for some gay men, particularly minority gay men, as there can be a perceived need of having to sacrifice one aspect of identity in order to embrace another (Bepko & Johnson, 2000), which can be hard for the other participant in the relationship to understand.

There are can be a number difficulties for partners in terms of complications in male-male partnerships related to age. For instance, members of both the dominant and gay communities can marginalize such couples, claiming that they are not *legitimate* couples, but instead are couples formed for illegitimate reasons like the stereotypical characterization that the older male is only interested in exploiting the younger male sexually and the younger male is only interested in seeking financial gain from the older male. Another potential area of difficulty related to age is centered on differences in couples in relation to each individual member's stage in the coming out process. Younger generations of gay males are more likely to have come out or to come out as gay during adolescence with exploration of sexual identity development generally taking place in young adulthood (Papalia et al., 2007; Patterson, 2005a), whereas older generations are more likely to have come out and explored sexual identity during young to middle adulthood. As a result, it may not be uncommon for a younger male to have actually been out longer and have had more relationships than someone who may be ten years older and who may be experiencing his first gay relationship and may not yet be as comfortable being out as his younger counterpart (Patterson, 2005a).

Male gender norms and related acculturation can also be compelling forces that work against men forming intimate and emotional relationships with each other (Tunnell & Greenan, 2004). With these gendered forces working against male couples, when couples do form there is the potential for a multitude of problems. For instance, in a heterosexist world, two men in a relationship together can be seen as representing a *violation* of the traditional norm regarding couples; this can lead to isolation and hiding from others when coupling, which in turn can create added stress on the couple (Edwards, 1994; Worth et al., 2002). Additionally, two men in a couple relationship can experience a double dose of male gender

(Patterson, 2005a). These couples, with strongly internalized conceptualizations of traditional male gender norms and roles like male competitiveness, can experience less role flexibility in their relationship and an inhibited ability to express emotions and form emotional connections (Bepko & Johnson, 2000; MacDonald, 1998). The stereotypic gender norm for men of competitiveness with one another can set members of the couple up for viewing disagreements as power struggles against one another with goals of winning and losing, which can lead to greater conflict and disengagement in the relationship as well as resentment on the part of the loser (Patterson & Schwartz, 1994). Furthermore, the stereotypic gender norm of men not openly expressing feelings can also create issues where members in the relationship tend to withdraw rather than explain feelings during conflict, which may result in the experience of confusion and hurt in their partnerships (Bepko & Johnson, 2000).

Positive Effects on Gay Male Couples Struggling with Society

Although it is true that there are many negative effects of societal oppression on same-sex couples, particularly gay male couples, it is also true that these couples can have some positive experiences in relation to their shared struggles with oppression. For instance, many gay couples report a sense of freedom, autonomy, and enjoyment through their partnerships, which is related to their being who they want to be through their involvement in non-traditional relationship forms, thus having an opportunity to practice shared non-conformity (Connell, 1995; Tunnell & Greenan, 2004).

The lack of role models and clear patterns set forth in society also tends to have the effect of gay male couples being more flexible in their relationship roles and communication exchanges in comparison to heterosexual couples (Bettinger, 2004; Green, Bettinger, &

Zacks, 1996). Indeed, research has shown that gay couples tend to have better facilitation of communication, exhibit more power sharing and fairness, use fewer controlling and hostile tactics, behave less defensively in disagreements, de-escalate during fights more effectively, and resolve conflicts more successfully in comparison to their heterosexual couple counterparts (Julien et al., 1997; Kurdek, 1998; Metz, Rosser, & Strapko, 1994; Patterson, 2005a). These strengths in communication may be potentially related to the experiences with the couple's shared sex and gender (Julien et al., 1997; Kurdek, 1998; Metz et al., 1994).

According to research, male-male couples have also been found to be involved in more emotionally close and cohesive relationships with each other than heterosexual couples (Bepko & Johnson, 2000; Bettinger, 2004; Green et al., 1996). These findings run counter to the stereotypical way of conceptualizing gay male couples, which views them as being emotionally distant and disengaged (Bepko & Johnson, 2000). Additionally, some researchers have found that gay men tend to appraise their relationships more positively in comparison to men in heterosexual partnerships (Metz et al., 1994). This trend could be related to the egalitarian or *best friend* relational pattern of gay male couples, which may be related to the shared socialization process of both partners being of the same sex and gender in the relationship (Landolt & Dutton, 1997; Means-Christensen et al., 2003).

Coping and Resiliency of Gay Male Couples

Gay males and gay male couples often develop resilience in effectively managing their relationship in the context of society, particularly in adapting to an oppressive world (Sanders & Kroll, 2000). Despite the myriad of challenges posed to gay couples, many are able to not only form and bond quickly, but are also able to persevere and endure in satisfying relationships (Patterson, 2005b). In fact, on average, gay men not only become

sexually involved with one another more quickly than lesbians, they may actually spend less time dating before living together, contrary to popular public opinions regarding women's relationships (Patterson, 2005b). Furthermore, a vast majority of studies involving large samples show that male-male pairings tend to survive longer than lesbian relationships (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Patterson, 2005a; Patterson et al., 1999). These research findings seem to belie the commonly held notion that gay men lack the necessary skills and desire to create and maintain commitment (Patterson, 2005a). Instead, what seems to be the case is perhaps the opposite; gay males and gay male couples have developed effective ways of coping with each other and with the forces working against them. Members of these couples often deal with forces like societal oppression primarily through the use of effective-problem solving skills and also through high amounts of social support (Campbell, 2000; Todoroff, 1995).

In a qualitative study by Todoroff (1995), the ways that gay men coped with heterosexism was explored. The researcher asked gay men to recall experiences with heterosexism and then rate these experiences in terms of both the amount of negative impact it had on their life and the control they believed they had over the event. The overall outcomes of the event in terms of being positive or negative were also explored. After the interview, the respondents completed a Cope Index, which quantitatively assessed varied coping strategies as being either adaptive or maladaptive (Todoroff, 1995). The findings indicated that adaptive coping strategies like using a problem-focused approach to the heterosexism, whereby a high degree of control over such situations was exerted, appeared to be related to positive outcomes (Todoroff, 1995). In the study, it was determined that gay men made use of problem-focused coping strategies about 50% of the time.

Research has shown that social support for gay male partnerships from friends, in particular, is significantly positively correlated with the couple reporting more closeness and care-giving, more openness of communication, less intrusivity of one's partner, and fewer reports of psychiatric symptoms (Campbell, 2000). In a study by Campbell (2000), 126 gay men who had been recruited through a large community event in the state of California, and were currently involved in committed couple relationships, participated. The study revealed that those men who more strongly supported and endorsed the heterosexist norms of the male gender role reported less social support, and more problems in their relationships and with psychiatric symptoms (Campbell, 2000). Furthermore, the findings indicated that the quality of gay male couple relationships is related to the amount of social support that the couple receives for being involved in a male-male partnership (Campbell, 2000).

Previous research already conducted in the Anchorage, Alaska area on sexual minority individuals found that psychological or social problems and stress related to problems of discrimination or harassment often does not bring such individuals into the mental health practitioner's office (Brause, 1986; Green & Brause, 1989). Much like national findings, accessing these kinds of resources for these types of problems does not seem necessary as long as the individuals have extensive interpersonal networks of friends and family to help them successfully deal with issues related sexual orientation bias and discrimination in their lives (Green & Brause, 1989). However, it should be noted that before the current study, local research aimed at examining the effect of these types of oppressive forces on gay couples specifically, as well as their coping strategies in handling these problems as a couple, had not been conducted. On the national level, what was previously found was that when problems related to societal oppression were beyond the afore

mentioned coping strategies, male-male couples frequently sought assistance from mental health professionals.

Social and Therapeutic Support for Gay Male Couples

Indeed, experiences with homophobia, heterosexism, and antigay behaviors have been so traumatic for gays that they can be a significant contributor to distress in couple relationships, bringing them to the helping professional's office (Twist et al., 2006).

Although there is a paucity of research on couples' therapy for male-male couples, what is known is that gay males and gay male couples are participants in therapy in proportionally higher numbers than heterosexual males (Bell & Weinberg, 1978; Haldeman, 2005; Means-Christensen et al., 2003). Nationally, about 32% of gay male couples have sought professional services and between 25% and 65% of gays have sought therapy previously (Means-Christensen et al., 2003; Modricin & Wyers, 1990; Robinson & Howard-Hamilton, 2000).

In Alaska, over 80% of the 323 gay male respondents in the Brause (1986) state-wide study reported having utilized some form of mental health treatment (including medical professionals, mental health providers, self-help groups, and/or substance abuse treatment). The most commonly reported reason for seeking services, at a rate of 24%, was that of relationship issues with one's spouse or lover, followed by issues related to: depression (18%), alcohol or drug use (12%), other relationships (12%), coming out (6%), anxiety or stress (5%), previous sexual assault or abuse (4%), and other (19%; Brause, 1986). Although relational issues are among the most commonly reported reasons for seeking therapy, statistical rates on RT, including couple and family therapy, was not available. In terms of the resources and providers sought for such problems, 28% of gay men received services from

mental health providers and 16% from self-help groups (Brause, 1986). Seventy-nine percent of those gay males who sought assistance through mental health providers found the services helpful (Brause, 1986).

Eighty-six percent of respondents in the state of Alaska reported that their mental health provider was aware of their sexual orientation and that in being aware of such information 93% of respondents reported that they experienced at least the same kind of care, or better, than if their sexual orientation was unknown to the provider (Brause, 1986). When gay male respondents reported not making their mental health care provider aware of their sexual minority status, the most commonly expressed reason in making such a decision, at a rate of 52%, was that the information did not seem necessary, followed by: fear that the provider would share such information (8%), not in the practice of informing anyone of one's orientation (6%), fear of disapproval from the provider (6%), and other (28%; Brause, 1986).

The knowledge that male-male couples show a trend towards coping with oppression and other problems through therapeutic services is significant. As the number of male-male partnerships continues to increase in this country, so does their use of mental health services (Plummer, 1995). This means that the number of gay males and gay male couples who are turning to therapy for help is on the rise (Malley & McCann, 2002). Right now, the rate at which gays attend therapy is estimated to be two to four times higher than heterosexuals and is believed to be continuing to increase (Robinson & Howard-Hamilton, 2000). As a result, mental health professionals must be prepared to effectively meet the needs of gay males and gay male couple clientele.

Because research has identified that male-male couples oftentimes seek out social and therapeutic support in coping with societal oppression, it was important to explore the

literature behind these trends, as well as to explore the resources available to gays and gay male couples in Alaska. In general, resources for gay male couples in most areas of the United States are somewhat limited, yet in more urban areas, there exist more options available for both social and therapeutic support (Bernstein, 2000).

Selection criteria for therapy providers like gender and/or sexual orientation of the therapist are often a factor of availability of resources (Bernstein, 2000; Patterson, 2005a). Thus, in smaller communities, mental health professionals need to take steps towards best preparing themselves to handle a wide range of clientele with diverse problems, including sexual minorities (Patterson, 2005a). It is likely that a member of the sexual minority population has presented or will present for therapy at some point, and, because of a scarcity of options for mental health treatment, it is also likely that he or she will seek therapy with whomever is available (Patterson, 2005a). In urban areas where options do exist, some gays chose gay therapists and others chose straight ones (Bernstein, 2000). Interestingly, national survey data has shown that when gay couples seek professional help, the choice of service provider tends to be based more on the gender of the professional rather than on the professional's sexual orientation (Modricin & Wyers, 1990). Additionally, survey data from Alaska has suggested that although someone of the same sex and same sexual orientation is important to 42% of gay male individuals seeking services, about 45% of gay individuals in need of such services have expressed no preference in terms of sexual identity and/or sexual orientation in their mental health provider (Brause, 1986).

The benefits to selecting a gay therapist seem intuitive. The potential for greater acceptance and shared understandings is higher with gay therapists. However, there are also perceived benefits to working with non-gay therapists. Some advantages could include the

perception of a clear boundary between one's therapy and one's social life, a chance to experience a member of the dominant society providing support rather than the typical dominant behaviors of non-support and in some instances hatred, and/or the benefit of having a therapist who does not share the client's sexual orientation and as such overall reality (Bernstein, 2000; Siegel & Walker, 1996). This later advantage can stem from a client's fear that he or she might be attracted to a therapist sharing the same sexual orientation; therefore, with a straight therapist, a gay client can have a better chance of avoiding such feelings (Bernstein, 2000; Siegel & Walker, 1996). Additionally, a gay couple working with a straight therapist can have the perceived advantage of curtailing potential sexual jealousy with regard to the therapist, which some clients fear could occur with a gay therapist (Bernstein, 2000; Siegel & Walker, 1996).

The kind of mental health profession and professional can be important to consider as well. For instance, MFTs may offer less pathologizing and linear responses to problems in comparison to other types of therapists (Malley & McCann, 2002). Additionally, MFT as a field offers collaborative forms of therapy that may be more respectful than more traditional forms of therapy (Malley & McCann, 2002). Furthermore, recent research conducted on the national level examining the comfort level in working with and support of human rights for sexual minorities by 208 AAMFT Clinical Members found that that the majority of the sample reported being fairly comfortable working with gay and lesbian clients (Green et al., in press) and that the majority was also supportive of human rights for gays and lesbians (Twist et al., 2006). Although these might all be encouraging reasons for male-male couples to seek services from MFTs or RTs, it may still be difficult to do so in the region of study,

because of the small number of licensed MFTs, 26 in all, in the urban area of Anchorage (AAMFT, 2008).

In terms of support in larger, urban settings, the literature indicates that gay males and gay male couples are often isolated in their communities, particularly from other male couples (Tunnell & Greenan, 2004). The population of the city of Anchorage and the immediately surrounding area is approximately 285,000 people (United States Census Bureau, 2005). A review of the social resources and support in the area via yellow pages, online searches, and personal and professional experiences revealed that there exists a limited amount of support and number of resources available to gay males and gay male couples. A search revealed the following resources, specifically for gays in the area: three human service organizations, one community-based media publication, one religious organization, three gay bars, one drug treatment center, and two gay-friendly mental health professionals (a psychologist and a counselor). The mental health services were not found through advertisements in the yellow pages of the local area phonebook, but through an extensive online search of gay-friendly-based websites and search engines.

From this review, it seems that male-male couples in general may experience more isolation than support in this urban Alaskan community of Anchorage. Additionally, issues in having trust in the therapists who work with gay clientele in the area seemed potentially problematic because of the lack of public advertisement of gay-friendly therapists (Bernstein, 2000). For instance, in general, less trust exists for gay clients in selecting a therapist based on yellow page referrals versus selection through lavender page referrals (Bernstein, 2000). Clients who select therapists through the lavender network tend to hold more implicit trust in the therapeutic services offered because they have already been assured by trusted sources

that these professionals are sensitive and informed about their particular needs and concerns (Bernstein, 2000). Indeed the need for a lavender type annual guide identifying LGBT supportive services has been expressed by 43% of gay males through survey research (Brause, 1986).

Research conducted in the state offered confirmation that there seemed to be relatively low levels of support and a need for more gay-friendly resources available to gay males and gay male couples. Several areas of need have been expressed by a percentage of gay males, including the following: advocacy for state-level lesbian and gay (l/g) rights legislation (46%), gay-specific health consultation and examination services (32%), workshops and retreats specifically for l/g, (30%), l/g specific social, theater, and concert venues and events (30%), education about l/g specific issues (28%), l/g specific recreational activities and services (26%), counseling services for issues with sexual identity and relationships (18%), phone counseling services for l/g (16%), and l/g specific housing and employment information (11%; Brause, 1986). Additionally, gay male respondents identified that specialized professional workshops offered in the gay male community would be of benefit. The topics most desired for these kinds of workshops were: relationships with lovers or partners (61%), health-related issues (51%), and relationships with people other than lover or partner (38%; Brause, 1986).

Overall, there appears to be little formal support and few resources available for gay male couples. Additionally, given the potential for experiences with oppressive practices and oppressors, it seems then that male-male couples are likely to experience oppression with the added stress of having few outlets for coping with this oppression.

Therapy with Gay Male Couples

It is clear that same-sex couples are seeking out therapy for support in their relationships and for addressing issues with oppression. In fact, the majority of MFTs report working with gay clientele (Bernstein, 2000; Green & Bobele, 1994; Green, 2000; Twist et al., 2006). In studies of MFTs and AAMFT Clinical Members, 72-80% of the therapists indicate that about 1/10th of their clients are sexual minorities (Bernstein, 2000; Green & Bobele, 1994; Green, 2000; Long & Serovich, 2003). Thus, it is imperative that RTs prepare to meet their needs. However, there remain many questions around how best to prepare for such work and whether or not the field of therapy itself is a truly safe, gay-friendly context for gay clientele to seek support. In relation to these questions, part of the focus of the current study was to attend to these unanswered queries in the specific context of Alaska.

Oppression in Therapeutic Practices

Although the rates of gays in therapy is fairly high, most experts believe that this is probably a low estimation because many persons who are gay choose not to reveal their sexual orientation to their therapist out of fear of rejection and discrimination (Bernstein, 2000; Green, 1996). Gay couples often do not trust therapists in general because of their societal experiences of oppression and marginalization (Tunnell & Greenan, 2004). As a result, before coming out in therapy, many gay couples attempt to ascertain the therapist's level of acceptance or rejection of sexual minorities (Tunnell & Greenan, 2004). Testing a therapist in this manner can take many forms—through direct questioning, confronting attitudes and behaviors, and through subtleties like listening for certain language use (i.e., if the therapist asked whether the client has a “boyfriend” or “girlfriend” rather than “partner”) (Bernstein, 2000). Often, gays who reveal their sexual orientation to therapists still

experience some sort of oppression by the therapist. Therefore, it is important that the therapist establish trust with clients by understanding their oppressive experiences, including those that occur in the therapeutic context (Bernstein, 2000).

Experiences of non-support in therapy for gays have been and are a reality. Sadly, the mental health field has a history of being oppressive towards gays. For instance, since the advent of the field of psychology, attempts to diagnose homosexuality as a “perversion” or “disorder” have occurred (Nevid, Rathus, & Greene, 2006). The first documented attempt to classify homosexuality as a *disease* was made in 1886 by Richard von Krafft-Ebing in his work, *Psychopathia Sexualis* (Nevid et al., 2006). In this book, he listed homosexuality as being one of over 200 deviant sexual practices and proposed that the “disease” was caused congenitally or acquired early in life (Nevid et al., 2006). Over time, views of homosexuality through a psychological lens have not varied much from this original conceptualization. For instance, from the first published version of the *American Psychiatric Association* (APA) *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) in 1952 to the published version of 1973, “homosexuality” was classified as a mental disorder (Bernstein, 2000; Bess, 1995; Nevid et al., 2006).

In 1973 members of the APA voted to remove homosexuality from the DSM, which was one of the first steps towards sexual minorities being viewed as emotionally and mentally healthy by members of the mental health profession (Bernstein, 2000; Bess, 1995; Nevid et al., 2006). However, there was much controversy surrounding this change in classification. Part of this controversy led to the 1974 decision by a small majority, 58% of the general APA membership, to replace the diagnosis of homosexuality with that of “sexual orientation disturbance,” instead of the originally proposed idea of complete removal of

homosexuality from the DSM (Nevid et al., 2006). This later categorization was then replaced in the next version of the DSM with “ego-dystonic homosexuality,” which was described as a lack of arousal in wanted heterosexual relationships, or distress from unwanted homosexual arousal (Haldeman, 1991; Means-Christensen et al., 2003). It was not until 1988 that this final reference to homosexuality as a mental illness was removed from the DSM completely (Haldeman, 1991; Means-Christensen et al., 2003).

The path to removal of homosexuality from the DSM was one marked with controversy in the forms of activism and resistance. Even today there is still debate over to what degree the eventual declassification transpired through political pressure or scientific research (Nevid et al., 2006). Politically, members of the GLF appeared at the 1970 APA conference in San Francisco, California and spoke out against those members who spoke of homosexuality as a disorder (Nevid et al., 2006). Also during this time activists and some supportive mental health providers, drawing from studies by Kinsey and Hooker, pointed out that in classifying homosexuality as a psychological disorder, the psychiatric profession had accepted an untested and therefore unsupported assumption that homosexuality was connected to or a symptom of mental pathology (Nevid et al., 2006). Most members of the field of psychology today feel that the change in classification was the result of both science and activism. Regardless of the exact reasons for the change, change did occur nonetheless and its effect has rippled through other mental health organizations. Today, many of these organizations like the American Counseling Association (ACA), National Association of Social Workers (NASW), and the AAMFT have also ceased to classify homosexuality as a disorder.

Although there has been a change in classification, it is undeniable that oppression

has occurred historically in coding and also in actual practice. For instance, research has indicated that clinicians tend to hold more negative attitudes towards clients they believe to be gay (Bernstein, 2000; Murphy, 1992). Furthermore, it has been estimated that as high as one half of the therapists in the country continue to view homosexuality as an illness (Bernstein, 2000; Marmor, 1996).

Part of the reason for ongoing oppression in these professions is the lack of research, training, supervision, and clinical recommendations available to mental health providers (Gottman, Driver, Yoshimoto, & Rushe, 2002; Green et al., in press; Greene, 1994). Some limited information exists, but just as gays are typically invisible and marginalized by the dominant discourse, so too are those who speak to their experiences and issues. Additional factors exist to explain the dearth of research and clinical techniques, including ongoing practices of heterosexist bias, discrimination, ignorance, misinformation, and a general lack of knowledge about same-sex couples (Greene, 1994; Markowitz, 1991; Means-Christensen et al., 2003). Another factor is the heterosexist assumption that same-sex relationships are either so different from or similar to different-sex relationships that study of these couples is less deserving than research in other areas (Means-Christensen et al., 2003).

MFTs are not separate from the oppressive forces of either the dominant society or the mental health field. In fact, many of the traditional family therapy models are primarily designed for different-sex couples and, therefore, the use of them when working with same-sex couples can be not only inappropriate, they can also be ineffective and maybe even harmful (Green et al., in press). Additionally, many MFTs report feeling under-prepared, a lack of knowledge, incompetent, somewhat uncomfortable, and a lack of adequate supervision in working with sexual minority clients (Bernstein, 2000; Doherty & Simmons,

1996; Green, 2000).

The MFT field also faces some unique challenges in comparison to related mental health fields when working with sexual minorities. A main factor contributing to ongoing oppression for same-sex couples is the lack of support for the couples from some, although not all, religious groups (Means-Christensen et al., 2003). Although it is true that one of the oldest understandings of homosexuality is a religious one—one that has typically viewed homosexuality as *evil* or *sinful*—modern religious scholars point out that this view towards homosexuality has gone through periods of both tolerance and intolerance and that currently acceptance of homosexuality can no longer be ignored (Bess, 1995). In response to the growing need for acceptance of homosexuality and sexual minority persons, some supportive religious groups, persons, and practices have emerged. For instance, there is the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC), which was started in Los Angeles, California in 1968 by a gay Pentecostal minister named Troy Perry, who had been struggling with his sexual orientation and after having been rejected by his church (Bess, 1995). As a result he started an organization where he could offer supportive ministry to the gay and lesbian population (Bess, 1995). From these humble beginnings the MCC has grown into an internationally-based Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches (UFMCC) of approximately 244 churches, including 194 national and 50 international organizations (Metropolitan Community Churches, 2005). There is even one of these churches in Anchorage, Alaska.

Although religious groups like the MCC clearly represent an example of religious tolerance and acceptance of homosexuality, many religious groups and organizations do not practice this kind of tolerance and acceptance. This can be of particular concern in the MFT

field, because many Commission on Accreditation for Marriage and Family Therapy Education (COAMFTE) programs are housed in religiously-based settings (Long & Serovich, 2003). These programs sometimes prohibit hiring LGBT faculty and allies (Long & Serovich, 2003). Furthermore, because the COAMFTE supports programs' core religious beliefs, such programs at times discriminate against sexual minorities in a myriad of ways (Long & Serovich, 2003). Moreover, the COAMFTE has made it mandatory for all accredited MFT programs to provide content on issues specifically pertaining to gender, sex, sexual orientation, and sex therapy. The response to this demand by many of these religiously-based programs has included the incorporation of educational training and supervision around reparative or conversion therapy and encouragement of celibacy practices for sexual minority persons (Long & Serovich, 2003). Reparative or conversion therapy has become a generic term for those forms of talk therapy that claim to be able to change or shift an individual's homosexual orientation to a heterosexual one (Ford, 2001). These types of teachings are in accordance with the programs' religious affiliations, yet according to COAMFTE standards discrimination on the basis of religion is strongly prohibited, which means that these programs have the right to educate and practice in the ways that correspond with their religious beliefs (Long & Serovich, 2003). However, most of the major mental health organizations and many members of the AAMFT believe that reparative therapy is oppressive, a form of prejudice, harmful towards gays, and should not be practiced (Greene, 1994; Long & Serovich, 2003; Tunnell & Greenan, 2004).

Certainly MFT programs deserve to have their religious-based rights and beliefs respected; however, some of these beliefs may be harmful when working with gays and gay male couples as they do not align with being supportive of this population. Therapists

practicing from a non-supportive position cannot deny services to clientele based on their sexual orientation, yet the AAMFT Code of Ethics suggests that they should refer them to other professionals if they are unable or unwilling to provide assistance (Bernstein, 2000; Long, 1996). This seems like a reasonable solution except in areas where there may be a lack of alternative professionals for referral, resulting in no referral options, which is unacceptable. Yet, practicing therapy with gays when one is unsupportive of them and their rights is potentially harmful and may be unethical (Green et al., in press; Twist et al., 2006). These issues are illustrations of the ongoing struggles in the MFT field of addressing oppression towards gays and sexual minorities.

Perhaps some of the biggest factors in continued experiences of oppression in the therapeutic context are therapists' unexamined heterosexism, lack of self-awareness, and lack of attention to experiences of oppression for gays both inside and outside of therapy. In fact, heterosexism and heterosexual bias are not only harmful to sexual minority clients, such biases are also a likely factor in being the undoing of a therapist in effectively working with such clientele (Greene, 1994; Sanders & Kroll, 2000). Studies have found that these biased practices by counselors have led to between 38% and 79% of same-sex couples finding the experience unhelpful (Means-Christensen et al., 2003; Modricin & Wyers, 1990).

Gay-Friendly Therapists

Although therapists are not separate from society, there are ways that professionals can strive toward combating oppression in therapy, thereby taking steps toward becoming gay-friendly therapists (Green et al., in press; Green & Twist, 2005; Robinson & Howard-Hamilton, 2000; Tunnell & Greenan, 2004; Twist et al., 2006). Research has documented some steps that therapists can take in becoming more gay friendly. These steps include: 1)

becoming more aware of one's heterosexist biases and acknowledging them (Green et al., in press; Green & Twist, 2005; Greene, 1994); 2) increasing one's knowledge of gays, gay male couples, and the gay community itself (Green et al., in press; Greene, 1994); 3) receiving specialized training for honing one's skills to more effectively work with gay clientele (Green et al., in press; Greene, 1994); 4) receiving supervision in which supervisees explore their comfort level, skill set, therapeutic approaches, personal biases, and support of gay clientele (Green et al., in press; Twist et al., 2006); 5) increasing research involving gay clientele and dissemination of findings, specifically for those clinicians at the doctoral-level or who are operating from science-practitioner model; and 6) seeking out and engaging in professional and personal relationships with members of the gay community (Green et al., in press; Twist et al., 2006).

Although these practices may be helpful in combating some of the oppression experienced in therapy for gays, in consideration of the specific area and individuals in the current study, I decided it was important to explore what has been friendly and helpful specifically for my participants before drawing further conclusions about possible best practices for therapists working with gay male couples in Alaska. Even after such a dialogue with participants and further discussion of possible measures towards combating oppression for male-male couples in therapy, in this moment in time it still does not seem possible for therapists to be completely free of societal oppression, because it is so ingrained in our culture and has been acculturated so seamlessly into our beings that we all suffer from spots of unawareness (Bernstein, 2000; Long, 1996). As long as oppression and discrimination towards sexual minorities is sanctioned by the social majority, no matter how many affirmative action statements and related practices are posed in the mental health fields,

therapy will continue to be only situationally effective for male-male couples and only minimally effective at changing oppressive forces into ones of social justice (Wetchler, 2004). As a result, I see part of the role of MFTs, particularly those who are gay-friendly, as being one of challenging oppression towards gays both inside and outside of the therapy room.

Rationale and Research Questions

The research statement in this study acted as a guide for the methods chosen to conduct the study. This study was focused on providing a better understanding of the experiences of self-defined gay male individuals who were currently involved in a couple relationship, with exploration into how influences in Alaskan society, such as experiences of support and non-support, affected these couplings. I attended to both supportive and non-supportive experiences (i.e., homophobia, heterosexism, and antigay behaviors) of couples. As a result, one of my primary research questions was “What have been the experiences in society and the Alaskan community of gay men in their partnered relationships?” From this exploration, it was my hope that information gained had the potential to offer valuable insight and first-hand information about gay men’s relationships in Alaska. With more accurate information from gay male couples, perhaps some of currently-held myths and misinformation believed by the dominant society in Alaska could be dispelled, leading to a better understanding of these relationships, which may be of benefit to the couples themselves as well as to the state.

I viewed this research as not only being valuable to the gay male couples and the state of Alaska, but also the subsystem of society of which I am also a member—the MFT field. In general, the field of RT offers very little information about male-male couples and how to

offer the best possible therapeutic assistance for such partnerships. It was my belief that by gaining more information about these relationships, the research and practitioner communities, particularly those in the state of Alaska, could become better informed. Furthermore, information gained in the study could then help highlight the need for more information about gay male couples and how to more effectively meet these couples' needs in therapy. To help gather this information, a secondary research question was "What kinds of supportive resources are available for and accessed by gay male couples, and what is of most benefit to the couples from these resources in terms of best assisting the couple in coping with experiences in society?"

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

Qualitative Methodology

An aim of this research project was to hear the voices of gay men in relationships who previously had not had much of an opportunity to be heard regarding their experiences in the Alaskan community. Based on this aim and research questions, a qualitative approach was the most appropriate methodology for this study. Furthermore, to date, the bulk of what little research exists with regard to gay male relationships has been primarily quantitative in nature and the small amount of research that has involved the sexual minority community in Alaska has also been primarily quantitative (Brause, 1986; Green & Brause, 1989).

Additionally, while previous research in Alaska had focused on the LGBT community as a whole, none of these previous studies in the state had focused primarily on gay males or more specifically on gay male couples. Since there had been little to no qualitative research on this specific population and area of study, gathering more quantitative information would have been a missed opportunity to have those operating from either of the two forms of research traditions mutually inform each other (Reichardt & Rallis, 1994), while also offering a more comprehensive understanding of this particular population, place and phenomenon.

Qualitative methodologies can address and elaborate on complex topics, emphasizing social context, multiple perspectives, and circular causality (Merriam, 2002). As Merriam (p. 3) has pointed out, the "...key to qualitative research lies with the idea that meaning is socially constructed..." The relationships of gay male couples and the dominant discourse of such couples have been socially constructed, typically, through homophobia, heterosexual bias and a general lack of knowledge. Thus, this study aimed to break down the meaning of

this discourse and in its place co-construct with the participants a first-hand representation of gay male relationships that is based on their knowledge, experiences, and reality.

The knowledge gained from qualitative studies is primarily through interviewing and talking which employs the use of language and meaning—and is, therefore, subjective (Creswell, 1994, 1998). This methodology is focused on the words of the participants as the data, with a view that the participants and researcher co-construct the basis of the construction and themes of the research (Merriam, 2002). Thus, through the use of this approach, the goals of this study were accomplished by hearing from participants in their words about their realities. From the multiple voices involved in qualitative studies, including that of the researcher, there are multiple constructions and interpretations of reality that are in flux and change over time and space so that meaning itself is very complex instead of simplistic (Guba, 1981; Merriam, 2002). Additionally, since the knowledge attained is subjective it is thereby laced with personal bias and values, including those of the researcher (Creswell, 1998).

Interpretive Qualitative Design

The main purpose of this study was to understand how gay males in relationships exist in, experience, and cope with society. An interpretive qualitative study seemed appropriate because the main goal of interpretive studies is to elucidate and interpret meanings of participants (Merriam, 2002). Interpretive qualitative studies have the following characteristics: the researcher strives to understand the meaning of the participants, the researcher acts as the primary instrument for data collection, the research is conducted inductively, and the inquiry produces richly descriptive data (Creswell, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Merriam, 2002). The data is usually collected through interviews,

observations and/or documents (Merriam, 2002). The analysis of the data involves identifying the reoccurring patterns that cut through the data, presented in the form of categories, variables, themes, and factors (Creswell, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Merriam; 2002). The primary goal of an interpretive study is to elucidate and interpret meanings of participants (Merriam, 2002). It has been said that interpretive qualitative studies are one of the most common forms of qualitative research, yet qualitative studies themselves can look very different from each other (Merriam, 2002). The current study was but one way to conduct interpretive qualitative research.

Constructionist Frameworks

In addition to the study's basic interpretative design, the research question and hence the research design has been informed through a blending of several constructionist based frameworks—the frameworks of feminism, queer, and critical theories. These theoretical frameworks attend to issues of power, gender, social justice, identity, representation, and meaning (Briodo & Manning, 2002). It is important to note that although these theories share a lot of overlap in ideation, they are not synonymous with each other (Briodo & Manning, 2002). However, they can be combined in a judicious manner to inform the same research question and design, with the recognition that not all aspects of each of the theories are completely compatible (Briodo & Manning, 2002).

Critical theory framework. The critical theory framework calls for action towards a truly democratic society through means of social justice (Briodo & Manning, 2002; Lincoln & Denzin, 2000). In this context, when talking of social justice, I am asserting the following definition by Enns and Sinacore (2005, p. vii):

...centralizing and affirming the perspectives of those whose experiences have been

marginalized or ignored; transforming [experiences] such that power differences are minimized and the empowerment of [the marginalized] is optimized; working toward the full and equal participation of all [people], and rethinking the institutional structures in which [the experiences] occur.

This framework is focused on studying social institutions and their effect on society, including groups and individuals within the society (Patton, 2000). Critical theorists make the claim that society in its current form is oppressive, meaning that certain groups hold more power than others (Briodo & Manning, 2002). From this framework, oppressions must be examined, deconstructed, and eventually reconstructed to reflect a more democratic based society (Briodo & Manning, 2002). In the current study, perhaps the most predominant oppressions considered were heterosexism and homophobia.

The critical theorist who conducts research also recognizes that he or she is not separate from the existing societal oppression. Therefore, part of the role of the researcher and research itself is to assist in the dismantling of oppressions. The role of transparency around the acknowledgment of oneself as a member of the oppressionistic society and the dismantling of oppressions on the part of the researcher through reflexivity, for example, is therefore imperative. Additionally, the employment of methods like respectful co-participation with participants, including acknowledgment of the power a researcher has with attempts made to bring about more equitably-based power relationships with participants, is also a necessity in the research process (Briodo & Manning, 2002). If one practices these types of collaborative means in research, then the research “has the [potential] capacity to emancipate, empower or otherwise make free a particular oppressed group of people” (Seale, 1999, p. 9).

As a researcher, I saw value in both acknowledging my membership in the dominant oppressive society, as well as the ways that I may be considered somewhat of an outsider. I am part of the oppressive whole, are we all, due to my inherent heterosexist bias and homophobia. In terms of myself as an individual, my inclusion in this oppressive group is more specifically influenced by the fact that I am not gay and that I have resided in two regions of the country (the southern and midwestern regions) that reportedly tend to be more oppressive towards sexual minorities. There are most likely many other ways that I am oppressive, particularly in terms of being heterosexist; however, due to my heterosexism it is difficult for me to so readily identify ways I have been and am oppressive. However, since even before the advent of this study I have tried to elevate my awareness in this area—to help combat my own oppressive thoughts and actions and I will continue to do so.

There are also certain roles and affiliations that I hold that have lead to either my own experiences of oppression from society and/or the ability to see oppression towards sexual minorities more clearly. I have seen the value in sharing these experiences with participants. Although I am not gay, I do not self-define as entirely straight either. I have had relationships with and strong feelings for both sexes; however, my sexual behavioral preference happens to be primarily towards men. Additionally, there are some aspects of me that are in some ways outside of the dominant discourse in which we all exist and, as such, have led to some experiences of suppression. These aspects include being the following: a woman, a non-religiously affiliated yet spiritual person, composed of a multi-ethnic background, and being a person with a learning disability.

A common question asked in a critical framework is, “How is X perspective manifest in this phenomenon?” (Patton, 2000). In this study, the X represented societal forces and the

phenomenon was gay male couples. So the question embedded in the study informed by this framework was, “How have societal forces like oppression manifested themselves and what has been the effect of these types of forces on gay male couple relationships from the perspective of the gay male?”

Queer theory. One aspect of queer theory, as a framework, involves questioning social constructions of identity, including sexual orientation, as well as gender and sex (Briodo & Manning, 2002). Thus, the role of the researcher using queer theory to inform a study is to give participants an opportunity to define their own identity, gender, and sex (Briodo & Manning, 2002). It is also important for the researcher to keep in mind that these constructions themselves are not stable, static, and singular constructs but rather fluid, ever changing, and multiply-constructed experiences (Briodo & Manning, 2002).

In the current study, I attended to identity, gender, and sex of participants by giving them the space to include themselves in the research process, if they defined themselves as having a gay identity and being of a male gender and sex. Although I as a person have been open to having other self-identified persons in the study, as a researcher I believed that it was necessary to have some established categories in the current study for the sake of answering the research question in a consistent manner. The research question was specifically focused on the experiences of gay men in couple relationships, so it followed that participants be gay and born male. As a researcher, I recognize that I used normative constructions of identity, sex, and gender in the current study. However, I also attempted to be sensitive to alternative constructions by providing space for potential participants to define their own identities, sex, and gender in regards to inclusion in the study rather than deciding inclusion for them based on the imposition of my own assumptions about these features.

Feminist theory. The field of feminism lacks consensus about whether it should focus on human commonalities, regardless of sex, or just attend to female-specific concerns (Briodo & Manning, 2002). Regardless of this lack of consensus, a distinctive feature of feminist theory is the “development of knowledge and theory that is inclusive of human diversity” (Briodo & Manning, 2002, p. 441). In general, the present study was aimed at elevating the voices of underrepresented and typically less empowered people, which is line with the aims of feminist theory.

Researchers using feminist-based methodology try to displace the objectivist male-centered approach common to the dominant practice of traditional research and in place of this take a more subjective female-centered approach (Briodo & Manning, 2002). Although not all feminist research is qualitative and not all traditional research is quantitative, qualitative approaches are typically more congruent with feminist values in that they focus “on the subjective experiences and meanings of those being researched” (Maynard, 1994, p. 11). An aspect of feminist-based qualitative research includes reflexivity statements by the researcher.

Reflexivity statements that specifically attend to the biases, values, and experiences of the researcher are of particular importance as the researcher is the primary tool for interpretation (Creswell, 1998; Gergen & Gergen, 2000; Olesen, 2000). Another important aspect of feminist qualitative research involves the consideration of the participants’ voices in the research and the findings of such research (Briodo & Manning, 2002). In the current study, I sought to illuminate the voices of a traditionally unheard group of people in our society in hopes that their voices would have the potential to reach the local therapists, practitioners, researchers, and general public. Therefore, it was essential to give ample space

for their voices to be heard.

Sample

Purposive Sampling

In qualitative studies, purposive or purposeful sampling is used instead of random sampling (Merriam, 2002). Purposive sampling can be defined as judgmental sampling where the researcher selects the samples, non-randomly, but based upon highly specific participant characteristics that will yield the most salient results (Sullivan, 2001). In the current study, the specific participant characteristics included the following: the person must have been a self-identified gay male, who was in a relationship with another male, and be a current resident of the state of Alaska. The term “gay” in this study referred to those men who self-defined their sexual orientation in this manner, meaning that they were primarily affectionally and erotically attracted to other men (Greene, 1994). Additionally, the term “male” referred to those individuals whose self-defined sex was biologically male and who held a gender orientation of being male, as well (Blumer & Barbachano, in press).

It was important that the participants defined themselves as gay males rather than me, as the researcher, making assumptions about their orientations. I felt this was important because I am not a gay male; thus, I am an outsider to the gay male community. The potential for uninformed assumptions about any community to which people do not directly belong can oftentimes be made more readily than when the person is a member of said community. Throughout the research process, awareness and recognition of myself as an outsider was something I consciously attended to as much as possible to help combat potentially uninformed assumptions. In addition to this point, it is also common practice and oftentimes essential for gays to identify themselves as such through self-report, because unlike other

minorities, such as ethnic minority members, who usually hold physical characteristics that identify them as minorities, gay males do not (Greene, 1994). Self-identification was also important because the social identity of being gay has become so reified that it has been imposed through oppression of gay men, making it difficult for them to experience their own definition rather than be confined to a social definition (Connell, 1995).

Another decision about inclusion criteria was whether or not to interview gay male individuals about their societal experiences in their relationships or gay male couples about their experiences. I decided to interview gay male individuals rather than couples; however, I also remained open to the possibility of interviewing each member of a dyad, but individually. A primary reason for this decision was that interviewing individual participants involved in a couple relationship rather than both participants in a couple relationship seemed respectful of differences between individuals members involved in a relationship. For instance, if one member of a dyad wanted to be involved in this research activity and the other did not, why should neither be able to participate, or inversely, why should one be potentially *forced* into participating? By having the inclusion criteria be individuals involved in a couple relationship this allowed for both members of couple to participate individually, as well as one member of a dyad to participate while the other chose to not participate.

In addition to the inclusion criterion for participation, there were also exclusion criteria: any males who did not define themselves as gay or male, who were not involved in a relationship with another male or males, and who did not currently reside in Alaska. From my position as a resident of Alaska, I have a historical and ongoing relationship with the state and thus am an insider to the area—holding a good understanding of the culture and nuances of not only the urban area of Anchorage, but also much of the state-wide regions as well.

Gatekeeping

A gatekeeper is important in many qualitative studies in assisting the researcher's entry into the community of study, which can be sensitive and delicate territory to traverse (Merriam, 2002). A gatekeeper can also be helpful in assisting researchers who may share some of the larger cultural values of the group of study, but who are outsiders to the immediate culture of the group; in other words researchers who come from an etic perspective (Lincoln & Denzin, 2000). This perspective is in contrast to the emic perspective, in which the researcher shares in the smaller, more localized and immediate culture of the group of participants in the study (Lincoln & Denzin, 2000). In the current study, I was operating from more of an etic perspective because the group of study was gay males in relationships and I am a female who has been involved in a straight relationship. However, I did have some insight into the culture of study as an ally of the gay community and as a woman who had explored relationships with other women.

In light of these considerations, a gatekeeper or several gatekeepers into the gay male culture were necessary to obtain the majority of the sample in the current study. In identifying a gatekeeper, I made contact with three individuals who were peers and/or professional contacts already familiar to me in the Anchorage and surrounding urban area and who were familiar with or members of the gay male community. One of these contacts was a gay male, another was a straight male who was friends with several gay males, and the final was a straight female who was friends with and had family members who were gay men. My original plan was to utilize only one gatekeeper; however it ended up ensuring a higher chance of connecting with potential participants by having more than one potential gatekeeper at the onset of the study. After multiple attempts to make connections with

potential participants through the three gatekeepers, finally one successful attempt was made through the female gatekeeper. After making contact with and attaining my first participant in the study through this gatekeeper, snowball sampling was then one of the primary sampling methods utilized.

Snowball Sampling

The form of purposive sampling that was primarily used in the present study was snowball sampling. In general, snowball sampling is the process of collecting a few participants from the particular group of people of interest in the study who then encourage other people to participate. Those people then encourage others to participate, and the process continues until a desired sample size is reached (Sullivan, 2001). Participants are encouraged to participate until the data collected reach the point of saturation. In the current study, the process of snowball sampling started after having contact with my first participant, whom I met through a gatekeeper. After meeting with him, I asked him to circulate information about the study to potential participants in his community. Potentially interested parties were then provided with a means of contacting me or I was provided with a means of contacting interested parties.

The total number of participants for the current study was somewhat ambiguous at onset, as is oftentimes the case in qualitative research, as the number of participants is frequently tied to the process of the research itself, specifically to the point at which saturation is reached (Merriam, 2002). In general, however, relatively small numbers of people are used in qualitative research, so that precision by the researcher can be better ensured in the attempt to understand the particular in depth, rather than trying to figure out what is generally true to the many (Merriam, 2002). Furthermore, the number of participants

in qualitative research seems to vary not only based on when saturation is reached, but also on the format in which data is collected (i.e., through focus groups, individual interviews, observations), the type of qualitative research selected (i.e., interpretive, grounded theory, phenomenological, case study, ethnographic study, narrative analysis, critical qualitative, postmodern), and the number of researchers involved in the study. From a review of several qualitative studies, the number of participants typically ranges from one to twenty-five (Brott & Myers, 1999; Cheng, 2007; Correll, 1995; Hebert & Beardsley, 2001; Jones & McEwen, 2000; Lather & Smithies, 1997; Merriam & Muhamad, 2000; Murphy & Wright, 2005; Tisdell, 2000; Worthen & McNeill, 1996), with the average number of participants ranging from six to twelve and oftentimes with an ideal number of eight (Patton, 1990). The number of participants then that I attained the point of saturation with in the current study was eleven, which seemed in alignment with expected numbers in qualitative studies.

Once initial contact was made, I had a discussion about the study with the potential participant, including the purpose, as well as whether or not the person met inclusion criteria. After a brief discussion about inclusion/exclusion requirements and the purpose of the study, the Informed Consent Document was reviewed with the person and he was asked to sign it once he had decided to participate (See Appendix A: Informed Consent Document). The Informed Consent Document was approved through the Iowa State University (ISU) Institutional Review Board (IRB—a committee that reviews and approves human subject research studies) (See Appendix B: Iowa State University Institutional Review Board Letter of Approval of Study) before the onset of this study. Participants were also given a chance to have any questions they may have had about the interview process answered and were also made aware that they could withdraw from interviews and/or the study at any time with no

consequences. After participants signed the consent form, they were given a copy to keep. The participant was then encouraged to talk with other interested parties about the study and refer them to the researcher. Of the eleven participants, eight were attained through the original gatekeeper and first participant and then the subsequent process of snowball sampling.

Public Presentation

As per the suggestion of one of the members of my university-based committee, I briefly presented my research study at the statewide Alaska Pride Conference 2006, which was held in October in Anchorage. From this public forum, I had several members of the gay male community approach me regarding my work and their interest in participating. Of the individuals who approached me, one person met the criteria and entered the study through this venue.

After this public speaking engagement, two other opportunities became available at which I was able to speak about my study. One was in January of 2007 in the context of an upper-division sociology course entitled, "Gay and Lesbian Lifestyles," which was offered through the Department of Sociology at UAA. The second venue was through a Psychology Department Colloquium at UAA, which occurred in April of 2007. During both of these opportunities, I prepared a presentation about my research. Although there were no members of the gay male community who approached me regarding my work and their interest in participating in the study immediately after either of these presentations, from each of the times I presented in a public forum I apparently gained recognition and credibility in the gay male community as someone who was conducting research with this population and who could be trusted, because shortly after the completion of each of these presentations I had

people come to me at the university asking me about my research who were interested in becoming participants. Of the individuals who approached me, two people met the criteria for inclusion and entered the study.

Having participants enter this study through public presentation proved to be effective in terms of increasing the number of participants in the research and valuable in terms of the content provided by such participants. However, before beginning my study I had been reluctant to publicly present the research and potentially attain participants through such presentation. After much reflection and subsequent journaling I realized that there were a number of reasons why I had been reluctant to potentially gain participants through a method other than through the use of a gatekeeper and subsequent snowball sample. The primary reason was that I did not want to make the research so publicized and advertised out of respect for the confidentiality of members of the gay community.

I ended up changing my mind about publicly speaking about the work and potentially attaining participants through this format. One reason for this change was the knowledge that I simply had a need for more research participants to reach saturation. Another was a demographic need for participants of more varied ages. The method I had been using to acquire participants, that of snowball sampling, seemed to be primarily providing me with those gay males in the age range of middle adulthood, and I wanted some participants of younger ages, as there seemed to be potential differences in themes around societal support or lack thereof that could be tied to age. I also noticed that I seemed to be attaining a relatively higher number of participants than expected who had participated in therapy. A fellow researcher at a UAA Psychology Department Colloquium, pointed out that this preliminary finding too may be related to a potential sampling effect. For instance, if the

participants who first entered my study had participated in therapy, this might have led to them knowing other people who value therapy and as such may have participated in therapy themselves. Due to the nature of the method of snowball sampling then, it was possible that I could have been acquiring a relatively higher number of gay males who had participated in therapy than what was actually more reflective of the numbers within the gay community.

As my findings demonstrate, public presentations resulted in meeting these concerns—I gained more participants, all of whom were younger and had participated in therapy. Therefore, information gained through participants attained through public presentation definitely helped me to solidify and clarify my findings.

Benefits and Risks for Participants

I consider gay males a vulnerable population because of the pervasive heterosexism and homophobia in society. As a result, it was important for participants to fully weigh both risks and benefits for participating in the current study. No more risk or potential for harm for participants than would be expected in everyday life in the current study was expected. Additionally, I took every step to minimize and prevent any potential risk or harm based on the vulnerability of the group within the society. Moreover, should any discomfort or issues have arisen for participants in the study, certain precautions and anticipatory measures were already in place for assistance.

There could have been a few instances of potential concern in relation to risks for participants. During the procedures of the research process, the interviews were focused on personally- and relationally-based information. It was possible that in the sharing of this kind of information, certain emotions, feelings, and psychological stressors could have arisen. If any of these feelings had been uncomfortable for the participant, the option of not answering

any of the questions was made available. It was also possible for the participant to take a personal moment to collect himself and his thoughts at any time during the process. In addition to this, professional contacts and resources were provided to all participant as a part of the informed consent process in case the participant needed to access such resources as part of follow-up for any issues (See Appendix C: Professional Resources). Additionally, if, during the interviewing process, any of the participants had disclosed any present experiences of self-harm or harm to others, I had in place access to professional resources as part of follow-up for any such issues, aimed at offering safety for the participant (Appendix C). Furthermore, if the participant had disclosed abuse as being experienced in his relationship/s, I had provided access to appropriate professional contacts and resources as part of follow-up for any such issues, aimed at offering safety to the participant (Appendix C). The professional resources made available were those that in most instances had been self-defined, through advertisement, as being gay-friendly.

Despite the potential for risks, the benefits for participants, professional MFT therapists and researchers, as well as society, outweighed the potential risks. A benefit is defined as a desired outcome or advantage. A benefit for some participants was the experience of positive feelings after having had a chance to share about themselves and their partnership in a supportive environment. Beyond the individual benefits to involvement in the current study, it is believed that information gained has the potential to benefit the local Alaskan community in particular by providing valuable insight and first-hand information to help dispel some of the currently held myths and to assist in the demystification of many of the stereotypes that prevail around gay male relationships. Additionally, it was hoped that participation in the study provided a space for members of an underrepresented group of

individuals to have had their voices heard, which had been sorely lacking.

It was also hoped that the current study would be of benefit to the field of MFT, or RT, of which I am a member. In general, in the therapy field there is little information about gay male couples and how to offer the best possible assistance for these partnerships. Therefore, the information gained in the study can help attend to this need and, as a result, it was hoped that it will enhance the benefits of therapy for gay male couples by helping the therapist more successfully attend to the needs of these couple configurations.

Data Collection

A common form of data collection in qualitative studies is interviewing the participants (Merriam, 2002). In this study, I gathered data to address the research questions by interviewing self-identified gay male individuals who were involved in a romantic relationship. I used a semi-structured interview format, in which there were pre-structured open-ended questions (Merriam, 2002). When saturation was reached, this meant that there was no need to gather more information from participants because enough examples of the dimension or concept of study had been gained from the center of the distribution rather than from the extremes (Sullivan, 2001). Saturation was reached after about a year-long period of interviewing, as data collection took place from of November 2006 through December 2007.

Semi-Structured Interviews

The semi-structured interview questions were based on the literature review, including theoretical and research based works from the fields of MFT, social sciences, and the society in general (See Appendix D: Semi-Structured Interview Questions). As a student of and professional in the MFT field, the interviewing medium in qualitative research was one that I was very comfortable with because I engaged in an interviewing type dialogues

with clients almost daily as a therapist for a number of years. Although I was comfortable interviewing people, I was also aware that my role as a therapist in interviewing is to help create change and improve upon a person's life in a therapeutic manner and that this was different than my role as a researcher. I saw my researcher role as being one of more engaging in dialogue to elicit information from participants.

In the current study, interviewing took place in a series of meetings. The first actual interview took place after a brief meeting with potential participants where discussion of procedures, decisions about inclusion in the project, and a reading of the Informed Consent Document took place (Appendix A). Part of the discussion of the procedures of participation in the study involved explanation that the interviewing process and data collection/analysis would last for approximately six months to a year, during which time they may be asked to participate in a total of two to four meetings or interviews. In addition to this involvement, participants were informed they would be invited to provide feedback and input into the research outcomes and findings throughout the research process. Another part of the discussion of the study included the purpose of the study. This was particularly important given that gay men have usually experienced and are experiencing a tremendous amount of discrimination, so there is an acknowledged need to be sensitive to their experiences in research and practice (Ariel & McPherson, 2000; Bepko & Johnson, 2000). For this reason, I fully disclosed the purpose of the study as a means to invite the participants to be co-researchers to the fullest extent possible. Additionally, to be sensitive to confidentiality for the population, I pointed out that the participants would want to choose a pseudonym for their participation to be used during interviewing and for transcription and reporting of the results.

After the initial meeting, in which a decision regarding participation was established, I set up the first interview. After the initial meeting with each new participant, and before the first interview, I wrote about the meeting, including my thoughts, feelings, questions, and comments in my researcher journal. During the first interview, the following was completed: the signing of the informed consent forms (Appendix A), which included a list of professional resources, completion of demographic forms, (See Appendix E: Participant Demographic Form), and the first interview. The Participant Demographic Form consisted of information from the participant about themselves and their partners in the areas of age, sex, gender, race, sexual orientation, religious preference, socioeconomic status, level of education, current occupation, and information about their relationship, including the length of time and definition of current relationship. The one-on-one semi-structured, open-ended interview involved the participant having an opportunity to answer questions asked about himself and his partnership (Appendix D). These first interviews typically took place for a time period between 60 to 120 minutes. At the conclusion of this first interview, I provided each participant with a \$20 gift certificate to Sears and encouraged the participants to invite others from the gay community to participate. Additionally, I wrote about each of the first interviews in my researcher journal. All of the first interviews were completed between the period of November 2006 through July 2007.

A tape recorder was used to record the conversations between myself and the participant during the interviews. Upon completion of the meetings, the tape recorder was turned off. The bulk of the information provided during the interviews was then transcribed, coded, and categorized throughout the research process. Transcripts of the first interviews were then provided to the participants for review so they could consider their accuracy.

Simultaneously I began the process of coding and categorizing the transcripts. During this time I also started the second meetings.

The second meetings took place between January 2007 and December 2007. Each of these meetings was again tape recorded and transcribed. During the second meetings, we discussed the accuracy of the transcripts from the first interviews, the preliminary themes that I had found to date, and the research process itself. All of the participants reported that the transcripts were accurate in terms of content, but there were some minor technical problems reported; a few words missing and some minor grammar and spelling errors. When participants expressed wanting technical errors changed, I made the changes and then provided the revised transcripts to the participant to ensure their accuracy. The participants also expressed that they felt that they had done the majority of the speaking in the first interviews and that they felt the interviews had accurately captured their words and thoughts. Any preliminary themes to date, as well as general demographics of the participants, were also discussed during the second meeting; the bulk of participants agreed with the majority of the themes that were presented. At the conclusion of these meetings, each participant was again provided with a \$10 gift certificate to Sears. Additionally, I again, wrote about each of the second interviews in my researcher journal.

The third and final meetings were then scheduled with participants when possible so that they would have a chance to discuss the final research outcomes and findings. A few of the participants were unavailable to meet for the third meeting due to a variety of reasons. One participant had moved out of the state and as such was consulted via phone for his feedback. Another participant had suddenly and very unexpectedly died in a tragic accident, making follow-up impossible. Those participants that I did meet with received a copy of the

final findings, their second transcriptions, and a final \$10 gift certificate to Sears. These meetings were much more informal and were not recorded, but I recorded my thoughts on the discussion and reflection of these meetings in my researcher journal. The third meetings took place between February and March of 2008.

Participant Privacy

There are a few key areas regarding the relationship between the researchers and the participant/s that must be ethically considered in qualitative research: participant confidentiality, results, and dissemination (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). I have had quite a bit of experience with attending to these areas not only in the context of research, but also as a therapist—particularly maintaining the confidentiality of clients. Although the roles of researcher and therapist are different, my ability to protect people's information in my therapeutic experiences proved invaluable in my role as researcher.

The first area of specific attention was the privacy of the participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Indeed, maintaining confidentiality of the participants was important in helping them to feel more comfortable with participating in the study. In consideration of this, taped interviews and records of all participants have been kept confidential. Moreover, records identifying participants were kept confidential to the extent permitted by applicable laws and regulations and were not made publicly available. However, federal government regulatory agencies and the IRB may inspect and/or copy these records for quality assurance and data analysis.

Taking steps to protect confidentiality helped address some of the risks involved in participation of the study, because if confidentiality was not protected it could have presented a problem for participants who could have lost interest in the study or experienced a loss of

control over the process. More specifically, protecting confidentiality may be highly valued by gay male couples because of oppressive forces and discrimination that members of these couples have historically experienced. Another way to help ensure privacy for participants was through the use of pseudonyms. Therefore, participants were each given a pseudonym of their choosing and any information was de-identified, and the pseudonym used instead.

All records, including written documents, surveys, taped interview meetings, transcriptions of interviews, and data analysis were de-identified and placed in a secured location. The secured location consisted of a locked filing cabinet in a locked location—my university office—which was accessible only by me. In addition, all information on the computer was entered and stored on a password-protected computer. Upon completion of this study and subsequent approval of the dissertation research by the appropriate body at the university level, the tapes will be destroyed, as will any other identifying information.

A second area of specific attention in terms of ethics in qualitative studies was reporting results and subsequent dissemination (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Dissemination of the results will take place, but for the sake of maintaining the privacy of participants, identifying information of the participants will not be disclosed. Instead, the pseudonyms chosen by participants will be employed to protect their identity. Furthermore, identifying information will remain confidential if the results of the study are published.

Costs and Compensation

At the completion of the first through third meetings, participants were compensated for their participation. As a token of appreciation for the participant's time and efforts in the study, he received gift certificates. I would have preferred to compensate participants in the study with actual cash; however, according to the administrative support in the department

through which the project was funded, this would have required me having to report participants' actual names and perhaps other identifying information to departmental persons. In order to uphold my ethical value of non-disclosure of the participants' identifying information in the current study, I decided to show appreciation through the means of gift certificates instead.

As was briefly mentioned above, gift certificates were secured through grant funding. Funding was allocated through the ISU Human Development and Family Studies (HDFS) Graduate Student Research Fund. The securing of this grant involved the completion of an application and a summary of the research project. Included in the project summary was information regarding the project title, principle investigator, summary of the study, and an outline of the project budget. Upon review and acceptance of the application, moneys were allocated towards the purchase of gift certificate to compensate participants. However, the process of selecting a gay-friendly business from which to secure gift certificates was somewhat difficult. Administrative support in the HDFS department informed me that for ease of transaction I would need to purchase all gift certificates in the state where the university is housed—Iowa—rather than in the state of study—Alaska. This meant I needed to locate nationally-owned and operated businesses that existed in both states from which to obtain gift certificates, rather than my preferred choice of locally-owned and operated ones in the state of Alaska. There were only a few nationally-based businesses that overlapped between Iowa and Alaska. Once I established the names of these companies, it was important to me to do my best to select those businesses that strived to be gay-friendly.

Using the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) 2005 Corporate Equality Index (CEI), which consisted of a scale from 0-100 in which higher scores indicated a more gay-friendly

business, I tried to select gay-friendly businesses that existed in both states (Human Rights Campaign, 2005). In order to be considered a gay-friendly company, at least one of the following criterion needed be met: there was nondiscrimination policy in place, domestic partner benefits were available, and sexual minority employee groups had been established (Human Rights Campaign, 2005). However, the use of the CEI was somewhat problematic in that it describes mainly information on nationally-based companies rather than on state-based local ones. In addition to this, the companies rated must be large enough (500+ employees) to be included in the CEI, or more corporate-sized, meaning that most non-profit companies and smaller businesses are excluded from being ranked (Human Rights Campaign, 2005).

Based on the CEI scores, as well as the basic living needs of the participants in the study, I decided to provide gift certificates to Sears. According to the CEI, Sears received a score of 100 on the national level in terms of being gay-friendly. Sears was also an easily accessible business in the state of Alaska. For the first meeting, compensation consisted of a \$20 gift certificate to Sears. Compensation for each subsequent meeting was a \$10 gift certificate to the business. To my knowledge, there were no costs for participants for their participation in the study.

Data Analysis

As I went through the research process, discussion from the first semi-structured open-ended interview questions that were tape recorded were then transcribed, as were the member checking discussions that took place in the second meetings. All interviews were transcribed by the same transcriber, who was a member of the UAA Behavioral Health Research and Services (BHRS) Department. This person met both UAA and ISU IRB

requirements. In consideration of keeping all of the participants in this study aware of the procedures and process, during each of the first meetings the participants were made aware that a UAA BHRS staff transcriber would be reviewing and transcribing the taped interviews. Approval for the use of the assistance in the transcription process by a UAA BHRS staff transcriber was attained through the IRBs of both ISU and UAA.

The process of qualitative research is recursive and systemic in nature. In other words, information is gathered from participants, analyzed inductively based on data provided, and simultaneously the researcher develops themes and then returns to the participants to further refine, alter, and check themes against participants' reality (Merriam, 2002). Based on this procedure, in this study as interviews were transcribed I then reviewed them, inductively finding a unit of data and then comparing it to another unit of data, looking for common patterns and themes that cut across the data (Merriam, 2002). Units of data for comparison of possible patterns were found by first underlining certain phrases in each transcript that appeared to be a common pattern between transcriptions and making notation of the possible theme associated with each phrasing.

Phrases from transcripts from the first interviews that were determined to be part of a pattern were then further explored for emergent themes. The exploration took place through a process of open and focused coding (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). Open coding involved pulling out excerpts from the transcriptions in the form of potential themes. In using open coding to review the first interviews, I conducted the process by exploring the underlined patterns found across interviews and then I made notations of the themes beside the underlined portion of each transcript (See Appendix F: Open Coding Transcription

Example). The excerpts that were underlined and notated were then used as examples of various re-occurring themes. Themes were generated from the patterned phrases across transcriptions, as well as in the context of what I had noted about gay males and gay male couples from a review of the literature and in relation to my researcher journal—checking it with my thoughts, feelings, and experiences of the participant meetings and my experiences both within the gay and dominant communities.

After the process of open coding from the first interviews, I then began conducting second interviews with participants to review my preliminary themes with participants and check for accuracy. Simultaneously, I submitted the themes from open coding to the peer reviewers for feedback. While second interviews and peer reviewing of the themes was taking place, I was also in the process of completing focused coding. Focused coding was used to help me explore themes that emerged in the open coding of the transcriptions (Emerson et al., 1995). In this process, memos from participants from second interviews, as well as transcriptions from the second interviews, notes from my researcher journal and feedback from peer reviewers was used to create themes and establish connections between the various themes found in the open coding process (Emerson et al., 1995; Esterberg, 2002). The phrases within the transcripts that had previously been identified through underling were then highlighted according to coding of specific themes (See Appendix G: Focused Coding Transcription Example). The indicated themes were then pulled out and an assessment of salience of a theme within a participant's transcription and between participants' transcriptions occurred.

As was the suggestion of one of the members of my university-based committee, the application of Hardiman and Jackson's (1997) *Social Oppression Matrix* was helpful in coding the themes of support and non-support, in particular. The co-authors of this model assert that "social oppression exists when one social group, whether knowingly or unconsciously exploits another social group for its own benefit" (Hardiman & Jackson, 1997, p. 17). Co-authors Hardiman and Jackson (1997) predicate their model on four key principles that when combined create the "condition of social oppression" (p. 17). Each of these four principles, paraphrased below (Hardiman & Jackson, 1997), seemed applicable to the theme of non-support

- 1) The dominant group has the power to define and name reality and determine what is "normal," "real," or "correct" for the oppressed group.
- 2) Harassment, discrimination, exploitation, marginalization, and other forms of differential and unequal treatment are institutionalized and systematic and do not require the conscious thought or effort of individual members of the dominant group, but instead have been enacted as business as usual in that they have become embedded in society over time.
- 3) Psychological colonization of the oppressed group has occurred through socialization by the dominant group leading the oppressed to internalize and minimize their oppressed condition whereby the oppressed group then colludes and helps to maintain the oppressor's ideology and social system.
- 4) The oppressed group's culture, language, and history is misrepresented, discounted, or eradicated and in place the dominant group's culture is imposed.

Hardiman and Jackson's (1997) conceptual model includes a definition of oppression in which individuals experience a variety of roles through a dynamic script and in multi-leveled contexts. Thus this matrix is composed of three contextual levels: the individual, the institutional, and the societal/cultural levels, as well as a description of the dynamic workings of how these levels, in which oppression occurs, are supported and reinforced through the

dimensions of application and psycho-social processes. The psycho-social processes dimension includes information with regard to an individual's advocacy, participation, support, or collusion in the system of the socially oppressed (Hardiman & Jackson, 1997). In the application dimension of the model the attitudes and behaviors with regard to how oppression is manifested in both beliefs and actions of individuals and systems are acknowledged (Hardiman & Jackson, 1997). This model also includes information with regard to dominant and subordinate social roles, namely the agent (or oppressor) and target (or oppressed), and how individuals occupying these roles interact between and within their respective groups, as well the dynamic scripts accorded each within the varied contextual levels (Hardiman & Jackson, 1997).

While all of the components of the *Social Oppression Matrix* seemed potentially relevant in coding the theme of non-supportive experiences in society, the context dimension of the model was the only aspect of the model that was applicable to both the themes of support and non-support in the current study. For clarification, the application of this dimension of the matrix did not occur until after both a discussion with regard to its' relevance to the themes of support and non-support with participants during the member checking process in the second interviews, as well as after the reception of feedback from peer reviewers in terms of the applicability of this dimension of the matrix to these specific themes. The context dimension of this model included three levels—the individual, institutional, and cultural/social levels (Hardiman & Jackson, 1997).

On the individual level, the focus is on the beliefs and/or behaviors of the individual person (Hardiman & Jackson, 1997). Examples of non-support on this level of the matrix include harassment, slurs, and behavior exclusionary of the oppressed group (Hardiman &

Jackson, 1997). The focus at the institutional level is on the practices and ideologies of institutions like family, government, education, neighborhood, and religion (Hardiman & Jackson, 1997). Inclusion of the family at the institutional level is debatable since families are composed of individuals. As such housing the family in the individual level may have been an equally valid way of categorizing the individual participants within a family. However, in the framework posed by Hardiman and Jackson (1997) family was considered to be a unit in and of itself rather than one that was made up of the individual members comprising it. Therefore, when coding examples of non-support and support from the family, I chose to remain in alignment with the co-authors' decision with regard to family; in other words viewing family as a unit or institution. Finally, existing on the social/cultural level are the cultural norms of a society "that perpetuate implicit and explicit values that bind institutions and individuals" (Hardiman & Jackson, 1997, p. 19) providing them with justification for their actions. Examples of non-support on the social/cultural level of the matrix include messages about the oppressed group in the form of cultural norms and beliefs like the view that "homosexuality is sick or evil" (Hardiman & Jackson, 1997, p. 19).

Trustworthiness

Throughout the process of data analysis and development of the findings, a series of rigorous steps were undertaken to ensure trustworthiness. Trustworthiness includes the following dimensions: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Sullivan, 2001). In qualitative research, the researcher demonstrates that her/his findings are trustworthy by providing a thorough description of her/his process and role (Sullivan, 2001).

Credibility

Credibility is a dimension of qualitative research that is comparable to internal validity (Sullivan, 2001). Establishing credibility involves ensuring that as a researcher, one is measuring what is intended (Sullivan, 2001). In the present study, several methods, including triangulation, member checks, and peer examinations, were used to help ensure credibility.

The process of data triangulation is a common method used by qualitative researchers to check and establish validity or credibility. Several types of data triangulation have been documented in the literature. These types include: methods triangulation, data triangulation, investigator triangulation, theory triangulation (Guion, 2002; Hoepfl, 1997; Patton, 1990), and environmental triangulation (Guion, 2002; Marshall & Rossman, 1999). In the current study, theory triangulation was employed. Theory triangulation involves the use of multiple professional perspectives applied to the examination and interpretation of a singular data set (Guion, 2002; Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Popular approaches used when seeking multiple perspectives are the employment of professionals outside of the discipline area of study and/or the use of individuals from within the content area, but who are in varied positions of status (Guion, 2002). Credibility is established when individuals with differing perspectives from different disciplines and/or positions, examine the same information in the same way and reach the same conclusions (Guion, 2002). In this study, varied professional points of view when examining the data and emergent themes were provided through the reviewers selected for the peer examination process.

The peer examination process involved having colleagues who were familiar with the

topic and/or qualitative research process look over the raw data and analysis to assess whether the findings were plausible based on the original data (Merriam, 2002). Peer checks are typically conducted by people, who are able to identify strengths and weaknesses of the conclusions, while simultaneously providing an outsider view of the conclusions reached by the researcher to see if they themselves would arrive at similar conclusions (Sullivan, 2001). The peer examination process in this study involved three colleagues who were selected because of their knowledge and experience with sexual minorities, their knowledge and experience with me, and their experience with qualitative methodology. In the role of peer reviewer, each person was provided guidance as to the expectations and tasks of them via notation (See Appendix H: Peer Reviewer Notation). The main tasks asked of each peer reviewer were to provide feedback on the themes presented to ensure that they were accurate from an outsider perspective, and to help counter any biases that may be present on the part of the researcher, which should be identifiable to the peer reviewer based upon reflection of the transcripts and journaling provided.

For the purposes of this study, it was essential that peer reviewers selected be effective in terms of the reviewing process itself, and that they also meet researcher needs in terms of theory triangulation. Therefore, the professionals included as peer reviewers were not only familiar with the content area, the researcher and the particular methodology, each was either from a different discipline outside of the researcher's area of study, HDFS and MFT, or from varied positions of power within the same discipline. One peer reviewer (Peer Reviewer 1) was a member of my university-based committee, and is an HDFS/MFT faculty member. Another (Peer Reviewer 2) was a graduate student in the field of Criminal Justice from a Midwestern university and is from and currently resides in Alaska, which has the

added advantage of being a reviewer who is very familiar with the environment in which the study has been conducted. The final reviewer (Peer Reviewer 3) was a fellow graduate student peer in HDFS/MFT.

Aside from the purposeful selection of those with varied backgrounds and positions in reviewers, in order to assure theory triangulation, it was also essential to share the bulk of the same data and information with each of the reviewers to see if their conclusions and findings were congruent with not only me, but each other as well (Guion, 2002). Therefore I shared the following information with each of the reviewers: informed consent document, interview questions, demographic questionnaire, current themes and demographics, personal and professional journaling and reflexivity, revision of themes over time, sources of national and Alaska-based LGBT news and information, feedback after every meeting with a participant (initial meeting, first meeting, and in some instances a second meeting), feedback on different media and historical portrayals of sexual minorities, dialogues with my major professor, several presentations that had been given on the study, and feedback from these presentations. In addition to these materials, I provided each reviewer with a set of transcriptions that had memos and categorical coding information embedded within the margins of each document. I decided to provide the following transcriptions to the following reviewers: Peer Reviewer 1 received information from participants 6 (Chad), 9 (Eric), and 3 (Hunter), Peer Reviewer 2 received information from participants 4 (Benjamin), 6 (Chad), and 9 (Eric), and Peer Reviewer 3 received information from participants 2 (Esteban), 1 (Jag), and 6 (Chad). Out of the eleven total participants, I used six of the participants' transcripts in the peer examination process, including some from earlier in the research process and others from later. I provided both information from the same participants for

review, as well as information from different participants. In doing this, I wanted to ensure that the reviewing process would check for both consistency between and within participant transcriptions and subsequent themes.

The final method to assist in the assurance of credibility in the current study was member checking. As a researcher, a strength that I brought to this study was that member checking was a process similar to what is done as a therapist in MFT. For instance, in therapy, as information is gathered from clients, theories are developed about clients' problems and/or solutions (Rafuls & Moon, 1996). After this, the therapist returns to sessions with the clients with his or her theories and/or solutions in mind and checks them against the clients' realities, after which ideas are then modified as necessary (Rafuls & Moon, 1996). Therefore, before beginning the study I had previous experience interviewing a person, processing the conversation with him/her, and then making revisions, which seemed helpful in terms of experiencing success in the member checking process.

Member checking involves the researcher sharing her conclusions about the emerging themes with the participants with the hope of reaching agreement between the researcher's construction of reality and the participants' constructions of reality (Merriam, 2002; Sullivan, 2001). In the current study, I experienced helpful feedback and success with the member checking process. I returned to most of the participants at two points for member checking—the first time, during the second meeting, to review accuracy of the transcriptions from the first interviews, and to discuss the preliminary themes based on the first interviews and the second time, during the third and final meeting, to briefly discuss the final themes and conclusions of the study. During the second meetings, participants reported that the

transcripts were very accurate and if changes needed to be made it was oftentimes grammatical in nature and not in content; additionally most of the preliminary themes were confirmed by participants acting in the co-researcher role. Most participants agreed with themes discussed and were not surprised by the findings. If there was some disagreement, participants seemed comfortable offering correction, criticism, and suggestions in the form of minor changes to the themes or conclusions. For instance, participant 3, Hunter, pointed out that when discussing each individual participant's demographics, listing their exact occupational title made it "somewhat easy" for him to identify many of the participants, as the gay community is a small one. He suggested that I consider using more general categories from the Census to make possible identification based on occupation more difficult and increase the level of confidentiality. As a result of this type of feedback, the occupations of participants were then provided in a more general manner.

Transferability

The transferability of findings, or the attempt to generalize the findings from a study back to the population of study, is conceptualized differently in qualitative versus quantitative research (Sullivan, 2001). In qualitative studies, generalizability is determined by the readers or users of the research, and the users determine the extent to which the findings can be applied from the context of the study to others (Merriam, 2002). If a user determines that a qualitative piece is generalizable, it is said to show the transferability of the findings from one context or setting to another (Sullivan, 2001).

The process of transferability, then, is to ensure that the data and conclusions of a study are able to be transferred to a similar context in a meaningful way, which in qualitative

research is referred to as naturalistic generalization (Stake, 1980). In the current study, providing a thick, rich description of the context of the study was one way of better establishing transferability (Creswell, 1994; Guba, 1981). Providing rich descriptions of the findings for the reader helps to maximize the variation within the study and sample, thus providing the reader with a greater range of possible situations and contexts to transfer to her/his own contexts and experiences (Merriam, 2002).

Dependability

Dependability is the idea that in reaching the conclusions in a study, the researcher need consider the ever-changing context within which the research occurs (Sullivan, 2001). Dependability is better ensured through the researcher providing a description of the changes that occur in the setting of study and how such changes affect the approach to the study. This description takes place through the construction of a thorough audit trail, which is critiqued in the peer examination process.

An audit trail, or the documents, notes, and researcher journals that show in detail the way the data are collected, themes and categories arrived at, and how the researcher's decisions are made throughout the inquiry, are commonly used in qualitative studies to help ensure dependability (Merriam, 2002). In other words, an audit trail is the explanation of how coding decisions are made. This involves the placement of field notes in the transcribed interviews, which are later audited and reconstructed through peer review (Sullivan, 2001). In the current study, I kept a detailed account of all documents related to the study, the bulk of which were contained in the researcher journal (See Appendix I: Researcher Journal Excerpts). This audit trail was then reviewed through the peer review process.

Confirmability

When conducting qualitative research, there must be enough data available to adequately describe the situation being researched, so that if a second observer looked over the data, he/she would arrive at similar conclusions to those of the current researcher (Sullivan, 2001). In other words, the conclusions reached must be confirmable to others outside of the researcher (Sullivan, 2001). In the current study, confirmability was established through triangulation of the data through theory triangulation in the manner outlined previously, as well as through researcher reflexivity statements and a thorough audit trail.

Researcher Reflexivity

Reflexivity statements are used to illustrate researcher position (Merriam, 2002), which involves the researcher making her role, assumptions, biases, world views, theoretical orientations, preferences, and any relationship to the study that may affect the researcher's involvement in the study transparent (Merriam, 2002). This is important because the researcher in qualitative studies is the primary research instrument and this means that the data interpretation is done through the researcher. The researcher himself or herself is capable of evoking varying degrees of reactivity in participants and in the information obtained. The reactivity of participants is influenced by the amount and kind of influence exerted by the researcher over what is being said by participants and how that is interpreted, analyzed, and subsequent conclusions are formed (Sullivan, 2001). Therefore, it is important to understand how the researcher arrived at his or her particular interpretation of the data (Merriam, 2002).

Researcher reflexivity is also important in the establishment of the credibility of the researcher and hence the work itself. Although ultimately one might argue that it is the readers of the research who will determine the credibility of the work and the researcher. However, with provision of reflexivity statements throughout the work, readers can make a more informed decision about the overall credibility (Merriam, 2002).

Researcher Role

As has been noted, the discrimination and misinformation surrounding the gay community, which can be seen in the dominant society, makes the researcher role entering into the gay culture one that requires sensitivity, empathy, and openness (Ariel & McPherson, 2000; Bepko & Johnson, 2000). This means that the relationship with the participants and the gatekeeper/s needs to be attended to with the highest of ethics, openness, and sensitivity.

I believed I was very capable of forming the kind of relationships with the gay community that was necessary. As a practitioner of RT, I had previously had the opportunity to share in therapeutically-based alliances with gay couples. Although a therapeutic alliance was not the same as the role of and alliance within the researcher-participant relationship; many of the skills needed to establish trust in the relationship in both contexts were similar. Also as a person who is a member, ally, and activist of the sexual minority community, I knew that I was capable of forming trusting, open, and genuine relationships with the participants in this particular study. I believed that building a trusting relationship with the participants in the study was essential in light of the discrimination that had been commonly experienced by gay men.

Researcher Bias and Assumptions

Transparency of the researcher's bias and assumptions can be helpful in demonstrating how the researcher has worked through some of the personal and/or professional attachment to the topic of study. This type of description can also show what has led to the interest in the topic of study on the part of the researcher, as well as the interpretation of the topic of study.

My biases were related to who I am and what my experiences have been. I am a 33-year-old predominately European-American female who is an advanced doctoral student in MFT/HDFS. Human sexuality has been an area of interest for me as a teacher for the last twelve years, as a therapist for the last eight years, and as a researcher for the last six years. In 1996, I began teaching as an assistant in a collegiate-level human sexuality course in Arizona. Through this experience I became more educated and aware of the diversity and complexity that exists in humans in the area of sexuality.

As I was gaining more formal knowledge of human sexuality professionally, I also gained more knowledge personally in this dimension of my own life. Part of this journey led me towards becoming an ally of the sexual minority community and also as an advocate for this oppressed group. I also found myself exploring my own sexuality and sexual orientation at this time. Through exploration and self-examination, I came to the conclusion that I am an individual whose sexual orientation is somewhere between straight and lesbian on a continuum of sexual orientation. Some people might title my sexual identity as bisexual, but I typically do not label myself in this manner. Through my personal experiences related to sexual orientation I have experienced a minute amount of oppression and discrimination that

can come from having relationships with one sex, another sex, or both. Additionally, via both the professional and personal experiences that occurred during this time, I became a more open minded and aware person with more empathy towards people different from and similar to myself. This led to me wanting to find a way to be helpful to other people and to be an agent of social justice for those who still experience blatant discrimination in this country, such as members of the gay community.

Partially in response to these experiences, I became a therapist who works with not only different-sex couples around their issues in and out of the bedroom, but also with same-sex couples. In 2000, I began conducting individual and couples therapy with gay and lesbian couples through an externship with a non-profit AIDS outreach organization in Louisiana. Through this experience I learned that many gay couples seemed to have very few people, either inside or outside of the gay community and relationship, to which they could vocalize their concerns, including their triumphs and struggles as a couple. However, the clients I saw seemed to truly benefit from having a medium in which they could talk to each other through open communication and talk about themselves as individuals.

In 2004, as I was taking a cultural diversity course at Iowa State University, I came up with a research idea that involved gay and lesbian couples as participants in a study. In the course we had been discussing gay and lesbian couples, including the current debate that we are experiencing as a country over the right for same-sex couples to marry. I experienced a feeling of frustration and anger at myself for thinking of myself as an agent of social justice, but since moving to the Midwest almost a year previously, I had not done anything overtly to show support for the same-sex couples community or their battle for rights of marriage. I

immediately felt better and more liberated when I had the idea to do something to raise the voices of same-sex couples during this critical time in our history, which ultimately was to conduct a research study. As I formed my program of study committee, I discussed my research interest with people and gained more ideas through dialogue and was pointed to wonderful literature to enhance my idea. This process led to a preliminary draft of the proposal and research questions for the current project.

In the three years since the initial idea for the current study arose, I have had an opportunity to become more professionally involved in the struggle for social justice for gay and lesbian peoples. I have been involved as a member of a research team that has conducted and published research in the area of MFTs' comfort level and attitudes in working with gay and lesbian clientele. I have also had an opportunity to review many therapeutically-based books and articles, as well as policies aimed at sexual minority people and had a chance to comment on such works.

On a personal level, over the last three years, I have had a chance to welcome more members of the sexual minority community into my circle of friends and family. In addition to this, I have had a chance to continue to explore my own sexual identity and the sexuality of my partner/s. I have really come to better understand that for me sexual and gender orientations are fluid and that rigidity in labeling can be problematic for many people in that it is so limiting. I know that I love and am attracted to whom I am attracted to because of who the person is and not what kind of corporeal body the person exists within. Additionally, I had the opportunity to live in a committed cohabiting partnership and saw glimpses of how such a coupling is limited in terms of legal, financial, and health related matters in

comparison to the more socially privileged marital-based partnerships. In light of all these experiences, I felt prepared both personally and professionally to conduct this study.

In gaining more information with regard to gay male couples from the participants in this study, who I consider experts in area, and in reviewing my researcher journal, it has become fairly clear to me what some of my assumptions were at the onset of this study. These assumptions seemed related to who I was going into the study and what my previous experiences had been. Perhaps the biggest assumption I made prior to the study was that the majority of the experiences that gay male individuals in couple relationships would have had in society were ones of primarily oppression. What I found was that while all of the participants had experienced some form of societal non-support in their relationships, not as many of these experiences were reported as I would have anticipated nor did I anticipate the amount of support that participants reported. Based on my previous experiences with both the dominant and gay communities in Alaska, I had assumed that there would be many more reports of non-support.

Another of my assumptions at the onset of the study was that I might have difficulty gathering participants and having them feel comfortable disclosing to me because of our non-shared sex, gender, and orientation. However, I found that this did not seem to be the case. In fact, many of the participants reported that they were very comfortable talking with and being friends with women, particularly straight women. Some participants even pointed out that they saw parallels between the fight that women have had for rights and the fight for rights for gay men.

Finally, not so much of an assumption but rather an observation of my knowledge level before talking with participants was that it was clear that I did not have much, if any,

understanding of the complexity involved in couples being out or not. My professional and personal knowledge of the coming out process up until this time had been only of individual sexual minorities and not couples. It is now clear that individual differences in being out influence the couple relationship, and that embedded within the couple relationship itself there are layers of complexity in terms of degree and context of couple visibility.

It is clear that my biases and assumptions in this study were related to my experiences and who I am as a person. Additionally, the motivation with which I chose my topic and population of study were also influenced by who I am and my experiences. On a personal level, I am friends with and have family members who are members of the sexual minority community. I value these people greatly, as well as other people within society that are less empowered in the context of the dominant society, and I care about their rights. I am sickened by oppressive practices towards the disempowered. I wanted to do something about these kinds of practices and I see my research as one way of doing something even though it is something relatively small.

In relation to my connection with the sexual minority community as a whole, while I would have ideally liked to include both gays and lesbians in the current study, it would have been too great a task. Therefore, I had to make a decision regarding which population to include. I chose gay male rather than lesbian female couples for a number of reasons. Personally, I have known more gay males in my lifetime and in the region of study I knew more gay males, which made entrance into this particular sub-group of the sexual minority community easier. Additionally, from an examination of the literature I found that gay males and gay male couples reportedly experienced greater and more frequent social stigmatization and discrimination than their lesbian counterparts. Since part of the focus of my study was in

examining couple experiences of varied forms of non-support, gay male couples then seemed to be the more relevant choice of the two from a research perspective.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

One of the primary purposes of this study was to gain a better understanding of the societal experiences of gay male individuals in their couple relationships, in the state of Alaska. A secondary purpose of the current study was to gather more information about the kinds and level of support that existed in Alaska for gay male couples, as well as what supportive resources were available and were of most benefit to these couples in terms of best assisting them in coping with negative experiences in society.

Previous research and literature focused on experiences of gay couples had revealed that such partners experience unique challenges in their relationships related to predominately oppressive forces of non-supportive systems that are operating from both outside the dyad through means of homophobia, antigay behaviors, heterosexism, discrimination, prejudicial and stereotypic practices and from inside the dyad through the demographics of the individuals involved in the couple relationship or through different points in identity development as a couple and/or as individuals.

In this chapter, I delineate findings similar to previously conducted research in terms of experiences of male couples residing in the state of Alaska. Experiences of support for male-male couples were found, and such support was not only experienced as a tool in coping with experiences of non-support, but also as a means of preventing negative experiences through what has been termed in the literature families of choice or chosen families. Finally, information from gay males regarding what they believed to be ideal and helpful in terms of societal treatment with regard to their partnership will be presented.

In this chapter the main themes and sub-themes are presented within categories. The

first category was “Alaskan Gay Male Couples” with two themes housed within this category—*More Alike than Different* and *Identity Development*. Furthermore, within the theme of Identity Development there were several sub-themes—*Development of the Individual* and *Development of the Couple*—with regard to how couples formed and visibility management of the couples. The second category was “The Real Alaska” and there were two themes contained within this category—*Non-Supportive Experiences* and *Supportive Experiences*. There were different levels within which supportive and non-supportive experiences occurred, which included the sub-themes of the *Individual*, *Institutional*, and *Social/Cultural Levels*. The third category was “Coping Tools” and two themes comprised this category—*Families of Choice* and *Mixed Experiences in Therapy*. The fourth and final category was “The Ideal Alaska” and two themes were housed in this category as well—*Laws of Equality* and *Sharing Acceptance: Walking Hand-in-Hand*. Also contained within this chapter are examples of the themes, and when applicable, sub-themes, provided in the form of excerpts from participant interviews. It was important to provide excerpts to validate themes and also to give the participants a space to have their voices heard.

Alaskan Gay Male Couples

The total number of individual participants in this study was eleven; each participant was involved in a relationship with another gay male. In three instances both partners chose to participate in this study, meaning that while there were eleven participants in total, information with regard to eight couples was elicited.

In terms of the demographics of the relationships, the range of the length of time for couples (as of September 2007) was from one year to 31 years and six months. The average length of time for the partnerships involved in the current study was a little over 12 years.

Participants' defined their relationship in a myriad of ways—"living together," "domestic partnership," "equivalent to marriage," "long term relationship," "partners," and "committed." The demographics of the couple relationships are summarized in table format at the end of this manuscript in Table 1.

More Alike than Different

According to the participants, the gay partners in the current study were more alike than different to one another, demographically speaking. This ran contrary to national literature regarding gay male couples, where it had been noted that these couples tend to be more dissimilar to one another on average, particularly with regard to age, ethnicity and level of education. However, it is important to note that a generalization about all Alaskan gay male couples, or gay couples in general, was not one of the aims of this study and therefore the sample accrued is most likely not a fully accurate representation of all such couples. This sample was then not derived with the goal of generalization to or representation of the entire Alaskan gay male population, but rather collected in an effort to better understand in depth the experiences of such couples.

In consideration of the literature with regard to differences in demographic background and the effect this can have in terms of increased levels of conflict and less longevity of gay male partnerships, I made every effort to collect accurate information regarding demographics of the individuals involved in the couplings in the current study. Demographic information was collected by having participants complete both the Participant Demographic Form (Appendix E) and via question four of the semi-structured interview questions (Appendix D).

From information reported using the Participant Demographic Form individuals in the couple relationships were most similar—in 100% of the cases—in terms of sex, orientation, gender, and SES. All participants self-identified and identified their partners as having a sexual orientation of being gay, and with a match between biological sex and gender of male. Additionally, members of couplings were more similar than not in their religion (63% similar, 38% different). The majority of the participants identified themselves and their partners as Middle class (73%), and Christian (59%).

Half of the couples were similar to each other regarding race and age. The ages of participants and their partners ranged from 20 to 67. The mean age for participants was 42 years, for partners the average age was 41 years and for both participants and their partners the average age was 41 years. The majority of the participants and their partners identified as White/Caucasian (77%) and the remaining identified as Asian/Pacific Islander (14%), Latino/Hispanic (4.5%), or Biracial/Multiracial (White/Hispanic; 4.5%) . The demographics of the participants are summarized in table format at the end of this manuscript in Table 2.

Members of couplings only differed more than were similar on the variables of occupation with 63% different and 38% similar, and education with 63% different and 38% similar. The occupations of both partners and participants were varied, but the highest percentages were in the following categories: 32% Student, 27% Retired, 23% Medical, and 18% Government. In terms of level of education, the majority of participants and their partners had at least some college (95%) and 55% had at least a Bachelor's Degree or higher. The demographics of the participant's partners are presented in table form at the end of this manuscript in Table 3.

From the interviews, participants most often identified that they were similar demographically in terms of age, race, SES and occupation. For instance, Esteban, a middle-aged, middle-class, bi-racial educator noted the similarities, demographically, between him and his partner and the implications of such demographics in terms of the couple's interests when he commented, "we are just kind of frumpy, nearing middle aged school teachers, you know? So we like to hang out and read books..." Another example is Karl, a participant in late adulthood, who was retired, White, and originally from the Northcentral area of the U.S., who commented that he and his partner did not "feel that they were treated differently [because] I think we both are White, Anglo-Saxon, you know upper middle class people." A final example of shared demographics between individuals in the couple relationship comes from Dexter, a twenty-something college student, originally from the Central U.S., and the implication of he and his partner's shared demographics in terms of experiences in society, "No. I think we probably have had similar experiences. We're both White, both come from you know middle to upper-middle class families, and are college educated."

From the interviewing process, participants identified as being different demographically in terms of race, religion, education, and occupation. Here is an example from Dexter regarding the influence of occupational differences in the members of a dyad and how these differences can create differences in societal experiences:

I don't know of any examples that he felt treated differently—well aside from one—the work environment, but I think that it was a little bigger though than demographics. Yeah it didn't matter if he was White or Black or had three eyes or two you know? He would still be treated differently.

Dexter's partner had previously worked in a branch of the United States Armed Forces (USAF), which lead to many differential experiences of society for the participants in the

relationship. Their experiences on the job were almost completely polarized; one having experienced an inability to be out on the job along with large degrees of non-support to the point that he was kicked out of his position with the military and the other, Dexter, who had experienced “all positive experiences, all positive at my job. I have been open at every job I’ve ever had.” Dramatic differences in demographics and how this intermixes with societal treatment can place a strain on couples. For instance, Dexter and his partner’s relationship has dissolved, and this may be in part due to the societal treatment related to differences in demographics and the difficulty that each partner seemed to have in fully acknowledging or understanding such differences in experience.

In another instance of dissimilar backgrounds, this time in terms of religion, it was clear that dissimilarity can create a negative effect on one or both of the members of the dyad. Bill, an early twenties, Atheist college student, noted that his partner’s “religious background is not welcoming since they think (homosexuality) a sin. And that’s a problem.” However, not all of the couples in the study who had dissimilar demographic backgrounds had differential experiences in societal treatment or if they did, the experiences were not as drastic or as problematic. For instance, Hunter, a middle-aged government worker who hailed from the Northcentral part of the U.S., noted that he and his partner “have differences in educational backgrounds, [but] that doesn’t bother me. Just because you get a master’s degree doesn’t mean that you’re smart, it just means you have more tolerance for university culture.” This was similar to Eric’s experiences, who was originally of the Northeastern region of the U.S., and who is a White male partnered with a Filipino male. In his experience their mixed racial backgrounds led to an increase in positive experiences in society, which

was demonstrated in his statement "...and the fact that he is Filipino has always made it easier, much, much easier for him to be gay. And it's made it easier for me, you know."

Identity Development

One of the variables that played a prominent role in the participants' lives was the developmental-based variable of identity development. Identity development was discussed in two ways: first, in terms of gay identity development of the individual—the individual coming out process and second in terms of development of the couple—the process of coming out as a couple. All eleven participants discussed individual identity development and with a great degree of salience. The development of the couple's identity was also a sub-theme that was discussed by most participants—all but one, and with great salience.

Development of the Individual

Both the D'Augelli Lifespan Model and the Cass Identity Model were helpful in understanding identity development. In the current study, each of the participants could be placed on a continuum that ranged from Stage 4) Identity Acceptance to Stage 6) Identity Synthesis, but most participants also made some mention of their earlier experiences on this continuum, with stages 1) Identity Confusion through 3) Identity Tolerance. When applying the D'Augelli Lifespan Model to participants I found that each of the respondents had experienced or were continuing to experience each of the six steps, with primary attention to Step 3) Gay Social Identity, Step 4) Becoming or being a Gay Offspring, Step 5) Intimacy Status and Step 6) Entering the Gay Community.

Jag, a late twenties, college-educated government employee and former member of the military talked about the acceptance of his identity, and the development of his gay social

identity and intimacy status, in the context of discussing how he and a partner started to form a relationship:

So we had a class and that's when I saw him online and then from there we hit it off and yeah between him you know it kind of opened me up to a lot of other gay friends, and I never had many because I [did not know many]. I just think it's kind of interesting. And so, I guess I kind of just came out to myself during that whole time, it was really good, and I became more comfortable with myself.

Jag and this partner were both active in the military when they began their relationship together. After a military peer that they had out-ed themselves to as a couple turned them in to their superiors, they underwent a military investigation and were released from the military with honorable discharge statuses. However, this non-supportive experience with an institution, the military, greatly influenced them not just as individuals but also as a couple. In the following excerpt Jag talked about the effect the incident had on both him and his partner. It is clear that Jag showed remarkable resilience and an ability to adapt to non-supportive experiences, while also progressing in terms of the development of his gay identity by beginning to engender a sense of pride in his identity and the solidification of his personal gay identity status:

Yeah, yeah you know. It's interesting. It's kind of a funny story. So we had to deal with that, and that was kind of tough...it's really kind of sad... you had to really be careful with who you're associated with. So, to talk about after that... actually I think it's probably the incident that I think defined who I was. I think I took a lot of strength from that and found out who I was and what was important. So I think that was the real defining moment for me. And for Dylan, I think it hit him a lot tougher and he never really picked up. He was always at the top of his class, always at the top, really just kind of sickening because his identity is kind of built around what he wanted to do in the military and he didn't really know what to do after that.

In this excerpt, Benjamin, a college-student in his mid-thirties who was originally from the Midwestern part of the U.S., also talked about his movement into identity

acceptance, and discussed the steps of developing a personal gay identity status and a gay social identity:

I changed from when I lived in rural Alaska, I changed, I was totally [passive]. I knew I was gay since I was three but wasn't even ready to address the issue. And when I moved into Anchorage I was kind of shy and I had no job, no friends, I lived on my own, so I came out [in] Alaska. Anchorage was my first exposure to being gay and to be integrated into the community.

Like Jag, Benjamin went on to further discuss his movement into a sense of pride in his identity. Benjamin also shared his experiences interacting more with the urban Alaskan gay community and its members, which seemed to be the beginning of his identity entering into a gay community:

That, I do have to say that's one of those things I've truly enjoyed, coming out, interacting with people, and seeing the variety of gay people. Everything from you know street hustlers all the way up to doctors, lawyers, big wig oil executives. It's amazing to me; it's like wow, a nice variety.

In all instances, participants seemed to be happy with their current place in terms of the development of their individual gay identity. However, the path towards that development differed. As was mentioned, Jag's path was one of being forced into coming out, because of his experience being out-ed in the military, whereas Benjamin's coming out was done on his own terms and in his own time. In the following dialogue between Wazul, a participant in his early twenties, and me, it is clear that his out-ing experience was more akin to that of Jag's in that he did not necessarily do it on his own terms, but rather was "forced" into it through negative experiences with non-supportive institutions like his private religious school, church, and family of origin:

Wazul: Actually my senior year in high school, they show us an old videotape called 'It's Not Gay' and that talks about how horrible the homosexual lifestyle is and how the average (lifespan) of a homosexual is forty-one and the average homosexual has two hundred and fifty-four partners in a lifetime and the

average lifespan of a relationship is about two months, so...yeah. It definitely was something very negative. Then of course when I was fifteen I was trying to get myself cured and I told one of my youth pastors and he was just like well you just need to read your bible and pray. And, that didn't work. So yeah and also along with the religious backgrounds, my parents are religious so it wasn't...yeah I was frowned upon. And then of course I went to a religious church, religious school, or Baptist church and Baptist school, so...

Markie: So this was kind of the message you got from lots of places?

Wazul: Yeah it was...what was it called? The abominable sin.

Markie: So it amazes me that under all that...pressure to conform, you know to this idea, that you know you've kind of had the courage to overcome that and...

Wazul: Well it's kind of like...actually I found that the pressure is what actually makes, makes you just want to come out and say, and just say whoever wants to hate me, hate me. I just don't want to deal with the pressure anymore.

In the above excerpt we see Wazul recount his progression from identity comparison to identity tolerance, while simultaneously moving from having a heterosexual identity to developing a personal gay identity and become a gay offspring. Most conversations with participants were centered on later stages and steps in the gay identity development process. This was clear in the following example from an interview with Rick, who is in middle adulthood and originally from the West coast:

I would say probably anybody that knows me more than just casually certainly knows I'm gay. I don't think I come across as being overtly gay. I don't try to hide it, that's just who I am. But anybody who's met me more than once or twice has probably figured it out, you know...It's [being gay] a non-issue...I had already accepted the fact I was gay because that's a factor of my life just like having dark hair and dark eyes or whatever it is. So yes, it's just a factor. It's not going to change, so it's a non-issue.

In the above excerpt, Rick talked of reaching a sense of identity synthesis. A similar sense of identity from Karl was demonstrated in the following excerpt:

So I think you know I've been treated well. In an ideal society I wouldn't worry about hate mail and hate phone calls and stuff like that. And how would you know that you were in this kind of society? I guess I'd feel that I would feel okay about being open. And I do. Yeah I think we're in (the ideal society).

Development of the Couple

D'Augelli's fifth step was applicable to the development of the couples' identities, particularly those that were in the early stages of their relationship. Step Five: Developing a Gay Intimacy Status of the Lifespan Model of Gay Identity Development as posed by D'Augelli, involves the development of a gay partnership, including managing the amount and level of out-ness of the couple in various social contexts—what has been referred to as “invisibility” or “visibility management.” During the coding of this sub-theme, gay couples talked about their ability to express certain feelings and behaviors in relation to the specific contexts and cultures they were in and from, which appeared to be the practice of visibility management. As such, the sub-themes included in this section included how the couples formed, as well as the couple experience of visibility management.

How we became a couple. What follows are some excerpts of the varied ways that participants developed and/or maintained their couple identity. For instance, Karl, shared how he and his partner developed their relationship, which had lasted just under thirty-two years:

I had just finally come out to myself then I ran into my partner and was attracted when I saw him and tried to get to know him and finally did get to know him. Finally after several months of kind of working out the meetings and being together and getting to know each other, we made a commitment and that was [difficult at the time because] he was living in Barrow at the time, I lived in Anchorage. So about six months after we decided that we wanted to stay together, in our, in our little Eskimo village for our first year, that's when we first got together and it was a village of three hundred and fifty people and I thought, we're the only White people in town and we lived together in a little, a

little cabin about fifteen by twenty two feet and we managed to survive that year so that was a good start.

Eric also shared how he and his partner of almost three years developed their relationship:

I read profiles on-line of guys around Anchorage and met a few for coffee. With my partner he was actually the only one that I actually dated. So anyway I e-mailed him, he e-mailed back and about a month later we went out, I was away on travel, he was away on travel and eventually we got together and went out. We've seen each other since; it was about nine months thereafter before we started living together. That's how we met. It was lucky happenstance that I saw his profile and e-mailed.

In the following excerpts, members of long-term couple relationships shared how their respective partnerships developed, as well as the ways that the members of the partnerships continued to maintain their couple identity. Rick, who had been in a "long term relationship" for a little over twenty-four years said:

I've been out as far as being openly gay for twenty...I had to do the math real quick, twenty seven years, twenty six years, something like that. So it's, and I guess I have a little bit of a background as far as you know how I've experienced our society. When I first kind of came out, my partner was very well known in the community and made it more interesting, because I was kind of testing the waters if you would and then to be around somebody where you walk to the grocery store and everybody knows who he is and so forth that was interesting...I think another thing too in being somewhat unique in the fact that we've been in a relationship for as long as we have, people you know the standard assumption that the gay community are a bunch of one night stand guys and you know moving on to the next thing and the fact that we've been together so many years and you know had gone through so many life experiences, you know death of parents and death of siblings and things you just go through when you've been with anybody that number of years. I think we've gained, I believe we've gained a lot of respect from our peers, our co-workers, and even our neighbors; somewhat conservative neighborhood but again we've been there in the same place for a number of years, well over fifteen years. And so your neighbors just like, I think it's kind of the same thing [as our relationship].

Esteban, a participant in a "domestic partnership" for almost twenty years said the following about the development and maintenance of the identity of his coupled relationship:

I think sometimes people spend too much time trying to find the right person. I just gave up on dating. I decided you know the bars suck and you know when it happens, it happens and I wasn't feeling particularly needy or lonely or you know feeling like my life wasn't complete and then I met Johnny and we have just kind of been together for nineteen years, so... And it wasn't deliberate; I mean of all places I met him at church. So yeah, so I mean, which was good for me because I thought that was a better omen than meeting somebody at a bar... And you know if everybody's looking for Mr. Right, you know you're looking for the lawyer, the doctor, whatever I think we do that no matter who you are; heterosexual, bisexual, we're all looking for that right person and I wonder if there is any... Yeah I think what I found out is you find somebody that you're somewhat compatible with and then you grow up together... And [over time] I have felt that people have maybe seen us a little bit differently, maybe in a positive way and it doesn't fit a stereotype that they might have.

Couple identity development and maintenance was also clear in the following dialogue between Hunter, a member of a partnership, lasting thirteen years, and a relationship that he defined as “equivalent to marriage:”

Well this is a small town, so you know of other people. I was in a relationship for five years and then single for a year, and I wanted a traveling companion so I was with my men's group that meets on a monthly basis. I said hey, anybody want to go on a trip? I'm planning on going on a trip in a few months and of course a lot of people said, I'll go. Some of these guys were real trolls. I mean they were like right from under the bridge. Right from under the bridge. And I thought oh great, me and my big mouth. But then my partner said it sounds like a good idea, let's talk about it. So, actually we went on a honeymoon first before we developed a relationship... After the trip, we became better friends and said let's hook up so we did.

Visibility management. Experiences of couples being “visible” were noted by all participants in the current study. This sub-theme of visibility management was particularly salient for gay couples in their experiences with the dominant culture. In each of the following four excerpts, Esteban, Hunter, Bill, and Benjamin talked about managing the visibility levels of their couple relationship by interacting in a more covert way with each other (i.e., not showing public displays of affection [PDA]) within the dominant society. This

was a common way of managing visibility within society that was expressed by all participants. Esteban said:

I live in a state that is politically conservative and culturally conservative...so I think just in this state, in this society, you know I'm, I'm certainly protective of myself, my partner, my relationship in that [we] don't try to draw attention to ourselves and make a big deal out of our lifestyle.

Hunter stated:

I think it's what you make it. If you want to feel you're being prejudiced or being harmed in some way, you can be. It depends on how you act too. We don't act really straight but we're not going around holding hands and kissing on the street like some people do. We're older and that's just not our style.

Bill, a young college-student, and his partner, who both resided in the home of a gay-friendly peer of theirs, Betty, after having been made relatively "unwelcome" in the homes of their families of origin in part due to their relationship, shared the following regarding public affection:

Bill: In Betty's home, I feel that we can be ourselves, we can hold hands, cuddle; we can do anything. But outside of her home it's...I feel that I'm forced to be like distant and not be able to you know hold hands, hug, well hugs [are] not as bad, it's holding hands because I feel like society's forcing us not to engage in such PDA.

Markie: Public Display of Affection?

Bill: Yeah, and the other reason is I feel that my safety is at risk when I engage, when I do that. He doesn't feel the same way, even though he says he can protect me if something happens, I don't want to have to get to the point where he has to protect me. Yeah. If I can avoid it altogether then I'll go for that option.

Finally, Benjamin, who had been in a relationship for a little over a year, shared similar sentiments about public displays of affection during our discussion about dating:

Well, I don't find, I mean it's not like we're holding hands walking down the street or other displays of affection or anything like that. So it's not like everybody knows that you're on a date.

Part of managing being out as a couple was related to managing the level of visibility within the dominant society in general, another part was managing visibility within different contexts (work, school, religious institution) and with different individuals (co-workers, family, friends, peers) of the dominant society. In these two excerpts both Karl and Benjamin talked about visibility management in the institutional context of family and/or with individual family members and friends. Karl said:

And eventually we came out to, you know all our friends and either directly or they just figured it out, by the way we include one another and talk about one another and some people were surprised but most people didn't have a problem.

Benjamin shared the following regarding decisions around visibility management with family and friends:

Markie: It's not just the decision to come out [just one time as a couple] it's who do you tell [and keep telling]?

Benjamin: Yeah and I knew I had to. I knew I had to come out to my family and my friends because I wasn't going to be, I knew when I came to Anchorage I was going to start looking for a partner not just casual sex or dating; I actually like dating. But I knew once I found a partner I wasn't going to be one of those that hides him away from the family, like oh he's my roommate, and my roommate for fifteen years. It's not fair to either one of us. And I see it all the time too. Yeah, I know a lesbian couple who, you know she's out, the other one isn't. The other one's sister came up to visit and they had moved all her stuff out to a separate bedroom and pretended that they were separate. It's like no, I can't do that.

In the following four excerpts, visibility management was discussed in the context of the work and/or school institutions and/or with co-workers and peers. For instance, Jag, a current government employee and former member of a branch of the military said this of a relationship with Dylan:

He was always like really secretive because he was in the military and so you know, in the public he would always be you know really kind of stand-offish. And so you really can't, you have to be really cognizant of that fact when you're out in the public, wherever you go. Even when you're coming to a gay bar for example, [because a lot of] straight people go there.

Chad, a participant in late adulthood, who was retired, White, and originally from the Northeastern area of the U.S, shared the following of his and his partner's former place of work, which was with the government in the area of medicine:

Part of how we've interacted [and] been out to friends and co-workers has to do with the fact that we both work[ed] for the government. And there was lots of talk through the years about sexual orientation and what was acceptable and what wasn't and you kind of got the idea that you need to be cautious about saying you were you gay. And so we didn't really say anything and just lived together and worked together and it wasn't an issue. I personally believe that people don't know this is an issue for folks and it still is an issue in our society. If people don't know, they don't really know your sexual orientation until you tell them, even though they can see that you have a relationship and they see you together with this person. They really don't know for sure until you tell them. And my experience has been that some people are surprised when I finally have talked to them about it, others, one said I know, another one said I thought so, I wasn't sure and some have no idea, some kind of maybe cross their mind but basically it didn't matter because my main focus these past thirty years has been work, and I really worked hard and I feel like I did a good job and inside my feeling is that my feelings are normal for me and so this is not an issue. Yet it was a sexual part in me and it was something that I didn't identify with [at work]. I worked, I was focused on work and working hard and doing a good job and supporting the people I worked with and it never came up basically.

Furthermore, the sub-theme of visibility management was evident in the responses of participants when asked question three during the semi-structured interview, "What have been the reactions to your participation in a same-sex couple relationship from your work environment?" For instance, Bill, who was a student as was his partner, responded with "Okay, my work environment, school, reactions...not that many reactions, really. I think maybe it's because people don't know we're a couple because we don't engage in PDA."

Hunter, who was a government employee and whose partner was retired, responded similarly. Hunter shared the following through our dialogue:

Hunter: My partner doesn't come to a lot of my work functions. But he's welcome to. He's come to some but it's just not his thing. Just like regular couples. Like I said, no difference....You know in a work environment, I bet your husband doesn't come to everything you do at work.

Markie: No, I would love for him to though.

Hunter: Yes.

Markie: But have you attended his social things?

Hunter: Yeah, yeah...But, we don't sit there and hold hands we just act like normal buddies. That's just like regular married couples? I mean if they're dating they might hold hands but once you've been married a couple years—what's the big deal?

The excerpts presented above are examples of the themes and sub-themes housed within the category of Alaskan Gay Male Couples. The first theme was that gay male couples in the urban area of study in the state of Alaska were reportedly more alike demographically speaking than different. The second was that identity development particularly that of the individual and the couple was a commonly reported and integral part of Alaskan gay male couples. Furthermore, experiences with couple formation and visibility management were reportedly key aspects of the development of gay male couples.

The Real Alaska

A primary goal of this study was to hear from gay males involved in partnerships about their actual experiences in Alaska. In relation to this goal, one of my hopes in conducting this study was to help dispel some of the misconceptions and stereotypic beliefs that exist with regard to experiences of gay couples in any state. In this study, the real experiences of gay male couples in Alaska were clearly identifiable as being experiences of

non-support for their relationship, as well as experiences of support. All of the participants repeatedly identified both kinds of experiences in the urban area of study in the state of Alaska. Additionally, there was a part of the *Social Oppression Matrix* that was salient across each of these themes, which was that both types of experiences occurred in varied contexts. The *context dimension* of the *Social Oppression Matrix* was then particularly helpful in both localizing and operationalizing the contexts in which instances of both non-supportive and supportive experiences had occurred. The salience of both kinds of experiences in this particular sample was relatively similar; however, across all of the interviews there were slightly more reported experiences with non-support than support.

Non-Supportive Experiences

Negative experiences in the Alaskan society for gay couples did and do happen. These experiences happened in the context of one of three levels—the individual, institutional, and/or social/cultural levels. These levels, while seemingly separate, mutually influence each other and therefore the boundaries between them are fluid. Additionally, participants, when describing their experiences of non-support in Alaska, oftentimes used terms like “discrimination,” “prejudice,” and “stereotype.” However, although many participants used these types of terms in some instances when talking about their “negative” or “non-supportive” experiences, in the majority of cases when negative experiences were mentioned they were not labeled with this terminology. Thus neither my previously identified terms (i.e., antigay behavior, homophobia, heterosexism) nor their terms (i.e., discrimination, prejudice, stereotype) were used consistently enough when describing negative experiences in society to warrant further delineation in terms of verbiage with regard to this theme of non-supportive experiences.

In this section of the chapter then, excerpts are provided from various participants regarding their non-supportive experiences. While experiences of non-support in each of the contextual levels were salient, the highest degree of salience of reported non-supportive experiences occurred within the individual level in the current study. However, experiences within each of the contextual levels and examples of where different contextual levels mutually influenced each other are presented.

Individual Level

In the current study, of the eleven participants, ten discussed experiences of non-support on the individual level with great salience. What follows are different excerpts of negative experiences, which took place in the context of the individual level, in the Alaskan society for gay male individuals involved in partnerships. These are examples of non-support from friends, acquaintances, classmates, co-workers, peers, and professionals. What follows was an example of a negative experience with friends/former co-workers from Eric. In this example his ability to remain optimistic and resilient even though he had experienced some non-supportive feedback from peers with regard to his relationship is evident. Eric stated:

There have been people, some of the friendships that I had before I came out that haven't held up very well. You know they've just been supplanted by other relationships and it's...it hasn't really been a problem, it's just like oh well, you know. I'm disappointed that some of those friendships didn't hold up and you know I have [former] co-workers [from] out in the bush who currently now reside in Eagle River and we've tried getting together you know, we've tried continuing the friendship and it just doesn't, hasn't worked out. I guess they're not really comfortable with it, so...so oh well. That's just going to happen sometimes...So in terms of reacting to society's negative effects on us, you know those negative aspects have been few and far between really, so we haven't been in a situation where we've had to deal with any really tough situations. You know if one of our neighbors in our new neighborhood decided they were going to bash us or that kind of thing then we would have stories to tell about how we cope with those experiences, but we've lucked out.

Here is another example from Wazul of experiences of non-support from friends/former classmates:

Let's see...friends, because I went to a Christian school, most of my friends were Christians. And by the time I came out I only had a couple of friends from high school, so...they were, they weren't thrilled, but they accepted it. After trying to convert me...

Wazul's partner, Bill, also shared about his negative experiences with Wazul's friends/former classmates:

As far as like people he knows, like his classmates...they're...we tend not to like, he doesn't introduce me and I don't introduce myself when we meet his friends from the Christian school. I don't really have the, I don't really want to meet them.

Bill also shared about such experiences with one of his partner's friends from this specific group of people:

He has this one friend who was, they grew up together, and they grew up in this very religious school, they were brought up together religiously with a very religious background...He was pretty kind of like condescending about [us] at first. Like he was, but he was trying to understand, I could tell he was trying to understand, he was trying to you know try to fit it with his religious views and...I think he's progressing...I think he's progressing, and that's a good thing.

In this excerpt, Karl shared experiences of non-support for him and his partner's relationship from friends and acquaintances:

We did though for quite a, or initially when we were together people would not necessarily invite us both out together. And after a while, after you know ten years or something maybe if I would've been given an invitation to go to dinner, then I would tell somebody else that it might be good to invite my partner. So people you know, we did you know were generally supported there. And sometimes I think that they just invited me out and sometimes I might go and sometimes not because at that point...you want to be seen as a couple.

Some of the experiences that primarily occurred within the level of the individual context moved from this context to another, as individuals influenced the institution or

society or were influenced by the institution or society, whereby clear boundaries between them began to blur. Here is an example of a negative experience from friends with participant Karl, where it is clear how these individuals influenced his choices with the institution of work, as well as how the institution influenced his thinking with individuals:

One of the things I think why I didn't come out to a lot of people [about my relationship] was even though people said people would be more accepting of gay people if they knew how many people that were gay that they were associating with and knew them and liked them, I didn't believe that. I think I had some experiences from prior to that or coming out to close friends who then felt distant from me and I didn't find it as helpful. And so I think I, and that was very early on, or when I even questioned my sexuality, I came out to maybe some close friends and had a heart to heart talk and I felt a distance or separation with that close friend and so I wasn't convinced that if somebody, that if you told somebody that you trusted if you were gay that they would suddenly become more accepting. And so I think that was one of the reasons why for a while I didn't feel very comfortable saying anything about my relationship. Well so you know also in the setting that we were in, as a gay physician in a public setting, that you know that might be an issue too for some people and so I didn't advertise that. So we sort of didn't push it, but I think you know living in a, pretty much living in straight community, and having mostly straight friends you know and I think you know acting not like a couple really was safer.

In a dialogue between Rick and me, in response to questions one and two, he talked about a negative experience with an individual co-worker, which also brought about further negative experiences with the institution of work:

Markie: What have been your experiences in society/Alaska community as a member of a gay couple?

Rick: I'm sure there's people who you know give you a glare or a look or whatever but you don't care. I think there's only one time, and I'm not too sure if it fits into this question, or the second one, but I had one situation in a work environment where the person and I just didn't get along. And I always just assumed it was because I can be somewhat of an ass, I mean I can... And as we were having a heated discussion one time he made some comment about "You, fucking faggot"... Yeah, so it kind of, "Okay now I understand why so and so doesn't like me." And I went up to our HR [Human Resources] department and said I'm uncomfortable in this situation, what are we going to do about it? And

to my surprise neither one of us were fired, but he was the one that was counseled very heavily about appropriate reactions within the workplace and so forth and so on.

Markie: Wow, is, uhm, in some work environments sexual orientation is covered in terms of a form of, you know people aren't allowed to practice hate crimes and discrimination. Do you know if it was in that work environment?

Rick: Not in that work environment, no. This was going back a few years, but one of the things I've learned from my own personal experiences is that people can't whisper things about me when I'm open about it. They can't for example say, you know Rick's gay, well duh!

In the next excerpt, Bill and I talked about several non-supportive experiences that occurred within several different contexts. The non-support started within the individual level—a negative comment made by an individual, but since the individual was a part of the university and the comment happened while on campus Bill also felt he had experienced non-support on the institutional level. Furthermore, when he sought therapeutic services, also on campus, to help him manage the experience, the therapist minimized this primary presenting problem and instead focused on his symptoms of Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD):

Markie: What was your experience in therapy? What was helpful and unhelpful for you in terms of your sexual orientation regarding your therapy experience?

Bill: Okay nine...it was mainly because I was frustrated and stressed out of me and my being gay and having to deal with homophobic people. I don't know I think it was...the therapist focused on my being stressed but not on my being gay...Yeah we talked a little bit about, yeah, because I ended up having, she ended up prescribing me anti-depressants. This was during the winter, with the light.

Markie: Yeah, SAD.

Bill: Yeah she gave me the light or she also gave me the option of taking medicine...I chose the light. Yeah, I don't know. I think...I didn't really find the answers I was looking for...You know in regards of my being gay and how to yeah how to deal with the [homophobic] world. How to cope with it...It was, it was, we talked about it. But it seemed like it was just like mini and like a chunk of it. But for me it's like the main cause of the whole thing. Yeah and

now that I think about it, it was kind of, SAD was on top of what I had gone through you know. It would have been helpful...I don't know I think like ways of trying to, like, trying to figure out ways of how to cope or deal with these kinds of situations so that it doesn't take over my life. Because it was, when I was dealing with, the main reason I went to her was because I was really stressed out with my school work and I had this homophobic, well I don't know if he's, he...I was part of student government and he said a homophobic slur. And I was really stressed out about it because this was the last place I was expecting to hear this kind of language. And I felt I was obligated to tell everybody who goes into that office, so during the meeting, we have assembly meetings, I told everyone about it and that should not happen again. But...I was still stressed out after that and so I went to her. With just like the stress of my school work and that and the weather.

Institutional Level

While all of the participants expressed experiences of non-support on the institutional level, it was to a lesser extent than that discussed on both the individual and societal/cultural levels. What follows are different excerpts of negative experiences, which took place in this contextual level, in the Alaskan society for gay male individuals involved in partnerships. Included are examples of non-support from institutions like families, neighborhoods, religious settings, and a combination of like institutions. For instance, Hunter shared about his experiences of non-support from members of the institution of the neighborhood in which he and his partner reside when he said, "They (the homeowners association) asked for someone to host its [block party picnic] next year and of course we raised our hands, and said, 'We'd be happy to' and after everybody got done rolling their eyeballs, they said, 'Okay.'" In the following excerpt, Karl shared about his negative experiences with the religious setting of a church organization:

I'm active in a church and my partner isn't, so you know, there we're not seen as a couple so much... But the congregation is generally you know, I mean I haven't had any negative experiences before, but they also have not chosen to be openly accepting of gays; they've never gone and made a decision on that. But it's helpful for me not to wait for church to be accepting, just to go in and

act as if they are already and that's been helpful... Ideally, I think largely we are our own group in Alaska [speaking of the congregation apart from the dominant governing national religious body] and I think, I still feel nervous about the church [on the national level] and it's the caboose on the train that's going along, it's the last thing that's going to change....

In the following two excerpts, from both Jag and Wazul, experiences of non-support from the familial institution are shared. In the following dialogue, Jag shared about the reactions from members of his family after he came out about himself and his relationship, which happened in the context of undergoing a military investigation into he and a partner's relationship while they were actively serving:

Yeah it was really quite sad. But it was interesting because I wasn't out to my parents at the time so this whole investigation made me come out to my parents. It was, it was really tough and my mom cried but I was like the [military] will probably be talking to you because they're trying to investigate me... You know the first thing my mom said was actually funny, she was like "no more grandkids?!" And she started crying... Yeah she was hoping for more grandkids. But you know it was, it was weird because also my twin brother is gay, and...

In this dialogue with Wazul, who was originally from Alaska, his experiences with non-support with the institution of his family of origin are shared:

Wazul: Well, with my family they were not accepting. My father's kind of uh, you can say he's a borderline White supremacist so he's, he's really uh, he really reveres Hitler, so he shares a lot of the same ideologies and so that split us up for about a year and a half but we recently started...

Markie: Okay, that split you and your dad up.

Wazul: Yeah, and then the rest of my family wasn't thrilled about it either, and another thing is I don't know if it's [like this with] his (partner's) family so much, but my family is always wanting to spend time with me and it's, it's nice to spend time with the family but at the same time they want to exclude him so it's like he's just going to sit at home or something and I think it might be similar for his family a little bit. So it's kind of like the people we want to go to help (for), they're the ones who also want to split us up.

Wazul's partner, Bill, confirmed these experiences of non-support from within this particular institution, he said:

My partner, he grew up Baptist background, as I've said. And generally Baptists are antigay; they would kick you out if they knew you were gay. And his parents are not really welcoming to me. In fact the other day he started working for his dad and he thought I should help him out so that it would be faster and his dad vetoed it. And he was like it turns out my dad's still homophobic. So I just left. His mom, she would never, she would not have lunch together with us anymore as a couple. We did once, that's it.

In the excerpt below, Jag, who was originally from the state of Alaska, shared about the effects of multiple institutions (family, religion, political system, and military) in Alaska on himself, his partner and the gay community in general when he described how they intersect and combine to have a primarily negative effect:

Exactly, because all my friends leave, so it's really kind of...so finding a person to be in a gay relationship here is kind of difficult too because you know we all grew up in such a screwed up environment of not being welcome, you know my parents took a long time to get used to being, having a gay son also to find out they have a second gay son. All these religious fanatics appear, it's very conservative, lots of military. So you kind of know every, most gay guys, especially young ones take a long time to figure out who they are and figure out their inner strength. We're all screwed up; every gay guy I know has issues, including myself. And I wouldn't know about straight guys or straight girls but there just seems there's always a self loathing, low self esteem, self body image and that kind of, you know you have to take those, it affects every gay relationship and every one that I've been in. And especially the one I have now, my current partner can't be skinny enough, can't be cute enough, wants to be adored all the time, real low self esteem. You know I was telling you earlier that he's on this crazy chemical dependency from drinking two pots of coffee, smoking all the time, drinking all the time and not eating on top of it all. So it's just like, just a roller coaster of emotions and ever since I'd have to say me being with my previous partner and going through that whole being kicked out of the military for being gay and then becoming a social activist, that I've really found out who I am.

Social/Cultural Level

In this study, ten of the eleven participants reported experiences of non-support on the societal/cultural level with a considerable degree of salience. What follows are excerpts of

negative experiences which took place in this contextual level, in the Alaskan society for gay male individuals involved in a partnership. This section includes examples of non-support from society/culture like messages the gay individual in the coupled relationship has received from the dominant and/or gay communities, as well as instances of non-support from strangers whose behaviors directed at the individuals and couples are an expression of these types of negative messages. For instance, in the following excerpts by Jag and Benjamin the negative messages that they have received from various social entities and leaders in the Alaskan society at large are evident. Jag said, “Alaska comes into this because it’s so conservative and it’s got these you know the extreme religious groups here too, for example like those leaders who disown their lesbian daughter [simply] because she’s a lesbian.” Benjamin stated, “Some politicians here will make that jump that if you’re going to legalize gay marriage the next step is that you have to legalize bestiality.” Jag also shared the following pervading societal message from the institution of the military:

And you know the air force for example isn’t really military, it’s really corporate America. And it’s like you know I’m just hearing all this stuff about how military and gays can’t work together, it’s just bullshit you know it’s just like corporate America, corporate America made it work. And they say you know, well we don’t have the same issues.

Participants Eric and Jag shared about the general attitudes and feelings of non-support from the dominant society and in some instances this lead to discussion of their perceptions of these negative societal attitudes and feelings, as well as the actual effects on them and their partnership. For instance, in the following excerpts, both Jag and Eric discussed the non-supportive attitude for their sexual orientation and partnership from the dominant Alaskan community. Eric said:

The people I taught with or the people I taught, the community I taught in is extremely conservative, uhm...it's an isolated village and there again I don't see those folks much. I've been back and visited a few times, but, I think a lot of them probably still don't realize that I'm gay. I think a lot of the people that do realize probably don't have a good feeling about it, but I was pretty well liked out there and I've never gotten any overt disrespect from anybody...So, no bad experiences but I do know that I lived out there for twenty three years, I know that the attitudes are not very supportive and I'm sure a lot of people have a bad feeling about it, but again I left there.

In response to my asking of question one, "What have been your experiences in society as a member of a gay couple?" Jag shared the following:

How were your experiences in society as a gay couple? So I think that the, the number one thing I always find is having to deal with your partners issues and I think that's what I'm trying to [do] and also how about society, uh [the] issues society brings up such as getting kicked out of military because you're gay or you know interact with the external factors like you're dealing with homophobic people and whatever yahta, yahta, yahta. But I think, for me, the number one thing is just the issues of the inadequacies and all those issues that can go along with the growing up in a non-accepting community I guess you would say. And uh, I think there's just a lack of resources too, especially in a place like Alaska. I mean there's no uh, no one wants to, I don't want to live in a gay ghetto, but...I mean this is a, this is pretty much it right here. Gay bars that are mixed with lesbians and all sorts of ages...So it is limited.

Eric also reflected on the experiences of non-support for his relationship from the negative messages he had been given not only from the dominant Alaskan community, but from the gay community in the state as well. He communicated the following in response to a part of question four, "How does society and the community react to your relationship based on the demographic characteristics of you both?":

Okay another aspect of our demographic I guess is our ages and I am fifteen years older than my partner. And I remember when we were first going out; I didn't think about this earlier but we did have some, a little bit of negative reaction from some of the gay community. Because there is this notion of middle-aged White guys targeting young minority guys, or even young White guys, "twinks." My partner, although my partner's in his mid-thirties, he could pass for ten years younger than that very easily. He has a hard time getting served in bars and restaurants that serve alcohol, so...I sometimes heard

comments from White gay guys that you know that I'm one of those old farts picking up "twinks" and something like that, which I didn't see myself in that regard at all. So that was sort of negative, the difference in our ages, I don't know it doesn't occur to us really but every once in a while we're reminded that other people might notice it and have some kind of reaction to it.

Uhm...you know I think I'm okay for fifty one, I'm not you know looking too used up at this point but I guess we've faced the fact that you know we are fifteen years and to look at it as we could easily be twenty five years apart so some people maybe think that the relationship is based on factors other than...you know who we are as people. It's more like it's not based on the idea that I want a young dark guy or he wants an old sugar daddy...Society you know maybe does see that sometimes or assume that and Anchorage too. You know you get the same thing in Anchorage and again, I guess I don't ever feel that from the Filipino community because I think they're very accustomed to gay relationships and they're very accustomed to biracial relationships, there's a lot of that. And I think they also, there's a lot of relationships where there's quite a few years between husbands and wives and they just don't jump to some of the conclusions...So, so much for age, it's not an issue to us, it's other people who look at it and see...

In the following selection Eric communicated his feelings of "fear" for himself and with regard to his partnership, which are partially related to the effect of messages of non-support from the dominant community in Anchorage. He expressed the following:

Yeah I'm not as scared as I was you know when I was first coming out, and this was only like four or five years ago. I was afraid of bashing. I was you know afraid of being within a block of a gay bar at night just for fear of association, you know a guy by himself on that block, you know and maybe I had, you know I feel like I remember hearing, well not hearing but maybe I remember seeing people in downtown Anchorage sort of thinking oh, check out that guy you know at that bar right over there. Check out that guy you know being by the same parking lot as the community center. You know I got kind of, I kind of got that. But I'm kind of getting over that fear because actually nothing overt has ever happened to either of us. So it's more, it's more paranoia. Things do happen in places and things do happen I'm sure in Anchorage sometimes, but it's not as scary as I thought. Anchorage is not as scary as I thought it might be.

Long-term partners Chad and Karl each shared about a negative experience with a stranger or strangers whose behavior/s was both an expression and a reflection of the kinds of negative messages that exist in the Alaskan community for gay couples. In interviews with

both Chad and Karl, that I conducted separately, when I asked question two, “What have been your experiences in the Alaskan community as a member of a gay couple?” (Appendix

D) they each responded with the following story. Chad shared the experience this way:

One of the experiences we had in the community was that we got some hate calls. This was what was unhelpful. We started getting this just at the time when Caller-ID was just coming out. And the calls we got, one of the calls I got I recorded, at least one of them, and one of them it said like queers, rot in hell, sperm dripping from your asses, and I can't remember all the specific things, but it was something like that. I got the impression that you know I tend to not be threatened? And I think my partner was a little more worried than I was, but even so you hear these things, and bad things can happen to people. I got the impression though that these were kids, older kids, teenagers and their parents were probably pretty conservative and I kind of got the idea that [they thought] maybe we were gay and they would call us up and hassle us... I thought that maybe since I had received a few things in the mail? I don't know if I signed up for the Advocate magazine or something like that and once you get on that mailing list... I don't know, I'm just wondering if somebody saw in my mailbox, something that made them think I was gay and because of that they knew that there were two guys living together there, they figured out that probably we're going to be gay... But that neighbor, who still happens to be there, she's been there for a while, was not very friendly, and all the other neighbors were very friendly. [So who knows?]

Karl described the same instance of non-support in this way:

Yeah, the only negative things I've experienced in Anchorage was, I don't know how many years ago, but probably, it was about the time that Caller-ID first came out, whenever that was available. We were getting obscene phone calls at our house. And some guy would call and say terrible things and so finally we got Caller-ID; it had just came out you know and we wouldn't have done it otherwise, and so then we knew the number it was coming from. And so then after I found out the number this was, late on Christmas Eve, I and my partner were both home, alone and I said I'm going to look it up, I'm going to find out, that was when I got the Caller-ID and I looked up the number and found out the address of where it was originating, you can do that in the phone book. And so then I found the address and I drove over there to kind of get a sense of the neighborhood, where it was, and uh and it was a middle class neighborhood and there was a light on in the house and there was a pick up truck parked in front, I got the license of that pick up truck and I didn't do anything with it, I just put it away. I wasn't going to threaten anybody because that would just make things worse, and then when a while later when I got another call and I picked it up on the phone and I thought on this phone I

always had to push talk or something to answer it, but what I didn't realize it talked, you picked it up and you start to hear right away, I've always pushed talk on that. Well before I pushed talk I picked it up and I noticed on the Caller-ID and I said, "Oh, it's that same guy calling again." And then I pushed [talk], and then I said hello and he hung up, never said anything and I never heard from him again. So he knew that I knew who it was who was calling because I could see the number, so he heard when I picked it up saying, "that's that same guy calling again."...That was it. So anyway, that stopped. And I don't, I think we might have gotten, I can't remember if we got something at the house or not, I don't think so. But I do remember feeling concerned. Whenever I opened my mailbox I stood aside. And I did that for a number of years thinking there might be something explosive in the mailbox you know. But there was never, never anything happened but and I don't feel that way now. I mean there was...there was enough; enough had happened to us that we felt the need for precaution. We didn't know what it was, where it would come from, you know?

Supportive Experiences

Positive or supportive experiences for gay male individuals in coupled relationships also occurred in Alaska. As with non-supportive experiences, supportive experiences happen in context and again Hardiman and Jackson's three levels—the individual, institutional, and social/cultural levels—were applicable in coding these experiences. As was the case with experiences of non-support, while there was a high degree of salience experienced for participants in each of the contextual levels, it was within the individual level where the highest degree of salience was reported in the current study. In this section of the chapter excerpts are provided from various participants of their supportive experiences as a participant in a gay relationship in Alaska. Also presented are experiences within each of these contexts and some examples of how different contextual levels mutually influence each other.

Individual Level

With a great amount of salience, all eleven participants reported experiences of support within the individual contextual level. What follows are experiences of support from

different participants that took place in the context of the individual level of Alaskan society. The following positive experiences are with individuals that are either friends (both gay and straight) and/or co-workers. For instance, in this quote from Bill, support for his relationship from his friends was clear, “Friends have been pretty positive. When it comes to our relationship my friends, yeah, most of my friends. I can’t think of any that are like against us. If they were, I don’t think they would be my friends.” Hunter shared similarly when he discussed the support he received from his friends for himself and his relationship—he reported, “Of course all of our friends know us [as a couple] and that’s not a big deal otherwise they wouldn’t be our friends.”

In the following quote from Esteban, a participant originally from Alaska, there was also a demonstration of support from friends, “I don’t know if, always know what people think of us, but I think it’s generally positive. I think I must have really close friends that view us in a positive regard too because we’ve got two goddaughters and a godson so you know I mean people must trust us with their kids.” Eric shared about the experience of support from one of his close friends and former co-worker: “My closest friend that I retired with, you know she and I are still close friends. She’s in Homer and she’s been a great supporter.”

In the following selections from Benjamin and Rick supportive experiences from friends, some who are gay and others who are straight, were apparent. Benjamin reported:

Friends [are] accepting too. I have good friends who were very staunch or very you know ultra religious but I think it really helped them seeing...I don’t think they ever knew a gay person in their life. Just what was told on TV, or what was published in books. And so it was kind of a step back for them to say oh wow, Benjamin, I like him, and he’s gay so that’s kind of, maybe gay people aren’t that bad. I have, I still have a really good relationship with them.

Rick stated:

And friends are the same way I think uh, a significant portion of our, what I would consider close friends are gay. Not all of them. But it stands to reason, social things you do together and what have you. And then there are friends that aren't and with them it's just become like I said a non-issue.

Institutional Level

To a somewhat lesser extent in comparison to the individual and societal/cultural levels, experiences of support within the institutional level were discussed by all of the participants. What follows are different excerpts of positive experiences which took place in this contextual level, in the Alaskan society for gay male individuals involved in partnerships. These are examples of support from institutions like families, as well as university, religious, and work settings. In the first four examples of support from participants, the institution that was mentioned was the family. In this first instance, from Benjamin, he asserted the following with regard to support from his family of origin:

So, the family for the most part I think has been pretty accepting. My mom was kind of like the last holdout but she, you know actually I went and saw her a couple weeks ago and she's doing really well with it now. She just kind of like accepted it and she and I talked about it a little bit and once we, she's to the point where I want her to be at for me to be happy, so it's nice.

This second instance of support was from Dexter—in the following passage he talked about support from his family of origin as well:

I have had super positive experiences in the Alaskan community. I don't think I've had...any adverse experiences. I came out when I was eighteen, and my mom was, she was supportive almost from the get-go. My step-dad was kind of neutral about the whole thing, but...yeah...And it has been a theme of support ever since then.

In a third example of the theme of supportive experiences, Wazul briefly shared about the support he received from members of his family of origin as well:

Wazul: Two of my siblings are pretty accepting about it...

Markie: Were they older, younger?

Wazul: One younger sister and an older brother.

In a fourth example, Rick talked about support from family, both of origin and procreation.

He shared:

Being with the same partner for going on twenty four years, for a long time anyways we both have been very lucky that our families have been very supportive of the relationship. Not only the immediate family, you know my partner's parents, my parents, but my siblings, my nephews and nieces, his nephews and nieces and so forth and so on and it's, again I think it kind of comes back to the whole thing about not trying to keep a secret. You know I've got nephews that are in high school and it's always just been the two uncles... They don't know any different. And I'm fortunate enough too that they also have other family friends that have gay relatives so it's just kind of been like a non-issue. So family's been, I think we're both very lucky we've had a lot of support on that. I think it made it a lot easier for, you know for, me as a you know gay youth coming out and acknowledging my own sexuality, to not have that fear that my parents weren't going to talk to me anymore and my brother wouldn't ever see me or whatever you know that kind of stuff.

In this exchange, Wazul shared about supportive messages with regard to his orientation that he had received from the institutional setting of the university:

Markie: And then you're also a student, so has this been a pretty, like...

Wazul: Actually I found the University very friendly.

Markie: Okay.

Wazul: Yeah because even like in economics, they you know my teacher talks openly about John Canes as one of the best, as one of the best economists there is and very free with him being I don't want to say flamboyantly gay, even though he ended up marrying a ballerina. I found it very friendly... Very friendly, or non-issue.

Markie: Okay. Either it's just not brought up, or...

Wazul: Yeah it's more of an objective environment.

Jag also discussed the support he had received from the university setting for both himself and his relationship:

I was working with the university and I got a, you know I got a, I was working as a, I became a conference coordinator, which you know stereotypically gay kind of role I guess, you know planning meetings and whatnot...I liked my bosses and I liked my job...the university is a very liberal place and was friendly and great and...I guess that was good but the pay wasn't as good as you think...but I said well it's a job. And it gave us domestic partner benefits. And so it was a really friendly place and paid lunch and it would pay for our school too if we wanted to go to school...And then the gay community gives out scholarships that are off the books, checks, and also whoever applies gets money.

In the following two excerpts, two more settings of support were discussed. Rick shared about support for both him and his partner in their respective work settings. He said:

Both due to work situations where we both worked in professions that have probably been a little more accepting to the gay community. Coming from the technical side that I'm in, most companies have anti-discrimination policies on sexual orientation. Because to do business in a lot of cities on the West Coast, you have to have those things in place or you can't do business with the city of Portland, the city of San Jose, the city of San Francisco. You just can't do business with them, period. So, in the work environment as well I think we both have chosen careers that allow us to be who we are and not have to be, you know overly concerned.

Wazul discussed the support that he experienced for himself and his partnership from both a gay-friendly religious setting and an individual from within that setting. Wazul stated:

Markie: Any other situations with uh your partnership where you experienced acceptance, lack of acceptance?

Wazul: I'm a member of the Metropolitan Community Church which is very accepting, of course because it's a GLBT [Gay, Lesbian, Bi-sexual, Transgender], anti-hate church. And one of the members who I live with, she's the one who took me in after I came out to my family. So I've been with her for a year and a half.

Social/Cultural Level

What follows are passages of positive experiences that took place in the context of the social/cultural level in the Alaskan society for gay male individuals involved in a partnership. This section includes examples of support from society/culture, such as messages the gay individual in the coupled relationship have received from the dominant and/or gay communities, as well as instances of support from strangers or groups of anonymous persons whose behaviors directed at the individuals and couples are an expression of supportive messages. In the current study, ten of the eleven participants, reported supportive experiences in this level and with a high degree of salience. For instance, in the following excerpts by Hunter and Bill, support received from within the gay community in Alaska is apparent.

Hunter said:

When we have friends to the house we kind of mix the gay community. The gay community has a group called Identity and that's an important group. It's a good crossover of all different kinds of people—and supportive of all people. In the past it was more straights and gays and now with the community center moving I think it's more of a gay thing but, Identity was kind of a crossover. We used to have big potlucks and have straight people and gay people come, transgendered people would come but, transgendered don't really get the attention that they should have here so they feel kind of like the oddball out.

Bill shared the following during our dialogue:

Bill: The gay community...oh yeah the gay community! The reaction we got is like wow! You guys have been together two years! That's like ten years in gay years! Yeah. It's been a positive reaction when it comes to our relationship. Yeah especially those bar type people, they're like oh my gosh! My longest relationship is like seven months and it didn't last.

Markie: So they kind of give you guys kudos for maintaining the relationship for a while.

Bill: Yeah. But hearing about other gay couples who are also in the long-term relationship, even longer than ours, is not rare, which is good.

Several examples of positive experiences for male-male couples that had taken place while out in the general public of Alaskan society were found within this sub-theme as well. Here was an instance of this type of societal support from Wazul, “Actually when we go to restaurants together a lot as a couple and I think it’s probably more obvious than not, especially when we go to the nice ones together. And we’ve never had a negative experience. I mean I’m sure it has to do with the fact that you’re paying them. (Laughs)” In the following dialogue, Dexter reported a similar experience while out in public:

Markie: Okay, so what about your experiences as a member of a couple? Any that were negative, that you think were different than your individual experiences?

Dexter: Like, experience of my partner?

Markie: Yeah like you and your partner. Like let’s say you’re out at dinner or something, yeah or like around people, or...

Dexter: Not that I’ve noticed but I’ve been told I’m pretty oblivious to adverse experiences, but no I’ve been told that you know people have not been super acceptive of it, but I’ve never noticed, which could stem from my positive coming out experience and I don’t think it’s a big deal.

Eric shared about several supportive experiences from various members of the dominant Alaskan society. He stated:

In Anchorage we always feel fairly comfortable. For example, I don’t know how many times, but numerous times we’ve been together one place or another and people have volunteered to take our pictures for example for us. You know recognizing that we are two guys who might want to have their pictures taken at the Iditarod start or at the scenic overlook at Earthquake Park or something like that, so that’s a really nice experience....And a year ago we house hunted; we bought a house, we furnished it. The sales people at all the Anchorage furniture stores knew us and of course, you know to their advantage of course but you know we were always treated well by sales people who obviously recognized that we were a couple and shopping for house furnishing together. Never had any off experiences with that...we used the same physician; of course he knows that we’re a couple. Right after I started living with my

partner I had surgery and we were all, yeah cancer surgery unfortunately and it went okay, it went fine but we were you know, the hospital staff, the clinics, the doctors treated him as my partner you know and when he waited in the waiting room during surgery they right away let him know that everything had gone fine. He spent the night in my hospital room and...you know nobody seemed to have any concerns about it. We do have signed health directives for one another, but he was just never even questioned. We felt really accepted and we felt respected.

In this last example, Dexter talked about his overall perception of support from the Alaskan dominant society. Dexter said:

I think Alaska is a lot better than a lot of other places (in terms of support)...Like Anchorage, Anchorage is pretty, aside from our huge military population, like everyone comes from all over the country and it's just like a big melting pot with all different ideas and beliefs and people just kind of have to tolerate what everyone else is thinking and when you get out of there all the surrounding communities are pretty inbred and you know bible thumping and...We have a very libertarian community.

Coping Tools

In the literature review, I identified three primary coping tools that gay male couples utilize in dealing with oppressive or non-supportive forces in society. These three coping tools were: 1) social support networks, 2) problem-solving strategies employed by the couple, and 3) participation in professional mental health services. Although all three of these tools were identified by participants as a means of coping with negative experiences in Alaskan society, the coping tool of social support networks or families of choice/chosen families was much more prominent and salient in the current study. Because the most common theme identified by participants as a means of managing and preventing negative experiences in society was that of social support or families of choice, I primarily focused on this theme in this chapter; however, findings around professional mental health services were important to document as well.

Families of Choice

In the current study, social support networks were the primary coping tool identified by gay males in couple relationships for preventing and managing negative experiences in Alaskan society. In the following two excerpts, both Dexter and Esteban discussed how they surrounded themselves by a “protective circle” of “positive” people as a way of safeguarding themselves and their partnerships. Dexter stated, “Yeah there’s a huge military population here. But I’m not affiliated with any of that. I think that’s been one benefit. But people keep to their own little circles and I think I’ve stayed in my own little protective circle, which has benefited me; like I don’t want to branch out.” Esteban shared:

I just tend to, and I think Johnny does too; we kind of tend to surround ourselves with people that we think are good friends. We develop those friendships with people; we try to avoid people that are toxic. We try to stay out of that whole situation and away from people that are not living productive, positive lives from our perspective...Yeah I mean so I just think that in this state, in this place, in this time, in this age we’re probably just protective of ourselves and our relationship and who we let into our lives.

The persons that composed the supportive social networks for participants included gay and straight friends and couples, members of a certain religious group, LGBT groups, pastors, family members, and for some, a combination of some or all of these sources. For instance, in these passages by partners Wazul and Bill, it was apparent that their family of choice was composed of many different sources of support. Bill shared about the following sources of support:

By surrounding ourselves with accepting people, like the church, our friends, our other friends, the bar, gay events. We go to this group on campus, GLBT group; we spend a lot of time there. Yeah this is mainly how [we are supported.]...And family, friends. And...we seek support from our support group. I’m very passionate about it. I’m actually a volunteer and I drag Wazul along with me. That way we can socialize together with gay people on campus. We seek support through other couples. We have like two friends that are a

couple. And we kind of look to them, they're like the closest thing that we can go to. That's it. That's all I can think of.

Wazul also shared similar sources of support included in their family of choice and also mentioned some additional sources. Wazul said:

[We receive support from]...of course the lady we live with and I'd say other gay friends as well as straight female friends; they tend to be very supportive. I think actually just hanging around an acceptable, accepting environment is probably the best support. Like just talking somewhere where it's [comfortable]...Then actually we, the pastor that I'm seeing, he's a very good friend with the lady we live with so he's over at her house a lot, so we get to talk with him sometimes...He's very personable so it's easy to talk to him and the community center. I mean we just go there just to see what's new and check out books and it's supportive in the way that it's like there's actually a place here that's for gay people, not like, not something that you have to go search for a tiny little section in the back of a store or something, so that's kind of nice. And I think another thing that's supportive is like to actually see people our parents age or older that are very accepting and supportive. So that kind of like opens your eyes...

For some participants like Eric and Dexter, the primary family of choice happened to also be the family of origin, either their own family, their partner's, or both. Eric made this clear in this passage:

[We receive support] I would say entirely [from] each of our respective families; [they] are extremely supportive. Just very supportive. My partner, he was raised by his aunt and she lives with us now. She's a hundred percent supportive. My mom loves my partner just as much as if we were married, and she's ninety-six so she's adapted just fine. All my siblings are good with it; all of his siblings are good with it. So there's a lot of support there. We have gay friends; they were almost entirely his friends from before I knew him and mostly Asian guys. And they continue to be friends, as I said our experiences have gone separate ways to some extent but they're still friends, we still get together on weekends. We go out dancing on weekends with the same old group of guys. Very supportive, we have them over for dinners; they have us over for dinners.

Dexter asserted a similar sentiment during this communication exchange between us:

Dexter: And then where do we seek support? Family. I think first and foremost would be my mom...She's the most supportive person, yeah. Like when I've

had past partners spend the night Christmas Eve over there, you know wake up and open presents together. Yeah.

Markie: Wow. She's really supportive.

Dexter: She's super supportive... Yeah, my brother and his fiancé, they're all really supportive. Even my dad, like Republican, Catholic, yeah. He would have my back if I needed it.

The majority of social support, however, reportedly came from friends, both gay and straight. In these first two excerpts, both Chad and Hunter described the support they have received for their partnerships within their network of gay friends. Chad shared:

It's nice to have some support in the gay community, and I have since retiring we've been more open. Yeah we've talked to more people about it... And in the gay community, when I came out and talked to them about it, I feel that they are very supportive and I think that we've tried to be supportive of them too. We've tried to be like good examples to show people that despite some... critics, especially religious critics, I have to say that gay people are no different than heterosexual people... And even despite me knowing that when Karl and I went on a cruise, a gay cruise [we] didn't know what to expect, thought that it might be a little bit of a turnoff, might be too free-will sexually or whatever. [But,] it was a cross section of America. These are people that you would see on the street, and have not a clue, just a normal group of people who happened to be gay. Writers and lawyers and clerks and I mean very, very normal. So it was a surprise even to me, even though I knew it!... It does feel more relaxing just to know that people that are around you that are gay and that think it's okay. Probably the time that I felt the most, the times that I felt the most relaxed about being gay was going into a gay bar, but to go there and know everything's okay, to be who I was. Somewhere in there I had to learn that it was okay, for myself because I was taught that it wasn't okay. And they're still good friends of mine, and I talk to... two of the three and the other one I just haven't seen to talk to. And they're still good friends.

Hunter also shared with me about he and his partner's very supportive network of gay friends. He stated the following during our dialogue:

Hunter: We have a good network of friends that we form this informal dinner group. So once a month from September through May there's fourteen of us – so seven couples and it originally started as a closeted military group. But they still wanted to have some bond with the gay community so that's how it formed. They've been meeting for twenty years now. Just a group of friends.

It's kind of changed over the years, the membership has changed so it's not military couples anymore. People come and go from the group but basically there was a core group of people, and that's really good because you meet every month and you get to talk about things that are going on and discuss political issues and gay community issues.

Markie: Is it primarily gay male couples?

Hunter: No.

Markie: No.

Hunter: It's about half and half.

Markie: Okay.

Hunter: We just had a couple that moved on, so now it's more men.

Markie: Okay.

Hunter: It is single men and couples too, so, mixed group.

Markie: Okay, okay. Wow, that's awesome.

Hunter: I think that happens up here. Alaskans like potlucks and that kind of thing so they will invite people into their homes, where other communities they don't do that.

Markie: Really? I haven't thought of that.

Hunter: Maybe it's because we're small. Like Fairbanks, if you want to get together in the gay community in Fairbanks, you meet in people's homes.

Markie: Yeah I guess that's true. Because my gay friends, that's where we meet – in our home, or their home.

Hunter: But other people say let's do lunch. And then you go out.

Markie: I guess that's...wow, I never thought of that Hunter. Like it's just, I never thought of it. Why do you think that's a difference, really? The meeting in homes versus public?

Hunter: I think it probably started because there were more closeted groups in the good 'ole days. And it just kind of continued.

In these next two passages, both Jag and Benjamin talked about the support they have received for their partnerships within their network of both gay and straight friends. Jag talked about the support he received from these two groups of friends, as well as the differences in the kind of support they each have offered:

You know I have some good friends that happen to be a little older and I've referred to them but they're kind of that...fatherly role in certain ways but they're, in a lot of ways, we're on the same kind of level. You know I met that one guy for example when I was working at the university at the time and I was using his facility and you know we've had an on par relationship also in some ways he's also kind of a mentor in some ways. Which is kind of good you know I've picked my friends pretty well and that's really give and take it's not like some of my partner's friendships I don't think have been all that way, even though he won't admit that. You know so I have some other friends like that and I have a, a couple, I have a good doctor friend and his partner, who have been together for a long time. And the guy at the university has been together for like sixteen or seventeen years with his partner. That is a long time. And the other guy's a school teacher and they have a relationship that works. Well it's mostly them and you know my partner has a good support group for you know here's my stories and stuff like that but I don't know it's different. I don't have, you know I used to have issues with being gay and someone in my support group really helped me out with [that]; my gay friends who are in their forties and stuff like that...I [also] have a lot of younger friends but they're all straight. And you know I got associates that are gay and my age kind of like true friends that are gay and you know it's...it's...I more see along parallels with real relationships even though I can't do all the stuff they do you know like being in an open relationship or whatever. But, I'm a nester. I like nesting. And I prefer to stay at home, watch movies, cuddle up and watch movies at home with my boyfriend or whatever. To go hike or something and then come here and hang out in this place, with guys just kind of...I don't know, it doesn't seem to be very deep or fulfilling. And you know I have more parallels with my older friends because they share a lot more things in common with me.

Benjamin also shared about the support he received from both his gay and straight friends:

For the majority of the support it's through my friends. My friends I would consider more of my family, there's a couple of close friends. Actually it's interesting that my brother, who I said was bisexual, his wife is so accepting and so much fun that she loves spending time with us – goes to (the gay bars) and has actually dragged him there a couple times. And just has a blast. And she's fabulous so she's really like hey lets go hang out, take her to a couple

stores to buy lingerie with her, she'll try this, this, and that. So I find that nice. He's still you know adjusting to life and I think he's still reserved. But friends for the most part. I see my friends tons more than I see my family... More gay friends than straight friends. I don't talk a lot about my relationships with my straight friends, if they ask I would totally answer it. And my straight friends who I do interact with a lot, I have brought dates around like the guy I am seeing. He's interacted with them too. Yeah. So it's not like hiding... But I really do think my gay friends are [family]... because they know me I think a little better than family.

Long-time couple Karl and Chad each shared about their social support network, primarily consisting of straight couples. Karl shared:

And all our friends were mostly people that we work with and knew us as a couple, but may not know us as a relationship, but they knew us as a couple, and were always very supportive. And so it was never quite an issue. I remember when some good friends that we got together with, and still do, you know every couple times a week and we're the godparents of their girls. Finally at one point the parents, when the girls are in their teens, they decide they better tell them about the relationship. They said you know they told them (and) there was no issue with the kids.

Chad, Karl's partner, also shared about their friends, as well as the positive effect such friends have had on their partnership. He said:

Friends, close friends that we had have mainly been heterosexual couples. And we talked to them at a fairly early stage, maybe a couple of years depending on who the friends were, and very supportive, very, I mean these are people who just helped us to be more honest with each other and to become deeper friends.

In several instances the supportive networks participants identified were termed similarly to how they are commonly termed in the academic literature (i.e., fictive kin, families of choice, chosen family). For instance, Esteban referred to his social support network in the following manner:

Yeah, well you know I think we have really close family, we have really close friends. Like I say, a lot of our family here is fictive family. We have really close friends... you know we do associate with people from the gay community but I have to say we hang out probably with more straight people than with gay and lesbian people... So I think we have a close network of friends.

Karl referred to his social support network in this way:

Yeah. Yeah I think that friends have been supportive from the beginning so it hasn't been an issue. And some of us moved away from Alaska to get away from family, so you know that's nice... We form our own families then, you know... families of choice.

Mixed Experiences in Therapy

Professional mental health services were accessed by eight out of the total eleven participants (73%) in the current study for a plentitude of reasons and with varied results, as participants had very mixed therapeutic encounters in the current study. When professional resources were utilized it was typically not for issues concerning one's sexual orientation or for issues with societal oppression in relation to one's orientation or partnership, with the exception in the cases of three participants who utilized support from professional therapeutic services as a means of coping with issues related to sexual orientation. Two of these participants, Karl and Wazul, originally sought services on their own in hopes of "getting straight" or for "conversion therapy" and the other participant, Bill, accessed this resource as a means of managing societal oppression, specifically in "deal[ing] with homophobic people."

Although professional therapeutic services were accessed by very few participants for issues with sexual orientation, the majority of participants, seven of the eleven (64%), had participated in therapy for a multitude of reasons like SAD, depression, stress, smoking cessation, alcoholism in the family of origin, coping with grief, and work related issues, and a total of two of the eight couples had participated in couple therapy (25%) for relational issues. In the following two excerpts, Rick and Dexter, share about experiences in therapy that were related to these general types of issues. Dexter stated:

Participate in therapy or counseling...I went to a counselor to get anti-smoking drugs and it turned into a big, yeah, relationship counseling session. Yeah it was for smoking cessation and then I thought I was going kind of crazy too. Like why (am I feeling this way) when there's nothing wrong with me, and then, I don't know, looking back on it, it wasn't really me. Well it wasn't just me. And I didn't get any smoking cessation drugs.

Rick said:

About a year ago I was going through some depression issues and I called up my psychologist and again I hadn't seen him in probably in seven or eight years. But it was comforting to walk in and not have to start from square one.

Participants Esteban and Rick had experiences in couple therapy, again for general problems related to being a couple and not issues specific to gay couples or because of a need for assistance in coping with issues of societal oppression. This phenomenon was aptly explained by Rick when he said, "We weren't having problems as a couple because we're gay...we're having problems because we're a couple and because we're dealing with life."

Rick further explained:

We (had) been together for a number of years so like any couple, I think [like] *any* couple we've had our ups and downs. We've had issues that needed to be dealt with, we've had like I said three of four parents die through the course that we've been together, one sibling, so you know there's issues you need to deal with and we've been fortunate that we've had a very long term, that sounds like an odd thing, but a long term relationship with a psychologist. And we might go years, literally years, without seeing him. ...[so] we've done couple counseling with the same person a couple times and we've done things individually, and as a couple. Because you know there are certain things that you know depression affecting me, depending on where it gets to, may or may not affect the relationship. If I'm keeping on top of that and dealing with it, that's the hope, right?

Similarly Esteban shared the following regarding his and his partner's experiences in couple counseling:

Yeah we participated in couple counseling... I think it was just in that you know year seven, year eight and just questioning the relationship and why am I in this relationship and why am I with this person and do I even like this

person, where am I going with the rest of my life? And I think that I was trying to pin, uh some stuff on Johnny and Johnny had some unrealistic expectations and I think you just need to take all that ca-ca and because you can sit at home and go and bicker and go back and forth all day long but I think every once in a while it would be [good for] most people in a relationship to sit down and have a third party listen in and just listen to the noise that you're making. You know (the therapist) said that, you know I had a whole list of things that I had deemed was wrong with Johnny and she was like why are you trying to pin your happiness on Johnny and you know, she said you're responsible for your own happiness. And I'm like, that was like oh, revelation!

Six of the eight participants (75%) who had participated in some form of therapy reported that their therapeutic experiences had been helpful. In all of the therapeutic experiences that were viewed as helpful, none were those in which participants had entered therapy for assistance in coping with issues related to sexual orientation. As such, many of the gay individuals and gay couples who participated in therapy for reasons other than those around sexual orientation found the experience helpful. Excerpts provided from interviews with Rick, Dexter, and Esteban detail therapeutic experiences that were considered helpful.

Rick reported:

Experience in therapy...I'm an advocate of it. I think that I would never see it as a sign of weakness for somebody saying they need some help, it's a sign of strength saying okay there's things going on in my life that I'm not able to control at this time. I certainly would rather see some of my friends or family members admit that and go and get some help rather than turn to drugs or alcohol or guns or violence or whatever...Very helpful I think, I don't think I've ever had any situation where I was involved with any therapy or counseling that I thought was detrimental, probably because I wouldn't have gone back if that was the case.

Dexter shared:

It was really positive. Like, yeah she was super supportive and I was able to talk about my partner and she knew that I liked boys and she acknowledged him and it was, I really liked it. It was very helpful. But it was more just like acknowledging, I guess I just needed someone to acknowledge what I was feeling, and that's what she did and she did a really good job at it.

In the following passage, Esteban discussed how the experience of couple therapy was significantly helpful to the preservation of his relationship:

Yeah it was really helpful. I don't think, uhm...sexual orientation in terms of...I think it was, I don't think we really talked about our sexual orientation or being gay I think we were talking about the fact that we had conflicts that were unresolved and we were bickering and you know the bickering wasn't productive and we needed to sit down and have a conversation that was productive and for that we hired a mediator...I think it actually preserved our relationship – it helped us to understand each other and certainly helped us not only to understand each other better but to communicate better I think. And you know to own our own crap and not try to lay it on someone else and I think we did that for just about a year and half. And then we've never gone back, we've never really felt a need to so we, I think it also gave us skills to talk things out better with ourselves, and confront each other and stuff, so I think it was the best thing we did.

The same percentage of participants (75%), or six of the eight participants who had undergone professional mental health services, also reported experiences in therapy that had been unhelpful. When participants reported experiences of therapy that were not helpful it was most commonly related to oppressive practices on the part of the therapist, and at times this included the actual models used. For instance, a few participants talked about experiences with antigay forms of therapy like conversion or reparative therapy and the negative influence this had on them. Karl said of his experience with this model that he wished the psychiatrist “would have helped [him] kind of deal with [his] behavior rather than try to change it.” Rick shared his opinion of conversion therapy by referring to it as “poison” and went on to further discuss his partner's experiences with this kind of therapy when he said, “I do remember him telling stories about suicide and stuff while involved with that counseling because what he was hearing was this (being gay) isn't normal.”

Bill and Wazul also discussed unhelpful experiences in therapy. Their experiences were related to oppression, primarily in the forms of heterosexism or unintentional antigay behavior. Bill shared:

It would have been helpful...I don't know I think like ways of trying to, like, trying to figure out ways of how to cope or deal with these kinds of [homophobic] situations [in society] so that it doesn't take over my life. Because it was...the main reason I went to her and...I was really stressed out...about it...

Wazul stated:

I think just the whole listening thing was helpful, but I mean, maybe they're not, you know the specialist isn't [necessarily] gay or lesbian so it's, they can sympathize but I don't know if they can really empathize because they... I mean of course they do they're best but it's just specific to your problems whereas you know if you have an alcohol problem you go to AA (Alcoholic's Anonymous) or whatever but...so maybe it helped that all I was getting was no you're not wrong and you're going to be okay. That was a little like, maybe a little insufficient...So what didn't help then, yeah I guess [was] the lack of specialized [knowledge]...

While Bill and Wazul's reports of unhelpful experiences were clearly not as overtly non-supportive as those participants who had experiences of antigay therapeutic models, the end result for these two participants was still a lack of certain needs being met in the therapeutic context. Overall, while many participants had positive experiences in therapy, however, there seems to be room for improvement from the therapeutic community in terms of effectively working with gay males and gay male couples.

The Ideal Alaska

Although many of the participants reported that Alaska was a relatively supportive community for themselves and their relationship, it was clear that most believed it to be far from an ideal society. It was evident that practices of non-support in the forms of homophobia, heterosexism, and antigay behaviors do occur and in multiple contexts. As a

result, it is important to take steps to end these non-supportive practices and in place co-create a society closer to that of the ideal—one where we can all experience greater equality. In this section, I discuss two themes—laws of equality and sharing acceptance: walking hand-in-hand. Excerpts by participants in these themes were all taken from responses to question eleven, “If you were in an ideal society, how would you and your partner be treated? How would you know that you were in this kind of society?”

Laws of Equality

All of the participants in this study expressed the theme that they saw the ideal as including an increase in human rights—an end to discriminatory practices and an increase in fair and equal treatment. The most salience in kind of equal rights and protective laws discussed by participants were those akin to the ones already in place for straight individuals and couples in our society. All of the participants expressed a desire for equal rights and laws in the following areas: civil unions or marriage, adoption, health care, death benefits, tax benefits, and other seemingly basic human rights that most straight couples have had for a significant period of time. In the following dialogic exchanges, participants of varied backgrounds expressed this need for rights. In our dialogue, Dexter shared:

Dexter: But like we can live comfortably, like I don't feel persecuted or I'm not worried about getting beat up or anything. Yeah. People tolerate your lifestyle and they're aware of it and stuff, but...

Markie: But it's not fully accepted yet?

Dexter: Well I think a lot of people think that they're giving gay couples special privileges by giving them equal rights. Those aren't special privileges.

Markie: No, they're just equal privileges. Yeah, that makes sense. What about [these kinds of issues] in Alaska?

Dexter: Our state?

Markie: Yeah.

Dexter: I think, I think Alaska is an uber red state and I think there's a lot of people, there's a lot of narrow minded people here. And I've had good experiences I think because I'm not associated with like I have no ties to the military...

Bill shared about his version of an ideal society, which involved varied institutions like government, family, and setting of work and religion treating gay male couples with the same rights accorded straight couples. Bill also discussed the ways that he would know he was in such a society. Bill said:

Bill: In an ideal society it would be...that the federal government and the local government recognize our relationship and give us the same rights as other married couples. We should be able to adopt legally...We should be able to buy a house together. We should be treated equally as other employees, in terms of health care benefits, hiring, we shouldn't be hired or not hired just because we're gay or fired just because we're gay. It would be a place where people didn't judge us and we were treated just like everybody else, equally. What else...and our parents would be fine with us and treats us as if we're a heterosexual couple. And we shouldn't have to, like we should just be able to be ourselves and not have to tone down anything. In my ideal world, or society, religious people shouldn't, they're more, they're more accepting and compassionate and more understanding or if they weren't understanding they would try and understand. And they wouldn't be preaching hate in my society. They wouldn't be doing things like waving signs that say God hates fags or anything like that. I think we covered everything. In general it would just be a world where I don't have to worry about my being gay, just live my life, just you know just like my heterosexual peers. They don't have to fight health care bans, health care benefits bans, they don't have to fight you know marriage, heterosexual marriage bans...or adoption bans...we're protected in the hate crime legislation...It would just be, yeah a society where I can make choices for myself and pursue happiness and be free...without you know without interfering with other people's freedoms or their safety.

Markie: How would you know that you were in that kind of society, or how do you know?

Bill: How would I know?...I would know it if people, people started to X out differences. Agree to disagree and recognize that religious beliefs have differences and that religion should not be intertwined with politics or

government because some people are not engaged in religion and its kind of forcing religious beliefs on the government and to the people. I would know that my ideal society is on its way or I'm in it already if that was the case because I believe that the main reason why people are antigay is because of their religious beliefs. And if those religious beliefs are contained within their religion and they wouldn't impose it on other people and the government...

Markie: You would know.

Bill: Yeah I would know that my ideal society is on its way. And how else would I know? Uhm...I would know if everybody around me were more aware or more educated and people would consider you know stepping into my shoes and kind of educate themselves. How else would I know? Yeah. I guess I would know if I didn't have to you know if I didn't have to go and fight the marriage amendments, marriage amendments wouldn't exist, health care benefit blockades would not exist. And I would just be living as a normal college student. That would be great! Oh my gosh!....you know I could be getting good grades, you know A's and B's.

Markie: Getting more sleep.

Bill: Yeah more sleep. It (activism) definitely takes time. It stresses me out. So I would know if I didn't have the additional stress on my body and my mind. And I would definitely know if I, yeah didn't need to think about it. You know if people around me were just, you know you're just another person, you're no harm, you're contributing to society just like everybody else. I think if people saw me that way then I would know that I would be living in my ideal society.

Eric stated the following to me:

Eric: So, ideal society how would you and your partner be treated? Well you know we have an equal sign on the back window of the car and that's sort of...the ideal you know belief that we carry around in our minds...And I'd like to be equal in every way, you know I would like all the economic aspects to be equaled and inheritance aspects, income tax aspects. Yeah, we've done everything that we can, you know to mitigate all those things that we don't have. We do have our wills and we have joint ownership of house and car and we have joint bank accounts as well as separate bank accounts and well like I said the health directives, the living wills...we've done everything we can. I'm a retired state employee but you know how that's going in terms of the state fighting tooth and nail against offering benefits to a same sex partner even though I've done all the paperwork the state asks to establish our relationship. From the governor on down that's still being fought. So that's disappointing...frustrating.

Markie: Yeah, I thought they had made it so that state workers had to be recognized?

Eric: Well that's the court order but now they're trying to do a constitutional amendment to get around it or get above the court order. So, in the meantime you know it's, I have been, you know I was happy when the whole issue was being debated. There were a lot of good letters and articles in the newspaper; good supportive, you know there were some ugly ones but there were also a lot of, it's clear that things are moving in the right direction at a snails pace. So, that's nice.

Esteban shared that his version of an ideal society would be one based in realism rather than that of idealism—it would be a society where he and his partner would have more legal protection for their relationship. He shared:

Esteban: If you were in an ideal society, how would you and your partner be treated? How do you or...how do you or would you know what that felt like? Ok uhm...if it was ideal, uhm...I think that's elusive, I don't know if there is an ideal...I think there's, you know we all dream of a utopia. I don't know if there is a utopia. If I could desire a more realistic situation for ourselves it would be that legally we had more protection you know to do our wills, to do power of attorney – I mean we had to go do power of attorney, we had to do wills, we had to do all these things in court that the normal couple, the average couple wouldn't have to do to make sure that our property and that our, do not resuscitate and all this other stuff. I mean we had to go and take all these enormous measures to legally insure that if anything were to happen to us, we wouldn't have family interference, you know. And I just don't, you know most people you wouldn't have to get power of attorney over your husband or anything.

Markie: No you just have that right already, yeah.

Esteban:...What I really want is more legal protection and I want domestic partnership, that would be...and I just want the same, you know equal access, all those other things that I think we thought were ideal from the civil rights era, I want to make sure that that's applied to me. And I heard, you know I was listening to the politicians last night on the political debate and I heard (one candidate) say if I'm governor I'm going to make sure we make Alaska's laws work for Alaskans. And I thought, but not all Alaskan's. You know because, yeah.

Markie: Not for gay people, not for lesbian people...

Esteban: Yeah, we, we, yeah. Yeah, I don't know so I was thinking last night when I was listening to her speak I thought yeah, I would like the laws to work for all Alaskans, you know. Yeah, I don't know if you'll ever get to an ideal society... [but] I think that would be it.

Rick responded:

Rick: I think the only thing that's different on society as a whole versus what we're doing right now is the legal issues. You know the fact that without being intelligent enough to have a living will, a power of attorney, all these things in place, it could happen where either one of us could be in a situation where we're injured to the point where we weren't able to deal with our own issues and our partner wouldn't have the ability to make those calls for you. But I believe for the most part our families have known us long enough, they would not put up an issue. That being said anytime there's money involved, you can throw that out, right? You know death in the family... So and so owns fifty percent of this house that's worth three hundred thousand dollars, where's my cut? Not that these guys lived together for twenty four years and the survivor certainly is entitled to whatever comes out of the will. So that's some things I think we're learning going through deaths in our family, that we can't rely upon the laws as written to protect ourselves, the domestic partner benefits. We've both been lucky in the significant number of jobs I've had in my technical field, there's been benefits for my partner. Not true going the other way around. So, which is okay, you know, you know these things and when you keep the job you take a look at everything including money and you make a decision based upon it. But a couple of the companies I've worked for nobody ever asked the question if they had domestic partner benefits. And one of the companies, most recently, I left about a year ago, one of the managing partners was also gay. But nobody had ever asked that question, so I asked the HR person and I said, and this happened to be a Portland-based company, and she came back with yeah! And it's like, what, nobody asked this question before?...So, how would you know if we're in that kind of society? I guess, you know I think that we're making steps, we're making gains towards an equal rights society. Does that mean an ideal world? I don't know. But I think we're making steps on a regular basis and there's always one step forwards and two steps backwards at times and I think this whole thing that's going on with the State of Alaska and the employees is a really good example of that. You know that the circuit of appeals court said you're in violation of your own constitution so now some people want to rewrite the constitution as opposed to just dealing with it, so. I was disappointed you know a couple years back when they decided not to support any gay marriages or gay unions...

Markie: Okay. Do you have any other thoughts, comments, ideas that you would like to share?

Rick: I think it'd be, it'd be nice in a utopia someday someplace where a person's sexual orientation, that doesn't even come up. They're living with the person they love. They're family is as much as any other family. And I think that some of the things that we've gone through as a partnership, you know again...death of three of four parents, death of a sibling, moving, career changes, all those things – I mean they're just, they're just, I don't mean to say that it's any worse or different for a gay couple, it's the same things that you go through or anybody else in this building goes through and I think to some degree I like to believe that couples like us become a catalyst for more acceptance of it. And I think sometimes some of the better known activists sometimes are detrimental to it. I'm not saying that's wrong, I'm just saying like if you want to equate it to the Black civil rights in the 50's and 60's, the activists are the one that got the attention and got the things done. The ones that piss people off, the ones who are so far over here aren't going to move anyway. So you know I'd like to think in you know in 2040 or so that people are going to look back at the year 2007 and say why didn't we have this in place already? Just like we look back at you know it hasn't been that many years ago that women couldn't vote. If you weren't a landowner you couldn't vote. I mean the Blacks were discriminated against for voting you know it goes on, and on, and on, and on. And that was just normal, it wasn't wrong, it was normal for that time frame. That wasn't wrong for that environment, it was the norm...[But] we need activists, we need people out there talking...

Although all of the participants in this study expressed a desire for equal rights and laws in a multitude of areas, there were mixed reports by the participants particularly in one area—the right to legally wed. Five of the participants expressed a desire for this practice and the remaining six reported that they did not see value in this type of partnership. Those in favor of the right to marry and those who were not as invested in the attainment of this right expressed reasons for their respective position. The participants who were in favor of attainment of the right to marry supported this idea out of the desire to have full equal rights, therefore they wanted to be accorded all of the same rights as straight couples, including the right to legally marry. Those participants not in support of marriage saw it as too tied to religion and as such as being a relatively oppressive or an inaccurate way of labelling of their partnership. Many of the participants in this camp believed that a civil union was a more apt

means of legally labelling, supporting and protecting their partnerships.

In the following passage from interviews with Eric and Dexter examples of the in favor of marriage position are evident. Eric stated:

In a way my partner and I differ slightly on this in that I would, I would be a proponent for marriage, I would like to have marriage. He's Catholic, the Pope is never going to go for it and so the sacrament of marriage is something he does not aspire to at all. I would like to see gay marriage.

Dexter shared the following during our dialogue:

Dexter: Getting married would be cool; that would be ideal. We're just like getting benefits of marriage, Jesus Christ...Even with the will, like, it's not the same...Like if your husband dies, you're not going to have to pay taxes on everything you inherit from him.

Markie: You're right.

Dexter: And then even, like it's not just a piece of paper, I think there's, I don't know maybe gay men would be less slutty if there was you know a federal acknowledgement of their union...Because it's a lot easier to dissolution a...

Markie: Living together arrangement?

Dexter: Dating, yeah...if you have a lot more to lose I think people would work harder in relationships if they had to...

In the following excerpts from interviews with Esteban, Jag, and Rick, examples from the side of not favoring marriage are apparent. For instance, Rick shared the following:

The marriage thing I'm probably okay with because I think there's too many religious connotations to it in my personal opinion. And then of course the standard joke is if you want to make the defense of marriage act, you need to outlaw adultery, you need to outlaw divorce...

Esteban said:

So I would like to see, I've never, I don't you know and you're talking to a guy whose got a mother who was married seven times, I'm not really keen on the institution of marriage so I've never been one of those gay guys who was out there carrying a plaque going rah, rah, rah let's have gay marriage. I really think it's a religious thing, I really don't want to be married.

Jag commented:

Well you know first I think the ideal society for me would be the government doesn't regulate our relationships with each other. I think it's with anybody. I don't think they should be pre-jamming their little very holy and sacred institution of marriage down people's throat. And I don't think the government should have any business doing that. They just don't. And we should define our relationships and boundaries and our own contractual rights with each other... You know I mean you know with child support for example. You know a parent, one parent should have to support kids, you know whatever the relationship is. If they're not going to then step in for the kids benefit and societies benefit to help raise that kid. Eh, that's an exception but you know everything else you know I think... all those other contractile rights are just that, contractual rights. And I think that's as far as the government should go into it.

Sharing Acceptance: Walking Hand-in-Hand

Embedded within the idea of living in an ideal society, participants talked about how with increased levels of societal acceptance they would be able to “walk down the street holding hands” with their partner and “feel safe.” Dexter said this of society, “I can't hold my partner's hand and skip down the street, like being able to hold someone's hand and walk down the street [that would be ideal].” Bill remarked, “We should feel safe when we're walking outside, holding hands in the neighborhood or downtown or on campus.” Eric also expressed a similar sentiment when he shared:

It's a long ways from the ideal society. So in terms of marriage, in terms of economics, what other terms... would society... I would certainly want to be able to walk hand in hand on the sidewalks downtown and feel comfortable and that's... that's probably not going to happen in my lifetime in Anchorage, but again you know you just have to take a longer view and recognize that things are slowly moving in the right direction so that people do come up and offer to take your photograph together for example, [which has happened to us].

A theme reported by participants as being a part of an ideal society was that of increased “acceptance” for their relationships by members of society. Increased visibility by

gay couples without fear and experiences of any negative sanctions by members of society at large for their visibility was a method identified as a means of bolstering inclusion and as a means of measuring levels of increased acceptance by society. In these three passages taken from interviews with Rick, Benjamin, and Jag, a desire for an increased level of societal acceptance as being a part of the ideal society was evident. Rick stated:

Last question about an ideal society...I think, in my personal opinion, we create our own ideal society. So I think how we respond to the community we live in as partners has as much to do as how they respond to us. I think you know we can not try to hide who we are. You know we do live in a heterosexual society. And I think we have to adapt to that. That doesn't mean again hiding and being fake about who you are but that's different than living in San Francisco and wearing short shorts and you know combat boots and walking up the street, I think that's a different world. You're not going to do that in Anchorage, Alaska. Not often anyway...So, you know, I think in a lot of ways I would say we do live in an ideal society because we don't have a lot of issues with our neighbors, or with our peers, or with our friends, our family you know who are either making comments to our face or behind our backs about who we are, what we do. That's not to say it hasn't happened once in a while, it has happened in the neighborhood a couple of times. But you know it's usually the thing we always say in the newspaper stories, ends with alcohol may have been a factor. You know you just get over it. So I think, I think in an ideal society we would be treated just like everybody else.

Benjamin said:

Benjamin: If you were in an ideal society, how would you and your partner be treated? How do you or would you know what you are in this kind of society? We kind of talked, touched on that topic a little bit ago. I think in an ideal society everyone's intermixed. Everyone has you know, you live your life not hurting anybody, you live your life...you're not judged on your sexual orientation. And I actually find that kind of interesting how people who are gay you'll see the whole gambit of people who have pushed that on other people being gay. Their whole life is them being gay. And for me that's not, that's only part of my life. You know I also have things I like to do like hiking or biking or camping or spending times with family or friends, going to school, work. So that's only a part of me, some people I think let being gay become the be all of it. Everything's gay oriented.

Markie: Everything's gay.

Benjamin: Exactly. Or, I've seen this before too, where gay men will try and hit on straight men trying, hoping they will be gay. I think that is disrespectful. Let them decide who they want to be...So yeah, so yeah if the ideal society were us all interacting and you know...And you're not judged on your sexuality.

Markie: Right, right.

Benjamin: You know Markie you were talking about traveling around and traveling in relationships, one thing - I went to Europe a couple of years ago, I loved how the people there have that kind of live and let live kind of lifestyle. You know it's like you know you're not hurting me so what do I care? I just saw quite a few, I went to London, Amsterdam, Berlin, and Prague and Barcelona and I saw quite a bit in London, Amsterdam, a little bit in Berlin and especially in Barcelona. Which is so good because they actually have legalized gay marriages in Barcelona too. It is interesting to go from a monarchy, you know a king to this now. But it was so nice to see that in Barcelona - gay men just holding hands as they're walking down the beach, laying beside each other holding hands, you know playing in the ocean. And I was thinking when I saw that and I thought that's what I want for our country. To [be] where it's safe to do that and not be, you know judged harshly or...that kind of thing. That's hot!

In closing an interview, Jag remarked:

Jag: ...Religion, I think I wish we could get past it...you know in an organized religion sense. I have no problem with spirituality you know and that kind of shit but when you get into you know (that infamous local religious leader), and the evangelical, you sinner kind of thing and yahta, yahta, yahta...they're just making shit up, I mean really. It really is, just supporting their views and take one little word passage out of the Bible to support their view which totally taken out of context and that Bible's been, how many times has it been translated and...you know whatever. They take it on a word for word basis and even though [there are conflictual statements]...the whole preposition or whatever you want to say that they're making ignores those conflictual ideas. Their pieces that they're taking to make their case...but yeah so that would be the start of my society. But also I think a greater understanding of humanity. And you know in regards to sexual identity and gender and understanding why we are what we are and I think that will come but people are going to hear it, and accept.

Markie: Do you think it will come?

Jag: You know it's amazing how far it's come now. But yeah I think you could take a look at let's say race equality and big strides made in you know the fifties and sixties, seventies...But, it's like you know there still are second

class citizen Black people, and so we can say we don't believe in discrimination but is that really true? And it's illegal, but that doesn't mean it doesn't go on. I have a lot of problems with people at work and they sit there and go it's illegal to discriminate based on whatever but that doesn't mean it doesn't happen. Just means that you don't have to interview the person, you can come up for with a reason for anything. Like you know firing me because I'm gay for example. I mean really you can come up with another reason, no ones perfect, that doesn't mean it doesn't happen. So...are we supposed to have equality? Yes. Do [we]? No...So thinking I'm only going to live another forty years maybe, maybe fifty, uh knowing how...and uh but it's gotten better. And...I don't care...you know, oh I got hired as a manager for an airline ground company and I was twenty years old and I managed up to twenty people, in four departments. I'm good. And I started working in customs when I was sixteen so, on an intern basis, and hired on and stuff. It was just amazing, well they also had a thing about hiring young people, like (one corporate shipping company) hires young people in managing roles because they work harder yahta, yahta, yahta. It's true. Put out more and then are disposable. They really are disposable, they really are disposable and they work for nothing. But the main reason I found out later that I got hired was because the general manager was...the general manager was gay. And his dad's a respectable Republican here in town, well known, Catholic, big Catholic community and he was forty, forty one, never had gay sex, never had sex with anybody, never told anybody he was gay and lived in the closet forever. And it was not until he met me that he finally started accepting himself or admitting it. Isn't that the saddest thing ever? And this is like, so for him, so when he grew up a lot of people grew up like that; they married and they have kids and they hang themselves. And I've met more and more....geez, I went to the clinic at the university and I had a talk with the, the clinic director there. I don't know physicians assistant or whatever, nurse practitioner or whatever he was, biggest homo around. We talked about my partner or whatever, he was totally in the closet. It's like you don't see what you are, and it's...and to think about he was so uncomfortable about me talking about my partner and it's kind of like I don't know what's wrong with this guy. And because he's so clearly gay and it's funny because he was married and had kids. Yeah and then come to find out six months later he came out to himself, divorced his wife and his kids and became a flight attendant for a local airlines. And just did a total one eighty career change...he's accepted himself and gone back to private practice and stuff like that. But, it happens all the time, it's like...it was really kind of funny, for me to assume that this guy was so out too.

Markie: Yeah, you're like...don't you know?

Jag: Exactly...Well I think the biggest thing is going to be where it gets to the point where being gay isn't going to be a big threat.

Markie: So we wouldn't be doing this interview.

Jag: Yes, right, we would be like wow, boring... And I think that's like my main point you know, it's like I'm gay, that's it, that defines who (I) really (am) but it doesn't. [To some] (being gay) is this big thing and everybody cares about it. I just want to get to the point where (being gay) is just a part of who you are. I think that's where, I think my ideal society would be when it's just an aspect of who you are.

The excerpts presented above were examples of the two themes contained within the category of The Ideal Alaska. These two themes were each centered on the ultimate goal of gay male couples experiencing an end to non-supportive practices in society. One theme focused on gay male couples reported need for greater equality in terms of laws of society and another focused on a reported need for increased levels of societal acceptance for gay male partnerships.

In this chapter the excerpts presented were examples of the main themes and sub-themes contained within respective categories. The first category, "Alaskan Gay Male Couples," contained the themes of *More Alike than Different* and *Identity Development*. The second category, "The Real Alaska," contained the themes of *Non-Supportive Experiences* and *Supportive Experiences*. Two themes were housed within the third category, which was "Coping Tools," and these themes included those of *Families of Choice* and *Mixed Experiences in Therapy*. The fourth and final category was "The Ideal Alaska" with the themes of *Laws of Equality* and *Sharing Acceptance: Walking Hand-in-Hand* contained within it.

TABLE 1Table 1. Demographics of couple relationships

| Participant | Status | Length of Time |
|-------------|---------------------------|----------------|
| *1 & 1A | Living Together | 1 yr 6 mths |
| 2 & 2A | Domestic Partnership | 19 yrs 6 mths |
| 3 & 3A | Equivalent to marriage | 13 yrs 9 mths |
| 4 & 4A | Long Term Relationship | 1 yr |
| *5 & 5A | Living Together; Partners | 31 yrs 6 mths |
| 8 & 8A | Long Term Relationship | 24 yrs 1 mth |
| 9 & 9A | Committed | 2 yrs 9 mths |
| *10 & 10A | Living Together | 2 yrs 3 mths |

*Indicates that both members of the couple relationship participated in the study separately.

Note. Participants are identified by number.

Participant partner identified by letter attached to number of corresponding individual participant.

TABLE 2Table 2. Demographics of participants

| Participant | Age | Sex/ Gender | Race | Orientation | Religion | SES | Education | Occupation |
|-------------|-------|----------------|------------|-------------|-----------|-----|-----------------|--------------------|
| 1 Jag | 25-29 | M | W | G | None | M | BS | Government |
| 2 Esteban | 45-49 | M | W/Hispanic | G | Buddhist | M | MS | Education |
| 3 Hunter | 50-54 | M | W | G | Christian | M | AA | Government |
| 4 Benjamin | 35-39 | M | W | G | Christian | L | Some College | Government/Student |
| 5 Karl | 65-69 | M | W | G | Christian | M | MD | Retired |
| 6 Chad | 60-64 | M | W | G | Christian | M | MD | Retired |
| 7 Dexter | 25-29 | M | W | G | Christian | M | Some College | Medical/Student |
| 8 Rick | 45-49 | M | W | G | None | M | Some College | Management |
| 9 Eric | 50-54 | M | W | G | Christian | M | BS | Retired |
| 10 Wazul | 20-24 | M | W | G | Christian | L | Some College | Medical/Student |
| 11 Bill | 20-24 | M | Asian | G | Atheist | L | Some College | Student |

Note: Participants are identified by number and pseudonym.

TABLE 3Table 3. Demographics of participants' partners

| Participant Partner | Age | Sex/ Gender | Race | Orientation | Religion | SES | Education | Occupation |
|---------------------|-------|----------------|----------|-------------|-----------|-----|--------------|-----------------|
| 1A | 25-29 | M | W | G | Christian | M | Some College | Medical/Student |
| 2A | 45-49 | M | W | G | None | M | BS | Education |
| 3A | 55-59 | M | W | G | Christian | M | MS | Retired |
| 4A | 20-24 | M | Hispanic | G | Christian | L | BA | Management |
| 5A | 60-64 | M | W | G | None | M | MD | Retired |
| 6A | 65-69 | M | W | G | Christian | M | MD | Retired |
| 7A | 25-29 | M | W | G | None | M | BS | Government |
| 8A | 55-59 | M | W | G | None | M | HS | Non-Profit |
| 9A | 35-39 | M | Asian | G | Christian | M | BS | Medical |
| 10A | 20-24 | M | Asian | G | Atheist | L | Some College | Student |
| 11A | 20-24 | M | W | G | Christian | L | Some College | Medical/Student |

Note: Participant partner identified by letter attached to number of corresponding individual participant.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Perspectives on experiences with Alaskan society from the point of view of gay male individuals involved in partnerships have not been fully acknowledged in academic literature and in previous research. This interpretive qualitative study, informed by the constructionist frameworks of feminism, queer, and critical theories, aimed to contribute to the dominant public's general understanding of gay male couples while also providing more information on the kinds of support that existed for these couples. Another aim of this study was to provide those professionals in the field of RT with more information about how to best assist gay couples in dealing with experiences of societal non-support for their partnerships.

In this chapter, discussions of the previously identified themes contained within the noted categories generated from the data are presented and compared with previous research and followed up by explanations through the lens of constructionist frameworks. Following discussion of the of themes and sub-themes, discussion of the role of therapy for gay male partners involved in the current study, as well as discussion of possible implications for therapy in terms of challenging oppression towards gay couples in the context of the therapy are discussed. Last, implications for therapists outside of the therapeutic context as well as for members of the dominant general public in terms of challenging oppression that exists for gay male couples are identified, followed by limitations of the current research, and suggestions for future directions of research.

Alaskan Gay Male Couples

Participants in the current study characterized their relationships in a myriad of ways. Participants used terms like “partner,” “boyfriend,” or “friend” when talking about their

partner and terms such as “living together,” “domestic partnership,” “committed,” and “long term relationship” when describing their relationship. None of the participants’ descriptions of their relationships were remotely close to those of the predominant, yet misinformed view held by the general public, which is that of the stereotypical characterization of male-male couples being composed of one partner being in the role of *husband* and the other in the corresponding role of *wife* (Landolt & Dutton, 1997). The participants’ characterizations of their relationships were unsurprising, particularly in consideration of the previous research, which has demonstrated that the public’s stereotypical description of gay male couples is frequently inaccurate (Bell & Weinberg, 1978; Peplau, 1993).

What was somewhat surprising, however, was that couples in this study, by report on both the demographic form and through the interviewing process, were more demographically similar than different. My surprise was related to the fact that national literature regarding gay couples has noted that these couples tend to be more dissimilar than similar on average (Patterson, 2005a; Simmons & O’Connell, 2003). However, in the literature, the reason for such diversity in partners is primarily attributed to the fact that many gay men meet each other through more anonymous or public-type situations rather than through means of situations involving introductions through family, friends and/or co-workers (Patterson, 2005a). In relation to this information, one reason that many of the individuals involved in gay male partnerships in the current study may be more similar to rather than different from each other demographically may be because the majority of participants met their partners through friends, family, or co-workers. In fact, seven of the participants reported that they had met their partner through one of these sources rather than

through the more anonymous means, whereas only four of the participants reported meeting their partners through other means, including on-line encounters.

Even though couples in this study were more similar to rather than different from each other does not mean that these individuals represent a monolithic gay community. I know from talking about the make-up of the gay community with the participants in the study during the member checking in the second interviews that the gay community is diverse, which is a reflection of the literature (Greene, 1994). For example, Rick shared during our second meeting that “Anchorage is more diverse than people think.” I also know of the diversity in the area of study from living here and from reading local reports on the population make-up of the area. For instance in a recent article in the local newspaper, the *Anchorage Daily News*—Anchorage was reported as being a racially diverse community – with 50% of the population being Caucasian and the rest a mixture of various ethnic minority groups.

The ways in which couples differed did also speak to the fact that the couples were not part of a monolithic community. Furthermore, the demographic differences of couples in this study were similar to those reported in the literature. For instance, on the national level when couples are dissimilar it is in the areas of age, race and level of education (Patterson, 2005a). In the current study, half of the couples had members of the dyad that differed from each other 50% of the time in terms of age and race and 63% of the time in terms of level of education. The effect of differences on these variables between members in couple relationships tends to be negative, as the individuals experience differences in societal treatment related to these differences in demographics, whereby additional stress is in turn placed on the relationship (Patterson, 2005a). However, the couples of mixed racial

backgrounds in this study did not report additional stress in their relationships related to these demographic differences nor did the couples of mixed education levels report having difficulties.

Previous literature has found that when there is an age difference between members of a gay dyad members of society tend to marginalize the couple, claiming that participants in the relationship are not together for legitimate reasons, but rather stereotypical ones like the younger male wants a financial benefactor and the older male desires a mate with sexual prowess (Patterson, 2005a). One of the individuals in this study, involved in a partnership where members in the relationship differed by over ten years on the variable of age, did mention this type of marginalization for his relationship, particularly from the gay community. This kind of marginalization from members of the gay community towards members in the gay community was a clear example of the practice of internalized homophobia (Herek et al., 1998). Interestingly, however, by the participant's report, the couple did not experience an additional strain in their partnership in relation to this negative characterization, nor did the age difference between participants in the relationship create problems within the dyad itself. None of the other participants for which there were relatively significant age differences between members of the dyad reported such issues with marginalization.

The similarities in this study of the members in coupled relationships also warrant further discussion. The literature has noted that one of the predominant stereotypes regarding gay male couples held by members of the dominant culture is that gay male couples are composed of White, well-educated, affluent, and effeminate men (Anastas, 2001; Conley et al., 2001). Interestingly, the bulk of participants in this study in many instances seemed to fit

these stereotypic depictions of gay males. All but three of the participants and three of their respective partners identified as relatively affluent in terms of SES. Additionally, 95% of the participants and their partners had at least some college and 55% held at least a Bachelor's level degree, meaning that they were primarily well-educated people. Furthermore, 77% of the participants and their partners were White. However, none of the participants reported that they were effeminate or that their partners were defined as such. Instead, all of the participants and their partners reported that they were male in terms of sex and gender. The demographics related to socioeconomic affluence and level education may be attributable to the fact that the general population of people in Alaska, regardless of sexual orientation, tends to be significantly more economically well-off and slightly more educated in comparison to their national counterparts (United States Census Bureau, 2005).

As was mentioned in the previous chapter, in terms of individual identity development of the participants in this study, all of the individuals were currently in stages four through six of Cass's Identity Model (Cass, 1979, 1983, 1984) and in stages three through six of D'Augelli Lifespan Model (D'Augelli, 1994a, 1994b). The commonality shared between each of these stages and hence the individual identities of participants was that the bulk of them have an individual gay identity of being out with most people in their lives and across varied contexts. This was not surprising because had the individuals not been out they most likely would not have participated in this research.

As was discussed in the literature review, a comprehensive model for gay couple identity development was not readily available in the academic literature. This could be because of the common understanding that all couples, regardless of whether same-sex or different-sex individuals are involved, have the universal and shared experience of having to

negotiate developmental stages related to forming and maintaining a couple relationship, including issues with communication, relationship quality, fidelity, intimacy, management of resources and time, boundaries, and commitment (Cabaj & Klinger, 1996; Connolly, 2004; Green, 2004; Haas & Stafford, 1998; Julien et al., 1997; Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986; Means-Christensen et al., 2003). Although there may be universals for all couples in terms of couple identity development, the differences in the development of gay couples are related to such couples existing in what remains a predominantly a society of non-support. Thus, one potential explanation of the lack of a full model outlining gay couple identity development may be related to the fact that there are universals in terms of couple development across couple types; however, it remains critical to note that there are still some unique challenges in terms of couple identity development for gay male couples. As such, one of the models of individual identity development, the D'Augelli (1994a, 1994b) Model, did at least in part address one aspect of gay couple identity—the development of a gay intimacy status. This part of the model included the notion of visibility management, which was highly applicable to couples in the current study.

D'Augelli (1994a, 1994b) discussed the notion of “invisibility” or “visibility management” of the couple within the context of identity development. Although I can understand how public acknowledgement by an individual involved in a gay couple is a part of identity development and that when individuals in a gay couple are visible in society it can be perceived as progress in terms of identity development for both the individual and the couple, I do not think this is the only way to conceptualize the notion of visibility management. Early on in the interviewing process, I first noticed this idea of visibility management as a means of coping with non-supportive experiences in society by couples. As

has been noted in the literature, gay male couples often display and develop resilience in effectively managing their relationship in the context of society, particularly in adapting to an oppressive world (Sanders & Kroll, 2000). Also as research has demonstrated, one of the ways that gay couples manage forces like societal non-support with positive outcomes for the couple is through the use of effective-problem solving skills, particularly when these skills involve the practice of exerting high levels of control over the specific situation facing the couple (Todoroff, 1995). In consideration of this academic literature, I believe the employment of visibility management by couples as applied to non-supportive contexts as a form of problem-solving is an equally valid interpretation of these behaviors, especially when considered with the added understanding that it was often practiced by couples in instances when the couple appeared to have high levels of control in the situations in which they chose to be out or not. Furthermore, because all of the couples in this study practiced this type of behavior, and the majority of these participants are still together or were together for considerable amounts of time, I would say that the practice of this problem-solving strategy seemed to have a positive outcome for couples.

When I shared my conceptualization of this concept with the participants during the member check, they agreed that their being out in some places and with some people was a means of keeping themselves and their relationship safe and not necessarily related to identity development of themselves or as a couple. For instance, Bill said, “I don’t want to be like, you know being called names when I’m walking down the hallway or like [have] things thrown at [us].” Eric talked about this concept of visibility management in relation to coping with non-supportive environments in the following way, “Adapting to the environment is

what [we] have to do...it's a matter of safety, not necessarily physical safety but just safety for your self-respect because you don't want to get bad comments or bad glances.”

Through Eric's interpretation of visibility management, he alluded to a different aspect of decisions as a couple around the practicing of the behavior of visibility management. This was that while all of the participants noted that remaining invisible in unsafe situations, and being visible in those situations that were safe truly was a matter of survival on the part of the couple, it was also hard for couples to practice this behavior of not being fully *out* across all contexts. This may be because many of the couples felt they had a responsibility to be out consistently and not be “fake” as Rick mentioned. Indeed, many participants believed that by being consistently and openly out it might help to co-create the ideal reality of gay couples feeling comfortable being out everywhere and all of the time due to an increased level of acceptance in society. This idea was clearly articulated by Wazul in a dialogue during our second interview through the member checking process. Wazul shared that although he and his partner got “really anxious and uncomfortable” being a couple in public, he also felt like it was something they “should be able to do” and that he felt “torn” when they were not “out.” He elaborated that he knew that “you put yourself at risk” when “out” in public, but that “in the same token you have to realize that [being out] is how you make it more acceptable so that more people get used to it.”

Although D'Augelli conceived of the apparent practice of “visibility management” on the part of the gay male couple as being an aspect of identity development, and I thought of these same behaviors as a matter of applying problem-solving skills as a means coping with overt forms of societal non-support, one of the participants offered an alternative and plausible view of this behavior that I felt noteworthy. During the member checking process

with Jag, he pointed out that perhaps this notion of visibility management was related to the fact that in gay male partnerships it is two men involved in the relationship. He alluded to this when he said, “I was out with [my partner] one time and I started holding his hand or something like that and [his] friend went off – why can’t you be a man? Why do you have to act like this?” Jag went on to further say, “You know I think its also emasculating for some guys anyways.”

Jag seemed to be indicating that when two men in a relationship together are in public they have expectations regarding how they *should* behave towards each other, and that not only do they hold these pre-conceived beliefs, but that members of society do, as well. These beliefs may be centered on the idea that two men *should not* be affectionate towards each other, hence leading to invisibility of the couple when in public, especially with regard to displays of affection. This possible explanation of visibility management coincides with literature regarding male gender norms. Researchers have found that gay male couples may hide from others when coupling because in a heterosexist society, two men in a relationship together are viewed as a violation of traditional norms regarding couples (Edwards, 1994; Worth et al., 2002).

In any event, it was clear that the practice of visibility management was one of complexity and seriousness for gay couples and not easily summed up by any one explanation. As Wazul stated, quite pointedly, with regard to visibility management, “You could kill yourself or you could make the community a better place.” Thus, it was fortunate for me, this project, and members of both the gay and dominant communities that the gay persons in this study were out and in many instances proud of their identities, so that these valuable results and related information from this project could be co-created and hence

disseminated. However, I wonder whose voices were missing from this project? How might the experiences of those who are not out differ from or be similar to those in this study? In other words, who and what is missing in this research project? Answering these types of questions may be beneficial in future research studies. This would involve conducting research that includes gay males and gay male couples whose individual and couple identity development are in earlier stages, and as such who are not quite as out.

The Real Alaska

As has been noted in the literature, the dominant public climate regarding same-sex couples is somewhat paradoxical—comprised of continual antigay prejudice, public support for benefits, antigay marriage legislative movements, support from civil rights groups and allies, and many other varied yet oftentimes polarized positions (Green, 2004). In terms of the environment towards gay couples on a state level, the findings in the current study mirror these sentiments of the public on the national level. The gay male respondents in Alaska reported mixed positive and negative experiences in society with an almost equal degree of saliency, demonstrating this apparent paradox of support and non-support in our society.

However, it is important to clarify that in the present study, experiences of non-support or negative experiences for male-male partners was slightly more salient than experiences of support; this confirms that such partnerships still exist in what continues to be a relatively oppressive dominant social context—and this context in which male-male couples are embedded can have an effect on the couple (Connolly, 2004). The words of the participants, provided in the previous chapter best demonstrated this point. Furthermore, during the member checking process, the participants continued to confirm this finding as well. For example, Bill shared of instances of non-support, primarily in the form of what the

literature has referred to as heterosexism. Bill stated, “Well, [outside of the gay community] I don’t hear things like ‘Oh how’s your boyfriend? Or where’s your partner, how’s your partner?’ ...[so] it seems like I’m by myself and like I’m not in a couple.” Bill went on to discuss issues with the heterosexist assumption that people make when comparing gay and straight couples, which is that gay couples are “just like heterosexual couple[s].” Bill recognized that gay and straight couples are alike in many ways “like [in] everyday life—going to work, going to school, hanging out and just kind of like the little things;” he also pointed out that they are not by acknowledging that “gay couples have more challenges because of homophobia and heterosexism.”

Interestingly, while the use of accurate and specific terminology to describe negative or unsupportive experiences may be important for scholars, such precision in terminology was not predominantly used by participants, which had an effect on the coding of the theme of non-support. This theme was then coded without the employment of academic language and as such in place of using all the principles and components of the *Social Oppression Matrix*, only those aspects that were relevant in coding the theme of non-support, and were not a form of me, a researcher with some power, imposing, nor naming a participant’s reality, nor telling participants what was the correct way to label their experiences were utilized. Thus, of the four principles, the second principle, particularly in relation to the use of the terms “harassment, discrimination, and exploitation” (Hardiman & Jackson, 1997, p. 17) was the only principle that could truly be applied to help better understand the theme of non-support. However, although academic language like heterosexism and antigay behaviors were not predominately used by participants, this does not make experiences of these kinds of practices any less real. As I stated in the results section, the majority of participants

referred to their negative experiences in society through terms such as discrimination, prejudice, and stereotypes. The expression of antigay behaviors oftentimes takes the form of discrimination and is frequently related to feelings of homophobia and practices of heterosexism (Bigner 2000; Twist et al., 2006). All of the participants reported at least one experience of discrimination in some way, shape, or form. This finding was not surprising for a number of reasons.

First, previous literature regarding the population of study, in both Alaska (Brause, 1986; Green & Brause, 1989) and on the national level (Anastas, 2001; Ariel & McPherson, 2000; Connolly, 2004; Davison, 2001; Greene, 1994; Haldeman, 2005; Herek, 1989; Robinson & Howard-Hamilton, 2000) reported that the majority of gay males have experienced some form of discrimination related to their sexual orientation. Results from local studies had also further described the ways (i.e., loss of a job, slurs, verbal abuse, harassment, threats) and settings (i.e., work and religious contexts) in which discrimination had occurred on the state level (Brause, 1986; Green & Brause, 1989). The participants in the current study reported having experiences with discrimination in general, as well as in the ways that had been already noted in the previous studies local to Alaska. Additionally, the participants also had experienced discrimination across more settings than had been reported in the previous local Alaskan findings; including those of family and friends, local and state government, public university systems, neighborhoods, and professional mental health providers.

Second, from the national literature regarding the typical demographics of who tends to be more oppressive towards gay males (Berkman & Zinberg, 1997; Chng & Moore, 1991; D'Augelli, 1989; Eliason 1995; Ellis et al., 2002; Herek, 1999; Klamen et al., 1999; Malley

& McCann, 2002; Mazur, 2002; Schellenberg et al., 1999; Seltzer, 1992; Vicario et al., 2005), I had compared this information with that of the reported demographic make-up of the population in the Anchorage, Alaska (United States Census Bureau, 2005) and therefore I had anticipated that gay male couples residing in this area may be at-risk for experiences of non-support. Not only was it the case that participants were at-risk for and had actually experienced non-supportive treatment in this urban area, many of the participants pointed out the individual persons or groups of people that had treated them with such intolerance. The demographics of these identified persons and peoples more often than not matched those previously found to be more oppressive towards sexual minorities. Participants in this study described those who had been non-supportive as male, politically conservative, less-educated, and religious. Thus, the fact that each of the participants had experienced discrimination in Alaska was not surprising.

A number of findings within the theme of non-supportive experiences, however, were surprising. For example, the fact that there was a greater degree of salience found for instances of non-support occurring within the individual context (Hardiman & Jackson, 1997) rather than in the institutional and/or social/cultural levels was intriguing. Before conducting this study, I anticipated that more experiences of non-support would have occurred in the contexts of the institution or society rather than in the individual level. One reason for this presumption may have been related to researcher bias. For instance, I know of many examples of oppression towards members of the LGBT community on the social/cultural and institutional levels at both the national and state levels; however, I know of very few individuals who are overtly and blatantly antigay. In general, I do not surround myself with individuals who are purposefully homophobic, therefore it could be that I have

been relatively unaware of how many individuals there are who are homophobic and practice antigay behaviors. Due to this lack of awareness on my part it could have made it difficult for me to anticipate this finding.

Another reason for the presumption that a greater degree of salience would have been found within the levels of the institution and society, and not that of the individual, in terms of non-supportive experiences for male-male couples may have been related to previous literature. In national literature on gay male couples (Anastas, 2001; Auchmuty, 2004; Bigner, 2000; Connolly, 2004; Dworkin & Yi, 2003; Green et al., in press; Haldeman, 2005; Hart, 2002; Herek, 1999; Kitzinger & Coyle, 1995; Long, 2002; Ossana, 2000; Sanders & Kroll, 2000; Twist et al., 2006) and their experiences with various forms of oppression, it seemed that non-supportive experiences were primarily occurring at a more distant level (i.e., laws, media, health care practices, religious institutions), in terms of proximity from the couple rather than in the relatively close context of the couple's immediate circle (i.e., friends, acquaintances, co-workers, classmates, peers). Additionally, some of the literature at the local level seemed to demonstrate that more instances of oppression for gay couples were primarily occurring in institutions and within the general public (Bess, 1995; Brause, 1986; Robinson, 2005), rather than with and between individuals. However, the finding in this study that it is was from individuals, rather than institutions and society, that gay couples experienced negativity with greater salience was consistent with local findings by Green and Brause (1989). In their study conducted in the Anchorage area, examining 42 cases of sexual orientation discrimination, they found that the largest category of agents who had displayed such discrimination were, indeed, individuals within the community.

Perhaps the most interesting finding from the current study was that participants

reported so many instances of support for their partnerships in the Anchorage area. My preconceived idea was that there would be many more experiences of non-support than support and this was not the report by gay males involved in relationships. I think my pre-estimation in terms of support or lack thereof could be primarily attributed to researcher bias. For instance, although I occupy an etic perspective in relation to the group under study, because I am not gay nor am I a male, it was my belief upon entering this study that I did share somewhat of an emic perspective with the participants, because we were all participants within the same dominant local culture; that of Anchorage, Alaska. Having been born, raised, and have lived as an adult in the area, for a total of 23 years, it was my belief that I had a fairly accurate pulse in terms of the amount of support or lack thereof for sexual minorities in the area. In my experience, this pulse was one of much more non-support. Therefore, it was surprising yet encouraging for me to hear so many stories of supportive people and places for gay couples in Alaska. I definitely came to the understanding that I am operating from a singularly etic perspective in relation to gay males, particularly those involved in a relationship, and their experiences in our Alaskan community.

From careful examination of the previous literature, there was also some research to support the finding that the state of Alaska, and more specifically the city of Anchorage, may indeed be considered relatively supportive, especially in comparison to other places in the U.S. For instance Vicario et al. (2005), in a study conducted nationally, explored attitudes towards lesbians and gay men, and determined that more residents of the southern and midwestern regions, as well as those living in small towns, were more likely to hold negative attitudes towards gays. Based on this finding, it was not as surprising then that Alaska, as a Northern state, and Anchorage, arguably as a more urban area, would house residents with

less negative attitudes, at least in comparison to some other areas in the country.

What was even more interesting about this finding was the fact that again, it was within the individual level of society and not the institutional or social/cultural levels that the most amount of support for gay male couples was reported. I think this can be primarily attributed to the coping skills of gay men in self-selecting who they chose to include in their circle of support in what the literature has termed chosen families or families of choice. One of the participants, Eric, had a similar understanding of this theme, which he shared with me during the member checking process. He stated, “Yeah I would say that’s definitely accurate. Right...they’re getting support from the people that they’ve actually chosen because they’re supportive people.”

Social Support

When I considered my experiences in the area of study, as well as the literature on both national and state levels, the theme that social support networks, otherwise known as families of choice/chosen families, were the primary means of coping with negative experiences by gay male couples was not surprising. In terms of the national literature, families of choice as a means of coping with oppression on the part of gays has previously been documented (Ariel & McPherson, 2000; Bepko & Johnson, 2000; Campbell, 2000; Weir, 1999). Not only have social support networks been a documented source of coping for gay couples, research on the effect of these networks has also been conducted. For instance, Campbell (2000), in the state of California, explored the effect of social support systems of 126 gay men currently involved in couple relationships. Findings from that study indicated that the quality of the gay male relationship, including the couple’s ability to manage issues related to heterosexism, was related to the amount of social support that the couple had

received for being involved in such a partnership, particularly from friends (Campbell, 2000). Much like these national findings, in the Green and Brause (1989) study in Alaska, it was determined that when gay couples have extensive interpersonal networks of friends and family to help them successfully negotiate issues related to discrimination and sexual orientation bias, they are not in need of other resources to help them manage these kinds of problems.

It is clear from the literature that families of choice are an important source of support for gay couples across the country. However, I and many of the participants in the current study also discussed the fact that perhaps there may be an atypical number of people in Alaska who have chosen families regardless of orientation. This was related to the fact that Alaska is comprised of a relatively transient population with people who have typically moved away from their families of origin. For instance, in the current study, only three of the participants and their partners were actually native to Alaska—meaning born and raised in the state; all of the other participants and their partners were originally from elsewhere. As a result, as Benjamin noted, “a lot of people’s friends are their immediate family [because] you have a lot of transients come to live up here, or transplants, and they experience isolation.” Hunter shared a similar statement when he said, “...that’s why support from family of choice is one hundred percent, because your family’s not here, so you’ve got to have your own family of choice; we’re the state without parents.” What these participants and others were expressing was the notion that when people transplant themselves to Alaska they oftentimes experience a great amount of isolation and as a means of coping they tend to create their own families as sources of comfort. It does seem then that families of choice as support networks for all individuals, but even more so for gay Alaskans, may be more common in this state

than in other areas of the U.S.

The fact that therapeutic support as a means of managing issues around sexual orientation in the context of society was not found to be a major theme in this study confirmed previous research in the Anchorage, Alaska area and some of the findings on a national level. Locally, research involving sexual minority individuals determined that psychological, social, or stress related problems with discrimination or harassment does not typically bring such individuals into the mental health practitioner's office (Brause, 1986; Green & Brause, 1989). Indeed, it seemed to be the case, both in previous research and in the current study, that accessing professional therapeutic resources for such problems did not seem necessary as long as sexual minorities had extensive interpersonal networks of friends and family to help them successfully deal with issues related to sexual orientation bias and discrimination (Green & Brause, 1989). Furthermore, on the national level, research has shown that when problems related to societal oppression are beyond the common coping strategies (i.e., social support and problem-solving skills) of gay male couples, only then will members of the dyad seek out assistance in managing such issues from mental health professionals.

Regardless of the reason sought for therapeutic services, the rates for participation in both couple and individual therapies in the current study were consistent with the rates reported nationally for gay male couples and gay male individuals, respectively (Means-Christensen et al., 2003; Modricin & Wyers, 1990; Robinson & Howard-Hamilton, 2000). However, for gay male individuals' participation in such services, the rate in this study was somewhat lower than the rate reported in previous research (Brause, 1986) in the state of Alaska—64% versus 80%. The difference between these two findings may be attributed to

differences in sample size of the studies, which is related to the nature of the studies themselves. Interestingly, however, the myriad of reported reasons for accessing therapeutic resources in the current study was akin to the varied reasons previously reported in the Brause (1986) study.

The use of therapeutic services for male-male couples coping with issues related to sexual orientation and society may not have been identified as a primary coping tool in the current study; however, these kinds of services for such issues still warrants discussion for a number of reasons. First, because two of the participants experienced non-supportive forms of therapy like conversion or reparative therapies, from my point of view as a member of the therapy field, even one instance of these forms of therapy is one too many. Second, because only one instance of coping with oppression through accessing professional mental health services was indicated in this study, it could be an indication that gay males and gay male couples in Alaska are not utilizing therapy as a coping tool. This left me with many unanswered questions. Questions like: Why was therapy as a source for coping with non-support not being accessed? Would it be helpful for this source to be utilized more frequently? If so, how? How can we, as mental health providers, let members of the gay community know that we are available for offering support for these kinds of issues? In relation to these points and the fact that the majority of participants in the current study did participate in therapy for one reason or another, it seemed particularly important to further discuss what was helpful and unhelpful in terms of the therapeutic experience.

In the current study, many of those participants who had participated in therapy found the experience helpful. Interestingly, the percentage (75%) of those participants in this study that did find therapy helpful was almost identical to the percentage of gay males (79%) who

found mental health provider services helpful in the Brause (1986) study. The same percentage of participants (75%) also reported experiences in therapy that had been unhelpful. In the current study, participants' experiences of therapy being helpful or not was not linked to factors such as the type of mental health care provider, sex of the therapist, and/or the sexual orientation of the provider. This finding differs from previous research studies in which experiences of therapy as helpful or not is at times linked to these kinds of characteristics of the provider (Brause, 1986; Malley & McCann, 2002).

Participants also did not identify a certain type or model of therapy as being particularly helpful, instead, what the majority of participants reported as being helpful is what has been termed in academic literature as *common factors* of effective therapy (Asay & Lambert, 1999; Blow & Sprenkle, 2001; Garfield, 1992; Lambert & Bergin, 1994; Smith, Glass, & Miller, 1980; Sprenkle, Blow, & Dickey, 1999; Sprenkle & Blow, 2004; Wampler, 1997). Common factors are those dimensions of the therapeutic setting that exist across all therapy types and models that are not specific to a particular model (Lambert & Bergin, 1994). This includes client, therapist, relationship, expectancy, and treatment variables (Sprenkle & Blow, 2004). In the current study the variables that were reported by participants as being most helpful in their therapeutic experiences were those related to the therapist and the therapeutic relationship. These factors include variables like warmth, respect, empathy, trust, and genuineness (Sprenkle & Blow, 2004). For instance, in discussing what was helpful, participants Rick, Wazul, Dexter, and Esteban used similar descriptors which all appeared to be a reflection of these variables. Here are some of the descriptions they used when explaining their therapeutic experience in illustration of this point. Rick said that the following things were helpful; having “somebody you can relate to

and have a communication with,” and a space to “hear [oneself] talk.” Both Esteban and Dexter shared that “having a third party listen to you” is helpful in terms of couple’s therapy. Wazul expressed that someone who “listens” is helpful as is someone who can “sympathize.” Both Dexter and Wazul talked about how things like “support,” “acceptance,” and “validation” all helpful factors in therapy. Empirical research has demonstrated that these therapist and relationship factors are significantly helpful in terms of therapeutic outcomes; in that these variables account for 30% of the positive changes take place in the process of therapy (Lambert, 1992).

Previously I also alluded to what has been found to be helpful in working therapeutically with gay clientele in terms of combating oppressive experiences both inside and outside of therapy (Green et al., in press; Green & Twist, 2005; Greene, 1994; Twist et al., 2006). For the one participant who attended therapy for this specific concern, it seemed that these fore-stated therapeutic guidelines, as well as those presented by the American Psychological Association (APA; Division 44/Committee on Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Concerns Joint Task Force on Guidelines for Psychotherapy with Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Clients, 2000), would be helpful in assisting gay males and gay male couples with these types of issues. For instance, Bill shared that the things that would have been helpful in therapy were things like “the therapist focusing on my being gay and how to cope with a homophobic world” and he suggested that maybe if she had had “training on how to deal with gay people” or “specialized in gay couples” that would have been helpful. Instead, what Bill experienced therapeutically was relatively unhelpful, primarily due to experiences with heterosexual bias on the part of therapist. Previous literature has determined that this kind of bias is likely to be one of the key factors in being the therapist’s undoing in effectively

working with such clientele (Greene, 1994; Sanders & Kroll, 2000) and more often than not has led to many gay clientele finding the therapeutic experience unhelpful (Means-Christensen et al., 2003; Modricin & Wyers, 1990).

Other therapeutic practices that participants in the current study reported as being not only unhelpful, but also harmful, were those who experienced conversion or reparative therapy. This corresponds with the literature where it has been determined many times by most of the major mental health organizations that these forms of therapy are oppressive, a form of prejudicial practice, harmful towards gays, and as such should not be practiced (Greene, 1994; Long & Serovich, 2003; Tunnell & Greenan, 2004). Furthermore, previous research has demonstrated that therapeutic practices with gays that involve the therapist being in a position of non-support of gay persons and their rights is potentially harmful and may be unethical (Green et al., in press; Long, 2002; Twist et al., 2006). The findings in this study mirror those in these previous studies.

Making the Ideal Real

Two primary themes emerged in this study with regard to how participants would ideally like society to view and treat them on an individual and coupled level. These themes included a call for an increase in equality through laws as well as an increase in societal acceptance leading to the ability for gay male couples to be able to safely display their relationship in the general public. Since it was on the individual level that the categories of both non-supportive and supportive experiences yielded the most occurrences, it followed that the ability to support gay males and their partners in the co-creation of making the ideal society a reality need start with the individual. I saw this as including individual members of both the dominant majority as well as individuals within the therapy field.

Implications for Therapists: Beyond the Therapy Room

Clearly from previous research (Brause, 1986) and in the current study, gay males and gay male couples have sought therapeutic services for a variety of reasons in Anchorage, Alaska and with relative frequency. However, it was also apparent from this study that the gay population in the state was not seeking professional support for coping with non-supportive or negative experiences. A question that then arose was: Why? Why are gay males and gay male couples seeking therapeutic services for issues other than coping with negative experiences in society? This question was particularly relevant when in consideration that it was through social support that gay male couples in this study coped with such experiences, therefore why were professionals not a part of this network of social support?

These questions may in part be answered by previous research in the state by Brause (1986), which revealed that approximately 13% of the gay males who had participated in professional mental health services did so without disclosing their sexual orientation either out of fear of disapproval from the provider or fear that the provider would share this kind of information with others in the community. In consideration of the previous and current oppressive practices towards gay males by members of the mental health community such fears are not only understandable, but justifiable. Additionally, since there existed no readily available resources for identification of those mental health providers who may be considered more gay-friendly in the city of Anchorage it is even more understandable that gay males would not feel comfortable seeking out services for assistance with issues related to societal oppression—indeed if they did they might run the risk of engaging in therapy with someone who might practice the very types of behaviors they would be looking to escape in

place of receiving empathy for having had such negative experiences.

From the participants in this study and in consideration of the academic literature it is clear that some professionals engage in non-supportive and anti-gay behaviors in their therapeutic work with gay clientele. Thus there truly exists a risk for gays having further experiences of non-support within the therapy room, as the therapeutic reality is a part of the dominant society and as such practices in this context—including those that are prejudicial—are a reflection of those of the dominant majority. Therefore, it was possible that with such experiences in therapy taking place that news of these instances has had the power to spread from one gay individual to another. Thereby thwarting the chances of those informed gay male individuals from entering therapy, and in the instances where they might be accessing professional support it would most likely be without making their sexual orientation known.

With these issues in mind, it is clear that therapists have the power to either help or harm gay males and gay male couples in coping with their experiences of societal non-support. As a professional, I recognize that therapists, as members of the general public, do have some influence and power in this culture both professionally and politically. Therefore, we have the ability to encourage social justice and promote social change (Herek, 1999; Malley & McCann, 2002; Twist et al., 2006). Thus, I see helping manage negative experiences in society had by gay males both inside and outside of the therapy room as the only viable option. Furthermore, from the research previously conducted in the state of Alaska, gay males have indicated a demand for higher amounts of advocacy from the general public in terms of increases in state-level lesbian and gay rights legislation (Brause, 1986). Each of us, including members of the helping professions, must then answer this call and assist in promoting social justice and change.

Social justice involves both centralizing and affirming perspectives of those who experience marginalization and oppression (Enns & Sinacore, 2005; Twist et al., 2006). As such, we as a profession need to be politically active in changing some of the problems for gay male couples (Wetchler, 2004). We need to deal with one of the major sources of these problems—society (Wetchler, 2004). We need to go beyond supporting social justice for gays merely in principle, and primarily only in the context of the therapy room, by demonstrating a real commitment through actions aimed at increasing social justice (Ellis et al., 2002). We need to be concerned and combat issues that our gay clients face—issues like equal rights, civil liberties, domestic partnerships and/or marital agreements, which are just some of the areas that need our attention (Twist et al., 2006).

Concern for areas of social inequality for gays can be expressed through a number of avenues. We can mentor, volunteer, and support organizations and businesses of the gay community (Wetchler, 2004). As supervisors and educators, we can train therapists and students to effectively and supportively work with sexual minority clients (Green et al., in press; Wetchler, 2004). As educators and supervisors, we need to work on improving the attitudes of our students and supervisees as related to gay issues (Ellis et al., 2002; Green et al., in press). We can do this by including more gay perspectives into curriculums, inviting gay speakers to campus and through the provision of more gay resources and materials in our classrooms (Berkman & Zinberg, 1997; Chng & Moore, 1991; Ellis et al., 2002; Long, 1996). Through education and discussion with those who are prejudiced or who hold homophobic attitudes, some of these beliefs and attitudes can potentially be broken down, dispelled, and changed (Sims, 2002).

In order to challenge social inequity for gays, we also need to become involved in

human rights policies and legislation. We can do this by contacting our respective local (Alaska Association for Marriage and Family Therapists; AKAMFT) and national (AAMFT, COAMFTE) MFT organizations to share our views and influence related policies and provisions. We need to contact the representatives of our government and give our opinions about family, anti-discrimination, health, education, and human rights policies and laws, both before and after they are created (Eliason, 1995; Ellis et al., 2002; Twist, 2006). In taking these steps, we need to also encourage others to do the same (Twist, 2006).

Efforts of the national organization, AAMFT, have been made towards greater equality for gays. For instance, the AAMFT has taken an official position that having a same-sex orientation is not a mental disorder, and the COAMFTE has included an anti-discrimination clause that includes prohibition of discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation (AAMFT, 2008; Ariel & McPherson, 2000; Green et al., in press). Moreover, AAMFT recently took a supportive position with regard to same-sex relationships (AAMFT, 2008). The organization holds the belief that all willingly committed couple forms have a right to recognition, support, and equal benefits in terms of legal and civil rights (AAMFT, 2008). As a result, AAMFT vows to support public policy initiatives that are supportive of same-sex couples. This recent decision seems to reflect the majority of the Clinical Members' views and is also in alignment with human rights and social justice practices (Twist et al., 2006).

Challenging oppression of male-male couples through increased knowledge and understanding is believed to benefit not only the couple, but also society as a whole. Systemically, it is logical that if the dominant discourse around gay male couples continues to pervade, then inequality continues to exist in this subsystem. This means that the larger,

more dominant system also experiences inequality. When one group of people experiences inequality it hurts that group, as well as the rest of the population, as it displays the inequality of the society as a whole (Hart, 2002). With this in mind, it becomes quintessential to challenge oppression of sexual minorities and strive towards social equality that can assist in the unveiling and demystification of many prevailing heterosexist and homophobic beliefs and actions and replace them with realistic and subjective experiences of gay couples as we face oppression together.

Potential benefits of social equality for gay couples are both innumerable and difficult to fully envision at present. However, some theorists and researchers have begun to explore some such benefits. For example, in an exploration of the economic analysis of same-sex marriages, Portelli (2004) noted that through the legalization of same-sex marriage both the national and state-wide economies could benefit. In addition, it was also noted that by legitimizing of same-sex couples, the incentive to marry would be strengthened and there could also be an increase in profits for marriage markets and related business (Portelli, 2004). Furthermore, Portelli (2004) pointed out that through an increase of same-sex marriages there could also be a related increase in the provision of two-parent families in which to raise children, which can be an environment that can have the potential for both great emotional and economic security.

Challenging oppression of male-male couples through increased knowledge and understanding and practices of social justice does benefit the couple as well. For example, in states where same-sex unions (Vermont) and/or gay marriages (Massachusetts) are legally recognized, the couples have greater access to many of the legal, medical, and financial rights and legal protections as other couple forms in the country (Bepko & Johnson, 2000).

Additionally, in states where gays have been afforded some rights, it has led to shared dental and health insurance coverage, disability and retirement benefits, provision of bereavement and parental leave in employment settings, and various other family related benefits and aid (Ariel & McPherson, 2000). In addition to these gains, a growing number of religious bodies have welcomed sexual minorities, including an increase in events and services specifically designed for them and their needs (Ariel & McPherson, 2000).

Although these steps towards social justice have definitely benefited gays and gay male couples, these steps alone are not enough. We need to continue to challenge oppression towards sexual minorities and strive towards social equality. In doing so, we can have the potential to only further empower gay individuals and couples. My journey in assisting gays and society as whole in this social change process has already begun and I believe it will only be strengthened as a result of this research experience.

Implications for Society

In addition to members of the professional therapeutic community, in general, all of us can work towards greater social equality for all persons in our society. By being committed to and concerned with human rights, we can all experience greater equality in the society as a whole. Human rights stem from the philosophy that all individuals and groups comprised of individuals have a right to fair and equal treatment and as such not be subjected to discriminatory practices (Sims, 2002). In general, people believe that discrimination against any group is unjust, including that which is aimed at sexual minorities. For instance, in a national poll that took place in 1996, it was reported that most Americans oppose discrimination towards sexual minorities (Boykin, 1996). However, in this same poll it was also reported that most people already believed that gays were being protected against these

kinds of practices (Boykin, 1996). In reality, this is not the case. This means that most people do not realize there is continued discrimination against gays in this country. A lack of knowledge around gays and the discrimination they face also seems to be relatively commonplace by the general public in the state of Alaska as well. As was pointed out by a local ally and pastor from the region of study, "I [and others] never dreamed of the level of injustice against homosexuals until they became friends...[and until] the findings of Identity's One in Ten study came out and revealed a horror of discrimination..." (Bess, 1995, p. 199). Continued invisibility and ignorance of the lack of rights for gays is precisely what the antigay forces of the dominant society would like rather than seeing that discriminatory practices towards sexual minorities are still not only perfectly legal in many states, but continue to be widely practiced (Boykin, 1996).

Awareness and recognition of discrimination against gays is increasing, and, with greater visibility of the gay community and antigay groups, the general public is becoming more concerned about discriminatory practices. Indeed, more recent national poll data show that attitudes of the general public towards sexual minorities are becoming increasingly more supportive and favorable, particularly over the last three decades (Herek, 1999). For instance, most Americans now believe that gays should have equal rights regarding employment and basic civil liberties (Herek, 1999). In addition, most Americans favor same-sex domestic partnerships with limited legal recognition (Herek, 1999). Moreover, there have been some areas of human and civil rights that are beginning to be recognized as being oppressive towards gays and as a result changes are being made. These include rights to privacy, freedom of speech, press, information, science, and art; civic rights of spousal benefits, custody, marriage, and adoption; freedom from violence or threat of violence; freedom from

criminal prosecution based on sexual orientation; freedom to defend one's country in the military; workplace rights and benefits; and legal protection from discrimination (Harper & Schneider, 2003; Sanders, 2002; Sims, 2002).

Primarily due to increasing visibility, support, and acceptance of sexual minorities, there has also been some progress towards ending discrimination through codification of laws and policies. For instance, eighteen states have banned employment discrimination based on sexual orientation; twenty-six states have non-discrimination policies that include sexual orientation, and thirteen states offer domestic partner health benefits (Human Rights Campaign, 2007). In relation to the current study, although no statewide sexual orientation non-discrimination law in Alaska exists, in March 2002 the governor signed an order, Administrative Order Number 195, prohibiting sexual orientation discrimination in state employment positions (Human Rights Campaign, 2007). Additionally, the Alaskan Supreme Court ruled in October 2005 that both state and local governments must offer the same benefits to employees involved in both same-sex partnerships and different-sex marriages (Peterson, 2006).

Although changes in policy and law on national and local levels are steps towards challenging and overcoming oppression towards gays in the dominant society, more of these types of changes need to occur; different ways in which these changes can continue have been suggested in the literature. One is through increased visibility, outside of the sexual minority community, on the part of sexual minorities; however, with visibility can come increased experiences of discrimination, injustice, negative sanctions, sexual orientation bias, homophobia, and antigay behaviors (Bess, 1995; Green & Brause, 1989; McKirnan & Peterson, 1987). This means that for many gays, not being fully *out* may be one of the only

ways they have found to avoid more of these instances of non-support, even though being out may actually help to reduce some of the non-support. Indeed, 55% of gay men in the state of Alaska agree that equal rights and increased opportunities for gays and lesbians can only be achieved when greater numbers come out of the closet (Brause, 1986).

Another is through increased experiences of personal and meaningful contact with sexual minorities from which individuals have the potential to become more concerned with and supportive of gay and lesbian human rights (Bess, 1995; Green & Brause, 1989; Green et al., in press; Schneider & Lewis, 1984; Twist, 2006; Twist et al., 2006). For instance, on the local level, Green and Brause (1989) found that although only 43% of the 369 total employers and housing managers in Anchorage reported that they would support a city ordinance to protect homosexuals from discrimination, 64% of those who personally knew a sexual minority person supported such an ordinance. Furthermore in the same study, although 57% of employers would not hire someone they thought to be homosexual, fewer than 14% of those who had homosexual friends or family members reported that they would not hire someone of homosexual orientation. Among those housing managers, only 9% of those who had sexual minority friends or family members reported that they would not rent to someone they thought was homosexual, whereas 34% of those who did not have such friends or family stated that they would not rent to someone of homosexual orientation.

On the whole, our society needs to come to value concerns of both the majority and minority in order to truly claim to be a democratic nation. As it stands, preferences of the majority in this country typically trample and oppress the rights of the minority (Boykin, 1996). Oftentimes the cost of overvaluing the rights of the majority is at the expense of devaluation and oppression towards the minority, whereby they are forced to sacrifice their

basic human rights and civil liberties for the will of the many (Boykin, 1996). To increase the support for gays by members of the dominant culture, it takes more non-gays getting to know gays and more gays being out for non-gays to know. The relationship between more gays being out to non-gays need start with greater acceptance and support on the part of the non-gay members of the dominant society. This can be accomplished in part by non-gays getting to know gay members and offering support to them and their cause. Although many gays are more than capable of fighting for their own justice, as is evidenced by many of the participants in the current study, some, due to a position of having less power and status within the dominant society, are limited in terms of fights for their own justice (Bess, 1995) and therefore can benefit from having more support from those of us in society who inherently hold more power in comparison.

Although some sexual minorities may be in need of assistance in their fight for justice, oftentimes potential advocates of such justice are afraid to be open as well, for fear they may experience similar injustices to those suffered by sexual minorities (Bess, 1995). Despite these types of fears, people need to work together to challenge the status quo that the *majority rules* in order to ensure social justice and equality for all. Deciding to be an active advocate for members of the sexual minority community hinges on a real commitment in terms of actions and not just in mere words.

Limitations of the Study

A limitation of this study, as with qualitative studies in general, was the small sample size. As with most qualitative studies, with a small sample size recruited from one particular region, the research findings can neither act as a test for any of the theories regarding gay male couples posed in such a study nor can the findings be generalized to a larger population

(Sullivan, 2001). Although generalizability then was not possible, I did bolster the possibility of ensuring transferability or naturalistic generalization in the current study (Stake, 1980). This task was accomplished by providing rich descriptions of the findings, including many of the participants' own words, to give readers a great range of contexts and situations with which to relate and transfer the findings from this study to those of their own experiences (Merriam, 2002).

Additionally, while I was aware of the biases and assumptions that I held with regard to gay male couples and other aspects of the current study, there can be possible biasing effects of the researcher on the findings in qualitative research. In consideration of this point, I made my assumptions as explicit as possible in a previous chapter to help minimize some of the possible effects of researcher bias. In addition to making my biases and assumptions known to myself and others, further steps were taken like researcher journaling, peer reviewing and debriefings as the research progressed, which also enabled me to gain realizations about how I approached the research participants, how my questions, informed by my assumptions, shaped responses of the research participants, as well as where I stood throughout each stage of this research project. Additionally, thorough member checking during second meetings with participants and in many instances third meetings to finalize the results of this work further assisted me in being aware of my influence on the results and in better ensuring that the results were co-owned by the participants of the study.

Another limitation of this study was that the inquiry primarily focused on the point of view of gay male individuals involved in partnerships regarding societal treatment and the effect this treatment had on their coupled relationships rather than on both members of these partnerships. Although I stand by my decision to interview individuals rather than both

members of dyadic relationships primarily because I did not want to potentially *force* one member in a relationship to participate if the other wanted to, or have the person wanting to participate be *forced* into exclusion from the study because their partner did not want to be a part of it, I do think that there would be value in having both of the voices in the partnership heard regarding their experiences in societal treatment. In the current study, the bulk of participants involved one member of a partnership, however in some instances both members chose to participate. Although the information I gleaned from individual members of a dyad was invaluable and certainly represents their point of view regarding their relationship and societal treatment of their relationship, from the instances where both members of the dyad participated, I felt like I heard both sides of the couple's story regarding societal treatment and that this helped serve as a means of inherent validation for experiences in some cases. In many instances their stories were very similar, which led me to conclude that many of the individuals who participated would have had partners who shared a similar viewpoints had they participated. However, in other instances the stories were somewhat dissimilar with regard to perception of treatment in society for the couples. In these latter instances, it would have been much more useful to hear from both members in the relationship rather than just one. In future studies, then, it might be advantageous to hear from both members in the gay male partnership regarding their experiences with societal treatment.

Future Research

This study served as a means of attaining valuable first-hand information from gay males with regard to societal and therapeutic experiences in their partnered relationships in the urban area of Anchorage in the state of Alaska. Although the information attained was invaluable, future research exploring a few key findings further would serve to enhance those

findings in the current study. One of the findings that warrants further research is that of the experience of visibility management, which was repeatedly practiced by multiple participants in their coupled relationships and is also a phenomenon that has received little attention in the literature (D'Augelli, 1994a, 1994b). Therefore, future research aimed at further exploring the multitude of reasons behind visibility management by male-male couples would be beneficial. Possible research questions could include the following: Is visibility management truly a matter of individual and/or couple identity development? Or is the practice of managing visibility a means of coping with non-supportive people and/or places? And what role might gender or masculinity play in the outward display of certain public behaviors or not for male-male couples?

Other findings that could be enhanced through future research are those related to therapeutic services. For instance, although information attained from the point of view of gay males' experiences with therapeutic services in the state of Alaska is beneficial to those mental health professionals working with this population therapeutically, information from those offering the services to this population was not acquired and would also be helpful. Future research including the voices of mental health professionals in the state who work with gay male individuals and couples may offer a more holistic perspective in terms of offering the best services to such clients. However, before conducting the current study it was relatively unclear which mental health providers in the local area worked with sexual minorities, which made contacting them somewhat difficult at the onset of this project. Now that I have attained contact names and information from participants it would make this kind of follow-up study much more plausible.

Perhaps the most provocative, yet costly, possibility for future research involving gay males and gay male couples in the state of Alaska would be research conducted outside of the heavily populated urban areas like the one in the current and in previous studies (Brause, 1986; Green & Brause, 1989) and in place conducted in “the bush.” The Bush areas (i.e., Aniak, Barrow, Nome, Point Hope, Kotzebue, Unalakleet, St. Mary’s, Bethel, Dillingham, Dutch Harbor, Cordova, etc.), also known as “bush communities,” “villages,” or “hub communities,” are the portions of the state that are not interconnected by roadway systems whereby they exist outside of the urban and more densely populated areas (i.e., Anchorage, Fairbanks, Juneau, and the towns of the Kenai Peninsula and Matanuska-Susitna Boroughs), and are predominately comprised of Alaskan Natives in terms of demographic composition. While research in these areas of the state on various topics and with varied populations is being conducted, there remains very little research being done in these areas and absolutely none on gay males and gay male couples or on the LGBT population in general.

It is commonly believed by those sexual minority members of predominately the urban areas of Alaska, as well as by the experts on LGBT studies in the state, that the experience for sexual minorities in the villages is one best characterized by extreme isolation and loneliness (Bess; 1994; Brause, 1986; Green & Brause, 1989). As a result, for those LGBT persons living in the bush, there tends to be an increased rate of consumption and abuse of drugs and alcohol, as well as incidents of suicide (Bess, 1994; Brause, 1986; Green & Brause, 1989). However, there is little to no empirical information on sexual minority persons in these hub communities, therefore actual prevalence in experiences with regard to these kinds of issues is one of uncertainty. Furthermore, there is a dearth of information in

terms of support for sexual minorities in the bush communities, including support from professionals.

Clearly, research involving sexual minorities in the bush communities in Alaska *must* be conducted. However, a drawback in the conduction of research in these areas is that of financial hardship. Since the bush is inaccessible by roadway the only means of access are those of airplane or boat, which are both extremely costly. The costliness of such an endeavor could be one of the reasons why such research has yet to be conducted.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

In closing, in this study I aimed to explore experiences of gay male individuals in coupled relationships in the context of urban Alaskan society. In general, themes generated indicated a number of findings for gay couples in the state. Male-male couples did tend to experience more negativity or non-support for their relationships rather than support in the state of Alaska. When such negative experiences in society occurred, gay couples utilized social support networks as their primary means of coping. Although professional mental health services were not frequently accessed by gay male couples as a means of coping with non-supportive experiences in Alaskan society, nonetheless such services were accessed with some frequency by participants for a myriad of reasons.

There are clearly identifiable ways of co-creating a climate that is more supportive or gay-friendly and ideal for members of gay partnerships in the Alaskan community based on findings from this study. One step includes individual members of the dominant majority working with members of the sexual minority to increase equality for gays in law and policy. Another step is to actively encourage an environment of greater social acceptance for male-male couples to help foster a society where members of gay partnerships will one day feel safe in public to demonstrate their affection for and commitment to each other.

Participation in the fore-stated steps is encouraged on a group level, but more importantly in consideration of the findings in the current study, it is also needed on that of the individual grass-roots level. Each of us needs to be active in effectively changing the experiences of gay male couples from those of non-support to support whereby we are all

moved closer to a more ideal society—one of greater social equality. In doing this, we can participate in changing the personal and political forces that shape all of us for the better.

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APPENDIX A

INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Title of Study: A study of gay men's experiences of society in their couple relationships

Investigators: Markie L.C. Blumer, MA, MEd, LMFT Iowa State University
Megan J. Murphy, PhD, Iowa State University

This is a research study. Please take your time in deciding if you would like to participate. Please feel free to ask questions at any time.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences and effects of society on self-identified gay male individuals who are currently involved in a couple relationship. It is hoped that information about the individual's experiences as it relates to one's partnership will be gained, including information of one's positive and negative experience with society and the effect such experiences have on the relationship and how the couple copes with the effects together and through outside resources. You are being invited to participate in this study because you are a self-identified gay male who currently describes himself as being involved in a couple relationship.

DESCRIPTION OF PROCEDURES

If you agree to participate in this study, your participation will last for approximately four months and will potentially involve two to three interviews, each of which will take place for a duration of approximately 30 to 120 minutes. During the study, you may expect the following study procedures. During the first meeting, you will be asked to complete a written demographic questionnaire, followed by a person-to-person semi-structured interview involving open-ended questions about you and your current partnership. During the next two to three interviews, you will be asked follow-up questions about your initial interview and will be given a chance to revise and provide feedback about your participation in the research process as well as be given a chance to discuss the research and research outcomes/findings.

During each of the interviews, sessions will be tape-recorded. The tapes will be kept confidential and will remain in a secured location during the course of the research study. Upon completion of the study, about a year from the start of participation in the study, and subsequent approval of the dissertation research by the appropriate body at the university level, the tapes will be destroyed, as will any other identifying information.

Also, please note that at any time during the completion of the written demographic questionnaire or during the interviews you may skip any question that you do not wish to answer or that makes you feel uncomfortable.

RISKS

While participating in this study, there is a potential for some risks. The interview will involve questions about personally and relationally based information, which may bring up uncomfortable feelings, in which case you may decide not to answer a question or you may stop the interview all together. In addition, gay-friendly professional contacts and resources will be provided to you as part of follow-up for any such issues.

Additionally, if during the interviewing the participant discloses any present experiences of self-harm or harm to others, the researcher will provide access to appropriate professional contacts and resources as part of follow-up for any such issues, aimed at offering safety for the participant. Furthermore, if the participant discloses any current partnerships where abuse is being experienced, the researcher will again provide access to appropriate professional contacts and resources as part of follow-up for any such issues, aimed at offering safety to the participant.

Privacy for the participants is of the utmost importance in the current study due to the sensitivity of the information provided by participants. Therefore, the researcher will use de-identifying information in the form of pseudonyms and will keep all taped and written documents in a secured storage area and on a password-protected computer. Moreover, the researcher will keep all learned information during and after the study de-identified and the identities of participants confidential and anonymous.

BENEFITS

If you decide to participate in this study, there may be some benefits to you. A benefit is defined as a “desired outcome or advantage.” One benefit is that the participant may experience positive feelings after having an opportunity to talk about himself and his partnership in a supportive environment.

Beyond the individual benefits to involvement in the current study, it is hoped that the information gained in this study will benefit society by providing valuable insight and accurate first-hand information into gay male partnerships to help dispel some of the currently held myths about gay male relationships. Additionally, it is hoped that participation in the study will provide a space for an underrepresented group of individuals in the study to have their voices heard.

COSTS AND COMPENSATION

You should not have any costs from participating in this study. You will be compensated for your participation in the current study. As a token of appreciation for your time and participation in the study, you will receive \$20.00 gift certificate to a gay-friendly nationally-based company, Sears, for your participation in the initial interview session. Beyond this first interview, if you decide to continue to participate in the subsequent two to three follow-up interviews you will receive \$10.00 gift certificates for each visit that is completed.

PARTICIPANT RIGHTS

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or leave the study at any time. If you decide to not participate in the study or leave the study early, it will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

If at some point during participation in the current study the participant becomes harmful towards himself or others, appropriate resources and referrals will be made available and his participation in the study will be terminated.

RESEARCH INJURY

Emergency treatment of any injuries that may occur as a direct result of participation in this research is available for the participant. A list of potential local physicians and medical facilities for referral and for access will be made available by the researcher.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Records identifying participants will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by applicable laws and regulations and will not be made publicly available. However, federal government regulatory agencies and the Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves human subject research studies) may inspect and/or copy your records for quality assurance and data analysis. These records may contain private information.

To ensure confidentiality to the extent permitted by law, certain measures will be ensured. You will be given a pseudonym of your choosing, any information will be de-identified, and this name used instead. All records, including written documents, surveys, taped interview meetings, transcriptions of interviews, and data analysis will be de-identified and placed in a secured location – a locked filing cabinet and locked room, plus all information on the computer will be entered and stored on a password-protected computer. Upon completion of the study, about a year from the start of participation in the study, and subsequent approval of the dissertation research by the appropriate body at the university level, the tapes will be destroyed, as will any other identifying information. If results from the study are published, your identity will remain confidential.

QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS

You are encouraged to ask questions at any time during this study.

- For further information about the study contact: Markie L.C. Blumer, markie@iastate.edu, (907) 786-1717 or Megan J. Murphy, mjmurphy@iastate.edu, (515) 294-2745.

- If you have any questions about the rights of research subjects or research-related injury, please contact Jan Canny, IRB Administrator, (515) 294-4566,

IRB@iastate.edu, or Diane Ament, Director, Office of Research Assurances (515)
294-3115, dament@iastate.edu

PARTICIPANT SIGNATURE

Your signature indicates that you voluntarily agree to participate in this study, that the study has been explained to you, that you have been given the time to read the document and that your questions have been satisfactorily answered. You will receive a copy of the signed and dated written informed consent prior to your participation in the study.

Participant's Name (printed) _____

(Participant's Signature)

(Date)

INVESTIGATOR STATEMENT

I certify that the participant has been given adequate time to read and learn about the study and all of their questions have been answered. It is my opinion that the participant understands the purpose, risks, benefits and the procedures that will be followed in this study and has voluntarily agreed to participate.

(Signature of Person Obtaining Informed Consent)

(Date)

Professional Mental Health Resources

The Alaska Men's Center
600 Cordova St., Ste. 3
Anchorage, AK 99501
(907) 272-4822

F. Ken Freedman, Counselor, MA.
F. Ken Freedman Counseling
4220 Viscount Circle
Anchorage, AK 99502
(907) 566-1708

Identity Helpline
P.O. Box 200070
Anchorage, AK 99520-0070
1-888-901-9876
(907) 258-4777

Marie Bateman, Psychologist, PhD.
Veterans Affairs Mental Health Clinic
2925 DeBarr Rd.
Anchorage, AK 99508
(907) 257-4700

Narcotic Drug Treatment Center
520 E. 4th Ave., Ste. 102
Anchorage, AK 99501
(907) 276-6430

Professional Medical Resources

Alaska Family Care Associates
4001 Dale St., #210
Anchorage, AK 99508
(907) 929-5888

Alaska Health Care Clinic
3600 Minnesota Dr
Anchorage, AK 99503
(907) 279-3500

Comprehensive Medicine
615 E 82nd Ave, #300
Anchorage, AK 99518
(907) 344-7775

The Feeling Better Center
717 Barrow St
Anchorage, AK 99501
(907) 646-4668

First Care Medical Centers
3701 Woodland Dr, #1100
Anchorage, AK 99517
(907) 248-1122

The Health Care Center
5001 Arctic Blvd, #100
Anchorage, AK 99503
(907) 562-7643

Independence Park Medical Services
9500 Independence Dr, #900
Anchorage, AK 99501
(907) 522-1341

Mountain View Health Clinic
3521 Mt. View Dr.
Anchorage, AK 99508
(907) 278-2268

Patient's First Medical Clinic
6307 DeBarr Rd
Anchorage, AK 99504
(907) 333-7425

Providence Alaska Medical Center
3200 Providence Dr
Anchorage, AK 99508
(907) 563-3200

Ravenwood Family Clinic
4200 Lake Otis Pkwy
Anchorage, AK 99508
(907) 338-2273

Urgent Care Medical Clinic
5437 E. Northern Lights Blvd
Anchorage, AK 99508
(907) 333-8561

APPENDIX B

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY
OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Institutional Review Board
Office of Research Assurances
Vice Provost for Research
1138 Pearson Hall
Ames, Iowa 50011-2207
515 294-4566
FAX 515 294-4267

DATE: August 10, 2006
TO: Markie Twist
4380 Palmer
CC: Dr. Megan Murphy
4380 Palmer
FROM: Jan Canny, IRB Administrator
Office of Research Assurances
SUBJECT: IRB ID 06-329

Approval Date: 4 August 2006 **Date for Continuing Review:** 3 August 2007

The Institutional Review Board Co-Chair of Iowa State University has reviewed and approved the protocol entitled: "A study of gay men's experiences of society in their couple relationships." The protocol has been assigned the following ID Number: 06-329. Please refer to this number in all correspondence regarding the protocol.

Your study has been approved from August 4, 2006 to August 3, 2007. The **continuing review date** for this study is no later than August 3, 2007. Federal regulations require continuing review of ongoing projects. Please submit the form with sufficient time (i.e. three to four weeks) for the IRB to review and approve continuation of the study, prior to the continuing review date.

Failure to complete and submit the continuing review form will result in expiration of IRB approval on the continuing review date and the file will be administratively closed. All research related activities involving the participants **must stop** on the continuing review date, until approval can be re-established, except when necessary to eliminate immediate hazard to research participants. As a courtesy to you, we will send a reminder of the approaching review prior to this date.

Please remember that any **changes in the protocol or consent form** may not be implemented without prior IRB review and approval, using the "Continuing Review and/or Modification" form. Research investigators are expected to comply with the principles of the Belmont Report, and state and federal regulations regarding the involvement of humans in research. These documents are located on the Office of Research Assurances website or available by calling (515) 294-4566, www.compliance.iastate.edu.

You must promptly report any of the following to the IRB: (1) **all serious and/or unexpected adverse experiences** involving risks to subjects or others; and (2) **any other unanticipated problems involving risks** to subjects or others.

Upon completion of the project, please submit a Project Closure Form to the Office of Research Assurances, 1138 Pearson Hall, to officially close the project.

APPENDIX C**Professional Mental Health Resources**

F. Ken Freedman, Counselor, MA.
F. Ken Freedman Counseling
Anchorage, AK 99518-1121
(907) 566-1708

Identity Helpline
P.O. Box 200070
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(907) 276-6430

APPENDIX D

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. What have been your experiences in society as a member of a gay couple?
2. What have been your experiences in the Alaskan community as a member of a gay couple?
3. What have been the reactions to your participation in a same-sex couple relationship from your family/friends/gay community/work environment/etc.?
4. In completing the demographic form you had a chance to share about differences and similarities between you and your partner. What do you think the effect society and the Alaskan community is on you based on your demographic characteristics? What about the effect of society and the Alaskan community on your partner based on his demographics? How does society and the community react to your relationship based on the demographic characteristics of you both?
5. How do you and your partner manage these experiences in society and the Alaskan community? What do you find helpful? What is unhelpful?
6. Where do you seek support for your partnership? (i.e., support group, family, friends, gay community, community center, spiritual advisor, mental health provider, etc.)
7. If you have participated in therapy or counseling, what kind of therapy was it? (i.e., individual, couples, family, etc.)
8. Were you a child (under the age of 18) or adult (over 18 years of age) when you participated in therapy or counseling?
9. What was your experience in therapy? What was helpful and unhelpful for you in terms of your sexual orientation regarding your therapy experience?
10. Was your partner involved in the therapy or counseling? If so, what was this experience like? Again, what was helpful and unhelpful for you in your relationship from this therapy experience?
11. If you were in an ideal society, how would you and your partner be treated? How do you or would you know that you were in this kind of society?

APPENDIX E

Participant Demographic Form

1. What is your date of birth? _____

2. What is your partner's date of birth? _____

3. What sex do you most identify with? (Circle one) M F

4. What sex does your partner most identify with? (Circle one) M F

5. What is the gender that you most identify with? (Circle one) M W

6. What is the gender that your partner most identifies with? (Circle one) M W

7. With which race do you most identify (Circle one)?

White/Caucasian

Asian/Pacific Islander

Black/African American

Latino/Hispanic

Native American/Alaskan

Other: _____

Biracial/Multiracial (please specify): _____

8. With which race does your partner most identify (Circle one)?

White/Caucasian

Asian/Pacific Islander

Black/African American

Latino/Hispanic

Native American/Alaskan

Other: _____

Biracial/Multiracial (please specify): _____

9. What is your sexual orientation?

10. What is your partner's sexual orientation?

11. Do you identify with a religious or spiritual practice? If so, please explain.

12. Does your partner identify with a religious or spiritual practice? If so, please explain.

13. How long have you and your partner been together in a romantic relationship?

_____ years _____ months

14. How do you define your current partnership? (i.e., dating, living together, etc.)

15. What is your current socioeconomic status? (i.e., lower, middle, upper, etc.)

16. What is your partner's current socioeconomic status? (i.e., lower, middle, upper, etc.)

17. What is your highest level of education to date?

18. What is your partner's highest level of education to date?

19. What is your current occupation?

20. What is your partner's current occupation?

APPENDIX F

Open Coding Transcription Example

A Study of Gay Men's Experiences of Society in their Couple Relationships
Wazul
Interview 1
07/05/2007

Interviewer: MB
Interviewee: Wazul

MB: Okay! It is July 5th, uh 2007 and approximately 2:15 PM and we are located in the office and I am speaking with Wazul. Uhm and he will be starting the first uhm meeting, so take it away!

Q3 What have been the reactions to your participation in a same-sex couple relationship from your family/friends/gay community/work environment/etc.?

Wazul: Okay, I want to start with question three. (MB: Okay!) Uhm...well, with my family they were not accepting. My father's kind of uh, you can say he's a borderline white supremacist so he's, he's really uh, he really reverends Hitler, so he shares a lot of the same ideologies and so...uhm, but, so that uh...that split us up for about a year and a half but we recently started...

MB: Okay, that split you and your dad up.

Wazul: Yeah, and then the rest of my family wasn't thrilled about it either, but...my siblings, two of my siblings are pretty accepting about it and uh...uhm...

MB: Were they uhm older, younger?

Wazul: One younger sister and an older brother.

MB: Okay. Do you have a big family?

Wazul: I have two brothers and two sisters.

MB: Okay. A pretty big family, yeah. Are you in the middle?

Wazul: Yeah. (MB: Yeah.) Well, I'm fourth born..So I'm towards the end.

MB: Okay. Okay. Towards the end, okay.

Wazul: Uhm, let's see...friends, because I went to a Christian school, most of my friends were Christians. And by the time I came out I only had a couple of friends from high school, so...they were, they weren't thrilled, but they accept it. After trying to convert me...uh, let's see...friends, uhm gay community of course has been pretty accepting in my eyes. (MB: Okay.) Work environment, uhm my recent work environment has been very, I don't know if it's very

Non-Support
- inhibit
- contest
family of
pride -
tallest
siblings

gay - direct
inhibitorial
for
2 siblings

non-support
in with
and not
in the
family

support
gay friendly
society -> gay community

support/gay-friendly
institutional/provident
care

accepting, but uh it's not an issue, it's not something that comes up. (MB: Okay.) It's not a thing where I feel threatened or anything.

MB: Okay. Do you know if, I mean does your partner attend anything with you? Through your work setting, or?

Wazul: We went to a Christmas dinner, and... (MB: Okay.) yeah, but Arc of Anchorage in home health care is pretty, pretty gay-friendly, so...

MB: Okay. Do you know if they have uh like benefits?

Wazul: No, they don't.

MB: Okay. So it's not that level of acceptance.

Wazul: No. I work for Providence now as well, and they do. (MB: Oh okay, okay.) They have uh, they have one dependant adult or co-dependant too. (MB: Okay.) So it can be anybody.

MB: Any other situations with uh your partnership where you experienced acceptance, lack of acceptance?

support that
solidifies the
church
MCA

Wazul: Uh, well of course church. (MB: Okay.) I'd say it's hard because the church I am currently going to isn't so much a conservative church in that it doesn't speak out against it as much as most, but it still, you know it's not somewhere I could just bring my partner and feel comfortable. Uhm... but then on the other hand I'm also a member of the Metropolitan Community Church which is very accepting, of course because it's a GLBT, a hate church. (MB: Mhmmmmmm.) And uhm, the, one of the members who I live with, she's the one who took me in after I came out to my family. (MB: Oh wow.) So I've been with her for a year and a half.

MB: Okay. So I guess the community really was pretty accepting when this happened.

Wazul: Yeah.

support
institutional
provident
care

MB: Okay. (Wazul: Yeah.) Does your partner see your family with you at all or is he excluded from things?

Wazul: Yeah he's my, well with my sister and my brother, we hang out all the time, it's no big deal. (MB: Okay.) But as far as my parents, (?) - non-support-anti-gay marginalization (dominant) institutional (cf. q. 20.)

MB: Okay. What about his family?

support
institutional
provident
care

Wazul: Yeah, uhm no I'm not really excluded. I go over to his dad's house every now and again with him.

MB: Okay, so it's kind of a difference.

APPENDIX G

Focused Coding Transcription Example

Coding Key:

Contexts

Individual – yellow highlight

Institutional – bright green writing

Social/cultural – - white writing with yellow highlight

Support

Social Support – Dark Purple writing

Types of Non-Support

Homophobia – Green highlight

Heterosexism – Aqua highlight

- Heterosexism – Stereotypes – Pink highlight

Anti-gay Behaviors – Sea Blue Highlighting

-Discrimination

Negative Effect on couples

Lack of role models – Red highlight

No couple form – Purple highlight

No couple sustainability – Pea green highlighting

Marginalization – Brownish highlighting

Positive Effect on couples

Better communication – Red lettering

Best Friend – Blue highlighting

Shared Freedom and autonomy – Light gray highlighting

Demographics of Individuals in relationship

Dissimilar – Dark gray highlighting

Similar – White with gray highlighting

Individual Identity Development – white writing with red highlight

Demographics of Couples

Length of time – Pea green writing

Coping

Problem-Solving – Light Purple writing

Social Support – Dark Purple writing

Out when safe – Bright Yellow Writing

Ideal

Equity and equality (legal recognition) – dark green highlighting

Awareness and recognition – dark brown writing

Realize discriminated and oppose – Blue writing

Therapy

Rate and type of therapy – Light pink writing

Presenting Problems – Bold Black writing

Not helpful – Aqua writing

Helpful – Sea Green writing

Chad – Salience in Coding:Demographics of Couples

How met

Demographics of Individual

Identity development

Demographics of Individuals in relationship

Similar (work)

Contexts of Non-support

Individual

Institutional

Social/Cultural

Types of Non-Support

Antigay Behaviors

Heterosexism

(Stereotypes)

Coping

Out when safe

Support and Coping

Social Support

Contexts of Support

Individual

Institutional

Social/Cultural (gay community)

Positive Effect on couples

Shared Freedom and autonomy

Ideal

Equity and equality (legal recognition)

A Study of Gay Men's Experiences of Society in their Couple Relationships
 Chad
 02/27/2007

Interviewer: MB

Interviewee: Chad

MB: Okay, uhm it is February 27th at approximately and I am speaking with Chad and the first question is just how did you and your partner meet?

Chad: I meet my partner, hello? Hello?

MB: (Laughs) That will be hard to transcribe.

Chad: Uh I was working in a hospital in Barrow and uh Karl was a consultant in Anchorage. So we met over the phone first. (MB: Hmmmmm.) Talking about really sick patients. And then we met in Anchorage when I was there as part of work.

MB: Alright, thank you. And now you can go in any order you would like and just kind of say I am attending to question one or whichever question you would like to answer.

Q11 If you were in an ideal society, how would you and your partner be treated? How do you or would you know that you were in this kind of society?

Chad: You know I read through all the questions and uh I don't like to think of bad things, I saw a couple what's the good, what's the bad and all. But things will come out, but you know I kind of like reading down and seeing number eleven. If you were in an ideal society, how would you and your partner be treated? How do you or would you know that you were in this kind of society? And I...in an ideal society uh me, I am my partner would be treated the same as anyone else. And uhm for the most part I feel that that's how we are treated, and I would know that I was in that society because there wouldn't be, uhm uncomfortable episodes I guess you could say. And it almost seems like uh that type of uh society would be the same for people despite their differences; it's not just gay, straight, it's just...but uh it made me feel good because I think that to a large extent uh we are treated the same, so...

MB: Okay. And it's nice I think that certainly there's been a lot of progress in some peoples' lifetimes towards that kind of ideal society (Chad: Mhmmmm.) I think. So I really do think it's nice.

Chad: Uhm part of how we've interacted in uh...been out (MB: Hmmmmm.) to friends and co-workers has to do with the fact that we both work for the government. (MB: Mhmmmm.) And there was lots of talk through the years about uh sexual orientation and what was acceptable and what wasn't and uh, **uh you kind of got the idea that you need to be cautious about saying you were you gay. And so we didn't really say anything and just lived together and worked together and it wasn't an issue. And I think that uh, I personally believe that uhm people don't know this is an issue for folks,** (MB: Mhmmmm.)

and it still is an issue in our society. If people don't know, they don't really know (MB: Hmmmmm.) your sexual orientation until you tell them, even though they can see that you have a relationship and they see you together with this person. They really don't know for sure until you tell them. And my experience has been that uh some people are surprised when I finally have talked to them about it, uh others, one said I know, another one said I thought so, I wasn't sure (MB: Mhmmmm.) uhm and uh some have no idea, some kind of maybe cross their mind but basically it didn't matter because my main uh focus these past thirty years has been work, and I really worked hard and uh I feel like I did a good job and if uh, inside my feeling is that uh, my feelings are normal, for me and uh so this is not an issue and yet it was a sexual part in me and it was something that I didn't identify with. I worked, I was focused on work and working hard (MB: Mhmmmmmm.) and doing a good job and supporting the people I worked with and it never came up basically.

Q5How do you and your partner manage these experiences in society and the Alaskan community? What do you find helpful? What is unhelpful?

MB: Okay, okay. So is that kind of one way that you guys uhm, or that you...you know kind of just coped in society, or just not having to be a part of work experience, or?

Chad: The only coping part would be that I was a little afraid and I think through, like I personally wasn't (?) I worked for the government or not but uhm my partner (?) (MB: Yeah.) and uhm there are, there are these wrong perceptions that gay men would prey on kids. And uh so the idea is that, my feeling on it was that he could be fired or we could be fired by saying that we're gay. (MB: Mhmmmmmm.) And so I just never brought it up, that helped me to decide not to bring it up. But I appeared in public and stuff, you know came to functions and it just wasn't an issue, it was like this is who I brought. (MB: Mhmmmmmm.) And it wasn't, I didn't introduce him as my partner to my friends, (MB: Mhmmmmmm.) so...did I get off the subject?

MB: No! No, no, absolutely not.

Chad: But I guess what I'm saying is I didn't, I didn't feel like I was hiding it, it was, I was acting normal and uh...uhm probably the only people I felt a little weird about and I finally need to talk to were people I knew were gay. (MB: Hmmmmmmm.) Because they didn't even know. (MB: Wow.) And I was in a show one summer for like fourteen weeks and this guy still didn't know by the end of it, and I think we was pretty savvy. (MB: Wow.) Yeah so uh... like I said people really don't know about (?), and it didn't matter to him either I guess. Except that it's nice to have some support in the gay community, and I have

APPENDIX H

Peer Reviewer Notation

Hello,

First, thank you again for agreeing to serve as a peer reviewer. The packet of materials was sent via mail, yesterday, October 1, 2007. You will receive two packets - one of the researcher journal and another of the transcripts with memos in the margins. The most recent themes based on memos and the developed categories and sub-categories are located in the researcher journal under the section themes please. You will also find the current demographic breakdown under the section demographic results. Both of these entries are in the beginning - in other words - recent in time.

As a peer reviewer you have been selected for a number of reasons—you know the topic at hand, you have had experience with the topic, and you know me. In your role as peer reviewer, I will be interested in hearing your feedback, comments and suggestions, specifically in regards to exploring the external consistency, reliability and validity of the research. The process of member checking has been helpful thus far in confirming for me the themes from the participant as co-researcher point of view. This helps with the internal consistency, reliability and validity of the research. As you examine the identified themes within the categories and sub-categories, as well as the researcher journaling, the main goal to have in mind is ensuring that the themes presented are “accurate.” Checking for accuracy in the themes is essential to helping counter any biases that may be present, which should be identifiable when you reflect on the transcriptions and journaling provided.

The researcher journaling consists of several different kinds of information. Here is some of the information: informed consent document, interview questions, demographic questionnaire, current themes and demographics, personal and professional journaling and reflexivity, revision of themes over time, sources of national and Alaska-based GLBT news and information, feedback after every meeting with a participant (initial meeting, first meeting and in some instances a second meeting), feedback on different media and historical portrayals of sexual minorities, dialogues with major professor, and several presentations that have been given on the study and feedback from these presentations.

In terms of a timeline, it would be most ideal to have your feedback on or before October 19, 2007, which should be about two weeks after your reception of the materials. Please, contact me if you have any questions or requests for further materials or to discuss the timeline for feedback. Thank you in advance for your participation, time and efforts.

With Respect,

Markie Blumer

APPENDIX I

Researcher Journal Excerpts

I have selected two entries from my researcher journal. The journal is much too cumbersome for total inclusion. There are a total of 245 pages and counting. The entries I selected include the very first entry in journal and the last entry I made regarding a second meeting with a participant.

Date: March 2, 2006 - Thursday

Title of Entry: Dissertation reflexivity

Now that prelim exams are over. I need to focus on the dissertation. I am doing a qualitative study on gay male couple relationships. Part of the qualitative research process is the reflexivity or researcher bias and lens of the researcher himself or herself. In relation to this I journaled for a while and will now begin to do so again.

When I originally comprised my dissertation topic and study I believed I would look at same sex couples communication. Mainly exploring conflict, conflict resolution, and communication. I also believed that I would look at the role that media has on such communication. In the last year or so I have be committed to research involved same sex relationships and professionals working with them. I see the civil rights movement for gay, lesbian, bisexual queer and transgendered persons as the last major civil rights movement in this country. It is absolutely imperative that all people have rights!! All rights for all persons! This comes from a professional, political and personal point of view. I have had so many rainbow community friends and some family - I want them to free to do whatever the heck they want. I also see myself as a member of the rainbow community as an ally and also as a woman who has dated other women. One thing that has recently troubled me personally is that I am engaged to a man and as such I can get legally married in the United States. While this is wonderful and I am excited. I am bothered because if my partner were a woman this is not something I would be able to do here (except in Boston). I ask myself do I get married and practice my heterosexist privileged position. If so, do I get married somewhere where all people could marry? Do I not get married until all people can do so? How do I talk about this with my co-participants? These are all questions I struggle with and discuss and need to answer as I go.

As the dissertation proposal has gotten closer I came to the conclusion that I needed to rearrange my committee members - there are five faculty members - 3 within my department and 2 outside. I originally chose members only based on content area and acceptance of the glbt community. This was fine criteria but when I changed methodology to the more controversial and less practiced qualitative paradigm it became necessary to change members. I now have an excellent committee - strong in both qualitative research and knowledge of gay issues and relationships.

My major professor also asked me to narrow my scope from same sex couples to either gay or lesbian couples. I chose gay male couples. This was a difficult decision for me. I chose gay male couples. This decision was made for a number of reasons. Personally I have known more gay males than lesbian females over my lifetime. I have more literature on gay male couples than lesbian couples. And the social stigmatization while great for both couple figurations seem to be a little more negative for gay male countries in the country. I discussed my reasoning and decision with many people for feedback and to process. It was so difficult but I think I made a good choice.

Anyway, having made a choice in population, I feel more confident about my research. I have a ton of literature to review, and introduction to write and the methodology to construct for my proposal before the end of May. But at least I have narrowed eh? Around the same time I was fortunate enough to get to see the movie *Brokeback Mountain*, discuss it and read about it in the latest advocate magazine. I was impressed by the movie. I was more impressed that my straight male partner took me to it for Valentine's Day and was awesome to watch it with. He is great! We talked about masculinity and sexuality and male closeness and friendship. It is really a movie about male friendship and closeness and how men have these interactions plus can be affectionate and sexual towards each other if they want/feel/need/so desire. We both agreed it was great to see a movie about male closeness and friendship. The movie and the gay relationships I have seen and experienced have me wondering much for my research.

In a recent meeting with a new committee member I was asked what my research question was and here it is? What is the role that a multitude of variables play in gay male partnerships particularly on communication between the dyad? These variables include but are not limited to power, gender, socialization, family of origin, politics, media, age, religion, culture, region, etc. I will be asking about such variables of individual gay males who are currently in a partnership/s. I will be conducting the interviews in Alaska starting this summer. Because it will be in Alaska I think I will learn even more since there has been little to no research on the rainbow community in Alaska. The next question was what is my motivation for the research? Why do this? At first I was almost offended by this question because my gay friends who know me - just know why, but then I realized I must seem like a straight female fag hag or something? My motivation is simple - I want to learn more about gay male couples as a therapist so that I can more effectively assist them with their dyadic communication and relational issues - there is little information out there on this but it is needed. Gay male couples have lots of problems but oftentimes are uncomfortable (with good reason) presenting to therapy to work on issues - we as a field need to know more to help make them more comfortable and to be more effective. Also the field of MFT has failed to take a position on same sex couples including marriage even though in our nationally based study we found that the majority of MFTs are comfortable and supportive of such partnerships and even though the APA has already taken a position of acceptance. Our field is behind and we need to catch up. On a personal level I am committed to be supportive to my friends and family of the rainbow community and I want to do all I can to help with the civil rights movement - I see my research as a way to do this. Most of all I want to give the minority voice of gay males a chance to be HEARD! These are my reasons!

Date: December 4, 2007 – Tuesday

Title of Entry: Second Meeting with Participant 8

I had my member check or follow-up meeting today with Participant 8 or Rick. It took place on campus in my office. We discussed the transcript of his first meeting in terms of accuracy and content. He shared that it was accurate in terms of content and that he saw just a few minor elocution errors, so I told him I would correct the errors he pointed out and give him a copy of the revised transcript.

This was also my last meeting (in person) with a participant for the 2nd interview. For participant 5, for example, he had his last interview already because he died at the end of October, so he has given his final comments and feedback in the study.

Back to Rick. We reviewed the themes and categories and Rick provided confirmation to what I had developed. One thing that stands out in reflection of this interview is that Rick noted that it was nice to see that others in the Alaskan gay community had experienced similar things - it seemingly made him feel connected. Overall, he confirmed the analysis and he seemed to feel good about the themes of the study.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Markie Louise Christianson Blumer was born on February 10, 1975 in Anchorage, Alaska. She attained her Bachelor of Science in Psychology, with a minor in Criminal Justice, in 1996, as well as a Master of Education degree in 1998 from Northern Arizona University. In 2002 she received the Master of Arts in Marriage and Family Therapy, with an emphasis in Sex Therapy from the University of Louisiana at Monroe. In completing her Doctor of Philosophy in Human Development and Family Studies, with specialization in Marriage and Family Therapy, at Iowa State University she has been a two-time recipient of the Alice M. Ford Scholarship, received the Outstanding Graduate Student of the Year Award from the Iowa Association for Marriage and Family Therapy, been named the Student/New Professionals Award winner, as well as the co-recipient for the Marriage and Family Therapy Section Outstanding Student Research Award by the National Council on Family Relations, and most recently was the receipt of both a Teaching Excellence Award, and a Research Excellence Award from Iowa State University. Since 2006, Markie has served as an Editorial Board Member for the *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy* and as a Visiting Professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Alaska at Anchorage. Additionally, she has been a Certified Substance Abuse Counselor and is currently a Licensed Marital and Family Therapist. Markie is also the proud partner and wife of Timothy Michael Christianson Blumer and mother of infant son, Leif Brenmark Christianson Blumer.