

## **Intact Marriages in Which One Partner Dis-Identifies with Experiences of Same-Sex Attraction: A Follow-Up Study**

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*This study is a one-year follow-up study of heterosexually married couples in which one partner reports having experienced same-sex attraction and both partners report satisfaction with their marriage despite facing such constraints. Questionnaires were sent to 32 individuals who had participated in the initial study. Of these, 30 returned completed questionnaires. The questionnaires contained open-ended questions about the participants' experiences, motivations, coping behaviors, and so on. Analysis suggested a number of themes related to vulnerability to extramarital relationships, coping activities, and satisfaction with marriage. Suggestions for clinical practice include exploring sexual identity issues, maintaining communication, and monitoring emotional connection in the marital dyad.*

In an earlier study of heterosexual marriages in which one partner experienced same-sex feelings but dis-identified with a lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) identity (Yarhouse, Pawlowski, & Tan, 2003), it was suggested that marriage and family therapists (MFTs) keep open the idea that marriages may be resilient to one partner's experience of same-sex attraction. Although some marriages may end if one spouse identifies as LGB and pursues same-sex relationships (Hill, 1987), other marriages may survive with both partners expressing a desire to remain in their marriage for a variety of reasons (Klein & Schwartz, 2001).

In an initial effort to explore this largely unstudied population, Yarhouse et al. (2003) gathered information of the perceptions and experiences of

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couples in which one partner contends with same-sex attraction. The present study is a one-year follow-up of these couples.

## METHOD

### Participants

Participants in this study were 15 heterosexually married couples in which one partner reported having experienced same-sex attraction and both partners were satisfied with their marriage. The couples were from a sample that had participated in a previous study (Yarhouse et al., 2003) and agreed to complete a second questionnaire one year later. The original sample had been contacted through purposeful sampling in which the researchers identified gatekeepers who made the study available to potential participants. At the time of the original study, none of the participants were involved in professional marital therapy. Sixteen couples participated in the original study, and one couple moved from the area and was unreachable at follow-up.

Participants were persons who experienced same-sex attraction (“strugglers”<sup>1</sup>) and spouses of strugglers. Each of the strugglers and their spouses identified themselves as White. Ten of the 15 strugglers were male, and 5 were female. Based on items from the original questionnaire, the mean age of the strugglers is 41 years, with a range of 33 to 50 ( $SD = 5.42$ ). The mean age of spouses of strugglers is 41.5 years, with a range of 30 to 50 ( $SD = 5.63$ ). The mean length of marriage is 14.4 years, with a range of 7 to 28 ( $SD = 6.40$ ).

Thirteen of the 15 strugglers and 12 of the 15 spouses identified Protestant Christianity as their religious affiliation. Two strugglers and spouses identified their religious affiliation as Latter Day Saints (LDS). Seven of the strugglers reported attending religious services nearly every week, while 8 reported attending services more than once a week. Spouses reported similar religious attendance.

### Data Analysis

Due to the relative under-representation of studies about this population, primarily qualitative methodology was employed. Qualitative methodology is deemed appropriate for analyzing relatively unexplored research questions (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984), and in this follow-up study, qualitative methodology allowed participants to share details about their present marriage, past

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<sup>1</sup> As with the original study, we continued to use the word “struggler” because it seemed to capture the subjective experience of the sample, that is, they felt they *contended* with same-sex attraction, that it was not something they wanted in light of the fact that they were heterosexually married. This in no way is meant to imply that all persons who experience same-sex attraction are “strugglers”; many are quite content with their same-sex attractions and have integrated them into an LGB identity.

and current experiences of attraction, past and current coping activities, and so on.

Most of the response options for this follow-up study were derived from content analysis of items from the original study. Those items were analyzed consistent with the data analytic process discussed by Miles and Huberman (1994), wherein the researchers read over the data independently, organizing it into themes and subthemes, and then discussed the various concepts. This resulted in several broad themes for answers to each item. If needed, each researcher re-reviewed the data independently and convened again until consensus was reached on all items.

## RESULTS

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

Strugglers were asked to rate their subjective experience of homosexual and heterosexual orientation and attraction prior to marriage and currently. On a 1–10 scale in which 1 represents no homosexual orientation or attraction and 10 represents strong homosexual orientation or attraction. Regarding homosexual orientation, the mean rating was 4.80 ( $SD = 2.83$ ) prior to marriage and 1.86 ( $SD = .66$ ) currently. The mean rating of homosexual orientation at the time of the original study was 1.56 ( $SD = .63$ ). Concerning homosexual attraction, the mean was 6.43 ( $SD = 2.50$ ) prior to marriage and 3.07 ( $SD = 1.77$ ) currently. The mean rating of homosexual attraction at the time of the original study was 2.50 ( $SD = 1.10$ ).

On the 1–10 scale the mean rating for heterosexual orientation was 6.40 ( $SD = 2.58$ ) prior to marriage and 8.79 ( $SD = 1.05$ ) currently. The mean rating of heterosexual orientation at the time of the original study was 9.13 ( $SD = .96$ ). Regarding heterosexual attraction the mean rating was 4.79 ( $SD = 2.25$ ) prior to marriage and 8.00 ( $SD = 1.35$ ) currently. The mean rating of heterosexual attraction at the time of the original study was 7.88 ( $SD = 1.63$ ) (see Table 1).<sup>2</sup>

### Motivations for Keeping Marriage Intact

Respondents were also asked to select from a list of eight responses derived from content analysis from the original study. The most frequently occurring motivations reported by strugglers were *love for spouse* ( $n = 12$ ), *commitment to spouse* ( $n = 12$ ), *commitment to children* ( $n = 10$ ), *affection* ( $n = 9$ ),

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<sup>2</sup> We did not include self-report ratings of homosexual and heterosexual orientation prior to marriage in the repeated measures ANOVA because this rating was based on recall memory, which has been criticized as a less reliable source of information.

**TABLE 1** Strugglers' Self-Report of Orientation and Attraction

	Prior to marriage	Original study	One-year follow-up
Homosexual orientation	4.80	1.56	1.86
Homosexual attraction	6.43	2.50	3.07
Heterosexual orientation	6.40	9.13	8.79
Heterosexual attraction	4.79	8.00	7.88

The self-report ratings of homosexual and heterosexual orientation and attraction from the original study to the one-year follow-up were not significant (Wilks' Lambda = .72;  $F(4,10) = 1.00$ ,  $p = .45$ ).

and *obedience to God* ( $n = 9$ ). The most frequently occurring responses for spouses were *love for spouse* ( $n = 14$ ), *commitment to spouse* ( $n = 13$ ), *obedience to God* ( $n = 12$ ), and *covenant* ( $n = 10$ ).

### Best Things about Marriage

Strugglers and their spouses were also asked to select from a list of 12 responses the things that they found best about their marriages. The most frequently occurring responses for strugglers were *shared values* ( $n = 12$ ), *friendship* ( $n = 11$ ), *mutual religious faith* ( $n = 11$ ), and *love* ( $n = 10$ ). *Shared values* ( $n = 14$ ), *mutual religious faith* ( $n = 13$ ), and *love* ( $n = 13$ ) were also important to spouses along with *affection* ( $n = 12$ ).

### Most Difficult Things about Marriage

In response to what the most difficult things about marriage are, *lack of time* was the most frequent response for strugglers ( $n = 8$ ) and their spouses ( $n = 11$ ). Both also found *communication*, ( $n = 8$ ) and ( $n = 7$ ) respectively, to be a difficult part of marriage. Spouses of strugglers also found *parenting* ( $n = 8$ ) to be a difficult aspect of marriage.

### Sexual Behavior in Marriage

Respondents reported on the frequency of sex in the past month and rated how enjoyable their sexual relationship is currently. Strugglers reported their frequency of sex in the past month as an average of 3.60 ( $SD = 2.26$ , range 1–8) sexual encounters with their partner, and spouses reported similar results:  $M = 3.86$  ( $SD = 3.23$ , range 0–11).

Respondents rated their current level of sexual enjoyment on a 5-point Likert-like scale: *terrible*, *more unpleasant than pleasant*, *not pleasant/not unpleasant*, *more pleasant than unpleasant*, and *great*. Nine strugglers responded that it was *more pleasant than unpleasant* and 6 responded that it was *great*. Similarly, one spouse reported level of enjoyment as *not pleasant*,

not unpleasant, 8 reported *more pleasant than unpleasant*, and 6 reported that it was *great*.

Respondents were also asked to explain their rating of their level of sexual enjoyment. Strugglers focused on the things that *complicated the sexual relationship*, such as *health issues*. For example, one struggler stated, "Now that I'm attracted to girls it makes it hard that my wife is so overweight." Another struggler stated: "Complicated by health problems, her being overweight, lack of time and privacy [with children]." *Desire discrepancy* was also a concern for a struggler: "Sex is good, but my partner desires more frequency and it causes problems." Another struggler wrote: "More frequency would make our sexual relationship stronger. Lack of frequency is primarily due to energy levels being stretched by parenting, a demanding ministry life, and physical illness." One female struggler pointed to the difference in enjoyment of sex with his spouse versus a same-sex partner: "I still want to be able to enjoy sex with my spouse as much as I enjoyed being with a woman."

Spouses responses were similar to the strugglers responses in that they focused on the things that complicated the sexual relationship, such as *health issues*. For example, one spouse wrote, "My spouse does not feel attracted to me because I am overweight. He says intimacy is hard for him for this reason." *Desire discrepancy* was also noted: "I have a very low sex drive and my husband has a very high sex drive. It's been hard meeting in between."

## Affairs

In the previous questionnaire 62.5% of the strugglers admitted to having extramarital sexual relationships at some point in their marriages. The reported rate was much higher than national averages, where no more than 25% of those interviewed reported having had either extramarital or extracohabitation relationships. According to Lauman et al. (1994), "over 90% of the married women and over 75% of the married men" reported fidelity over the lifetime of their marriage (p. 214). With this follow-up questionnaire, more questions regarding these affairs were asked. Eight of the strugglers acknowledged having affairs during their marriages. All of the affairs were reported by strugglers to be with people of the same sex. The number of affairs that strugglers reported were 1 (n = 4), 2 (n = 1), 3 (n = 2), and 100 (n = 1). Spouses' responses were similar. Strugglers were also asked how long they were married when they began to have an affair. Responses ranged from 1 month to 16 years, though the vast majority of affairs (87.5%) occurred within the first 5 years of marriage.

## Happiness before Affair

Strugglers and their spouses were asked to respond to a rating scale that ranged from *extremely unhappy* to *perfect*, regarding the degree of happiness

in their relationship in the weeks prior to the affair. Following were struggler responses, *extremely unhappy* (n = 1), *fairly unhappy* (n = 1), *a little unhappy* (n = 4), and *happy* (n = 1), and *extremely happy* (n = 1). Spouses responses were similar, *fairly unhappy* (n = 2), *a little unhappy* (n = 3), and *happy* (n = 2).

Respondents were also asked to comment on what contributed to the ratings provided. Strugglers typically acknowledged *difficulties in marriage* (e.g., “Infant child and finances” and “Communication problems in a new marriage”) They also noted *emotional vulnerability* (e.g., “I felt my husband lacked empathy and I turned to women to meet my emotional needs. I also carried a lot of pain inside but did not understand it at the time, so I took it out on him.” and “My woundedness and brokenness.”). Spouses responses similarly echoed *difficulties in marriage* (“I was freaked out about being married—I felt very vulnerable” and “Financial and parenting stressors. Both working, spouse distant and depressed and angry.”)

### Relationship Prior to Affair

When asked to select from eight terms to describe their marital relationship in the weeks or months prior to the affair, strugglers reported *poor communication* (n = 5), being *in conflict* (n = 3) and *frequent arguing* (n = 3) as descriptors. Similarly, spouses reported *poor communication* (n = 5), *lack of intimacy* (n = 4), and being *in conflict* (n = 3) as descriptors of their marital relationship in the weeks or months prior to the affair.

### Struggles with Same-Sex Attraction

Strugglers were asked to describe their struggles with same-sex attraction in the weeks or months prior to the affair. Several common themes emerged, including *addictive patterns of behavior*. For example, one struggler wrote, “Fell into pornography and phone sex,” while another noted an “Increased desire related to sexual addiction and need for relief.” Still another noted “Highly addictive and compulsive” sexual behavior. A second theme reflected an *internal struggle*. For example, one male struggler wrote: “I was very anxious prior to the marriage and wondered if I would be able to be a husband. I had only experienced homosexual contact and had not been to counseling.” Similarly, a female struggler wrote: “It’s not so much that the marriage was so bad . . . My problems were internal. A woman co-worker was empathetic and nurturing and the hole in my heart cried out. I felt confused and out of control.”

### Coping

Strugglers were also asked to describe how they coped with their experiences of same-sex attraction in the weeks or months prior to the affair. Their

responses were typically suggestive of “*acting out*” behaviors (e.g., “alternating between fantasy/pornography, and suppression”; “I fantasized about her more—even during sex with my husband”; and “A lot of fantasy not confessed led to acting out.”).

Spouses were also asked to describe how they coped with their struggles same-sex attraction. Their responses suggested *lack of awareness of problems* (e.g., “We weren’t communicating how we felt so I didn’t really know what was going on” and “I was unaware of what would happen until after it happened”) and *internalization* (e.g., “Assuming his unhappiness was due to some failure of mine, I would try to do better as a wife, woman to not ‘rock the boat’ . . . and “I lived in denial as much as possible”).

### Sex Outside of Marriage in Past Year or Currently

Respondents were asked if they currently are or in the past year had engaged in sex outside of marriage. Two strugglers reported engaging in sex outside of marriage in the past year. One of the strugglers reported currently engaging in sex outside of marriage noting being “tired of the ‘battle against temptation’” as his explanation. To another item asking about the future of his marriage, he reported feeling “positive” about their future because, “I’ll quit sinning and repent . . . eventually.” The other struggler described how she became involved in a current extramarital relationship:

A friend who became consumed with me. I told [my husband] . . . of my attractions as soon as they started, and [I told] others for accountability. I tried to totally break from her—but she kept coming after me. This is when I failed. I should [have] told [my husband] to handle her for me, because I was too weak to say ‘no’ to her even though I wanted to. In my past (before my healing) I didn’t want to say ‘no.’”

None of the spouses reported currently engaging in sex outside of marriage or having engaged in sex outside of marriage in the past year.

### Religious Coping Activities

Respondents were asked to respond to the helpfulness of specific religious coping activities on a 5-point Likert-like scale (*not at all helpful* to *very helpful*). According to strugglers *worship* (n = 9), *prayer* (n = 8), and *groups* (n = 8), were *very helpful*. Similarly, for spouses *prayer* (n = 10), *worship* (n = 8), and *devotions* (n = 6) were *very helpful*.

### Current Degree of Happiness in Relationship

Participants reported on the degree of happiness they currently experience in their relationships by responding to a single item from the Dyadic Adjustment Scale. The rating scale ranged from *extremely unhappy* to *perfect*. The

following were the strugglers responses: *a little unhappy* (n = 1), *happy* (n = 2), *very happy* (n = 7), and *extremely happy* (n = 5) ( $M = 4.07$ ,  $SD = .88$ ). When asked to elaborate on their rating, one struggler wrote,

While my partner does not always understand the issues, there is constant love and support. He is a gift from God. I am also far more comfortable with myself . . . which has taken a lot of stress off of our relationship.

Spouses rated the same item from the Dyadic Adjustment Scale and reported feeling *fairly happy* (n = 1), *happy* (n = 4), *very happy* (n = 6), and *extremely happy* (n = 4) ( $M = 3.71$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ). One spouse wrote: "I am extremely happy with my marriage. I love my husband. Our marriage is far from perfect, but I am always willing to work hard to keep it working."

### Support for Marriage

Spouses of strugglers were asked to report on the degree to which family/friends support them as a couple. They responded on a 7-point Likert-like scale ranging from *extremely high* support to *extremely low* support. Responses suggested that spouses felt high support, 6 spouses reported *extremely high* support, 3 reported *very high* support, and 3 reported *high* support.

Expanded comments suggest, however, that spouse's support systems extend beyond immediate family/friends. The church also seems to be an important resource for spouses. One spouse shared that "Without our church family our marriage might have failed." Similarly another spouse shared, "My family does not live close by, but have frequent phone calls. We are strongly committed to several people, especially people within our church small group."

### The Future of Your Marriage

Respondents were asked to rate on a 5-point Likert-like scale their feelings about the future of their marriages in light of their same-sex attractions. The scale ranged from *extremely negative*, *negative*, *neither negative nor positive*, *positive*, to *extremely positive*. Six of the strugglers reported feeling *positive* and 9 of the strugglers reported feeling *extremely positive*. Similarly, 5 of the spouses reported feeling *positive*, and 10 reported feeling *extremely positive*.

Respondents were also asked to explain the ratings of the future of their marriages. The optimism that exists for these couples seems to be rooted in their overcoming same-sex attraction and in their relationship with God. One struggler wrote:

We are both more dependent upon God and less dependent on ourselves and each other. We communicate better and are working on it. I think

we have weathered very hard things—my struggle and sex abuse. God brought us through. Our marriage is stronger and I am happier now than I have ever been. I see things in our marriage only getting better.

From a spouse: “God continues to draw us deeper into our relationship. We continue to grow as individuals and as a couple.”

## DISCUSSION

This follow-up study shares the limitations of the original study, that is, by relying on purposeful sampling the results cannot be generalized to all persons who experience same-sex attraction and are heterosexually married. Also, as we stated regarding the original sample, we initially sought reasonably stable marriages to further our understanding of these “resilient” couples, and many of these couples were highly religious by self-report.

Despite these limitations we believe the results may further our understanding of the experiences of those who struggle with same-sex feelings in the context of their marriage. This study was conducted in part to aid our understanding of the high rate of infidelity reported by the original sample. Several questions were asked to clarify what led to extramarital relationships.

The literature suggests that women tend to have affairs due to unmet emotional/relational needs, while men tend to make “sexual justifications” (Glass, 2002, p. 490), such as not having as much sex with their wives as they desire. Along these lines, women tend to be more likely than men to have an emotional connection or to be in love with their extramarital partners. Men tend to be more concerned that their wives might have sex with another partner, whereas women tend to be more concerned about their husband’s emotional involvements with others.

Extramarital relationships have been related to depression among those involved in the affair (Beach, Jouriles, & O’Leary, 1985); however, in a study of a non-clinical sample, 56% of men and 34% of women who had extramarital relationships reported that their marriages were happy (Glass & Wright, 1985). In another study, self-report ratings of *pretty happy* and *not too happy* were 2 and 4 times more likely to report extramarital relationships than those who reported being *very happy* with their relationship (Atkins, Baucom, & Jacobson, 2001). Infidelity within the first year of marriage has been related to low conscientiousness, impulsivity, and narcissism (Glass, 2002). Interestingly, promiscuous patterns of extramarital relationships can reflect addiction or entitlement, which is itself “a compulsive drive toward excitement that temporarily relieves feelings of emptiness or anxiety” (Glass, 2002, p. 490).

Our study found that some strugglers—in describing their same-sex attraction in the weeks or months prior to the affair—reported addictive patterns of behavior. These included use of pornography and phone sex. One

struggler commented on his “Increased desire related to sexual addiction and need for relief.”

All of the strugglers who indicated having an affair reported having had affairs with people of the same sex. The affairs most often occurred within the first 5 years of marriage, and this might be understood in the context of how marriages are often viewed as more vulnerable to affairs early on. In fact, people may question whether they have made the right decision in marrying their partner, and they may find themselves more open to an extramarital relationship if they are going through a difficult time in their marriage. For those who have same-sex feelings and questions related to public (to others) and private (to oneself) identification (as straight), these questions about whether they are with the right person would be compounded by questions about whether they “really are” LGB. This question, along with the external stressors of marriage, may weigh heavily on those in the sample and may have contributed to extramarital relationships. A related concern is whether a person feels he or she can function (emotionally) as a spouse in a heterosexual marriage. We refer to this in our study as *internal struggle* (e.g., the struggler who wrote: “I was very anxious prior to the marriage and wondered if I would be able to be a husband”).

However, even with this possible explanation for the timing and biological sex of the persons with whom they had an affair, it should be noted that two strugglers (2 of 15 or 13.3%) reported currently having an affair. In both cases the affair was with someone of the same sex. In these cases it does not appear to be a case of early marital vulnerability and questions about whether they made the right decision, but perhaps larger questions about their sexual identity and how to manage current attractions to members of the same sex.

It was noted that in a clinical sample over half of men and about one-third of women who had had extramarital relationships reported that their marriages were happy (Glass & Wright, 1985). We found that some couples reported happiness in their marriage in the weeks prior to the affair, with one struggler rating themselves as *happy* and another as *extremely happy*. Two spouses, too, reported feeling *happy*. Other strugglers and spouses reported unhappiness in the weeks prior to the affair, with most of the strugglers rating themselves as a *little unhappy* and two others as *fairly unhappy* and *extremely unhappy*. Five spouses rated themselves as unhappy (2 as *fairly unhappy* and 3 as a *little unhappy*).

Unhappiness prior to the affairs tended to be related to the kinds of difficulties most couples face, including financial difficulties, having children, and communication. What we refer to as *emotional vulnerability* is also seen in the literature on extramarital relationships, as women are more likely than men to have an affair for emotional reasons.

A final consideration has to do with coping with unwanted same-sex feelings and prevention of affairs. Recall that some of the strugglers in this study suppressed their feelings and got involved in same-sex fantasy and

pornography. Spouses reported poor communication and a general lack of awareness about what was going on for their partner in this area. This is an interesting challenge. On the one hand, the couple might benefit from better communication and greater transparency, but, as one spouse indicated, she did not want to be part of the ups and downs of those struggles: "That's between him, God and accountability partner. I don't ride that roller coaster with him." Perhaps for some individuals, social support and accountability may be best achieved through friendships and small groups. At the same time, communicating and monitoring the emotional connection in the marriage appears to be of great importance.

## CONCLUSION

This was a follow-up study of 15 heterosexually married couples in which one partner reports same-sex attraction and both partners report satisfaction with their marriage. The responses shed light on the circumstances that led up to extramarital relationships in a disproportionate percentage of marriages. Several themes related to participants' experiences, communication and emotional connection, and reasons for keeping the marriage intact may aid our understanding and prevention of extramarital relationships.

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