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# An Empirical Study of the Mother-Son Dyad in Relation to the Development of Adult Male Homosexuality

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Previous research suggests the need for further exploration of the parent-child relationship in the development of adult male homosexuality. Utilizing the Parent-Child Relations Questionnaire (PCR-II; Siegelman, 1979) 135 men (57 ego-syntonic homosexuals, 34 ego-dystonic homosexuals, and 44 heterosexuals) were surveyed. Results included significant group differences on the PCR-II Mother scales and on frequency of sexual abuse. Results are consistent with past studies which suggest an important role for environmental factors in the development of homosexuality, as consistent with theoretical literature from an object relations perspective.

## INTRODUCTION

In 1973, after a long period of political debate and professional conflict, homosexuality was deleted by the American Psychiatric Association from its official listing of psychiatric disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 1973). Since then, in spite of the fact that a significant portion of society claims a homosexual orientation, and a disturbing amount of professional and societal confusion continues about the subject, published empirical research regarding the impact of environmental factors on the development of homosexuality has decreased significantly. As Bieber and Bieber (1979) stated, "The openness and politicizing of homosexuality have helped many homosexuals overcome feelings of isolation and to some extent guilt, but it has also served to reinforce denials that personal problems exist" (p. 417).

Not all etiologic research has ceased, however. Since 1973, apparently spurred by intense political pressure, a quest to conclusively determine a genetic etiology for homosexuality, to the exclusion of potentially contributing environmental factors, has ensued. Rekers (1995) stated,

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Biological approaches are often either reductionistic models of causality or statistical inferences based on theories that are themselves naïve in their simplicity. There is a great deal of rich complex data about the development of homosexual orientations, yet the careless misapplication or misappropriation of such information for the sake of expediency does little to advance understanding. (p. 297)

Schore (1996) studied the impact of primary attachments and socio-emotional stressors on neurological development and subsequent behavior. His findings may be helpful in establishing a broader scope of investigation into a potential biological etiologic factor leading toward the development of adult homosexuality. Schore stated, "Less than optimal affect-regulating experiences with the primary caregiver are imprinted into the circuits of this frontolimbic system that is instrumental to attachment functions, thereby producing orbitofrontal organizations that neurobiologically express different patterns of insecure attachments" (p. 59). He continued, "Deficits in function must be associated with defects in dynamic structural systems, and a theory of the genesis of psychopathology needs to be tied into current developmental neurobiological models of the experience-dependent anatomical maturation of brain systems, especially systems involved in socioemotional functioning" (p. 59).

This broadened view of the impact of environmental factors on subsequent brain development, as suggested by Schore (1996), may help to understand the etiology of homosexuality and contribute toward a resolution of this ongoing nature-nurture debate. The issue of biology versus environment is important to the extent that the exclusion of either narrows the focus of exploratory research, thereby limiting the fullest possible understanding of the homosexual.

Without denying the possibility of replication of existing genetic or biological findings, and in keeping with the view that more research is needed regarding the etiology of homosexuality, the current study examined potential environmental activators in the development of male homosexuality with a specific focus on the mother-son relationship. In addition, this study explored the impact of environmental factors and current life experiences on the heterosexual and homosexual groups. While clinical experience considers the importance of these factors, they have heretofore not been empirically studied. These factors include history of sexual abuse, age at first sexual experi-

ence, primary childhood attachment, number of sexual partners, and depression.

The predominant model for studying environmental impact on the development of homosexuality has been mother-son and father-son relationships. To date, little work has been done on whole family dynamics, including the impact of siblings, on the development of adult male homosexuality. While the potential contributions of birth order, number of siblings, and parental age variables to homosexual development are important for consideration and deserving of further investigation, such studies, like much of previous research, are reductionistic. They attempt to define and explain too simply that which appears to be an intricate and complex process. This study does not deny or minimize the impact of whole family dynamics, but will focus primarily on parent-child issues in an attempt to further clarify issues raised by previous studies. Specifically, a theoretical understanding of the development of male homosexuality from an object relations perspective will be reviewed.

Object Relations Theory centers around the concept that the developing infant's sense of being (or self) is determined by the way the mother, or mother-substitute, responds to the child. Past research has suggested the evolution of homosexual orientation within an Object Relations Theory matrix (Bergler, 1956; Socarides, 1978). As development occurs, the child must first form a secure, close attachment to mother, while discovering a self separate from mother; he must also identify with a male role model in order to internalize a secure male identity (Lynn, 1962). When the mother significantly impinges (by acts of either commission or omission) on the process of attachment and/or subsequent detachment, the boy's sense of masculine self will be adversely affected (Atkins, 1982; Greenberg & Mitchell, 1983; O'Connor, 1964).

Psychoanalytic literature asserts the importance of the male child's replacement of the primary object of his identification—his mother—with identification towards his father (Abelin, 1975; Chodorow, 1988; Dumas, 1997; Mahler, 1975). Greenson (1968) stated, "The male child's ability to disidentify [with the mother] will determine the success or failure of his later identification with his father" (p. 370). Poorly developed paternal relationships can push boys into avoidance of masculine behavior, leading to feelings of inferiority and a perceived lack of manliness (Moberly, 1983; Nicolosi, 1991; van den Aardweg, 1984). Although beyond the scope of the present study, a similar

model has been theorized for the psychosexual development of girls (Williamson, 2004).

Fisher and Greenberg's (1996) analysis of current literature supported the idea that many homosexual males experience an overly close relationship with their mother and a negative relationship with a hostile father (Fisher & Greenberg, 1996). A close-binding and intimate (CBI) mother-son relationship can impinge the process of attachment (Bieber & Bieber, 1979). According to Horner (1988), a CBI mother can facilitate in her son a "false-self syndrome." Britton (2004) classified this syndrome as a narcissistic disorder: The mother facilitates the child's withdrawal from external relationships to become preoccupied with himself. Britton goes on to say that these individuals "cannot form an ordinary transference relationship. Some remain aloof and detached, others are adherent, clamorous and concrete in their transference attachment and yet others form an unreal, compliant relationship" (p. 478).

The literature also supports Freud's theory of the mother-son dyad and homosexual development (Fisher & Greenberg, 1985): that homosexuals are more likely than heterosexuals to report having an affectionate mother who treated her son as a confidant and discouraged appropriate adolescent heterosexual behavior (Bieber et al., 1962; Evans, 1969).

The empirical literature on the mother-son relationship can seem contradictory to the CBI relationship; other research has suggested that distant and less restrictive mother types can also contribute to homosexual development (Apperson & McAdoo, 1968; Siegelman, 1974; Stephan, 1973). One such researcher stated that homosexual males reported their mothers as less loving and more rejecting than mothers described by their heterosexual peers (Millic & Crowne, 1986). Bene (1965) found that homosexuals reported significantly more hostility from and less affection toward both the father and the mother than heterosexual males.

The current study examined the mother-son relationship in contributing to homosexual behavior using the Parent-Child Relations Questionnaire (PCR-II; Siegelman, 1979). In addition, this study explored the impact of environmental factors and current life experiences on the heterosexual, ego-syntonic homosexual, and ego-dystonic homosexual groups. Although clinical experience considers these factors to be important, they have not previously been empirically studied within the

same sample. Relevant factors include history of sexual abuse, age at first sexual experience, primary childhood attachment, number of sexual partners, and depression.

### Hypothesis

The primary focus of the current study was on the homosexuals' responses to the PCR-II scales Mother Love, Mother Demand, Mother Attention, Mother Reject, and Mother Casual. The study compared the responses of ego-syntonic and ego-dystonic homosexual groups with each other and with a group of heterosexual males.

Relative to the Mother Love, Mother Demand, and Mother Reject scales of the PCR-II, it was hypothesized that homosexuals would report a less loving, more demanding, and more rejecting mother than their heterosexual peers. This is the first study to compare ego-dystonic and ego-syntonic homosexuals' relations to their mothers. It was hypothesized that there would be no difference between the two groups. The current study also explored without hypotheses the possibility of group differences in the areas of sexual abuse, depression, number of sexual partners, and primary parental attachment.

### METHODS

The purpose of this study was to investigate the mother-son dyad in the development of adult male homosexuality. Utilizing the criteria and questionnaires established by Dickson (1997) and Phelan (1996), the Parent-Child Relations Questionnaire (PCR-II; Siegelman, 1979) was given to each of the participants, and answers were examined. The authors further compared the responses of ego-dystonic (dissatisfied with their sexual orientation) homosexuality and ego-syntonic (satisfied) homosexuality with those of heterosexual males (Dickson, 1997).

### Participants

The questionnaire was administered to 135 men: 57 ego-syntonic (satisfied with their sexual orientation) homosexuals, 34 ego-dystonic (dissatisfied) homosexuals, and 44 heterosexuals. Each participant was asked to read and sign a statement of informed consent. Confidentiality was assured.

Homosexual orientation was differentiated according to self-reports of same-sex desires, fantasies, and/or sexual partnership (Dickson, 1997; Phelan, 1996). Participants

were classified as homosexual if they reported having homosexual tendencies "all of the time" or "some of the time"; those who reported having homosexual tendencies "none of the time" were classified as heterosexual.

For the purposes of this study, ego-dystonic and ego-syntonic homosexuality were distinguished based on this question: "If it were possible to change my sexual orientation, I (would or would not)." Those who expressed no desire to change orientation were considered ego-syntonic; the others were categorized as ego-dystonic. None of the heterosexual participants indicated dissatisfaction with or desire to change from heterosexuality.

Homosexual participants were recruited from clinical outpatient as well as non-clinical, non-criminal sources. Group and organizational leaders of various homosexual support, church, and political groups were contacted for permission to present the study to their group members.

Heterosexual volunteers were sought from men's civic, political, and religious organizations. Permission to discuss the study was obtained from appropriate group and organizational leaders. Participants were then recruited from among the groups' memberships.

In addition, participants were recruited via Internet notices placed on various user boards and news services. Respondents were sent the questionnaire electronically. Questionnaires completed in this manner were returned electronically and printed for future reference and analysis.

### Instruments

All participants completed a questionnaire that included clinical and demographic variables: age, race, educational level, socioeconomic status, parental marital status, religiosity, and therapeutic experience (see Table 1). The PCR-II (Siegelman, 1979) is a 100-item test designed to assess the characteristic behavior of parents towards their young children as remembered by the child as an adult. There are separate forms of the PCR-II examining different parent-child relationships: mother-daughter, father-daughter, mother-son, and father-son. This study utilized the mother-son portion of the questionnaire. Each item was scored on a 4-point scale: (1) very true, (2) tended to be true, (3) tended to be untrue, and (4) very untrue.

The PCR-II has several subtests for characterized behavior including the following: (1) Loving, or the extent to which the mother is perceived to be warm, helpful, and affectionate; (2) Rejecting, or the extent

to which the mother is perceived to be cold, hostile, and derogatory; (3) Casual, or the extent to which the mother is perceived to have few rules or restrictions and to be casual about enforcing the rules that exist; (4) Demanding, or the extent to which the mother is perceived to restrict the child and enforce rules, demanding respect and punishing hard when the child misbehaves or refuses to comply; and (5) Attention, or the extent to which the mother is perceived as "spoiling" a child or giving the child special attention or gifts as rewards. Scores on each subtest were tallied with a maximum score of 40. High scores on each subtest indicated a high level of that quality. A generalized Kuder-Richardson formula calculated 20 reliabilities for this questionnaire, ranging from .76 to .95 (Alvarez, Farber, & Schonbar, 1998).

Based on previous studies conducted by Finkelhor (Finkelhor, 1984; Finkelhor, Hotaling, Lewis, & Smith, 1990), several differently worded questions were asked to participants to elicit responses relevant to sexual abuse history (see Table 2). All participants were also asked to complete the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI), a 21-item scale which is widely accepted as a clinical instrument with a test-retest reliability ranging from .74 to .93 (Beck, Carlson, Russell, & Brownfield, 1987).

### RESULTS

Significant ( $p < .05$ ) demographic differences were found in a three-way analysis of variance between the heterosexual and ego-syntonic homosexual and ego-dystonic homosexual groups in education, ethnicity, income, religious affiliation, church/synagogue attendance, psychotherapy experience, and marital status (see Table 1).

In order to test the hypotheses, a hierarchical linear regression analysis controlling for the covariance of significant demographic group differences was applied with each PCR-II scale serving as the dependent variable in turn. To determine differences between the ego-syntonic and ego-dystonic groups, the Protected F post hoc was examined.

### Mother Love

As hypothesized, the heterosexual participants recalled having a significantly more loving mother than did the homosexual group when demographic differences were controlled (see Table 3). As indicated in Table 4, the

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Heterosexual and Homosexual Participants

Variable*		Heterosexual	Ego-Syntonic Homosexual	Ego-Dystonic Homosexual	Effect Size (p-value)
Education	<High school	0%	4%	0%	.27 (<.0001)
	High school	5%	11%	12%	
	Some college	9%	44%	24%	
	College graduate	25%	30%	44%	
	College +	61%	12%	21%	
Ethnicity	Caucasian	95%	82%	74%	.18 (.02)
	African American	5%	0%	3%	
	Hispanic American	0%	7%	21%	
	Asian American	0%	5%	0%	
	Native American	0%	2%	3%	
	Other	0%	4%	0%	
Income	\$0 - 9,900	7%	9%	21%	.20 (<.005)
	10,000 - 24,900	34%	31%	21%	
	25,000 - 49,900	20%	35%	35%	
	50,000 - 74,900	25%	5%	12%	
	75,000 +	14%	5%	9%	
	Did not answer	0%	16%	3%	
Religious Affiliation	None	7%	28%	0%	.26 (<.0001)
	Christian/Catholic	7%	21%	18%	
	Christian/Protestant	80%	33%	79%	
	Jewish	5%	4%	0%	
	Other	2%	14%	3%	
Church/Synagogue Attendance	Regular attendance	68%	30%	85%	.47 (<.0001)
	Not regular attendance	32%	70%	15%	
Therapy	Never	50%	32%	9%	.37 (<.0001)
	Currently	25%	9%	56%	
	Past	25%	60%	35%	
Marital Status	Single	34%	63%	62%	.29 (<.0001)
	Married	55%	9%	24%	
	Divorced	11%	2%	12%	
	Widowed	0%	2%	0%	
	Same-sex union	0%	25%	3%	

\*Variables which showed a significant difference were included in table.

Table 2. Survey Questions Asked to Participants to Measure Sexual Abuse

Sample Questions
Have you ever been sexually abused?
How old were you when you had your first sexual experience?
How old was the other person?
What was the gender of the person?
What was your relationship to the other person?
What specific activities were involved in the first sexual experience?

Table 3. Mean PCR-II Scale Scores of Heterosexual and Homosexual Participants

Variable	Heterosexual	Homosexual	Effect Size (p-value)	Overall Mean (SD)
Love	33.07	28.89	0.2 (.02)	30.25 (6.71)
Demand	22.19	26.90	0.22 (.01)	25.36 (6.99)
Attention	25.61	23.85	0.11 (ns)	24.42 (5.03)
Reject	13.89	18.50	0.26 (<.005)	17.00 (5.73)
Casual	23.61	22.83	0.04 (ns)	23.08 (5.94)

Table 4. Mean PCR-II Scale Scores of Ego-Syntonic Homosexuals and Ego-Dystonic Homosexual Participants

Variable	Ego-Syntonic	Ego-Dystonic	Protected F Effect Size (p-value)
Love	29.41	28.01	.22 (ns)
Demand	28.82	24.18	.29 (<.01)
Attention	24.14	23.28	.14 (ns)
Reject	18.17	19.06	.27 (ns)
Casual	22.01	23.92	.10 (ns)

Table 5. Exploratory Variables Among Heterosexual, Ego-Syntonic Homosexual, and Ego-Dystonic Homosexual Participants

	Heterosexual	Ego-Syntonic	Ego-Dystonic	Effect Size (p-value)
Sexual Abuse	< 2%	44%	57%	.36 (<.0005)
Age of First Sexual Experience	17.78	13.6	12.02	.19 (.06)
BDI	3.24	10.45	14.08	.43 (<.0001)
Number of Sexual Partners				
Past Week	0.47	0.72	0.38	.14 (.2)
Past Month	0.48	1.6	0.79	.17 (.11)
Past Year	1.67	7.61	3.44	.16 (.2)
Life	33.51	83.33	27.64	.13 (.3)
Primary Attachment				
Mother	55%	80%	74%	
Father	9%	2%	< 2%	
Both	29%	9%	12%	.14 (.3)
Other	7%	9%	15%	

mean scores did not differ significantly between the ego-syntonic and the ego-dystonic homosexuals on the Mother Love subscale.

### Mother Demand

As hypothesized, the heterosexual sample recalled having a significantly less demanding mother than did their homosexual peers. Table 4 shows that the ego-syntonic men recalled their mothers as being significantly more demanding than did the ego-dystonic homosexuals.

### Mother Reject

As predicted, the heterosexual participants recalled having a significantly less rejecting mother than did the homosexual participants (see Table 3). There was no difference between ego-syntonic and ego-dystonic homosexuals on the Mother Reject scale (see Table 4).

### Mother Attention and Mother Casual

The analysis indicated no significant differences between heterosexual and homosexual groups nor between ego-syntonic and ego-dystonic homosexual groups on the Mother Attention and Mother Casual scales (see Tables 3 and 4).

### Sexual Abuse

Significant differences in sexual abuse were found between the heterosexual and homosexual groups and between the ego-syntonic and ego-dystonic groups. Fewer than 2% of heterosexuals reported having been sexually abused, compared to 49% of the homosexual participants ( $p < .0005$ ). In the three-way comparison of heterosexuals and ego-syntonic and ego-dystonic homosexuals, 44% of ego-syntonic homosexuals and 57% of ego-dystonic homosexuals reported sexual abuse ( $p < .0005$ ) (see Table 5).

### Depression

Homosexuals reported significantly more depression than heterosexuals ( $p < .0001$ ). Within the homosexual subgroup, the ego-dystonic men were significantly more depressed than ego-syntonics ( $p < .01$ ) (see Table 5).

### Limitations

Since sampling in the current study was not random, idiosyncratic characteristics of the sample may have contributed to the results. Therefore, replication will

be crucial in establishing the validity of these results. As suggested by Friedman (1988), pen and paper questionnaires limit the researcher's ability to explore, in the deepest sense, the individual complexities and interactions of multiple layers of relational issues and are therefore limited as to empirical interpretation.

## DISCUSSION

The current study supported previous empirical findings (Bene, 1965; Bieber et al., 1962; Evans, 1969; Millic & Crowne, 1986; Siegelman, 1974; Stephan, 1973; Thompson, Schwartz, McCandless, & Edwards, 1973) that homosexuals and heterosexuals have significantly different recollections of their childhood mother-son relationships. As hypothesized, adult male homosexuals recalled having experienced a less loving, more demanding, and more rejecting mother than did their heterosexual peers. Additionally, the present study found the ego-syntonic homosexuals were more likely to recall their mother as demanding than were the ego-dystonic homosexuals. Otherwise, no significant difference in mother recollection of the two homosexual subgroups was observed.

Current findings were consistent with Object Relations Theory that an unhealthy and unbalanced triangular parents-child relational pattern may thwart a boy's gender and identity development from both the mother's and the father's influence, hindering the accomplishment of developmental tasks necessary for attaining and sustaining adult heterosexual relationships. These findings are also consistent with those previously reported (Bene, 1965; Dickson, 1996; Nicolosi, 1991; Phelan, 1996; Siegelman, 1974).

Both heterosexual and homosexual groups reported a high sense of attachment to their mothers and a higher sense of love from their mothers than from their fathers. The dissimilarity between their parents reported by the two groups of men was most striking in the areas of love, demand, and rejection. The process of developing a mature masculine identity appears to be affected by the mother-son relationship, the father-son relationship, the dissimilarity between the son's relationship with mother and with father, and/or a combination thereof. The current findings regarding the experience of ego-syntonic versus ego-dystonic homosexual males are perhaps most helpful in contributing to an overall understanding of homosexuality. The minimal



difference noted between the two groups may suggest that a more secure relationship with mother and father enables the child to develop and maintain a greater sense of "ego-syntonicity." These findings suggest that sense of dissatisfaction with self may contribute to the significant levels of depression currently observed in homosexuals (Bailey, 1999; Fergusson, Horwood, & Beautrais, 1999; Sandfort, de Graaf, Bijl, & Schnabel, 2001). In light of the previously discussed mother/father-son patterns, there appears to be an overall "dystonia" present among homosexual individuals which may pertain more to developmental separation and individuation issues than differences due to specific homoerotic identifications. Current findings support the possibility that this sense of dissatisfaction with self may contribute to the significant levels of depression currently experienced by the homosexual group.

The current study highlights the need for increased understanding of the effects of sexual abuse in the development of adult male homosexuality (see Table 5). The alarming rate of childhood sexual abuse should not be ignored in research pertaining to male homosexuality. All respondents in the current study who reported molestation designated a male perpetrator; none reported a female abuser. This finding, perhaps one of the most significant of the current study, suggests that sexual abuse should be considered in evaluating etiologic factors contributing to the development of adult male homosexuality. An experience of sexual abuse may contribute to the sexualizing of the unmet needs

for male affection, attention, and connection.

Previous psychological literature has focused primarily on single-factor theories regarding the role of environmental factors in the development of adult male homosexuality. The current study may be viewed as a preliminary step towards integrating varied investigations of the complex interactive influences which occur over time at multiple levels of conscious and unconscious organization in the child and in the family.

### Implications for Future Research

Further inquiry into the underlying complexities of the development of adult male homosexuality is clearly warranted. The need for additional research, including multivariable studies, regarding developmental and current life experience of adult male homosexuals is suggested. Relatively few studies have attempted to measure differences between ego-syntonic and ego-dystonic homosexual men; future research should replicate and expand current findings regarding the reported differences between the two groups. Longitudinal studies would support a clearer understanding of the impact of various life experiences on the development of adult male homosexuality over time. For example, a longitudinal study could contribute to integrating the somewhat fragmented pieces of past theoretical and empirical research pertaining to homosexuality and aid in lessening the prevalent rigid nature-nurture debate.

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