

# Mothers of Male Homosexuals: A Study

A recently completed doctoral dissertation by Gregory Dickson, Ph.D. found statistically significant differences between the childhood recollections of heterosexual and homosexual men. The dissertation was entitled, "An Empirical Study of the Mother-Son Dyad in Relation to the Development of Adult Male Homosexuality: An Object Relations Perspective."



Gregory Dickson, Ph.D.

A total of 135 men were surveyed—57 ego-dystonic homosexuals; 34 ego-syntonic homosexuals; and 44 heterosexuals from various parts of the United States. Utilizing the Parent-Child Relations Questionnaire (PCR-II; Siegelman & Roe, 1979), the study found that heterosexual males recalled a much better relationship with their mothers. Heterosexual men reported a significantly more loving, less demanding, and less rejecting mother than did homosexual males.

The study further found that male homosexuals reported significantly higher levels of current depression, as well as significantly higher levels of childhood sexual abuse than their heterosexual peers.

## Homosexual Men Experienced Their Mothers More Negatively

The study's results supported previously published empirical research that homosexuals and heterosexuals have significantly different recollections of their childhood mother-son relationships.

Going beyond the scope of previous research, the study found that ego-dystonic (dissatisfied with their orientation) homosexual males recalled having experienced a *more demanding mother* than ego-syntonic (satisfied) homosexual men. Otherwise, no significant differences in the recollection of the childhood mother-son relationships were found between the two subgroups of homosexual men.

Commenting on the findings, Dr. Dickson stated, "A cursory review of research to date suggests a lack of uniform findings on the role of the mother-son relationship in the development of male homosexuality. Some authors have found a *close, overly protective mother*, while others have found the opposite—a less loving, more demanding, and more rejecting mother.

While these results are seemingly contradictory, further investigation reveals an underlying consistency, in that the homosexual male has repeatedly reported a significantly

different relationship with his mother than that reported by his heterosexual peers. Whether he reported her as overly close or distant, a negative relational pattern is apparent."

He added, "It is reasonable to assume that either type of relationship (overly close or distant) may negatively impact the developing boy's ability to complete the necessary steps leading toward the accomplishment of the developmental tasks of *individuation and separation*. The overly close and binding relationship with the mother may prevent the young boy from "abandoning" her in order to join his father and his male peers. Likewise, the overly distant relationship

may not allow him to feel secure enough in the mother's love to leave it in order to explore peer relationships with other boys."

## The Homosexual Male Often Had to "Choose" One Parent Over Another

Findings of this study and of Dickson (1996) support earlier literature which suggests that the adult male homosexual has experienced a greater dissimilarity of relationships between his mother and father during his developmental years than did his heterosexual peers. The current study drew upon previous literature regarding the healthy early triangulation in which the boy is able to develop both a sense of connectedness to, and distance from, both parents.

"A lack of this healthy triangulation," stated Dr. Dickson, "may result in the developing boy finding himself 'stuck' between parents. He must choose one parent over the other. It appears that this phenomenon is present and much more extreme in homosexual development."

While both heterosexual and homosexual groups reported a significantly higher sense of attachment to mother and a higher sense of love from mother, the study found that the dissimilarity experienced between parents is most apparent in the areas of love, demand, and rejection.

Dr. Dickson stated, "A further complicating factor appears in that while the mother-son relationship demonstrates a negative relational pattern, the homosexual son feels, at the same time, relatively closer to mother than to father. In other words, the child may consciously feel closer to the mother, yet unconsciously feel *unsafe* with her. That unsafe sense may be triggered by either a *close-binding impingement* and/or a *less-loving distance*."

He continued, "It appears the process of growing into a mature masculine identity may be impeded by any of these factors including the mother-son relationship, the father-son relationship, the dissimilarity between the mother and father relationship, and/or a combination thereof...and this conscious and unconscious organization may have resulted in the many seemingly contradictory retrospective findings reported in the literature."

### **Gender-Identity Development is Thwarted by an Unbalanced Parent-Child Relationship**

These findings regarding the mother-son relationship, combined with those found by Dickson (1996) regarding the father-son relationship with the same group of participants are consistent with the object-relations theory of an unhealthy and unbalanced triangular parent-child relational pattern. Such a pattern may thwart the boy's gender and identity development from both the mother's and the father's side, hindering the accomplishment of developmental tasks necessary in order to attain and sustain adult heterosexual relationships.

Furthermore, the study sheds light on the potential relationship of a history of sexual abuse and the development of adult male homosexuality. **An alarming 49% of homosexual surveyed, compared to less than 2% of heterosexuals, reported sexual abuse.**

Dr. Dickson also found results suggesting that homosexual men are significantly more depressed than heterosexual men. However, his findings do not support the experience of sexual abuse alone as an adequate explanation for the homosexuals' level of current depression. Significant differences in the depression scores remained in the comparison of non-sexually abused homosexual and heterosexual participants for current levels of depression.

### **Childhood Sexual Abuse is Correlated with Male Homosexuality**

Results of this study underscore the need for increased understanding of the effects of sexual abuse in the development of adult male homosexuality. Dr. Dickson's findings are congruent with those of Finkelhor (1984) which found that **boys victimized by older men were four times more likely to be currently involved in homosexuality than were non-victims.** All of the respondents in Dr. Dickson's study reported their molestation as having occurred by a male perpetrator; none reported female abusers. This finding, perhaps one of the most significant of Dr. Dickson's study, suggests that sexual abuse should be considered in evaluating etiologic factors contributing

to the development of adult male homosexuality. Dr. Dickson stated, "An experience of sexual abuse could possibly contribute to the sexualizing of the unmet needs for male affection, attention, and connection."

The study's findings do not support the experience of sexual abuse as an adequate explanation of the difference in the way adult males experienced their mothers during childhood. The differences in the recollection of parent-child relations reported by the two groups remained significant following the removal of all sexual abuse cases. Non-sexually abused homosexual males continued to report having a less loving, more demanding, and more rejecting mother than non-sexually abused heterosexuals.

### **The Relationally Deficient Child is Vulnerable to Sexual Abuse**

Commenting on the abuse factor, Dr. Dickson stated, "It is possible that the male child who experiences the negative relational pattern with his mother, along with the less present and negatively perceived father, becomes more susceptible to the perpetrator's advances. Given the relational deficits experienced by the male child, it is also possible that the molestation, as devastating

as it may have been emotionally, simultaneously may be experienced by some of the boys as *their first form of adult male affection*, as well as something relational that is not shared in common with his mother. The abuse could, theoretically, be perceived by the boy as a facilitation of some form of separation-individuation between himself and mother."

Dr. Dickson continued, "It is also reasonable to assume that the sense of shame, secrecy, violation and anger which may result from childhood sexual abuse contributes to the development of a distorted paradigm through which the child views subsequent relationships with self and others. The duty of the parent to protect the child from all harm, as understood by the child, may be perceived as having been forsaken.

"The negative relational pattern present in the family may impede the child's ability to look to his parents for assistance in resolving the pain resulting from the molestation."

The multi-faceted approach of Dr. Dickson's study helps to clarify some of the previous literature's apparent contradictions about potential contributing factors in the development of male homosexuality. His study underscores the significance of the influence of multiple environmental factors in the development of adult male homosexuality. It further emphasizes the complex, often subliminal, yet powerful forces of not only the childhood mother-son and

Childhood sexual abuse  
may well be a  
contributing factor to  
adult homosexuality

---

Dickson study, continued from page 8

father-son relationships, but also the childhood experience of sexual abuse, as all of these factors relate to the development of the child's sense of self, including gender identification and future relational choices.

Pop culture and political rhetoric suggest that it is *society's lack of acceptance* which is solely responsible for pathology associated with homosexuality. Such a simplistic conclusion ignores homosexuals' *repeated reports in psychology literature* of conflicted parental relationships, as well as other important issues such as sexual abuse.

Dr. Dickson stated, "The current study, in concert with past literature, suggests that the issues surrounding committed adult homosexual identification may be more *core structural and relational*, rather than sexual in nature."

The findings of his study underscore the alarming prevalence of early sexual abuse, and also help to clarify the contradictory types of mother-son relationship found in the

backgrounds of male homosexuals.

Dr. Dickson concluded, "Recent investigation of homosexuality has been hindered by the American Psychological and Psychiatric Associations' philosophical shift, which fails to consider *the role of environmental factors* in the development of male homosexuality. The clearly complex nature of the issue should not be over-simplified, nor should scientific exploration be limited by politics."

*Copies of the dissertation, "An Empirical Study of the Mother-Son Dyad in Relation to the Development of Adult Male Homosexuality: An Object-Relations Perspective," by Gregory L. Dickson, Ph.D., are available through UMI, 300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346, or by telephone at 800-521-3042.*

*Dr. Dickson is employed by Thomas Aquinas Psychological Clinic, Encino, CA. ■*