Daughters, Sons, and Homosexual Parents

A study of adolescent and young adult narratives on growing up in gay and lesbian families

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REPORTS ON THE CENTURY OF THE CHILD

WORKING PAPERS ON CHILDHOOD AND THE STUDY OF CHILDREN
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1. Background and objectives

This study was carried out at the request of the Parliamentary Commission on the Situation of Children in Homosexual Families. The Commission was appointed by the Swedish Government in February 1999 and given a deadline of January 1, 2001 for its report. The main task of the study was to investigate conditions and social circumstances for children in homosexual families. Available knowledge was to be compiled, analyzed, and reported. The Commission was also charged with forming an opinion about current legal differences between homosexual and heterosexual couples with respect to adopting children and being named as specially appointed guardians, i.e., stepparent adoption. If the Commission concluded that the legal differences regarding adoption should be eliminated, the Commission was also to review the matter of whether assisted fertilization should be provided for women living in homosexual relationships (Commission Directive 1999:4). The assessment was to be based on the principle of the best interests of the child.

Because knowledge about the formation of homosexual families is based mainly on international research, the Commission also chose to initiate studies in Swedish contexts. Accordingly, this study was conducted at the request of the Commission in order to broaden the basis for forming an opinion. The Commission set the time frames and objectives for the study.

The objective of the study was to provide understanding of how children perceive growing up with one or two homosexual parents. According to the terms of the assignment, the primary question to permeate the interview study was: How do children growing up in homosexual families perceive their situations? The interviews focused on the children's situation in the family, relationships with parents and parents' partners, and the advantages and drawbacks of growing up with homosexual parents.

The study thus has a qualitative approach oriented at allowing adolescents, young adults, and parents the opportunity to contribute personal narratives of their family situations. In-depth interviews were held with a group of teenagers (16) and a group of young adults (15).

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1 This report was originally published in Swedish as an appendix to a Swedish government inquiry, Barn i homosexuella familjer (SOU 2001:10). This version in English is revised and shortened, in so far as that the section dealing with interviews with the 13 parents are not present. This report deals only with the interviews with the children of homosexual parents.
Both groups of informants have lived for varying periods of time or had regular visitation with a parent who defined himself or herself as homosexual. Most of the parents were biological parents who had “come out” as homosexual and who, in certain cases, had moved in with or entered into registered domestic partnership with a new partner. The older group of informants have moved out of the family home and live independent lives and thus differ from the teenage group, who are still living with or have regular visitation with the homosexual parent.

It is important to clarify that the informants in the study live in or have lived in families that in modern family studies are referred to as “post-nuclear families” (Hyden, 2000), “new families” or “reconstituted families” (Smart & Neale, 1999). These are family configurations that arise after two biological parents separate, such as stepfamilies, single-parent families, or as in this case, “homosexual families.” New family configurations are no longer a marginal phenomenon in our society; they encompass an increasing number of individuals. According to demographic data, at least 91% of children under the age of one year live with both biological parents, compared to 65% of 17-year olds. As children get older, fewer and fewer live with both biological parents (Statistics Sweden, 1999: 3). A common feature of post-nuclear families is that the biological parents maintain their relationships with their children. It is de facto parenthood that constitutes an important hallmark of post-nuclear families, even if arrangements for custody and housing for the children vary (Hyden, 2000). The informants in this study belong to the growing group of children/adolescents and young adults in Sweden who have lived or are living in family configurations that differ from the traditional nuclear family. The focus of this study is on children’s experiences when one or both parents have entered into a romantic relationship with an adult of the same sex.

The paper is laid out as follows. I first present the study and my empirical findings in a brief summary, which is followed by two sections on the central theoretical and methodological premises. The following section presents the interviews with daughters and sons of homosexual parents. The report concludes with a summarizing discussion.
2. Brief summary

In this study, 15 teenagers and 16 young adults related their experiences of having one or two homosexual parents. All of these young informants were born in a heterosexual relationship where the parents later separated and then they lived in “new” or “post-nuclear” families.

The analysis shows considerable variation in the children's and adolescents’ perceptions and experiences of living with homosexual or bisexual parents. One important finding of the study is that the parent’s homosexuality becomes a highly prominent theme in the interviews where the parent/child relationship is also described as inadequate. This was found in a few cases in the study where the parent’s homosexuality is presented as closely associated with negatively charged experiences. In the remaining interviews, parent/child relationships are presented as good and meaningful. In those cases, homosexuality is accorded less prominence in the children's life stories. Here emerge two different ways of telling about the parent’s homosexuality that show how experiences of life with a homosexual parent can vary. In the one case, homosexuality is described as something self-evident that certainly distinguishes the family, but not in a negative sense. Despite an array of differences in living conditions, homosexuality is described as a natural and accepted element of family life. Homosexuality in these cases is not a point of conflict for the informant. In the other case, homosexuality is described as a problem in relation to the informant’s friends and peers. The difficulties they describe do not however encompass the parent as a person; instead, the parental relationship is presented as significant. This attitude appears to be a consequence of the social, psychological, and cultural expectations that characterize the teenage years for some adolescents. A point of conflict emerges here concerning on the one hand loyalty to the parent and the adolescents’ familiarity with homosexuality, and on the other hand the adolescents’ participation in peer groups in which heterosexist views are expressed. The informants use various strategies to manage this conflict, which seems to characterize early adolescence since the endeavors to conceal are eventually transformed into a more accepting attitude as the adolescents get older. It is similar to the process that relatives of homosexuals go through when a son, daughter, brother, or sister “comes out” and the relative must manage kinship and concern on the one hand and heterosexist value judgments on the other.
3. Theoretical and methodological premises

In this study of how children experience and perceive parental homosexuality, there was reason to relate the findings to two different theoretical premises. The first deals with central concepts in studies of the social conditions of homosexuals. The other field concerns the issue of how "experiences" can be studied in a study where the method employed is in-depth interviews. This question affects both theoretical and methodological premises.

3.1 Being homosexual in a world dominated by heterosexuals

Studies of homosexuality have increasingly dealt with the issue of what it means to identify oneself and live as a homosexual or bisexual in various times and in various cultural and social contexts. These are research questions that are often formulated contrary to the interest of biomedical science in the cause of homosexuality. This burgeoning interest in the social, cultural, and psychological meaning and import of homosexuality, including from the historical perspective, is a growing field of research that embraces a number of different directions. This study converges primarily with research on homosexuals and bisexuals and their families, a field that largely has to do with how families manage the realization that a member of the family is homosexual (see for instance Patterson & D'Augelli, 1998). In this context, the spotlight is on the conflict between social values and norms concerning homosexuality and the relationships and ties that bind families and relatives. I do not intend to present this area of research here. Relevant research will instead be addressed in connection with the forthcoming report on the study in order to clarify important empirical findings and elaborate on related thought. My intent with the arguments that follow is instead to clarify certain fundamental theoretical premises.

My reasoning is based on the interactionist perspective developed by social psychologist Erving Goffman (1963/1973), which has been crucial to the analysis of homosexuality as a socially defined characteristic (see, e.g., Plummer, 1975). Goffman's theory has also helped illuminate and deepen understanding of the processes of stigmatization. The main point of Goffman's thought is that the attributes we ascribe to one another are not inherently discreditable, but rather that the surrounding norms and values determine how an attribute is
perceived and evaluated. An attribute is therewith defined as the relation between the attribute and a normative social stereotype, which means that the term "attribute" is relativized. This means in turn that

a particular stigma does not so much concern a number of actual individuals who can be divided into two camps, the stigmatized and the normal, but instead that it should be regarded as a bipolar, omnipresent social process within which every individual performs on both sides, at least in certain contexts and during certain phases in life. The normal and the stigmatized are not so much specific people as they are different perspectives. These perspectives arise in social situations with mixed contacts through the unfulfilled norms that usually have great significance during these meetings. (Goffman, 1963/1973, pp 163–164)

In the quotation, we find not only Goffman's emphasis on perspective and social interaction, but also that all individuals in a society participate in the stigmatization process, both as victims and victimizers in the stigmatizing perspective. Stigmatization is regarded as a consequence of social negotiations rather than objective fact. Thus, the significance of seeing normality and deviance as social constructions becomes relevant here. The interactionist perspective has had tremendous influence on studies of living conditions for homosexuals in western welfare states in recent decades.

However, an evolution has taken place in the field, in that increasing attention has been directed towards the stigmatization of homosexuality as one aspect of social views and attitudes towards sexuality on a more general level. If the interactionist perspective clarifies how stigmatization of homosexuals is expressed in social interaction, the structural aspects have been increasingly problematized. This evolution is reflected clearly in arguments surrounding the term homophobia.

Homophobia as a term (Herek, 1984; Innala, 1995) has been gradually abandoned in research contexts because it represents negative value judgments of homosexuality as an individual and relational problem (Kitzinger, 1987). The term heterosexism has come into favor instead, aimed at clarifying how heterosexuality is a dominant norm not only in interaction between individuals - social and psychological heterosexism - but also as a consequence of cultural and historical development. Psychologist Gregory Herek (1993, p. 90 ff) asserts that heterosexism in the social and cultural sense consists of two pillars. The first is connected to the idea of severing the private from the public, a division that is taken for granted in western contexts. Within the framework of this division, sexuality has come to be
ascribed to the private sphere. However, Herek says that this is paradoxical seen in relation to the organization of the western welfare state. The heterosexual relationship is in these contexts not at all private, but is rather highly institutionalized. This is evident in laws and ordinances that regulate parenthood, rights of inheritance, etc., which in various ways presume a heterosexual relationship between a woman and a man. The sexual relationship constitutes an implicit and hidden premise in these contexts because heterosexuality is presumed. If homosexual and bisexual individuals seek equal rights and living conditions, this implicit premise is called into question, making the sexual relationship visible. Homosexual relationships thus become strongly associated with sexuality rather than love, caring, responsibility, and similar concepts with which family and marriage are traditionally associated. When sexuality is laid open to view, the boundary between the private and the public is overstepped, and heterosexist reactions are to be expected (Herek, 1993, p. 94). This is one of the pillars of the heterosexist norm. The second pillar of social heterosexism is connected to the issue of cultural and social notions of masculinity and femininity. Herek (1993) says that the heterosexual norm implicitly embraces a view of women and men as different but complementary. The homosexual relationship thus breaches dominant notions and norms related to traditional views of feminine and masculine, which means that heterosexist reactions also aim at trespass against prevailing gender patterns.

This evolution of central concepts from homophobia to heterosexism suggests that homosexuality is not the unequivocal focus of research on the social conditions of homosexuals; rather, questions concerning societal views on sexuality and gender relationships are at least as pivotal. Scholarly interest has become increasingly directed towards varying and mutable relationships among factors such as biological sex, gender identity, and sexual orientation as different aspects of sexual identity (Garnets & Kimmel, 1993).

In this study, I will be using the term heterosexism with reference to the arguments outlined above, but that does not mean that the term homophobia has been omitted. Many of the informants use the term homophobia, which indicates its vernacular status. The term is also used in some of the literature and research to which I refer, giving reason to refer to the concept in connection with references and associated discussions.
3.2 On life stories and personal narratives

The debate of recent years about the children of homosexuals and homosexual parenthood that has played out in media and other public contexts has not escaped the informants in this study. Many refer to the debate in the interview dialogs and stress how they would have liked to express their personal versions of what was presented in newspapers and other media. This actualizes another relevant field of research that also touches upon the objective here of studying experiences of homosexual parenthood. In this study, I make no pretensions of studying perceptions and experiences as they are shaped and expressed in everyday contexts, instead, the study deals with narratives about perceptions and experiences. The informants share stories about childhood, family life, and conditions for parenthood in which the informant also tells about himself or herself as a person in relation to family life and its conditions, as well as in contexts outside the family. The narratives may thus be seen as personal narratives or life stories. These stories were shaped in relation to the conditions of the interview situation, where a number of messages were expressed more or less explicitly, which should be noted in a study of this nature. In that light, I found reason to make a connection to narrative theory with emphasis on the research direction that has dealt with personal narratives and life stories (Bruner, 1987; Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992). Accordingly, I have observed three specific aspects in my analysis of the empirical material.

Firstly, I noted the significance of the interview situation with respect to the design of the conversations. Gunilla Halldén writes the following on using interview material as an empirical source:

The interview provides material that is not a social reality, but rather a version created in a particular context: not randomly created, but characterized by that which defines the interview situation. This becomes especially noticeable when interviews are done to gather life stories (Ehn, 1989), but also has an effect on more focused conversations. (Halldén, 1992, p. 46)

Thus, it is important to observe what type of questions (explicit and implicit) the informants are answering in the interview.

Secondly, the life story is seen as an expression of the narrator's narrative identity in the sense of an answer to the question "Who am I/who are you?" This does not mean that life stories are seen as finished, concluded narratives; a life story is ultimately a constantly ongoing project of identity construction (Reeder, 1996, p. 120).
Thirdly, I direct my attention to the socially and culturally constructed nature of the stories (Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992, pp 4–6). The latter means that the experiences and perceptions shared in life stories are also interpreted in terms of narrative codes and cultural forms. Jørgen Reeder writes:

Our experience of the world becomes available to us after it has been interpreted and then appears to be our psychological "reality." Through the code based upon which we tell ourselves and others about central phenomena such as "love" or "feeling," a decided logic is precipitated for how we as individuals contrive ourselves in interaction with others, and for how we reflect over and understand these interactions (Reeder, 1996, p. 141).

Briefly, this means that the story told may also have been analyzed as an expression of a "spirit of the times" and a specific cultural, historical, and social context.

Narrative theory is thus a key point of departure in the study, especially with respect to its potential to clarify the point that although the objective is to study the experiences of children and parents, what I am actually studying is narratives about experiences. The analysis encompasses what is told, who is telling what, and about whom it is told, which means that the analysis is mainly directed towards the content. I have also compared the aspects of content in the narratives with empirical findings from other studies and contrasted them against theoretical perspectives.
4. Conducting a research study

The study informants signed up voluntarily to participate. As homosexual and bisexual individuals are a "hidden population," the only way to seek out informants is via advertisements or other more informal paths. The Commission on the Situation of Children in Homosexual Families published advertisements about the study in late summer 1999 in publications such as Land, ICA-Kuriren, Expressen, Dagens Nyheter, and in QX, a well-known gay/lesbian magazine. An advertisement was also published on the web site of the Swedish Federation for Gay and Lesbian Rights (RFSL). Sign-up forms were also distributed at activities arranged by organizations including RFSL. Individuals who are living in or have lived in homosexual families were encouraged in the ads and forms to sign up for possible participation in a study of homosexuality, parenthood, and family life. This resulted in a number of applications that were forwarded to the Department of Child Studies. It proved that most of the informants had seen the advertisement and the invitation to participate via RFSL.

As a result, the informants came to consist of a group of individuals who voluntarily chose to participate in the study. There is reason to ask in this context whether that meant there was risk that the informant group would be made up of a "positive sample," meaning that the participants in the study were mainly individuals with positive perceptions and experiences. The empirical results contradicted those fears, however, as the interviews yielded a highly varied picture of the informants' background and childhood, including extremes in the form of "success stories" and on the other end of the scale stories of difficult and troubled childhoods. Between these two extremes were also found descriptions of childhoods with both good and bad elements. The interviews thus cannot be said to provide a one-sided illumination of the central questions of the study. In light of the qualitative design of the study, I cannot comment on the extent to which the variation is statistically representative in relation to the general group of children of homosexual and bisexual parents. The informants in this study represent only themselves.

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2 Well-known Swedish newspapers.
4.1 The informant group

A total of 44 interviews were carried out and the interviewees will be referred to here as informants. The individuals who signed up to participate (teenagers, young adults, and parents) were contacted in winter 1999/2000. After contacting 25 young adults and teenagers by telephone, it proved that four had moved abroad or to another city and could not participate in the study. Of the 21 who remained, 18 elected to participate. The other three declined because they were already actively involved in other studies or in media contexts, or simply due to lack of time in general. The other 13 people in this informant group, all teenagers, were contacted when I spoke with their parents/families, who had signed up to participate as a family.

The teenage and young adult informants, who for the sake of simplicity will be referred to here as “child informants,” are presented as a group in Appendix 1. Descriptive information such as age, social class, region of residence, and family situation today and during childhood is reported in order to give the reader certain insights into inherent dissimilarities in the informant group. Note that it is not to be looked upon as the basis for a discussion of the representativeness of the group in relation to a larger population (Weston, 1991, p. 12). However, with reference to my duty in accordance with scholarly ethics to protect the personal identities and assure anonymity of the informants, they are not presented in relation to background data. The informants were given fictitious names (first names only for the sake of simplicity), which are presented in tables 1 and 2 below. The fictitious names are found in quotations from the interviews where information that is interesting in the context is stated in greater detail. However, certain details that had no critical influence on the reported material have been changed in a way that impedes identification without changing the prerequisites for analysis of the interpretations.

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3 Regarding the term “informant” rather than “interviewee,” the former is used in anthropological and sociological research but is coming into more frequent use in social sciences/humanistic oriented studies. The choice of words makes it clear that the study deals with qualitative interviews and that the interview conversation is regarded as the shared business of the informant and the interviewer, rather than that it is the interviewer who “draws out” the information from the person who is interviewed (Zetterqvist Nelson, 2000).

4 It was possible to provide only a code number for the interviews that indicated sex and age. However, it was more useful to use fictional names, since it made it possible to reproduce what someone said not only in one context, but also in others. In the “child interviews” there was also reason to highlight the individual life story, in which case the fictional name also helped bring individual aspects to the fore.
The tables are intended to give the reader an overall view of the group regarding age categories, sex, and fictitious names.

Table 1: Young adults (11 women and 5 men)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fredrik</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lotta</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susanne</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denise</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johan</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eva</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jonna</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terese</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mikael</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cecilia</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judith</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rikard</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tommy</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kristin</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Teenagers (7 girls and 8 boys)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Åsa</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kristoffer</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nils</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felix</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patrik</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karl</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erika</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malin</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Josef</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henrik</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johannes</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karin</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madeleine</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carolin</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The daughters and sons who were interviewed were characterized by the majority having grown up in a family with two biological parents who initially had a heterosexual relationship. Of the 31 informants, 26 lived with both biological parents at some time during childhood. Among the other five, either the biological father is dead, has never had contact with the child, or has never lived with the child but has had regular visitation. The parents later separated and one parent "came out" as a homosexual and, sometimes, embarked upon a homosexual relationship. This means that many informants can tell stories of divorce. Most of the informants have relationships with both biological parents. This is consistent with that depicted in the report produced by the Commission on the Situation of Children in Homosexual Families in cooperation with Statistics Sweden (2000). The report shows that older children (12 and above) of homosexuals were usually born into a heterosexual family and initially grew up in a nuclear family. Conversely, the report found that younger children in homosexual families have in greater numbers been born within an already established homosexual relationship.

Essentially all of the informants who have lived with both biological parents had functioning relationships with their biological parents when the interviews took place. Contact with the parents takes place in various ways and to varying extents, but they do have a
relationship in the sense that they see each other occasionally and are aware of each other's living situations (see appendix 1).

4.2 Qualitative interviews

I used a qualitative interview method and the in-depth interviews were semi-structured (Appendix 2). The questions and topics of conversation in the interview guide should be seen as suggestions and guidelines for the conversations that took place. The primary aim of the interview was to establish a conversational climate in which the informant was given the freedom to talk about what he or she found important in relation to the question of parenthood and homosexuality. The interviews were in most cases held in the informant's home. In other cases, we met in public places such as cafés and libraries, according to what worked and what the informant preferred. The interviews took between 45 minutes and two hours. All interviews were tape recorded except for one more structured interview where I took notes on the responses and wrote them out in full immediately afterwards. I chose the latter alternative when adequate time was not granted for an open interview. However, I analyzed those interviews using the same methods as for the others.

The interview design is reminiscent of what Elliot Mishler calls the "focused interview." They were carried out with focus on a specific event, with questions concerning how the event affected the informant's life (Mishler, 1986/1995, pp 96–99). From this perspective, the interview conversation is seen as a jointly performed act and as a social practice. This view is based on criticism of the assumption that what is said in an interview can be related to a conceived reality and thus be judged true or false (ibid, pp 52–65).

In the interviews, I tried as far as possible to create a basis for conversation centered on the informant. The informants often appeared to be very eager to share their experiences. During the interviews, however, I was actively involved in what was said in my capacity as interviewer. That also meant that I tried as far as possible to answer questions the informants

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5 Catherine Riessman describes an interview situation in which she as the interviewer switches between different approaches. In periods where the informant shapes a coherent and detailed narrative, Riessman remains quiet and intensely listening. In the next moment, it is Riessman herself as the interviewer who asks the informant to get more specific about certain details, which provides a basis for an expanded narrative (Riessman, 1997, pp 34–44). Margareta Hydén describes how the interviewer, by means of active listening, has the opportunity during the
had about me as a person, such as my family situation and sexual orientation. The significance of clarifying that I live in a heterosexual relationship became more apparent as the study proceeded. Specifically among the young adults, some of them wish to know if there was reason to believe that I would misinterpret or otherwise misunderstand the informants’ experiences of living in homosexual families.

This touches upon the issue of the researcher being unaware and unfamiliar with the informants’ living conditions and, in the next stage, how this affects the interview situation. It can create distance in the temporary relationship that is built up in an interview situation. On the other hand, with my “difference” coming from a heterosexual relationship I was enabled to ask several naïve questions that helped bring forth the narratives. I also found that the interview situation was strongly characterized by other factors, such as when the informants were able to identify with my role as a researcher (i.e., they had similar academic backgrounds), or with individual attributes such as conversational and interactional styles. My personal experiences of parenthood were also important as a basis for elaborating discussions.

Many of the informants’ questions also had to do with confidentiality and processing of the interview material. I tried of course to answer the informants’ questions as fully as possible and to accede to certain specific requests. This topic often became the angle of approach and discussions surrounding the core issue of children in homosexual families.

There are 1,300 pages of interview transcripts. The interview excerpts reported here were transcribed using a method that closely resembles the pauses and word order of spoken language, with certain adjustments to make them more readable. There is a transcription guide in Appendix 3.

4.3 Data analysis

An organization of the empirical material was the starting point for the analysis. It entailed several readings aimed at finding categories as a basis for sorting the interviews in their entirety and to look for recurring themes in the material. A running index was kept of the topics brought up in the interviews in order to create a “lateral” overview. In parallel, I also wrote an abridged version of each interview. This process resulted in the empirical material being organized in a way that provided a general interview and at the same time made it course of the interview to contrast the informant’s different narratives and ways of telling stories in order to deepen and expand the conversation (Hydén, 1992, p. 64).
possible to isolate specific themes. Based on the study objective and the central issues that inspired the study, I then took the next step in analyzing the material, which does not mean that proximity to the empirical was abandoned. Qualitative interpretation is a circular process in which questions asked of the material always lead to retrospection and new questions, and where the search for meaning moves between different levels (Smith, 1995). In the presentation of the empirical findings, each section begins with an accounting of certain characteristic aspects of the qualitative analysis which had a critical influence on how I came to present the empirical findings.
5. Interviews with daughters and sons

Based on the overview and careful examination of each interview created in the initial analysis, I was able to begin interpreting the interviews with the children of homosexuals. When the stories told in the interviews were related to the primary issue of the study concerning children's perceptions of their parents' homosexuality, three categories could be discerned.

The first category consists of 14 interviews (5 teenagers and 9 young adults) in which the informants present their parent's homosexuality as unproblematic. These informants relate positive experiences of living with homosexual parents, although that is of course not synonymous with having a "happy, carefree childhood." Descriptions of difficult and trying experiences are found here as well. However, the parent's homosexuality was not presented as a problem, but rather as something natural and accepted in these informants' lives. The next category, which consisted of 13 interviews (10 teenagers and 3 young adults), the parent's homosexuality is described as problematic from the standpoint of the child's relationships with people in his or her environment. In most of these interviews, however, the problems were described as transitory. They primarily had to do with difficulties with telling their peers about the parent's homosexuality, i.e., issues concerning openness to the outside world. The problems they depicted were of varying duration. Significant for this group is that the teenage years come into the foreground and secondly that the informants speak of their parent/parents in positive terms. The third category consists of 4 interviews where a sharply negative picture of the parent's homosexuality is presented. Significant for this group of interviews is that the informants, young adults only, feel dubious about their homosexual parent and that the family relationships are described as inadequate and destructive in several respects.

However, there was reason to see this division into three categories in relation to the age of the informants. In the young adult group, the parent/parents' homosexuality was predominantly described as either a positive or a negative experience, while in the teenage group, descriptions of problems related to openness towards the outside world (primarily peers), were awarded prominence. This generates an important question concerning the significance of when people tell about their childhood perceptions and experiences and how that affects the life story created in the interview situation. Telling about one's life here-and-now is different from the reconstruction of childhood that takes place when the informant
looks back at what was and uses visual memories and recollections to create a narrative. Several of the young adults and older teenagers describe problems with openness as a transitory phenomenon. In several of the interviews with young adults, I found comments on fleeting problems faced by teenagers dealing with their parent’s homosexuality. At the same time, the teenagers communicate a harrowing picture of problems related to openness in their daily lives. This indicates the importance of recognizing the issue of openness in terms of a "process" where the parent’s homosexuality is accorded varying degrees of significance depending on the child’s age and other circumstances, and that a change towards greater openness can be discerned.

The process evident in the empirical material is reminiscent of that depicted in "coming-out" stories (Henriksson, 1994, pp 210–214; Lundahl, 1998, pp 67–69; Weston, 1991, p. 15). Coming out is an established term for homosexual identity development that is meant to denote the complex process made up of realization and acceptance of one’s homosexuality and how one handles one’s homosexuality in relation to the social environment. That the coming out process can also be seen in the reactions of family members has been shown in earlier research in the field (Strommen, 1993). This study does not deal with realization and openness towards the informants’ own homosexual feelings, but rather their parents’ homosexuality. Here we find narratives that clarify what children may experience in both positive and negative terms, as well as narratives that suggest that their experiences and perceptions change over time, a phenomenon that is a fruitful to analyze in terms of "process". This is a point of departure for how the analysis of the personal narratives of daughters and sons about homosexual parents will be presented. I will begin to discuss the child/teenager’s first (sometimes sudden) or growing realization of the parent’s homosexuality. This will be followed by a discussion on how the child/teenager thereafter manages the realization/information with respect to the social environment and network that are the focus of their thoughts on the matter.

Communicating these young informants’ experiences and perceptions from a process perspective proved advantageous from a number of angles. It helps to emphasize and clarify the wealth of variety found in the interview material regarding differences when individual life stories are compared and the differences in perception that become evident in an individual’s life story over time. The choice to allow the process to become central in the presentation of the material did not mean, however, that I ignored the categorization into three groups. In the following, the division based on the informants’ narratives about their experiences with their parents’ homosexuality will remain. The categorization clearly shows
that about half of the informants talk about homosexuality, the homosexual parent, and his or her partner as something positive, important, and unproblematic. I will discuss this in greater detail in the next section under the heading "It got to be a natural thing." In this report, however, I give proportionately greater scope to discussing and reasoning surrounding the problems and difficulties that the informants describe. I did this because the analysis of these descriptions makes a fruitful contribution to illuminating a number of significant issues in relation to the primary study objective.

5.1 The encounter with a parent's homosexuality

In the following section, I will address the child's realization of and encounter with the homosexuality of a parent (or parents), where we can see two different ways of describing the matter. There are informants who tell about a specific time when they realized that their parent or parents were homosexual. This may have been a conversation where the mother or father openly introduced the partner, or a situation in which the child independently came to understand what kind of relationship the parent had with his or her same-sex partner. Others tell how their parent's homosexuality never seemed to be a surprise, but was always apparent. This way of describing the encounter with the parent's homosexuality is the most common among these informants. Its hallmark is that there was no specific point or critical event that decided the matter; instead, expressions like "natural" and "obvious" recur in the narratives. I interpret the use of those terms as a way of presenting the parent's homosexual relationship as something undramatic and ordinary, in the sense of events that are part of everyday life.

"Things just went along like in a normal family"

Under this heading, I present the analysis mainly of 14 of the 31 interviews, nine with young adults and five with teenagers. In slightly less than half the interviews, we find descriptions of the parent or parents' homosexuality as something "ordinary," "natural," and "obvious," in the informants' own words. The descriptions also imply positively charged relationships with both parents and their partners.

In the narratives where informants present the parent or parents' homosexuality as something natural and obvious, we find in certain cases descriptions of a specific event that the informant says was when he or she understood how things were. Johan, 23, tells about when his mother and her partner moved in together in a big house. Johan, one of four children
who lived with their mother, is running around with his sister exploring the new house. An event occurs that makes them understand that their mother and her partner’s relationship is a romantic one.

So, we were running around the house chasing each other and we ran in there //in the bedroom// AHA...there was only one bed and we looked at each other...and kinda realized that...okay, it must be like that //.. // it lasted maybe five minutes and then we didn’t think about it anymore...and we ran off...it was no more dramatic than that.

This short narrative suggests how the siblings’ concrete discovery that their mother and her partner shared not only a bedroom but also a bed contributed to deeper understanding of the nature of the relationship. Sharing both a bedroom and a bed implied that their mother shared a bed with her new partner instead of with the children’s father like she did before. Johan remembers this as an event that he did not later reflect upon from a more long-term perspective.

These discoveries or sudden realizations are, as I said, the exception in this group of informants, who speak of their parents’ homosexuality as something obvious and natural. We see here rather a number of attempts to reproduce a feeling that the fact that the parents, or one of the parents, lived in a homosexual relationship simply floated into the current of everyday life. One cannot discern a specific point or critical event that triggered a sudden realization or understanding about the family situation. Mikael, 25, says about growing up with his mother and her partner that "you just learned that it was natural." Fredrik, 19, describes his family life by saying “things just went along like in a normal family.” Erika, 15, says that her family is "ordinary" and that a lesbian mother is "no big deal." Words like “normal” and “natural” are central in these narratives, where family life is presented as being just like any other. The parents’ sexual relationships do not become prominent in the actual performance of family life, in the family’s practices, which may be said to constitute an important hallmark of family life in a more traditional sense. The adult romantic relationship appears in these narratives, but its sexual nature is not prominent. Instead, it is the adults, with their personalities and in their capacity as either biological parent or stepparent to the children, who are accorded prominent positions in the narratives.

Descriptions of the encounter with parental homosexuality as something natural and obvious do not necessarily mean that the informants describe childhood as a time devoid of difficulty and sorrow. On the contrary, many of the informants point out difficulties,
especially grief over their parents’ divorce. Susanne, 21, says about her mother’s plans to move in with a woman:

I seem not to have thought it was odd, because I talked happily about it at school and didn’t understand that it was unusual...I don’t remember thinking it was strange...it was no big deal.

Susanne was seven years old at the time and she said that the hard part was her parents’ divorce, which preceded her mother’s plans to move in with her girlfriend. Susanne describes how she sometimes still feels angry and disappointed about her parents’ divorce. A recurring theme in many informant narratives about undramatic perceptions of the parent’s homosexuality is that it was more difficult to reconcile themselves to the divorce than to their parent’s having become involved in a homosexual relationship.

It may be important in this context to remember that between one third and one half of all 18-year-olds in Sweden have experienced a parental divorce in the family (Hwang & Nilsson, 1996, p. 241). The high rate does not mean that divorce does not affect children’s perceptions. Children grieve for their “old” families and have strong and vivid memories of the event. Studies have also shown that many children of divorce dream that their parents will get back together (ibid, p. 242), which is also shown very clearly in this study. Carolin, 17, says that the divorce her parents went through when she was ten years old was a “living hell” for her. Her parents and the family were the “whole universe,” which fell apart when the divorce became a fact. Because of that, Carolin says that her father’s boyfriend made it easier for her to keep a romantic dream that her parents would reconcile. In Carolin’s world, a man could never replace her mother. However, Carolin shows that her views of what constitutes the family, and who belong to her family, have changed. After the divorce, Carolin had a hard time seeing how her mother, father, and siblings could be a family when they did not live together anymore. That was the basis for a longing for reconciliation, as the divorce had shaken her idea of the family as consisting of “mommy, daddy, and the kids.” Now Carolin emphasizes how she can once again see her family as consisting of both her mother and father, although in a new configuration. The family has been extended and broadened, in that her father’s partner is also an important figure in the family.

Anne, 21, also tells about a divorce during childhood. Anne was seven when her parents split up. She describes her feelings about her mother’s then girlfriend in the following words: “I wasn’t irritated that she was a woman, but more that somebody had taken my mother away from me, that my mommy wasn’t mine alone.” Anne compares this irritation with the anger
she felt when her father met a woman and says that it is a matter of the child’s unwillingness to see a parent have relationships with adults other than each other. This suggests how a new partner, regardless of sex, may also become a confirmation in the child’s eyes that the divorce is a fact. It also has to do with how a new partner may also be perceived as a disturbance in the relationship between the child and the parent, who had perhaps lived alone for a certain period with no other adults in the family (Öberg & Öberg, 1987/2000). A British in-depth interview study from 1980 shows that 21 children in homosexual households describe their parents’ separation as more difficult and traumatic than their parents’ homosexuality (Lewis, 1980; O’Connell, 1994). This finding is confirmed in this study, with its recurring descriptions of the parents’ divorce as the main problem, something that the teenagers and young adults can accept yet still feel grief and disappointment over.

There are problems other than grief over divorce that are presented as more troublesome than the parent’s homosexuality. Kristin, 28, tells about when she was ten and her mother began a relationship with a woman. The difficult thing about the mother’s relationship was not that it was with a woman, but rather that the relationship between the two women was a tormented one. The homosexual relationship was less important than the stress caused by its dramatic nature. When the mother later began a new relationship that eventually led to a registered partnership, it meant a great deal to Kristin. Her mother’s partner came to be an important person, a “gift” and a “fine person,” as Kristin puts it. Their relationship and partnership is now “so obviously right, and she is...she is one of those people who are always there for you.” Kristin also tells how her children relate to both their grandmother and her partner, the latter as an important and exciting person whom the grandchildren often ask for and mention.

Another example of problems unrelated to the parent’s sexual orientation emerges in the interview with Anne, 21. She describes her childhood with the heterosexual parent, in this case the father, who was awarded custody of the children when the parents separated, as one characterized by her father’s personal psychological problems. Anne describes weekend visits to her mother and her partner as calm oases in an otherwise fragmented life that was difficult for her to handle. In contrast to these stories of problems and conflicts, there are also childhood narratives characterized by experiences of happiness.
Images of a happy family life

Images of a happy childhood are created in these narratives. This does not mean that these informants have not gone through a divorce or other difficult to manage circumstances, but such events do not dominate the narratives. Cecilia, 27, describes how her "homosexual family" was

More open and perhaps happier and more hospitable, welcoming more people into the home than an ordinary mother/father/children family might do...but I can't say that I know for sure...because I've never lived in a family like that.

Cecilia says that she has little experience of living in a nuclear family, since her parents divorced when she was very small, but she can still make comparisons with her father's new family with whom she regularly spent time during childhood. Life with her father and stepmother was characterized by what she somewhat ironically calls a "normal life," a life that was not, however, as exciting as life with her mother. Cecilia is self-critical and asks whether she might be glossing over the situation, but returns repeatedly to how life with her mother and her partner was colored by openness and joie de vivre despite the divorce and several moves and separations. It was an exciting and fun life for a child, filled with an array of different people and a great deal of activity. Cecilia now has regular contact with her mother and her mother's former partner, the woman with whom Cecilia grew up. Similarly, Johan, 23, describes his childhood as a happy time. Johan, like Cecilia, was born into a nuclear family that was shattered when his parents divorced when he was six. When Johan was ten, his mother moved in with a woman whom Johan says is "more of a parental figure for me than my father, for instance." The character of their lives in the neighborhood of single-family homes in a small town was that they were a family like any other. The parents were open about their relationship and both took on active parenthood, in that they took turns going to parent/teacher meetings and were involved as active parents in a range of recreational contexts. Both women showed in their own ways that the house was open to the children and all of their friends. In this life story, the homosexual family is presented as utterly ordinary.

The interesting thing is that it seems as if the image of the 'ordinary family' and 'normal family' was constructed in very different ways by the young people. Cecilia describes what she calls 'the normal family' as something that is less exciting and not characterized by the same joie de vivre and challenges that life with her mother and the 'homosexual family'
offered. Johan, on the other hand, describes his mother and her partner's way of creating a family life like any other as his basis for a happy childhood. Recurring references to the biological parents as positive, important people are a common element of these life stories. The parents are people these young adults still see and socialize with often; that is, the relationship with the parents has become one of friends, imbued with a strong sense of belonging. We also find descriptions of a rich family life with the child having a fundamental sense of always being put first. The homosexual parent's partner is also presented as a significant person, not only during childhood, but also in the present day. That which differentiates the narratives is the degree to which homosexuality was an open topic of conversation in the family. In Cecilia's family, homosexuality was a significant element in that her mother and her mother's friends were actively involved in the gay rights movement. The home is described as a center for political activities including demonstrations, theater, festivals, etc. In Johan's family, homosexuality was never discussed openly and his mother and her partner were not active in the arena of sexual politics. However, this did not preclude the homosexual relationship from being a concrete and visible aspect of the practices of family life.

This indicates how different attitudes towards openness can take a variety of expressions in family life. There are informants whose parents do not talk about homosexuality and do not involve the children in discussions or arguments about what it means to be homosexual or bisexual. That approach does not preclude the parents from living openly with their homosexuality, in and through their everyday practices of family life. Other informants tell of parents who have clearly displayed their homosexuality, not only in how they lived, but also in words and by choosing to clarify and emphasize it in conversation. Yet another example of how the practice of openness can vary is provided by Kristin, 28, who tells about a parent who declared himself openly gay, but the openness was practiced more in word than in deed. These various approaches cannot however be unambiguously related to specific consequences for children.

In the preceding section, I discussed my analysis of a narrative of both positive and negative experiences dating from childhood, or in the teenagers' case, at the time of the interview. The parent's sexual orientation is described as something obvious and taken for granted and is not presented as the root or cause of problems. This applies to nine interviews with young adults and five with teenagers. These five teenage interviews differed from the remaining ten teenage interviews, upon which I will now focus.
The other ten informants tell of good relationships with their parents and of meaningful family relationships, but the encounter with and realization of the parent's homosexuality are described as difficult and problematic. This seems closely related to awareness of society's negative attitudes towards homosexuality, which affect the meaning that the teenagers ascribe to the parent's homosexuality. A similar theme is found in some of the young adults' life stories about how their teenage years and the realization of the parent's homosexuality came to be somewhat problematic.

"This was something weird"
The teenagers and young adults who describe their first encounter with parental homosexuality as difficult and troubling suggest to varying degrees how the encounter was characterized by awareness of how homosexuality is judged negatively in social contexts outside the family. Marie, 27, tells how her parents sat down with the children after the divorce and told them that their mother was going to move in with a woman.

They told us about it...we, or maybe it was just me, were aware that this was something weird...and different //...// it was the worst thing you could be. Marie emphasizes that she did not personally think it was weird, but "the thing was that you knew other people thought so...like 'fucking faggot' was the worst thing you could say." If a child is aware that homosexuality is judged and regarded as something negative, it may influence how the child goes on to manage the realization that a member of the family is homosexual, in this case a parent. Marie wonders whether this view of homosexuality was unintentionally reinforced by a specific course of events related to how conflict was managed in the family. Marie demanded that her mother not be open about her lesbian relationship in front of Marie's friends, a demand to which her mother chose to accede. Marie asks herself whether this had the unwanted consequence that her mother implicitly conceded that homosexuality was a problem that should be concealed. There were other aspects that should be taken into account, according to Marie, in that her demand could also be interpreted as an "act of revenge" for her anger and disappointment over the divorce. The way her mother responded to the demand thus may have become an attempt to ease her daughter's grief. Regardless of how this may be understood and interpreted, Marie's thoughts provide insight into the complexity and ambiguity of the family dynamic.

Informants in this study describe awareness that stigmatizing perspectives on homosexuality exist, especially in young people's peer groups. Benny Henriksson and Pia
Lundahl, researchers in sociology, conducted a qualitative study based on in-depth interviews and participant observations of adolescent attitudes and opinions about sexuality and relationships. At the time of the study, the adolescents often demonstrated negative attitudes towards homosexuality that nevertheless could not be seen as stable and general. There was rather ambivalence towards homosexuality that was manifested not least in the adolescents' tendency to change their negative attitudes when they came into personal contact with one or more homosexual individuals (Henriksson & Lundahl, 1993, pp 284–286). Henriksson and Lundahl also showed that young boys in particular demonstrated strong homophobia, especially those who “venerate very traditional sex roles” (ibid, p. 285). This “homophobia” is recognizable among the adolescents in this study who indicate awareness of homosexuality as a stigmatized category. However, the informants also relate how they resolved this dilemma as teenagers without, like Marie, trying to conceal and withhold the information from the outside world.

"When dad came out as gay"

Denise, 23, tells how at the age of ten she asked her mother if it was true that daddy was gay. That she used the word gay did not mean that she fully understood what it meant. Rather, she “didn’t really know what gay meant except that it was something that wasn’t particularly good.” A connection is implied here between the sexualization of adolescent language that has been noted in the Swedish press in recent years and what it means to have a mother who is lesbian or a father who is gay. When her mother confirmed Denise’s suspicions, Denise experienced strong emotions and reacted with tears and deep sadness. The situation changed after she talked to her father about it. Denise says that she had already known about it on one level and that after she had the chance to talk about homosexuality with her father “it was nothing...there was nothing more to it.” Denise’s story about her father and his homosexuality is similar in some ways to that related by Madeleine, 17. Madeleine says about her father’s homosexuality: “the only bad thing...the only bad thing for me was that I didn’t find out about it directly.” That which both of these young women describe as difficult was being aware as children of prejudices against homosexuals and suspecting that the parent was homosexual but that the parent did not tell the child about it. Madeleine says that once she came to an understanding by calling her father one evening and asking him, her worries were alleviated: “so, that’s the way it is, at least now I know.” Madeleine says that the knowledge made it easier for her to respond to the homophobia she met with at school and still does in
view of masculinity and fatherhood can contribute to men who are living in homosexual relationships and are active fathers being confronted with specific impediments and difficulties. Studies of masculinity have shown that fatherhood and masculinity are more closely linked to heterosexuality than are motherhood and femininity (Connell, 1995). This may be one reason that fathers hesitate to come out to their children. It should however be noted that these fathers, as discussed above, were not living with their children when homosexuality was brought into the open, which may be a circumstance that makes it more difficult to come out to one’s children.

**Teenagers who are reluctant to talk about homosexuality**

Parental homosexuality may become a problem for teenagers, especially for those in their early teens. It becomes clear in the interviews with teenage informants via how they tell and do not tell about the parent and the encounter with homosexuality as well as by what they tell. The theme has to do with being a young teenager, encountering homosexuality in the home and the family, and managing it in relation to the social context. It is expressed to varying extents in the teenage interviews in which homosexuality is presented as a problem, manifest especially in the interviews with a group of five boys and with two teenage girls, ages 14–15. It is also important to stress that some of the older informants likewise refer to experiences in their teenage years reminiscent of that which the younger informants express.

These teenagers, through their conversational style and how they treat the interview situation, communicate a message of great importance here. The teenagers have a hard time expressing themselves when the focus of the interview, i.e., homosexuality, is brought up. They frequently fell silent, said that they didn't remember. These interviews are of a particular nature, especially when compared to other teenagers, younger and older, who are eager to talk and tell about themselves and their families. The situation that arises when the interview is to be carried out may thus be interpreted as an example of a crucial problem for these teenagers, that of talking about the parent’s homosexuality with someone they do not know. The interview situation itself shed light on the teenagers’ endeavors to keep the parents’ sexual orientation secret from the outside world.

First, a description of how the initial encounter with homosexuality is depicted. Karl, 15, tells about the time when his mother told him that she had fallen in love with a woman.

I think I was in the sixth grade or something like that //...// that’s when I found out about it for sure, but I was so little I didn’t really understand very much...
was just a little kid in the sixth grade... I didn’t really get it (Interviewer: What did your mom say?) Mom said something like “I’ve fallen in love with a woman,” something like that (pause) it was so long ago, it’s hard to remember.

I would like to direct attention here to how Karl says "...it’s hard to remember." He refers to his poor memory on the one hand to explain why he doesn’t have much to say about the matter. On the other hand, Karl’s account may be seen as relatively detailed regarding the conversation between him and his mother. This may be interpreted as ambivalence about the topic of conversation. Similarly, Nils, 14, tells about a time when his mother talked to him about her lesbian relationship.

Mom told me one time in the evening... I couldn’t sleep and F. //his mother’s girlfriend// was there and mom came in and told me.

He then makes it clear that he doesn’t remember any more about it and shows clearly that he does not wish to elaborate on the topic. Maria, 15, certainly has a wider vocabulary and is more verbal than Karl and Nils, but she also demonstrates avoidance in relation to the central topic of the interviews. Maria never uses terms like “homosexuality,” “lesbian,” or “gay,” terminology that many other informants use repeatedly, sometimes seemingly as a way to mark their close familiarity with those words and comfort with using them.

In other words, these younger informants demonstrate a means of rejecting the topic that may also be interpreted as an attitude aimed at distancing themselves in general from talking about these things outside the framework of the family and the home. With their body language and metacommunication, the informants show that it is difficult, uncomfortable, and stressful to talk about the parent’s homosexuality. We also see clear awareness of society’s heterosexism, albeit in a more restrained verbal style than used by other informants who also tell about their awareness of homophobia. For instance, Maria, 15, says that her mother is lucky in that “it is a good thing that it didn’t all happen fifty years ago.” In this way, Maria refers to differences in attitudes and the evolution that has taken place in society with respect to homosexuality. But she emphasizes at the same time that she does not talk about it to anyone, whether close friends or just classmates. Nils refers to homosexuality as something “they don’t like” and that people might think having a lesbian mother is “weird, because you want to be like everybody else.” Kristoffer, 14, has been teased because his mother lives in a lesbian relationship, but says it only happens in certain situations. He relates:

They tease me sometimes... they say "your mother is a dyke" and stuff like that
disturbing narratives of childhood. In the following attention will be directed towards the four informants who have distinctly rejected the homosexuality of their parent or parents. I present each of the informants' life stories individually, followed by a discussion on specific themes. The first has to do with the informants' descriptions of their relationship to the parent or parents. The second deals with their judgments about homosexuality as a general phenomenon and in relation to the parent who has defined himself or herself as homosexual. These life stories are characterized by the way the two themes are linked.

Rikard, 26, grew up with a mother who came out as homosexual during his early school years. He says that this affected him and contributed to his vehement rejection of homosexuality. This rejection was not present from the outset. Rikard tells how a bitter divorce and intense conflicts took place in the home during his early childhood years. At that time, he says, his biggest problem did not seem to be homosexuality, but rather his parents' inability to devise relevant arrangements for his custody and housing. Rikard describes his father thus: "He didn't seem to care overly much." Rikard recounts a comment his father made recently when they were talking about the divorce. Rikard asked what his parents thought about his situation as a child, to which his father replied: "I guess no one really cared about you." According to Rikard, this was something that came to characterize his childhood and his experiences in general. He describes his attempts to conceal his mother's sexual orientation from others during his childhood years, as well as the teasing he endured when it was impossible to hide his mother's homosexual relationship. In his life story, his biological parents are presented as incapable of taking adult responsibility for him and his life. He makes no reference to partners or stepparents having a positive significance in his life.

Tommy is 28. In his life story, the focus is on his father's homosexuality. It is a story first of a struggle about homosexuality, but also a struggle "about a lost father //...//and then there was the homosexual aspect...but that is something else...there could be heterosexual aspects too....but it is about a lost father." Tommy claims that the loss of his father is related to homosexuality insofar as that "homosexual parents can be a little more egotistical than other parents." Tommy says that homosexual people are compelled to take a number of key positions that make their lives into "a whole other story" that they must carry with them. After his parents divorced, Tommy saw his mother very infrequently and his relationship to his mother is nearly non-existent. In this life story, as in Rikard's case, a childhood emerges that is characterized by the lack of responsible adults. That does not mean a lack of adults in the child's environment, but in many cases, the adults were busy seeking personal affirmation.
That was his father's distinguishing characteristics according to Tommy, who said his father was "much more like a buddy...than a parent."

Both of these young men point out how the conditions of homosexuality and the life that homosexuals and bisexuals live or are forced to live help create an "unusual life story." As a result, they suggest that children of homosexuals are ignored and unseen, which becomes the moral of their life stories. At the same time, one cannot avoid noticing how their opinions and judgments of homosexuality seem closely associated with the exclusion and abandonment they also describe. A similar pattern appears in the following two life stories.

Judith, 27, describes her relationship with both of her parents as poor. They divorced when she was very young and Judith did not perceive her mother's first lesbian relationship to be a problem. Instead, Judith says that the relationship gave her a "spare mom." Judith was about eight years old then and she had strong feelings for her mother's girlfriend, even though she knew the adults' relationship was "different" in that it was a romantic relationship between two women. However, the relationship ended; something which Judith says made her deeply sad. When her mother later began a relationship with another woman, Judith describes her perceptions as follows: "I had a really hard time with that, a hard time accepting it...so, I was really depressed about it when I was a teenager." Judith relates how her mother tried to get her to understand that the relationship made her (the mother) happy and satisfied. Judith responded by telling her mother "you don't understand that it makes me unhappy," but her mother gave no credence to Judith's reply to her plea. This was an example, Judith continues, of how her mother put herself and her homosexual relationship before Judith. She also expresses how the poor relationship between her and her mother makes it more difficult for her to accept the homosexuality.

And since I haven't had such a great relationship with her, I think I took it even worse...or worse and worse...but took it harder...that it was her in particular that...because I wouldn't react like that if I knew somebody who was related to a homosexual...or a friend or something like that...I think...that doesn't bother me...but that it was my own mother.

There is reason here to make a connection to how Judith's sister, who is also an informant in this study, judges her mother and her lesbian relationship and the whole course of events in another way. The two sisters reflect on their dissimilar judgments and say that they are very different individuals. Where one sister always demanded all or nothing, the other required less. Where the one asserts that her mother ignored her, the other emphasizes how important
her mother's happiness is to her ability to be a good mother. Where the one rejects the woman who became her mother's lifelong partner, the other sister embraces her as a good and important individual in the family. Earlier research (Dunn & Plomin, 1992) confirms that siblings from the same environment do not always perceive events the same way, which becomes apparent in the narratives of the two sisters although it does not preclude the possibility that siblings may perceive events and phenomena in similar ways.

The last of the four whose life stories are strongly characterized by a negative view of homosexuality and the homosexual parent or parents is that of a young woman. Jonna, 25, is adopted, and her life story presents an image of adults who betrayed and abandoned her. They are adults who put themselves first and whose problems were laid on the children. Jonna says "when you're a kid, you aren't strong enough to bear adult problems - it's like all you can do to deal with your own." Jonna came to Sweden with another language and memories from her homeland. She dreamed of having a family with a mother and a father. The dream was shattered when she started to "discover that this is odd...this isn't right" about the situation in her adoptive family. Her parents' homosexual relationship was a family secret that was concealed from the outside world. Jonna says that this is part of why "I guess the entire family is in some kind of psychological imbalance." Jonna's dreams and thoughts of being allowed to return to her homeland and find her cultural identity and her biological parents were given short shrift in the family. Jonna's parents refused to accept the need to seek out her identity, a need that many adopted children experience (Irhammar, 1997; Von Melen, 1998).

Thus, this life story depicts an image of an adopted child who ended up in a family that, according to Jonna, did not meet her expectations of what a family is, and that also concealed the difference. As there is one other informant in the study who is adopted, we can compare the two cases. In contrast, the other informant describes how his parents' homosexuality was always open to the outside world and that he has never seen his family as anything other than a "normal family" and an "ordinary family." Nor has he felt any great interest in searching for his roots or visiting his homeland, even though his parents told him about it and showed him pictures of his homeland and the orphanage where he lived in early childhood. On the contrary, the young man expressed strong irritation in the interview about adolescents who, based on his appearance, associated him with an ethnicity other than Swedish. This is reminiscent of what Anna Von Melen writes based on her in-depth interviews with individuals who were adopted. Some of them say how interest in their origins was never an important element in childhood, but was aroused when they got a little older (Von Melen, 1998, pp 107-119). The friends who wanted to associate the informant in this study with an
ethnicity other than Swedish also represented the group of people who, according to him, would also not understand his family situation, due to strongly homophobic attitudes. They were people who both ascribed to him a different ethnic identity and would not understand his family background. From this he came to understand the right to be different without being forced into categories and definitive descriptions and at the same time be able to talk about oneself as "ordinary" and "normal."

The preceding section dealt with the informants who expressed highly negative views of their parents' homosexuality in the interviews. The hallmark of these strongly morally charged childhood narratives is the informants' clearly expressed desire to communicate a message by means of their life stories, the message being that individuals with homosexual orientations are not suitable parents. The informants however also express feelings of ambivalence about the issue of parenthood and homosexuality. As they express it, there appears to be a split between intellect and emotion. On the one hand, an intellectual perspective that advocates a fair and equal view of all individuals, regardless of skin color, sexual orientation, gender, etc., and on the other hand an emotional attitude that powerfully and unambivalently rejects the notion of homosexual parenthood. However, analysis of these four life stories also shows experiences of exclusion and abandonment. In this study, I interpreted this as a theme that can be said to frame the informants' morally characterized message in a context. These life stories present examples of children and teenagers who grew up in situations where there was a lack of opportunity to create "a sense of coherence" (Antonovsky, 1987/1991). This need not be unambiguously interpreted to mean that it was the situation in itself or the relationships the children had that gave rise to the experiences these informants relate. Family life and relationships can be perceived differently by different siblings, which implies how children differ and how they adapt and relate to the people around them in different ways.

Conclusion

It is now time to conclude the arguments about the informants' initial encounter with and realization of parental homosexuality. That which emerged in the analysis is a connection between having a good relationship during childhood and adolescence with adults, parents as well as "new" adults such as domestic partners and stepparents, and the importance that the child or adolescent ascribes to homosexuality. Modern research on adolescence focused on development of identity has demonstrated the great importance that adolescents ascribe to adults during their teenage years. Adults are presented as vital dialog partners and advisors,
especially with respect to social relationships (Adamsson, 1999, pp 60–62). A researcher in psychology, Lena Adamsson shows how adolescents are concerned with managing the issue of psychological space in the sense of a balancing act that must be mastered in social contexts. The balancing act is a matter of evaluating personal needs in relation to the needs of others (ibid, p. 57). The Swedish child psychiatrist Lennart Ramström (1991) emphasizes that there is reason to observe the integrative aspect in identity creation processes during adolescence. This is a matter of both adapting to social contexts and thus mastering the "social game" and simultaneously forming individual attitudes towards values and ideals that adolescents encounter (Ramström, 1991, p. 112). This contradicts the notion of the teenage years as a period of total rejection of adults. Rather, the view on adolescence as a period of "Sturm und Drang" has in research contexts been replaced by a view of a period in which the individual is faced with new forms of and demands for adaptation, which present new problems and tasks.

The development task is a term used as a way of clarifying how certain problems and tasks are specific to certain periods in an individual's life course (Kirchler, Palmonari & Pombeni, 1993, p. 145). The tasks faced by an adolescent are in turn related to cultural and historical factors, as well as the individual's more personal and unique motives and driving forces (ibid, p. 145). According to Ramström, there are a number of expectations imposed on the young individual by society and the adult world. These may be formulated as goals that adolescents should achieve. This has to do with material independence, with work and a place in the job market, emotional independence in parallel with long-term relationships of friendship and love, long-term intimate relationships with a person of the opposite sex (preferably aimed at the production of children), solidarity with certain fundamental norms and rules of the game among adults, and sometimes the capacity to be content with oneself and with others (Ramström, 1991, p. 81). However, these are socially and culturally constructed goals that should be critically evaluated in the light of social frameworks and conditions that can both enable and impede their accomplishment, Ramström continues. The boundary that is created between expectations and opportunities should be seen as a point of departure for understanding the specific development tasks of adolescence (ibid, p. 82).

This implies how social expectations upon heterosexuality as a norm naturally give rise to conflicts for children and adolescents whose familial experiences and frames of references deviate from that norm. How this conflict is resolved seems closely connected to aspects of the family dynamic and how the children perceive their relationships with adults in the family. The personal narratives analyzed in this study clarify how important it is for children to feel that they are the primary focus of one or both parents' interest and, secondly, to have several
significant adults close to them. These aspects emerge as a key basis for acceptance by
children and adolescents of a parent's homosexual orientation. If the child has never perceived
the relationship with his or her parents as positive, and he or she is at the same time faced
with demands to adapt to new circumstances and new adults in the family, a situation arises
that is difficult for the child to master. There is a risk here that the parent's homosexuality will
in that situation become strongly associated with the child's sense of vulnerability and
abandonment. The socially established and strongly predominant notion of heterosexuality as
the only true form of love - a heteronormativity - means that deviations from this dominant
norm may stand out. There is risk that this will in turn become the target for accusations of
causing problems in a sort of "scapegoat thinking." Homosexuality in this context becomes a
hook on which to hang these difficult situations. Erving Goffman also describes how a stigma
can be used as a scapegoat for the injustices that affect an individual (Goffman, 1963/1973).

The next section discusses issues of how adolescents and young adults manage parental
homosexuality in the encounter with the outside world. It applies mainly to the group of
adolescents who believe that their parents' sexual orientation is difficult to deal with in
relation to the outside world. The other young informants, slightly less than half the group,
who see their parent or parents' homosexual relationship as natural and self-evident, do not
have such difficulties and so are not discussed.

5.2 Managing a parent's homosexuality in relation to the
outside world

In the preceding section, I reported how certain informants tell about their awareness of
homosexuality as something associated with negative value judgments and how it affected
them in their experience of having a parent who lives in a homosexual relationship. In this
section, I will direct attention towards how this experience is managed in relation to the
outside world. The focus is not on informants who have never perceived their parents' homosexluality as troubling, although I will refer to them in certain contexts.

This section deals with what the concerned informants relate about their various means of
managing the issue of "homosexuality in the family" vis-à-vis the outside world and vis-à-vis
themselves, i.e., reflections about themselves and identity issues. The distinguishing element
of this process is that the informants in most cases emphasize that their parents are "okay,"
that they respect their parents and their partners, but that the homosexuality is a problem in
relation to the child's everyday life outside the family. This primarily concerns teenage informants and some of the young adults and their reports of what it means to be a teenager with a homosexual parent. The informants' life stories are generally characterized by descriptions of how the subject is talked about in contexts outside the family. However, the endeavor to keep the matter secret is reported to be maintained for varying lengths of time. Karin, 17, asserts that the secrecy was important when she was "oh, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen." When asked what they were and are afraid of, the informants' responses were relatively unambiguous: the source of the fear is related to the desire to be "normal" and "like everybody else." We find here an attempt to identify with the normal (Goffman, 1963/1973, p. 52). This refers not only to the parent's homosexuality, but to anything that could be taken as a sign that one is different, strange, or peculiar. Marie, 27, says that when she was a teenager, she was constantly afraid of being bullied. Not only because of her mother's relationship with a woman, but also for the clothes she wore, because she wore glasses, because she wasn't cool enough, etc. The bullying never happened, but the fear of it controlled her unabated attempts to adapt to the demands shaped in teenage groups.

This fear of bullying is reminiscent of what Tasker and Golombok (1997) describe in their study of the children of lesbian mothers. The informants in that study related how the fear of being teased was a dominant element in their lives and some described having been teased. In this study, the former is confirmed insofar as that many informants, especially among those who feared being open about their family situations, refer to their fear of being bullied. However, few informants describe any real bullying related to the parent's homosexuality. A total of four informants were bullied in the sense of being harassed over a protracted period, of which two cases were related to the family situation. In the other cases, the bullying had to do with other aspects of the informants as individuals. Descriptions of bullying are given only by one of the four informants who talk about their parent's homosexuality in negative terms.

The stories told by the teenagers and young adults of their teenage years indicate the importance of having friends and of being able to declare a group affiliation. There is reason here to make a connection to current adolescent studies. I referred earlier to research that has shown the specific significance of adults to teenagers. That does not mean that peer groups are less important; rather, it forms the basis for exploring the rules and norms of the social game. According to child psychiatrist Jan Ramström, the teenage group constitutes one important aspect of the younger teenager's way of relating to and dealing with the psychological process that has come to characterize adolescence in contemporary social and
cultural contexts. Ramström's thinking stems from a psychoanalytical perspective based on "self-theories," a perspective that also brings to the fore the significance of narcissism in psychological development. Ramström says that understanding of the importance of the teenage group to teenagers is "central to understanding why all adolescents sometimes appear to be rather narcissistic" (Ramström, 1991, p. 104). The teenage group provides the opportunity to be mirrored, to be like, to create a picture of oneself in relation to others. The psychologist, Jane Kroger has also studied the meaning of the group to teenagers, but from a perspective inspired by Jean Piaget wherein emphasis is on how the self is evolved during a constantly ongoing process of interpretation and creation of meaning with the people in one's environment. She shows that the evolution of the self during this period consists of and is constituted by interpersonal relationships. It is a matter of maintaining the balance between self and others, rather than distinguishing oneself as a different and unique individual in relation to others (Kroger, 1989/1993, pp 153–154).

I have concentrated my report thus far on what the informants related about their fear of being seen as peculiar, or overly different, and how the value judgments of the peer group are highly significant to the teenager's identity creation processes (see also O'Connell, 1994). This is a similar theme in the life stories where younger teenagers described the difficulties consequent upon having a homosexual parent. In the following two different, discernable strategies aimed at managing the desire to conceal the family situation will be focused on. These strategies indicate gender-specific patterns of social actions. On the one hand we find a group of teenage girls and young women who describe a pattern of social action which they have developed that involves letting one girlfriend at a time in on their family situations. This is a way of testing the reactions of the outside world as well as the relationship with the girlfriend. On the other hand, there is a group of teenage boys whose strategy can more closely be described in terms of total secrecy in which the parent's homosexual orientation was consistently concealed from the people around them. I will first present the strategies and then provide a brief analysis based on a gender perspective.

"They were a little surprised, I guess, but they didn't back away"

Three of the teenage girls and one of the young adult women relate that the fact that their mothers lived in lesbian relationships was something they did not talk about with people outside the family. At the same time, they describe how they gradually chose to test the waters by telling their closest girlfriends, one at a time. These young women tell of similar
situations and how nervous they were about revealing the parent's homosexuality and its later significance to the relationship with their girlfriends. Åsa, 14, describes how she chose to tell her girlfriends about the situation that arose when her parents first divorced and her mother thereafter came out as a lesbian. The response she got to that message came to be the deciding factor in solidifying one of these relationships in particular. The girlfriend who showed that she understood the complexity of the situation and who promised her support came to be Åsa's best friend. She showed that she "cared," in Åsa's words. Karin, 17, chose to keep her mother's partnership a secret throughout her childhood. Karin says that only a few of her girlfriends were aware of her family situation. Karin continues: "That is still the way it is - only my real friends know about it." Karin's way of emphasizing real is important in the context because it indicates how this "secrecy" can also be used as a means of testing the strength of friendship. This line of reasoning recurs in other interview narratives. The parent's homosexuality emerges as an important aspect of the child's identity and as something that is a pressing matter to communicate to important people around the child. It is a matter not only of who will be told: how the initiated person reacts is also highly significant, not least so for the future relationship. A similar phenomenon has also been described by Kath Weston (1991), who within the framework of a comprehensive anthropological study interviewed 60 informants who defined themselves as homosexual. According to Weston, the purpose of telling friends that one is homosexual is not only to liberate oneself in conformity with culturally formed demands for honesty and authenticity, it is also a means of testing relationships with important individuals in one's immediate environment (Weston, 1991, p. 51).

Karin, 17, describes how her three girlfriends had responded to the information about her mother's homosexual relationship by exclaiming "And...?!"). In her group, this is a way of saying "And what difference does that make?" Malin, 15, says about her girlfriends' reaction to the message that her mother is lesbian "they were a little surprised, I guess, but they didn't back away." Using a spatial metaphor in terms of closeness/distance, Malin expresses how the information became a means of testing the relationship.

However, several of the young women say how their parents' sexual orientation is no longer something they want to conceal at any cost. It has become unproblematic without being unimportant. A process emerges here that indicates how the family and family relationships evolve due to several factors, not least the fact that teenagers get older and eventually move away from home. Marie, 27, says that she kept it a secret that her mother was lesbian throughout her childhood. In the interview, Marie tells how difficult it was to
keep the secret and the problems it entailed - not only the secrecy itself, but also her feelings of guilt about not having the courage to be open about it. The latter became clear on occasions when she met other children of homosexuals, e.g., while on vacation with her mother and her partner. Marie tells how she felt ashamed and bad when she was confronted with these other children who showed themselves to be open and unafraid on their home turf. Her attitude towards her mother's relationship has changed over time, and this experience has come to be an interesting and exciting aspect of herself. It has become something important to tell others, especially in romantic relationships. She immediately rejects men who "can't handle it" and who display homophobia. On the contrary, openness to the varied expressions of sexuality is a trait that Marie values highly, an opinion that has also been shown in other studies of the children of women in lesbian relationships (Tasker & Golombok, 1997). Similarly, Terese, 25, describes how talking about her mother's homosexuality is a test of the man she has met and how his acceptance becomes a sign of the strength of the relationship. The strategy described in the narratives of these teenage girls and young women indicates the importance they ascribe to relationships and the significance of sharing information and in so doing involving the other person in their lives. Something that is initially important in relationships with girlfriends later becomes important in romantic relationships. In their narratives, we also see a process of change that involves a reduction of the fear of being different and peculiar. In the following the strategy that is seen primarily in the narratives of teenage boys will be presented.

"Just think what the guys would say"

The teenage boys presented in the text above, like Karl, Kristoffer, Nils, and Patrick, can be seen to represent a specific attitude. How these adolescents talk about their encounter with homosexuality is tightly interwoven with an awareness of society's normative attitude towards homosexuality in general. As already described above, it was difficult to carry out these interviews. This was interpreted as an example of how the interview situation itself came to represent the nucleus of the problem, i.e., the unwillingness to talk about the parent's homosexuality with people outside the family. The topic thus came into conflict with the very premises of the interview situation.

A strategy emerges here that seems to be aimed at concealing the homosexuality from the outside world at any cost. Patrick, 14, tells about an event in school during recess. When the boys were standing and talking in a group, a classmate suddenly said "You guys know that
Patrick's dad is gay, don't you?" Patrick then describes his reaction, which was expressed in immediate action. He went up to the boy who spoke the words, pushed him to the ground and said "that isn't true." Patrick's own assessment of the result is: "Now he doesn't think that anymore." This is a clear example of how some of the teenage boys included in this study strive to silence all expressions that imply that the parent is homosexual. This may be interpreted as an attempt to withhold the fact from the outside world. Karl, 15, says explicitly that he has a "phobia" that information about his mother's lesbian relationship will spread "like wildfire." The expression that Karl uses, "just think what the guys would say," suggests in which group the information could be spread like wildfire. It refers to a group of friends, who see each other in school and after school, in short, a gang of guys age 13–15 who hang out together and do things together. Karl is part of this group, a group that means a great deal to him. In summary, the personal narratives of these young boys are characterized by references to this dense resistance to the information about the parent's sexual orientation becoming common knowledge in the peer group.

There is reason to ask what is at stake for these young teenagers, both girls and boys. One reason given by the informants themselves is the fear of not being considered ordinary and normal and consequently being thought of as homosexual herself or himself. Most informants describe having thoughts about their own sexuality in terms of homosexuality at one time or another, related to their parents' sexual orientation. However, it should be noted that the boys' strategy in handling the information concerning the homosexual parent toward the social context differs from the girls'. Girls seem to manage the information by means of gradual revelation to girlfriends and boyfriends, while boys seems to manage the issue through dense secrecy. There is reason to ask to what extent homosexuality are accorded different meanings for young teenage boys respectively girls in relation to friends and other youngsters in the same age group.

**Gender-related interpretation and patterns of social action**

Sociologically oriented studies of the social lives and interpersonal contacts of adolescents has shown how the teenage group is invested with great meaning for young teenage boys and that homophobia is often strongly present in these groups of young men (Henriksson & Lundahl, 1993). This homophobia, in the sense of taking on society's negative attitudes towards homosexuality, is used as a means of presenting oneself. "By distancing oneself from a group, one speaks simultaneously about who one 'really' is, or wants to be" (ibid, p. 284).
How teenage boys keep their parents' sexual orientation secret from their group of friends may thus be seen as part of the process of creating their identity as young men. British sociologically oriented studies suggest that when teenage boys in groups of friends and in contacts with girls strive to present themselves as heterosexual, it is also a matter of asserting their masculinity. In this context, the boys must demonstrate a masculinity that is characterized by social and cultural assumptions that they are active in relation to women and that the male body attracts women. Homosexuality may thus be said to challenge a traditional view of masculinity insofar as that the view of the biological sexes' complementarity and sexuality as a game of opposites is called into question (Connell, 1995). In groups of teenage boys, this is expressed in heterosexist attitudes and reactions and the constant clarification that they are actively interested in girls (Phoenix, 1997). This struggle incessantly to assert and imitate this normative heterosexuality has been interpreted as a sign of its importance to how young men also reproduce masculinity (Kehily & Nayak, 1997).

The teenage boys in this study have personal experience that heterosexuality is not self-evident. In a traditional nuclear family, or a family with a heterosexual single parent, heterosexuality is taken for granted and is thus invisible. Conversely, in a family where adults live in a homosexual relationship, this assumption is jeopardized. Suddenly, sexual identity emerges as something above and beyond biological sex and therefore less self-evident. That which these teenagers have been faced with is a view of sexuality that is taken for granted and thus open to change (Garnets & Kimmel, 1993). The strategy described by some of the young teenage boys included in the study may thus be interpreted as a means of handling a contradiction. It is about a conflict between on the one hand the view of love and sexuality found in their personal family life, to which they feel strong loyalty and on the other the demands for adaptation to a heterosexual norm that may characterize the formation of groups of teenage boys. When that happens, the young teenage boy in his encounters with peers sometimes chooses to conceal and withhold the part of his life that could be perceived as a sign of "inadequate" masculinity.

The teenage girls presented above and their endeavors to conceal their parents' sexual orientation also indicate a desire for conformity in relation to peers. However, we do not find here the same strong resistance to the risk of met by with heterosexist reactions. One of the main focus points of British and Scandinavian sociological research on the lives and social conditions of girls and young women has been the meaning of relationships in what appears to be culturally and socially accepted femininity. Among young women, other means of managing the normativity of the heterosexual relationship emerge compared to that which
may be said to characterize groups of young men (Bjerrum Nielsen & Rudberg, 1994; Phoenix, 1997). The heterosexual norm is upheld and articulated through how young women shape their bodies and appearance using clothing and makeup. This is certainly done in order to attract men, but the performance takes place in close and intimate interaction among girls. Studies of teenage girls’ creation of identity and consumption of culture have shown how young women both speak ironically of and resist a traditional view of women as passive by exploiting and playing along with traditional sex roles. It seems as if homosexuality as a phenomenon does not challenge girls’ relationships to one another in peer groups to the same extent as in groups of boys/young men. Teenage girls and young women work together to shape themselves and their bodies. To display themselves as young women and explore their sexual attractiveness in interaction with each other does not threaten the heterosexual norm in the same way as when men display themselves to each other and express concern for one another (Phoenix, 1997).

In summary, this indicates how norms and value judgments on femininity and masculinity in relation to issues concerning sexuality in general are accorded various meanings in groups of boys versus groups of girls. This may contribute to deeper understanding of the strong resistance that certain teenage boys demonstrate against the information about the parent’s sexual orientation becoming known amongst their friends. It also implies how the way that girls relate to one another is part of the creation of femininity. It is at the same time important to remember that this is one aspect of a more complex and composite picture of how young teenagers manage parental homosexuality in relation to peer groups. There is reason to clarify that the informants, girls and boys alike, state how their desire to conceal the parent’s homosexuality is also a matter of avoiding the risk of disturbing the balance in the group. If a teenager tells that his mom is lesbian or her dad is gay, there is a risk that their friends will avoid sexual allusions and heterosexist jokes out of consideration for the person who has told about his or her family. In the study by Kehily and Nayak (1997) mentioned earlier, humor in particular is presented as a central aspect of how teenage boys create and shape expressions of masculinity. Joking and goofing off become means of both regulating conflicts and concealing embarrassment and uncertainty. Several of the teenage boys in this study assert that they do not want to be "subjected to" the accommodation they risk being given if the parent’s homosexuality becomes common knowledge. Karin, 17, underscores the importance of allowing conversation and discussions to flow when teenagers meet, conversations that seldom are about parents and family life, but which constitute the basis for the group’s interaction. It is the participation in the group that is the point for
adolescents, both girls and boys, rather than that which distinguishes them as individuals. Thus, it is important to emphasize that even if gender-specific differences have been brought to the fore in the preceding discussion, there are also several similarities here. Accordingly, it is the strategies, i.e., *how the children manage the issue of parental homosexuality*, that is presented as gender-specific, which does not automatically mean that all girls and boys conform to these patterns. There are teenagers in the informant group who do not demonstrate this endeavor to conceal their family situations from the outside world, regardless of whether concerning a boy or a girl, with a lesbian mother or homosexual father.

I have concentrated the text on varying means of managing the fear of value judgments by the outside world and teenage groups. However, it is apparent that there exists variation over time here as well, and the teenagers and young adults' accounts on how they conceal and withhold information imply a process. Several of the informants describe how the fear that information about their family situations will be spread seems to be a transitory phenomenon, which I will discuss in the next section.

*From concealment to opening up*

Several of the older teenagers express how they *no longer* are afraid of what their friends might say about their parents' homosexuality. They tell their friends and do not fear or experience being ridiculed or derided. The teenage girls described above, who chose to tell one girlfriend at a time, demonstrate a strategy aimed at testing the waters and creating progressively more stable ground to stand on. They have control over what happens if they reveal the family situation and eventually, as they get older, they place less importance on who will be allowed to know about the once-so-secret life. Karin, 17, says about a situation that occurred recently when an acquaintance found out by coincidence about Karin's family circumstances, "it doesn't matter now." This process, which for some begins with a strong desire to conceal the family situation, gradually evolves into a more open attitude. The desire and endeavor to conceal, or to acknowledge that one is the child of a homosexual parent, becomes more a matter of *context* than of which people are allowed to know about it. Many of the informants declare repeatedly that there is no reason to mention the parent's homosexuality in *every* context. Adolescents and young adults do not talk about their families or parents and even less so about their parents' sexuality, especially not when they are in a group. But that does not mean that they conceal the fact and keep it secret in contexts where there is reason to refer to it. Once they open up and start talking about it, it proves that the
listeners often have a relative or friend who is homosexual and they are eager to talk about it. Denise, 23, talks about her girlfriend who defines herself as lesbian and who was keen to hear about Denise's father's situation and life as a homosexual.

These narratives about when the informants, after a few years, decide to be open about their parent's (or parents') homosexuality is reminiscent of how Erving Goffman describes the difference between concealing and covering as different aspects of information control. The former, concealment, is aimed at withholding and concealing that which is at risk for being stigmatized, unlike covering, which has to do with awareness of society's stereotypical reactions. The result is that people in certain situations choose not to display that which may engender negative value judgments, without necessarily denying or withholding information should the question arise (Goffman, 1963/1973, pp 125–128). This strategy is strongly reminiscent of descriptions by homosexual individuals and couples of the conditions of "outness." The desire and the decision not to live in secrecy are adapted to the current context. This is a process based on constant awareness of societal heterosexism, which is manifested for instance in the choice of homosexual couples to refrain from holding hands in public (Parikas, 1995, pp 77–79). This is an approach that is sometimes called "rational outness" (Garnets & Kimmel, 1993, p. 22). The expression refers to a desire to be honest and open about one's life, which does not necessarily mean that the individual always makes his or her sexual orientation clear, especially not when there is risk they will be harassed or insulted.

It is also possible to discern a specific aspect of this process towards progressively greater openness. Marie, 27, says that her parent's homosexuality constituted a threat when she was young. When she got older and moved away from home, it became a status-conferring and important aspect of her social identity. The desire to be like, which may somewhat generally be said to characterize early adolescence, gradually becomes a desire to be different. In that context, the knowledge that these young adults have, which is in part about understanding of homosexuality and alternative family configurations, becomes status-conferring "social capital" that they can invest in encounters with others. This also comes to expression in Rikard, 26, who describes how he is becoming more willing all the time to tell people that his mother is homosexual and how this arouses attention and interest in a positive manner, unlike the negative reactions that characterized his childhood.

The process that can be discerned, from concealment to progressively greater openness, is reminiscent in form and content of "coming out" stories (Henriksson, 1994, pp 210–214; Lundahl, 1998, pp 67–69). As a conclusion to the report of how daughters and sons perceive their homosexual parents I will elaborate on this process.
Conclusion: "Coming out" as the child of homosexual parents

The term "coming out" is now a generally accepted expression for growing realization and acceptance of having homosexual feelings and a way by which one chooses eventually to be open about it towards the people in one's social environment. The expression is shorthand for "coming out of the closet." Literary scholar Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues on this subject as follows.

The gay closet is not a feature only of the lives of gay people. But for many gay people it is still the fundamental feature of social life; and there can be few gay people ... in whose lives the closet is not still a shaping presence.

(Sedgwick, 1990, p. 68)

Sedgwick shows that the closet is a metaphor that has also come to be used in a more general sense, especially in descriptions of how individuals who have identified themselves as belonging to an oppressed group have chosen to step forward - "come out" - and clarify their identities in contexts where they were previously unknown. Sedgwick's main point however is that the metaphor is strongly associated with homosexuality or, more accurately, homophobia. "Vibrantly resonant as the image of the closet is for many modern oppressions, it is indicative for homophobia in a way it cannot be for other oppressions" (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 75).

Sedgwick emphasizes the specificity of homosexuality as an invisible stigma, compared with oppression based on more visible aspects such as age, size, disability, sex, or ethnicity (ibid, p. 75). This is reminiscent of Goffman's discussion of various types of stigma, such as physical marks and signs, personal character traits, and ethnic stigmas. In social encounters, these stigmas are visible and apparent to the social environment to varying extents. This affects how the stigmatizing process is expressed as opportunities to conceal or display the trait at risk for stigmatization vary (Goffman, 1963/1973, p. 14). However, the discussion of the closet as a metaphor for the encounter with societal prejudices about homosexuality is significant in this context. In this study, it does not have to do with realization of and openness to homosexual feelings in the informants themselves, but rather realization of and openness towards parental homosexuality. The informants in this study do not present...
themselves as homosexual, but they have grown up with and had close relationships with people who define themselves as homosexual or bisexual.

That which distinguishes the narratives that could be called "coming out as the child of a homosexual" is that the desire to conceal the family situation from the outside world turns into an acceptance of the family pattern as part of the child's personal identity. That which is special and different about a family with homosexual parents becomes something positive, which is especially noticeable in the interviews with young adults. Eva, 24, describes the strong feelings awakened in her whenever she sees symbols of gay rights organizations, such as a rainbow flag: "That is my background... it is part of my life." Through having lived with and gotten to know individuals, parents first and foremost but also partners and friends of homosexual parents, the children as individuals have gained insight into the conditions of stigmatization and thus the marginalized group's strong cohesiveness on the one hand and exclusion on the other.

The meaning of having a close relative, in this case a parent, with homosexual orientation is appropriately described using terminology coined by Erving Goffman. The children of homosexuals can be designated as wise people, "thus, people who are normal, but whose special situation has caused them to become very familiar with the secret life of the stigmatized individual and to be sympathetic towards it" (Goffman, 1963/1973, s. 36). Wise people not only have knowledge of and are familiar with what it means to be subjected to a stigmatizing perspective; they are also at risk of themselves being subjected to this stigmatization. According to Goffman, people manage this situation in various ways. There are those who adopt and assimilate the stigmatized person's situation and those who avoid or end the relationship in question (Goffman, 1963/1973).

I was able to discern a number of strategies in the life stories analyzed in the preceding text and they may be regarded and interpreted as various kinds of information control. One strategy is aimed at telling one friend at a time. This is an example of how the world is divided up into those who know and those who don't know, which I have discussed as gender-specific insofar as it has connections to contemporary interpretations of femininity. Another strategy is simply to conceal everything that has to do with the family situation, a strategy that may be realized in various ways, such as not bringing friends home. I have also discussed a strong desire to conceal coupled with an array of different actions as gender-specific, since it seems connected to the endeavor to uphold traditional notions of masculinity. A third strategy is constituted of what Goffman calls "disidentification," which has to do with inviting friends into the home, but asserting that mom or dad's partner is a "brother," "sister," "friend," or
similar. A fourth strategy is also discernable, that of finding "sore spots" in the other. A final and fifth strategy is, as several of the informants describe, to divert all conversations that stray onto the issue of the parent's homosexuality. These strategies could be seen as problem-focused coping strategies in the sense that they are reactions to a perceived conflict between loyalty towards the family and its norms and values and the peer group's demands for homogeneity, which are in part based on heterosexism (see Saffron, 1996, for a similar argument).

The teenage years may thus be said to be a critical point for some of the adolescents interviewed in this study. It is a time when social interaction and participation in peer groups is an important element in the teenager's creation of identity, when issues of similarity/dissimilarity related to sexuality, love, occupation, education, and other aspects are brought to a head. This endeavor to conceal seems however to be transitory, insofar as that several of the older teenagers and young adults describe how openness about the family situation no longer constitutes a threat. Goffman writes that a wise person "must in order to become wise usually first have gone through a sort of deep and far-reaching personal experience" (Goffman, 1963/1973, s. 41 ). This is a process that bears great similarities with the moral career that the stigmatized person undergoes. It is a matter of learning to manage and live with demands for normality and adaptation communicated in society and simultaneously to get to know oneself and accept "one's own" stigma (ibid, pp 40–49). In other words, we find here an attempt to be open in relation to people in one's environment, which has been shown to be an important factor in studies of psychological health in general (Strommen, 1993, p. 262).
6. Summarizing discussion

The study shows how children's and adolescents' perceptions and experiences of growing up with parents who are homosexual vary in several respects. We find some life stories characterized by a view of homosexuality as something natural and obvious. In these stories family life is described in several different ways, but the parent's homosexuality is presented neither as a social or psychological point of conflict. This attitude is found in slightly less than half of the 31 interviews with teenagers and young adults. This does not imply lack of awareness of heterosexism, but only that the informants have either not personally been exposed to it or that they have not felt threatened by it. The interview material also contains life stories where problems and difficulties surface. It seems that teenagers with homosexual parents may, in the encounter with other young people, be confronted more clearly with specific development tasks. On the one hand, this is a matter of closeness to the homosexual parent and loyalty to the family. On the other, it is about managing participation in a peer group where similarity is the basis for belonging. When a child has a homosexual parent, there is a risk of appearing special and different, with or without elements of heterosexism, which is not a desirable situation for adolescents who crave participation and belonging. The desire to conceal the family situation may thus be interpreted as a consequence of the specific social conditions of the youth culture and the teenage years. In the personal narratives where this confrontation with societal norms and values takes on prominence, the informants describe a number of different strategies aimed at managing this conflict. It is also possible here to discern gender-related frameworks of interpretation and action. My analysis indicates how the conditions for patterns of interaction and views on homosexuality and heterosexuality differ between groups of young women and groups of young men, which in turn is closely associated with traditional notions of masculinity and femininity.

However, in the informants' narratives on perceptions and experiences of attempting to conceal their situations at home, a variation over time emerges that is important to emphasize. It seems that this fear of being excluded from the peer group subsides as the teenagers get older. Some of the older informants, both teenagers and young adults, stress how when they were teenagers their parent's homosexuality was a problem that endured for various lengths of time. There are thus grounds to interpret and write about these problems in terms of a process. The desire to conceal the family situation that is strong for a younger teenager later
evolves into a progressively more open attitude as they get older. This process lasts for varying lengths of time, from being a problem that begins and ends within 24 hours to one that lasts for a few months, and sometimes for a few years during adolescence.

A teenager's desire to conceal a parent's homosexuality does not mean that the parent concerned is portrayed negatively or rejected. The relationship between the child and the parent may seem positive, which does not preclude conflicts and arguments. Conflicts and arguments in the family have to do with the teenager's testing of an independent position towards his or her parents, because they are an element of the environment that is both evaluated and reexamined from the teenager's perspective. This does not mean that the parents lose their relational meaning, which is extremely clear in this study.

The significance of a good relationship with the parent is something that perhaps becomes even more distinct in the narratives that communicate a different feeling and experience. In the four cases where informants described negative perceptions of the parent or parents' homosexuality, the relationship with the parents is also described as inadequate. The informants' narratives about negative perceptions of homosexuality are strongly characterized by descriptions of family life wherein the children felt shunted aside and devoid of influence with their parents.

In this study, the voices of children of homosexuals were heard. The stories presented are varied, with a number of personal narratives that depict different perceptions and experiences of having had one or two homosexual parents. An analysis of these life stories shows the importance of taking account of the child's age and phase in life as well as the perception of their relationship to the concerned parent. Both of these factors were significant to the understanding of how children perceive and have perceived parental homosexuality.

The change that some of the adolescents relate having gone through, from wanting to conceal to living in openness, is strongly reminiscent of descriptions by homosexual individuals and couples of the social conditions of outness. "Coming out" as the child of a homosexual or "coming out" as homosexual emerges as a psychological and social change process. It may be seen as a story of finding oneself or getting to know oneself, which has also been described in several earlier studies in the field. Meanwhile, it is important to stress the normativity implicit in such narratives of evolution and change. We find a number of demands here for reflexivity and self-observation as a path towards greater personal maturity, which have come to constitute key characteristics in modern society (Giddens, 1991). The linear course of development that becomes conspicuous in coming out stories should be regarded with some caution and not automatically considered as the "best" or only possible
way of talking about oneself and life in a "homosexual family." This narrative form may also be seen as a cultural framework with specific narrative codes and conventions for how something should be told, which entails not only possibilities, but also limits.

This caution concerning the form of a narrative and its normative assumptions is important in relation to the issue of the meaning of openness. Rejecting openness in certain contexts or expressing a desire to conceal one's home situation may be regarded from a normative psychological development model as "immaturity" or "regression." On the contrary, this study shows the importance of seeing openness as closely connected to concrete contexts and everyday practices, rather than as stages in a linear development process. The various types of family life presented by the informants in this study illustrate the complexity that is hidden behind issues of openness in relation to children's perceptions and experiences. An important finding is that there are no given and unambiguous connections between how the parent manages and talks about outness and the child's perceptions of the parent's homosexuality.

The focus of this study is on children's perceptions of having a parent who defines himself or herself as homosexual. Erik Strommen suggests that three components may be discerned in the way that relatives receive and react to homosexuality in the immediate or extended family. These are a) the family's values concerning homosexuality, b) how these values affect the continued relationship, and c) the family's options for managing conflicts of both social and psychological nature (Strommen, 1993, p. 259). When this applies to children, these components are accorded specific meanings. Firstly, there is reason to believe that children ascribe positive value to homosexuality as long as their relationship with the parent is good, regardless of awareness of heterosexism. Secondly, there is reason to consider the child's age in order to understand the importance they ascribe to homosexuality and heterosexist norms and attitudes. The teenage years may sometimes, but not always, be a period in life when the daughter or son's endeavors to adapt to the peer group engender a desire to keep the family situation secret. The tools required to resolve this conflict are once again a good and functional relationship with the parent - as perceived by the child - and opportunities personally to control the degree of openness towards the outside world.

This study shows that parents' romantic relationships and sexual orientation cannot be seen as isolated phenomena that unambiguously affect how children and adolescents perceive their family situations or how parenthood is practiced, which is consistent with earlier research in the field.
References


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The Department of Child Studies

Linköping University hosts an interdisciplinary Institute of Advanced Study known as the Institute of Tema Research. The Institute of Tema Research is divided into five separate departments, each of which administers its own graduate program, and each of which conducts interdisciplinary research on specific, though broadly defined, problem areas, or "themes" (tema in Swedish, hence the name of the Institute). The five departments which compose the Institute of Tema Research are: the Department of Child Studies (Tema B), the Department of Health and Society (Tema H), the Department of Communication Studies (Tema K), the Department of Technology and Social Change (Tema T), and the Department of Water and Environmental Studies (Tema V).

The Department of Child Studies was founded in 1988 to provide a research and learning environment geared toward the theoretical and empirical study of both children and the social and cultural discourses that define what children are and endow them with specific capacities, problems, and subjectivities. A specific target of research is the processes through which understandings of 'normal' children and a 'normal' childhood are constituted, and the roles that children and others play in reinforcing or contesting those understandings. The various research projects carried out at the department focus on understanding the ways in which children interpret their lives, how they communicate with others, and how they produce and/or understand literature, language, mass media and art. Research also documents and analyses the historical processes and patterns of socialization that structure the ways in which childhood and children can be conceived and enacted in various times, places and contexts.

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