



**STUDYDADDY**

**Get Homework Help  
From Expert Tutor**

**Get Help**

## **Family Members' Support for GLBT Issues: The Role of Family Adaptability and Cohesion**

TERESA REEVES and SHARON G. HORNE

*The University of Memphis, Memphis, Tennessee, United States*

SHARON SCALES ROSTOSKY and ELLEN D. B. RIGGLE

*University of Kentucky, Lexington, Kentucky, United States*

LINDA R. BAGGETT and REBECCA A. AYCOCK

*The University of Memphis, Memphis, Tennessee, United States*

*Families high in cohesion and adaptability are often able to function better than families low in cohesion and adaptability. This study hypothesized that heterosexual family members who report their family adaptability and/or cohesion to be high rather than low would have more contact with their GLBT family member, report more GLBT friends, family members, and GLBT acquaintances, as well as have more favorable attitudes toward and greater knowledge of GLBT issues. This study explored family environment (adaptability and cohesion as assessed by FACES III) of 136 family members of GLBT individuals and knowledge and attitudes (assessed by the Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Knowledge and Attitudes Scale for Heterosexuals; GLB-KASH). Participants reporting high adaptability in their families reported having more contact with the GLBT family member and more GLBT acquaintances than participants reporting low adaptability in their families. Participants from more cohesive families reported more GLBT friends and family members, more knowledge about GLBT issues, and more internalized affirmativeness than participants reporting unbalanced cohesion. Participants from families high in both cohesion and adaptability reported more contact with GLBT family members, more GLBT friends and family members, more GLBT acquaintances, more knowledge about GLBT issues, and more internalized affirmativeness than participants reporting either unbalanced cohesion or adaptability in their families. Implications for counseling are discussed.*

---

Address correspondence to Teresa Reeves, University of Memphis, Memphis, 325 Watkins St., Memphis, TN 38104. E-mail: reeves.teresa@gmail.com

**KEYWORDS** gay, lesbian, bisexual, family, adaptability, cohesion

## INTRODUCTION

Coming out to family of origin is one of the most challenging developmental tasks for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) individuals (Savin-Williams, 2001; Willoughby, Malik, & Lindahl, 2006). However, despite the challenge of self-disclosing to family members, many GLBT individuals appear to be out to their families of origin about their GLBT identities (Schope, 2002). Once self-disclosure has occurred, the family members of a GLBT individual often have a range of initial responses, including feelings of loss and disappointment (Robinson, Walters, & Skeen, 1989), anxiety about being excluded from the GLBT person's life (Savin-Williams & Dubé, 1998) as well as guilt, anger, and sadness (Herdt & Koff, 2000). Family members of GLBT individuals then appear to go through their own process of identifying as family members of a GLBT person (LaSala, 1998; Mohr & Fassinger, 2003). This process varies depending on the family member's desire and ability to integrate their family member's sexual or gender identity; common reactions include rejection, denial, tacit acknowledgement, tolerance, and complete acceptance of the GLBT family member (LaSala, 1998).

Family systems that are connected and flexible, or adaptable, prior to disclosure appear to be less negative toward their GLBT family members than families reported to be disconnected, rigid, or authoritarian in their relationships with one another (Willoughby et al., 2006). Therefore, a family climate that is connected and flexible may be best prepared for the onset of stressors and may protect against the impact of challenging events on a family system. Such a family climate may also enable family members to better integrate their GLBT family member once the family system has responded to the initial disclosure of GLBT identity. These flexible family environments may allow members to take risks to understand and appreciate GLBT issues once they learn they have a GLBT family member. The current study explores how family environment (cohesion and adaptability) may be associated with connection to GLBT issues, including GLBT-affirmative attitudes and interaction with GLBT community among family members of GLBT individuals.

Family systems that are cohesive and adaptable in their relationship dynamics tend to be more functional compared to families that report a lack of cohesion or adaptability (Olson, 2000). The Circumplex Model of marital and family systems was developed to explain how families function in a healthy or dysfunctional manner; it includes two major components of family functioning: *family cohesion* and *family adaptability* (Olson & Gorall, 2003). *Family cohesion* is the degree to which family members experience an emotional bond with one another. This dimension includes how well

families maintain boundaries and form coalitions, engage in decision making, and share interests, as well as use time and space for family connection (Olson, 1996, 2000; Olson & Gorall, 2003). Conceptually, this aspect of the Circumplex Model captures how families balance their separateness and their togetherness. In contrast, *family adaptability* refers to the amount of flexibility in family leadership and the degree to which family roles fluctuate and alter to meet family needs and changing family circumstances. This dimension reflects contemporary family systems theories that emphasize the importance of family change with respect to rules and leadership (Carter & McGoldrick, 1988; Olson & Gorall, 2003). Conceptually, family adaptability captures how families balance stability versus change.

According to Olson (1996), balanced family systems function in the center of the poles of these two dimensions. For example, a family considered balanced in cohesion would effectively maneuver between spending time together as a family and engaging in separate activities as individuals or in subsystems of the family. On the other hand, a family considered balanced in adaptability would respond to change with flexibility while maintaining family equilibrium. When family cohesion is unbalanced, or at the extremes, the family is either disconnected or enmeshed. In terms of adaptability, an unbalanced family would either be too rigid or too flexible in its rules and functioning when confronted with systemic changes. Combining the two dimensions, a balanced family would be both separated and connected (i.e., cohesive) as well as structured and flexible (i.e., adaptable).

Families with balanced types have been found to generally function more effectively, particularly during times of stress, than unbalanced types (Cumsille & Epstein, 1994; Friedman, Nelson, Smith, & Dworkin, 1988; Kouneski, 2001; Olson, 1996, 2000). The curvilinear model of family cohesion and adaptability (i.e., balanced cohesion and adaptability are found in the center between disconnected and enmeshed and rigid and too flexible, respectively), however, has been re-examined; increasingly empirical research has found a linear relationship existing between cohesion and adaptability with positive family functioning (Anderson & Gavazzi, 1990; Cumsille & Epstein, 1994; Green, Harris, Forte, & Robinson, 1991). In particular within the GLBT family literature (Willoughby et al., 2006; Zacks, Green, & Morrow, 1988), cohesion and adaptability have been found to have a positive relationship to healthy family functioning. Family stress theory has usually been offered as an explanation for the role of cohesion and adaptability in healthy family functioning (McKenry & Price, 2000). Families that have relational resources available prior to experiencing a stressor may be able to effectively respond, thus lessening the negative impact of the stressor. Therefore, the degree of intra-family strain during stressful periods can be associated with the level of adaptability and cohesion exhibited (Lavee & Olson, 1991). More cohesive families may experience less disruption due to stressors and more adaptable families may be better able to recover from

stressors (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983). Therefore, cohesion and adaptability may be considered protective factors when families experience stressful events (McKenry & Price, 2000).

Disclosure of GLBT identity by a family member within a family system is generally experienced as a major stressor within the family unit (Ben-Ari, 1995; LaSala, 1998; Mohr & Fassinger, 2003). Reactions range from overt hostility toward the GLBT individual, to avoidance or disengagement of family members, to active support of the GLBT family member (LaSala, 1998; Muller, 1987). Family dynamics may change after disclosure (Savin-Williams, 2001) and family responses typically improve with time after the disclosure (Savin-Williams & Dubé, 1998). However, most heterosexual family members must adapt to having a GLBT family member, and this developmental process often involves self-examination of attitudes toward homosexuality and their own coming-out process in identifying as a family member with a GLBT relative (Gallor, 2006; Worthington, Dillon, & Becker-Schutte, 2005).

In a study of 72 gay men who came out to their parents, it was found that high family cohesion and adaptability prior to coming out was related to more positive reactions from parents when compared with gay men who reported having families with low cohesion and adaptability (Willoughby et al., 2006). The authors concluded that families with systems that are high in cohesion and adaptability may prioritize the family system over social norms and reject social attitudes that are negative toward homosexuality when integrating the knowledge of having a GLBT family member. Therefore, we expect more cohesive and adaptable family systems to exhibit more favorable attitudes toward homosexuality, to be more knowledgeable of GLBT issues, and to be more connected to GLBT community than family members with less cohesive and adaptable families.

Research exploring the relationship of cohesion and adaptability beyond initial self-disclosure within GLBT individuals' families of origin is limited. Gallor (2006) found that positive attitudes toward homosexuality were associated with better parent-child relationship functioning among parents of GLBT individuals. These parents were all attending PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays), a support and advocacy group for family and friends of GLBT individuals, and reported that their involvement with this organization increased their positive attitudes. If highly cohesive and adaptable families are more likely to disallow negative social stigmatization of gays and lesbians to impact their family systems than families low in cohesion and adaptability, then it is likely that this rejection of social stigmatization would be evident in a range of attitudes toward homosexuality.

Research on attitudes toward homosexuality has advanced beyond initial assessments that explored a continuum from condemnation to tolerance, primarily focused on gay and lesbian individuals and their access to civil rights (Herek, 1984; Worthington, Savoy, Dillon, & Vernaglia, 2002). For example, new conceptualizations describe affirmativeness of GLBT individuals to not

merely represent an absence of heterosexism, but to include knowledge of GLBT community history and symbols, full endorsement of the civil rights of GLBT individuals, as well as acknowledgement of heterosexual privilege that goes beyond tolerance (Worthington, Dillon, & Becker-Schutte, 2005). These affirmative attitudes include a lack of religious conflict with GLBT identities and an internal sense of acceptance that recognizes one's own heterosexual privilege. Cohesive and adaptable families would be expected to have moved beyond superficial support for GLBT issues to active affirmativeness of GLBT individuals and their rights, and to be more knowledgeable of GLBT history and symbols.

As well, family members from cohesive and adaptable family systems may be more likely to engage with the GLBT community in comparison to less cohesive and adaptable family systems. For example, families that are better able to change their family system to adapt to changing situations may be more likely to increase their support system with other GLBT friends and family members than less flexible families. Similarly, family members from connected families may be more likely to reach out and create emotional bonds with GLBT acquaintances. This connection may extend to their own GLBT family member, as well, with greater family contact with the GLBT family member exhibited by family members from cohesive and adaptable family systems.

Existing research on family systems has considered cohesion and adaptability either jointly or as separate variables. While some researchers indicate that cohesion and adaptability work together (Olson, 2000), other research has identified that cohesion and adaptability may affect various areas of life to different extents (Cumsille & Epstein, 1994; Vandeleur, Perrez, & Schoebi, 2007). For example, Cumsille and Epstein (1994) found an inverse significant relationship between adolescent depression and family cohesion, but no significant relationship for family adaptability and depression. Vandeleur and colleagues (2007) found greater self-esteem and greater perspective taking of mothers was related to higher adaptability but not cohesion. For daughters both cohesion and adaptability were related to perspective taking and adaptability alone was related to emotional state. For sons, adaptability was related to perspective taking and cohesion was related to self-esteem. Because cohesion and adaptability may differ in their relationships to GLBT attitudes and connection, we explored each dimension to determine how it might associate with attitudes toward GLBT issues and connection to GLBT community for family members of GLBT individuals. We also explored whether family members who reported having families high in both adaptability and cohesion with these factors were more likely to be more connected and affirmative.

Research has found that stress for GLBT individuals can be buffered by social support and personal resilience (Diaz, Ayala, & Bein, 2004; Diplacido, 1998; Meyer, 2003), but few studies have considered the experience of family

members of GLBT individuals beyond self-disclosure and coming-out processes (D'Augelli, 2005). Willoughby and his colleagues (2006) speculated that families with high cohesion and adaptability may value the family's needs over the societal message of homonegativity. Therefore, we explored whether family members who are high in either cohesion or adaptability, or both cohesion and adaptability, would report more GLBT-affirmative attitudes, greater knowledge, and more connection to GLBT community.

### Hypothesis

Family members who report belonging to families high in adaptability or cohesion, or high in both, will have more contact with their GLBT family member, report more GLBT friends and family members, report more GLBT acquaintances, and have more favorable attitudes toward GLBT issues than family members reporting families that are less adaptable or less cohesive.

## METHOD

### Participants

One hundred thirty-six family members of GLBT individuals participated in this study. Seventy-six percent were women and 23% were men. The average age was 47, ranging from 19 to 76 years old. Family members reported knowing their GLBT family member's sexual orientation on average for 14 years. Ninety-three percent of the participants identified as European-American, 2% as Hispanic/Latino/Chicano, 2% as Biracial/Multiracial, and less than 1% as African American. Seventy-eight percent had an undergraduate or graduate degree. Fifty-eight percent reported full-time employment, 11% were employed part-time, and 13% were retired. The median annual personal income was \$40,000 and median annual household income was \$80,000. Sixty-one percent of the sample reported being married, 15% were living with their other-sex partner, 11% were single, and 10% were divorced. Forty-eight percent of our participants were parents, 29% were siblings, 7% were aunts or uncles, 4.4% were children, 8.1% were extended family, 2.9% were spouses or partners, and 2.9% were nieces or nephews. Participants reported that of their GLBT family members, 51.5% identified as lesbian, 38.2% identified as gay, 4.4% identified as bisexual women, 2.9% identified as bisexual men, .7% identified as transgender, and 2.2% chose "other" as the GLBT individual's identity.

### Measures

#### BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Participants were asked relevant demographic information, including age, gender, education, ethnicity, relationship status, income, relationship to the

GLBT family member, years known of GLBT family member's sexual and gender identity, and sexual and gender identity of the GLBT family member.

#### FAMILY ADAPTABILITY AND COHESION EVALUATION SCALES (FACES)

FACES III (Olson, Portner, & Lavee, 1985) is a 20-item self-report inventory that assesses family functioning, which is defined by the degree of reported adaptability and cohesion. The 10-item adaptability subscale includes discipline, leadership, roles, and rules. The cohesion subscale includes emotional bonding, family boundaries, interests and recreation, as well as supportive-ness. Participants' responses are based on a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from almost never to almost always the degree to which each question per-tains to their family. A clause was added to each item stem to clarify that participants were to answer the question with their current family (that in-cluded their GLBT family member) in mind. Subscale scores range from 10 to 50, with higher scores indicating more family adaptability and/or cohesion. Following Willoughby and colleagues (2006), we used a median split for adaptability and cohesion; scores below the median were classified as low and scores above the median were classified as high. The instrument has demonstrated content validity and discrimination between types of families, with test-retest reliability ranges from .80 to .83 (Olson & Gorall, 2003). In-ternal consistency for the current study was .76 for adaptability and .89 for cohesion.

#### LESBIAN, GAY, AND BISEXUAL KNOWLEDGE AND ATTITUDES SCALE FOR HETEROSEXUALS (GLB-KASH)

The GLB-KASH (Worthington, Dillon, & Becker-Schutte, 2005) is a 28-item self-report measure that assesses for knowledge and attitudes about GLB individuals using a 5-point Likert-type scale. The measure consists of five factors including Hate (6 items), Knowledge (5 items), Religious Conflict (7 items), GLB Civil Rights (5 items), and Internalized Affirmativeness (5 items). The Knowledge subscale assesses the amount of knowledge the individual has about GLB issues. A sample item from the Knowledge sub-scale is "I could educate others about the history and symbolism behind the pink triangle." The Religious Conflict subscale assesses the degree of conflict one has with traditional religious beliefs. An item from the Religious Conflict subscale is "I can accept GLB people even though I condemn their behavior." The GLB Civil Rights subscale assesses one's support for civil rights of GLB individuals. An item from the Civil Rights subscale is "I think marriage should be legal for same-sex couples." The Internalized Affirma-tiveness subscale measures the extent of the participant's internalization of affirmative beliefs about GLB individuals. An item from the Internalized

Affirmativeness subscale is "Feeling attracted to another person of the same sex would not make me uncomfortable."

Responses for each question range from "1—Very characteristic of me" to "5—Very uncharacteristic of me." Scores are summed on each subscale. Lower scores indicate greater Knowledge, greater Religious Conflict, greater endorsement of Civil Rights, and higher levels of Internalized Affirmativeness. The measure has been found to have sufficient test-retest reliability, internal consistency, and discriminant, convergent, and construct validity. For this study, the internal consistency coefficients for each subscale were Hate (.48), Knowledge (.86), Religious Conflict (.60), GLB Civil Rights (.69), and Internalized Affirmativeness (.72). The Hate subscale was not included in these analyses due to low reliability. Results should be interpreted with caution with the Religious Conflict and Civil Rights subscales.

#### FAMILY CONTACT AND GLBT INDIVIDUALS KNOWN

The frequency of family contact was asked with a single item: "How frequently do you and this family member have contact?" Responses ranged on a 10-point Likert scale from "never" to "daily." The survey asked about the number of individuals in the participant's life who identify as GLBT using two items. The first question was "Approximately how many close personal friends or family members identify as GLBT?" The second question was "Approximately how many acquaintances identify as GLBT?"

#### Procedure

Data were collected by an Internet survey which requested information about the experiences of family members and their attitudes toward GLBT issues and rights. GLBT individuals who were participating in a companion study exploring same-sex marriage issues were asked to forward information about this study to one of their family members. Other participants were recruited from GLBT-affirmative chapters of community organizations for family members such as Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) and COLAGE (Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere). Criteria for inclusion in the study were U.S. residence, age 18 or older, and identity as a family member of a GLBT individual. Participants were asked to respond to the questionnaire with their closest GLBT family member in mind.

## RESULTS

Table 1 reports sample means, standard deviations, and ranges of scores. First, we explored whether differences existed based on the family relationship type (e.g., parent versus sibling), on the variables of interest in the

**TABLE 1** Means, Standard Deviation, and Correlations

Variable	M	SD	Range	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1 Adaptability	29.71	6.72	11–47	—							
2 Cohesion	37.4	7.63	14–50	.53***	—						
3 Family Contact	7.88	−0.53	1–10	−0.24	−0.16	—					
4 GLBT Friends & Family	3.06	1.18	1–4	−0.16	−0.24**	−0.03	—				
5 GLBT Acquaintances	3.43	1.02	1–4	−0.12**	−0.08	−0.03	0.42***	—			
6 Knowledge	11.91	5.98	5–24	0.12	0.18*	0.06	−0.49***	−0.440***	—		
7 Religious Conflict	31.68	3.92	19–35	−0.13	−0.12	−0.11	0.25**	0.11	−0.26**	—	
8 Civil Rights	5.78	2.25	5–21	0.16	0.14	0.002	−0.12	−0.09	0.26**	−0.40**	—
9 Internalized Affirmativeness	11.52	4.84	5–25	0.08	0.19*	0.03	−0.56***	−0.468***	0.63***	−0.25**	0.31***

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

study. A multivariate test for differences (MANOVA) was statistically significant (Wilks'  $\lambda = .432$ ;  $F (42,562) = 2.620$ ;  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .131$ ), indicating the responses to the dependent variables varied by the type of relationship. The univariate tests found no significant differences across family relationship type for knowledge and attitudes toward GLBT individuals, number of GLBT friends or family, or number of GLBT acquaintances. The only significant difference was for the frequency of contact with the GLBT family member. Spouses/partners, parents, and siblings reported more frequent contact than other extended family members, as would be expected. Because this was the only significant difference on the primary variables of interest, all family members were included in the sample for all subsequent analyses.

We explored families on the two separate dimensions of adaptability and cohesion. Using a median split process to determine groups,<sup>1</sup> 72 participants were placed in the high adaptability group, indicating they reported more flexibility in their current family system, and 64 participants were included in the low adaptability group. Similarly, 70 participants were in the high cohesion group, and 66 participants were in the low cohesion group, indicating they believed their families to be less emotionally connected.

To address the question of whether family members with high versus low adaptability differed in knowledge and attitudes toward GLBT individuals and connection to GLBT issues, a two-group multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted. The independent variable represented degree of reported adaptability with 1 = high and 2 = low. Knowledge and attitudes toward GLBT issues were operationalized by four subscales: knowledge of GLBT issues, religious conflict, civil rights, and internalized affirmativeness. In addition to the attitude measures, dependent variables included the amount of contact with the GLBT family member, the number of GLBT friends and family members, and the number of GLBT acquaintances the participant had.

The multivariate test for differences between family members reporting high and low adaptability was statistically significant (Wilks'  $\lambda = .849$ ;  $F (7,128) = 3.258$ ;  $p < .05$ ), indicating that the two types of families differed on the dependent variables. We used univariate analyses of variance (ANOVA) to determine which of the seven dependent variables were contributing to group differences. Table 2 provides results of the univariate tests.

We found differences between family members with high and low adaptability for two of the seven dependent variables: family members from families with high adaptability reported more contact with the GLBT family member and more GLBT acquaintances than family members reporting low adaptability. We found no differences between the groups on number of GLBT friends and family members, knowledge of GLBT issues, degree of religious conflict, support for civil rights, or internalized affirmativeness.

**TABLE 2** Univariate Comparisons for Family Adaptability and Cohesion

Variable	Cohesion High vs. Low					Adaptability High vs. Low					High Adaptability and Cohesion vs. Low Adaptability and/or Cohesion										
	M	Bal	M	Unb	F	$\eta^2$	p	M	Bal	M	Unb	F	$\eta^2$	p	M	Bal	M	Unb	F	$\eta^2$	p
1 Family Contact	8.17	7.56	3.71	0.027	0.056			8.29	7.41	8.01	0.056	0.005**			8.35	7.56	6.08	0.043	0.015*		
2 GLBT Friends	3.33	2.77	7.94	0.056	0.006**			3.24	2.86	3.53	0.026	0.063			3.36	2.85	6.43	0.046	0.012*		
3 GLBT Acquaintances	3.51	3.35	0.89	0.007	0.347			3.65	3.19	7.33	0.052	0.008**			3.67	3.27	5.19	0.037	0.024*		
4 Knowledge	10.86	13.03	4.6	0.033	0.034*			11.26	12.64	1.81	0.013	0.181			10.02	13.2	9.86	0.069	0.002**		
5 Religious Conflict	32.13	31.2	1.93	0.014	0.167			32.14	31.16	2.15	0.016	0.145			32.38	31.2	3.03	0.022	0.084		
6 Civil Rights	5.49	6.09	2.49	0.018	0.117			5.44	6.16	3.46	0.025	0.065			5.4	6.04	2.67	0.02	0.105		
7 Internalized Affirmativeness	10.64	12.45	4.91	0.035	0.028*			11.14	11.95	0.96	0.007	0.329			10.53	12.2	3	0.029	0.048*		

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ .

To explore whether family members differed in knowledge and attitudes toward GLBT individuals and connection to GLBT issues based on degree of perceived family cohesion, a two-group multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted. The independent variable represented degree of reported cohesion with 1 = high and 2 = low. The same seven variables were the dependent variables in the MANOVA. The multivariate test for differences between families with high and low cohesion was statistically significant (Wilks'  $\lambda = .896$ ;  $F (7,128) = 2.127$ ;  $p < .05$ ), indicating that the two types of families differed in the dependent variables. We used univariate analyses of variance (ANOVA) to determine which of the seven dependent variables were contributing to group differences. Table 2 provides results of the univariate tests.

We found differences between family members who reported high versus low cohesion for three of the seven dependent variables (number of GLBT friends and family members, knowledge about GLBT issues, and internalized affirmativeness). Family members from more cohesive families reported more GLBT friends and family members, more knowledge about GLBT issues, and more internalized affirmativeness than families reporting unbalanced cohesion. We found no differences between the groups on amount of family contact, number of GLBT acquaintances, degree of religious conflict, or support for civil rights.

We then analyzed the data to explore family members reporting both adaptable and cohesive family systems in comparison to family members with less cohesive or adaptable systems. To address the question of whether families that were both cohesive and adaptable ( $N = 55$ ) differed from families who were low on at least one of the two dimensions ( $N = 81$ ) on knowledge and attitudes toward GLBT individuals and connection to GLBT individuals, we conducted a two-group multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA). The independent variable represented the degree of family adaptability and/or cohesion with 1 = high adaptability and cohesion and 2 = low adaptability and/or cohesion. The same seven variables were the dependent variables in the MANOVA. The multivariate test for differences was statistically significant (Wilks'  $\lambda = .852$ ;  $F (7,128) = 3.175$ ;  $p < .05$ ), indicating that the two types of families differed on the dependent variables. We used univariate analyses of variance (ANOVA) to determine which of the seven dependent variables were contributing to group differences. Table 2 provides results of the univariate tests.

We found differences between families for five of the seven dependent variables (amount of family contact, number of GLBT friends and family members, number of GLBT acquaintances, knowledge about GLBT issues, and internalized affirmativeness). Family members from families with high adaptability and cohesion reported more contact with GLBT family members, more GLBT friends and family members, more GLBT acquaintances, more knowledge about GLBT issues, and more internalized affirmativeness than

families low in either adaptability or cohesion. We found no differences between the groups on degree of religious conflict or support for civil rights.

## DISCUSSION

The results of this study indicate that when families are both highly adaptable and cohesive they have healthier family functioning. Explored separately, we found that family members with more adaptable systems reported greater contact with their GLBT family member and had more GLBT acquaintances. Family members with more cohesive family systems reported more positive attitudes and more GLBT close personal friends and family. However, family members reporting both high adaptability and cohesion were even more likely to be more knowledgeable and affirming of GLBT issues as well as more connected. Family members who reported having families high in both adaptability and cohesion reported more contact with their GLBT family member, more GLBT close personal friends and family, more GLBT acquaintances, and more knowledge of GLBT issues and greater recognition of their own heterosexual privilege in comparison to family members with low adaptability or cohesion.

As expected, highly adaptable and cohesive families seem to maintain more contact with their GLBT family members than family members from less adaptable or cohesive families. Although we cannot assume family environment may cause greater contact with GLBT family members or vice versa, we can consider two possible explanations: (1) being adaptable and cohesive may move a family to have more contact, or (2) having more contact may help families become more adaptable and cohesive, as having more contact provides more opportunity for communication. Olson and Gorall (2003) discuss communication as a resource for meeting demands by facilitating change in levels of adaptability and cohesion. Although the present study did not explore communication patterns among family members, it is likely that having increased contact is connected to the presence of emotional bonding and connection in a family.

Family members from adaptable and cohesive families appear more equipped than those from less adaptable and cohesive families to connect to other GLBT individuals beyond the GLBT family member. More cohesive families are more involved with each other's lives (Olson, 1996), and being adaptable may assist family members in making changes due to having a GLBT family member, such as incorporating GLBT people into their own social lives, perhaps as a way to maintain connection with their GLBT family member, to help the GLBT family member feel more comfortable, or to assist other family members to better understand GLBT issues that their family member may be facing. Families who are more cohesive may be more likely to know the friends of their family members, which would include other

GLBT individuals, such as friends and acquaintances. Families that are more adaptable may be willing to bring those individuals into their social circle and consider some GLBT people close personal friends.

According to Olson and Gorall (2003), families need to handle both stability and change to function most effectively. The family members in our study who reported having adaptive families also reported feeling close to each other, which may provide greater incentive to adapt to having a GLBT family member. Close families value their relationships and each others' experiences and are more likely to look for ways to adapt to the family members' needs than disengaged families. Therefore, it is not surprising that this study found greater family contact reported by family members with adaptive systems. It may also be that having a GLBT family member increases adaptable responding in families, who may experience the disclosure as a crisis and pull together to respond.

Members of a cohesive family are more connected with one another, and, perhaps, their family rules dictate that they stay in contact with one another. However, family member contact with GLBT members was not based solely on level of family cohesion. Family members who reported both high adaptability and cohesion tended to have significantly more contact with GLBT family members than those who reported lower levels of adaptability, regardless of degree of cohesion.

Extremely close family members tend to be interdependent and loyal (Olson, 2000). Families with high cohesion not only had more GLBT friends and family members but also reported more positive attitudes toward GLBT individuals in general. Their closeness with GLBT family members appears to relate to how they feel about GLBT people beyond their family member. Past research has found that the more gay and lesbian people an individual knows the more positive the person's attitudes will be toward gay and lesbian individuals. In addition, the closer those relationships are the more positive the attitudes are (Herek, 1998). Therefore, having close relationships seems to be related to having positive attitudes toward GLBT people who are not of one's family. In particular, family members with cohesive systems reported more knowledge of GLBT communities, its history, and the symbols connected to GLBT issues. In addition, they had wrestled with their own internal sense of heterosexual privilege and exploration of their own sexual identity to a greater degree than those with less cohesive systems, and reported having higher internalized affirmativeness. These two aspects of attitudes toward GLBT individuals—greater knowledge of GLBT issues and greater internalized affirmativeness—are considered to be important in moving beyond merely tolerant attitudes that are commonly found in attitude research on GLBT issues. It was not surprising, then, that we found no significant difference in endorsement of civil rights for GLBT individuals, which tends to be a more superficial assessment of affirmative attitudes (Worthington et al., 2005). These family members with balanced families may hold fewer

negatively stereotyped beliefs because they have a close connection with other sexual and gender minorities as well.

Families with low adaptability and/or cohesion reported the least contact with GLBT family members, having fewer GLBT friends and family members, fewer GLBT acquaintances, and less affirming attitudes. According to Olson (2000), families low in adaptability and/or cohesion lack the resources to change, with rigid families refusing to modify rules and members of disengaged families having less involvement in one another's lives. Members of these families do not affirm one another or look for affirmativeness from one another. Perhaps because this family style encourages physical and emotional independence, family members would be less open to learning about unfamiliar issues from family members.

A limitation of this study is that we cannot know if families develop affirmative attitudes because they are cohesive, or if those who report being affirmative perceive themselves as more cohesive than those who report not being affirmative. We also do not know from our results whether knowing friends and family members who identify as GLBT may encourage families to be more adaptable or cohesive or if families high in adaptability and cohesion choose to have GLBT friends after knowing they have a GLBT family member. Our sample is self-selected and most likely had some comfort with GLBT issues in order to fill out a survey. Overall, our sample reported moderate to high levels of adaptability and cohesion, and differences in attitudes and knowledge might be more evident in a more diverse sample with widely varying levels of adaptability or cohesion. Therefore, this study does not represent family members who are uncomfortable with having a GLBT family member or do not know of their family member's sexual or gender identity. Our sample tended to have positive attitudes toward GLBT individuals. Overall participants reported a high degree of knowledge about GLBT issues, a high level of internalized affirmativeness, a low degree of religious conflict, and a high level of support for GLBT civil rights. Our sample was predominantly middle-class and Caucasian and therefore should not be generalized to racially diverse populations or individuals of other socioeconomic levels, and future research should attempt to engage a more racially diverse participant pool. Finally, we based our measures of adaptability and cohesion on the perceptions of family members of GLBT individuals. We do not know from this study whether GLBT individuals who were related to these family members would also perceive their families to be adaptable or cohesive to the extent that was reported by the participants. Future research should compare perceived adaptability and cohesion between GLBT individuals and their family members.

Willoughby and colleagues (2006) suggested that the existence of family-level resources may reduce the effects of a stressor on the family system. Psychologists and helping professionals who are working with families with GLBT members should consider the importance both of flexibility and

closeness within the family. Awareness of family dynamics and coping styles may be explored to determine how adaptable and cohesive family members are, and therefore, how equipped they are to integrate GLBT identities within their family systems. Increased communication may facilitate more adaptable and cohesive family functioning. Families may be better able to support GLBT members by openness to questioning family rules and beliefs, particularly if the family functions in a rigid manner. Psychologists can facilitate a shift toward flexibility and closeness by helping family members increase their understanding of the GLBT family member's experiences and views. The results of this study suggest that families with high adaptability and cohesion value the family and may be best able to integrate GLBT sexual orientation into their family system, and this may require rejecting negative societal messages on minority sexual and gender identities.

Increasing adaptability and cohesion in families may enable families to become more engaged in the GLBT community. Although high levels of adaptability may help with families' initial response to self-disclosure of sexual orientation, family cohesion appears to be important for family members in adopting GLBT-affirmative attitudes. Helping professionals may wish to explore adaptability and cohesion with their GLBT clients and discourage clients from isolating from family of origin when coming out or developing GLBT communities. Developing a sense of closeness within the family may be a key factor in improving attitudes toward GLBT issues.

#### NOTE

1. The groups have unequal numbers; several participants shared the median score and rather than arbitrarily dividing these participants into the two groups, we elected to keep participants having the same score together in the same group.

#### REFERENCES

Anderson, S. A., & Gavazzi, S. M. (1990). A test of the Olson Circumplex Model: Examining its curvilinear assumption and the presence of extreme types. *Family Process*, 29, 309-324.

Ben-Ari, A. T. (1995). Coming out: A dialectic of intimacy and privacy. *Families in Society*, 76, 306-314.

Carter, B., & McGoldrick, M. (1988). *The changing family life cycle: A framework for family therapy* (2nd ed.). New York: Gardner Press.

Cumsille, P. E., & Epstein, N. (1994). Family cohesion, family adaptability, social support, and adolescent depressive symptoms in outpatient clinic families. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 8, 202-214.

D'Augelli, A. R. (2005). Stress and adaptation among families of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth: Research challenges. *Journal of GLBT Family Studies*, 1, 115-135.

Diaz, R. M., Ayala, G., & Bein, E. (2004). Sexual risk as an outcome of social oppression: Data from a probability sample of Latino gay men in three U.S. cities. *Cultural Diversity & Ethnic Minority Psychology, 10*, 255–267.

Diplacido, J. (1998). Minority stress among lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals: A consequence of heterosexism, homophobia, and stigmatization. In G. M. Herek (Ed.), *Stigma and sexual orientation: Understanding prejudice against lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals: Psychological perspectives on lesbian and gay issues* (pp. 138–159). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Freidman, L. C., Nelson, D. V., Smith, F. E., & Dworkin, R. J. (1988). Women with breast cancer: Perception of family functioning and adjustment to illness. *Psychosomatic Medicine, 50*, 529–540.

Gallor, S. M. (2006). Heterosexual parents' gender role attitudes, religious orientation, heterosexist beliefs, support group experiences, and relationship functioning with their lesbian or gay children. *Dissertation Abstracts International: Section B: The Sciences and Engineering, 67*, 3506.

Green, R. G., Harris, R. N., Forte, J. A., & Robinson, M. (1991). Evaluating FACES III and the circumplex model: 2,440 families. *Family Process, 30*, 55–73.

Herdt, G., & Koff, B. (2000). *Something to tell you: The road families travel when a child is gay. Between men-between women*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Herek, G. M. (1984). Beyond "homophobia": A social psychological perspective on attitudes toward lesbians and gay men. *Journal of Homosexuality* (Special Issue: Homophobia: An Overview), *10*(1–2), 1–21.

Herek, G. M. (1998). *Stigma and sexual orientation: Understanding prejudice against lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Kouneski, E. (2001). *Circumplex model and FACES: Review of literature*. Retrieved November 8, 2008, from [www.facesiv.com/pdf/faces\\_and\\_circumplex.pdf](http://www.facesiv.com/pdf/faces_and_circumplex.pdf)

LaSala, M. C. (1998). Coupled gay men, parents, and in-laws: Intergenerational disapproval and the need for a thick skin. *Families in Society, 79*, 585–595.

Lavee, Y., & Olson, D. H. (1991). Family types and response to stress. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 53*, 786–798.

McCubbin, H. I., & Patterson, J. M. (1983). The Family Stress Process: The Double ABCX Model of adjustment and adaptation. *Marriage & Family Review, 6*, 7–37.

McKenry, P. C., & Price, S. J. (2000). Families coping with problems and change: A conceptual overview. In P. C. McKenry & S. J. Price (Eds.), *Families and change: Coping with stressful events and transitions* (2nd ed., pp. 1–21). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Meyer, I. H. (2003). Prejudice, social stress, and mental health in lesbian, gay, and bisexual populations: Conceptual issues and research evidence. *Psychological Bulletin, 129*, 674–697.

Mohr, J. J., & Fassinger, R. (2003). Self-acceptance and self-disclosure of sexual orientation in lesbian, gay, and bisexual adults: An attachment perspective. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 50*, 482–495.

Muller, A. (1987). *Parents matter: Parents' relationships with lesbian daughters and gay sons*. Tallahassee, FL: Naiad Press, Inc.

Olson, D. H. (1996). Clinical assessment and treatment interventions using the family circumplex model. In F. Kaslow (Ed.), *Handbook of relational diagnosis and dysfunctional family patterns* (pp. 59–80). New York: Wiley.

Olson, D. H. (2000). Circumplex model of marital and family systems. *Journal of Family Therapy*, 22, 144–167.

Olson, D. H., & Gorall, D. M. (2003). Circumplex model of marital and family systems. In F. Walsh (Ed.), *Normal family processes* (3rd ed.) (pp. 514–547). New York: Guilford.

Olson, D. H., Portner, J., & Lavee, Y. (1985). *Family adaptability and cohesion scales-III*. St. Paul, MN: University of Minnesota.

Robinson, B. E., Walters, L. H., & Skeen, P. (1989). Response of parents to learning that their child is homosexual and concern over AIDS: A national study. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 18, 59–80.

Savin-Williams, R. C. (2001). *"Mom, Dad. I'm gay." How families negotiate coming out*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Savin-Williams, R. C., & Dube, E. M. (1998). Parental reactions to their child's disclosure of a gay/lesbian identity. *Family Relations*, 47, 1, 7–13.

Schope, R. D. (2002). The decision to tell: Factors influencing the disclosure of sexual orientation by gay men. *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Social Services: Issues in Practice, Policy, and Research*, 14, 1–22.

Vandeleur, C. L., Perrez, M., & Schoebi, D. (2007). Associations between measures of emotion and familial dynamics in normative families with adolescents. *Swiss Journal of Psychology*, 66, 5–16.

Willoughby, B. L. B., Malik, N. M., & Lindahl, K. M. (2006). Parental reactions to their sons' sexual orientation disclosures: The roles of family cohesion, adaptability, and parenting style. *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*, 7, 14–26.

Worthington, R. L., Dillon, F. R., & Becker-Schutte, A. M. (2005). Development, reliability, and validity of the lesbian, gay, and bisexual knowledge and attitudes scale for heterosexuals (GLB-KASH). *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 52, 104–118.

Worthington, R. L., Savoy, H. B., Dillon, F. R., & Vernaglia, E. R. (2002). Heterosexual identity development: A multidimensional model of individual and social identity. *Counseling Psychologist*, 30, 496–531.

Zacks, E., Green, R., & Marrow, J. (1988). Comparing lesbian and heterosexual couples on the circumplex model: An initial investigation. *Family Process*, 27, 471–484.

Copyright of Journal of GLBT Family Studies is the property of Taylor & Francis Ltd and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.



**STUDYDADDY**

**Get Homework Help  
From Expert Tutor**

**Get Help**