

# (HOW) DOES THE SEXUAL ORIENTATION OF PARENTS MATTER?

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*Opponents of lesbian and gay parental rights claim that children with lesbigay parents are at higher risk for a variety of negative outcomes. Yet most research in psychology concludes that there are no differences in developmental outcomes between children raised by lesbigay parents and those raised by heterosexual parents. The analysis here challenges this defensive conceptual framework and analyzes how heterosexism has hampered intellectual progress in the field. The authors discuss limitations in the definitions, samples, and analyses of the studies to date. Next they explore findings from 21 studies and demonstrate that researchers frequently downplay findings indicating difference regarding children's gender and sexual preferences and behavior that could stimulate important theoretical questions. A less defensive, more sociologically informed analytic framework is proposed for investigating these issues. The framework focuses on (1) whether selection effects produced by homophobia account for associations between parental sexual orientations and child outcomes; (2) the role of parental gender vis-à-vis sexual orientation in influencing children's gender development; and (3) the relationship between parental sexual orientations and children's sexual preferences and behaviors.*

**T**ODAY, gay marriage is taking on an air of inevitability" (*Detroit News*, "Middle Ground Emerges for Gay Couples," October 4, 1999, p. A9). So observed a U.S. newspaper from the heartland in September 1999, reporting that one-third of those surveyed in an *NBC News/Wall Street Journal* poll endorsed the legalization of same-sex mar-

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riage, while 65 percent predicted such legislation would take place in the new century (Price 1999). During the waning months of the last millennium, France enacted national registered partnerships, Denmark extended child custody rights to same-sex couples, and the state supreme courts in Vermont and in Ontario, Canada ruled that same-sex couples were entitled to full and equal family rights. Most dramatically, in September 2000 the Netherlands became the first nation to realize the inevitable when the Dutch parliament voted overwhelmingly to grant same-sex couples full and equal rights to marriage. As the new millennium begins, struggles by nonheterosexuals to secure equal recognition and rights for the new family relationships they are now creating represent some of the most dramatic and fiercely contested developments in Western family patterns.

It is not surprising, therefore, that social science research on lesbigay family issues has become a rapid growth industry that incites passionate divisions. For the conse-

quences of such research are by no means “academic,” but bear on marriage and family policies that encode Western culture’s most profoundly held convictions about gender, sexuality, and parenthood. As advocates and opponents square off in state and federal courts and legislatures, in the electoral arena, and in culture wars over efforts to extend to nonheterosexuals equal rights to marriage, child custody, adoption, foster care, and fertility services, they heatedly debate the implications of a youthful body of research, conducted primarily by psychologists, that investigates if and how the sexual orientation of parents affects children.

This body of research, almost uniformly, reports findings of no notable differences between children reared by heterosexual parents and those reared by lesbian and gay parents, and that it finds lesbian and gay parents to be as competent and effective as heterosexual parents. Lawyers and activists struggling to defend child custody and adoption petitions by lesbians and gay men, or to attain same-gender marriage rights and to defeat preemptive referenda against such rights (e.g., the victorious Knight Initiative on the 2000 ballot in California) have drawn on this research with considerable success (cf. Wald 2000). Although progress is uneven, this strategy has promoted a gradual liberalizing trend in judicial and policy decisions. However, backlash campaigns against gay family rights have begun to challenge the validity of the research.

In 1997, the *University of Illinois Law Review Journal* published an article by Wardle (1997), a Brigham Young University law professor, that impugned the motives, methods, and merits of social science research on lesbian and gay parenting. Wardle charged the legal profession and social scientists with an ideological bias favoring gay rights that has compromised most research in this field and the liberal judicial and policy decisions it has informed. He presented a harshly critical assessment of the research and argued for a presumptive judicial standard in favor of awarding child custody to heterosexual married couples. The following year, Wardle drafted new state regulations in Utah that restrict adoption and foster care placements to households in which all adults are related by blood or marriage. Florida, Arkan-

sas, and Mississippi also have imposed restrictions on adoption and/or foster care, and such bills have been introduced in the legislatures of 10 additional states (Leslie Cooper, ACLU gay family rights staff attorney, personal communication, September 27, 2000). In March 2000, a paper presented at a “Revitalizing Marriage” conference at Brigham Young University assailed the quality of studies that had been cited to support the efficacy of lesbian and gay parenting (Lerner and Nagai 2000). Characterizing the research methods as “dismal,” Lerner and Nagai claimed that “the methods used in these studies were sufficiently flawed so that these studies could not and should not be used in legislative forums or legal cases to buttress any arguments on the nature of homosexual vs. heterosexual parenting” (p. 3). Shortly afterward, Gallagher (2000), of the Institute for American Values, broadcast Lerner and Nagai’s argument in her nationally syndicated *New York Post* column in order to undermine the use of “the science card” by advocates of gay marriage and gay “normalization.”

We depart sharply from the views of Wardle and Gallagher on the merits and morals of lesbian and gay parenting as well as on their analysis of the child development research. We agree, however, that ideological pressures constrain intellectual development in this field. In our view, it is the pervasiveness of social prejudice and institutionalized discrimination against lesbians and gay men that exerts a powerful policing effect on the basic terms of psychological research and public discourse on the significance of parental sexual orientation. The field suffers less from the overt ideological convictions of scholars than from the unfortunate intellectual consequences that follow from the implicit hetero-normative presumption governing the terms of the discourse—that healthy child development depends upon parenting by a married heterosexual couple. While few contributors to this literature personally subscribe to this view, most of the research asks whether lesbian and gay parents subject their children to greater risks or harm than are confronted by children reared by heterosexual parents. Because anti-gay scholars seek evidence of harm, sympathetic researchers defensively stress its absence.

We take stock of this body of psychological research from a sociological perspective. We analyze the impact that this hetero-normative presumption exacts on predominant research strategies, analyses, and representations of findings. After assessing the basic premises and arguments in the debate, we discuss how the social fact of heterosexism has operated to constrain the research populations, concepts, and designs employed in the studies to date.

We wish to acknowledge that the political stakes of this body of research are so high that the ideological "family values" of scholars play a greater part than usual in how they design, conduct, and interpret their studies. Of course, we recognize that this is equally true for those who criticize such studies (including Wardle [1997], Lerner and Nagai [2000], and ourselves). The inescapably ideological and emotional nature of this subject makes it incumbent on scholars to acknowledge the personal convictions they bring to the discussion. Because we personally oppose discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender, we subject research claims by those sympathetic to our stance to a heightened degree of critical scrutiny and afford the fullest possible consideration to work by scholars opposed to parenting by lesbians and gay men.

### THE CASE AGAINST LESBIAN AND GAY PARENTHOOD

Wardle (1997) is correct that contemporary scholarship on the effects of parental sexual orientation on children's development is rarely critical of lesbian and gay parenthood. Few respectable scholars today oppose such parenting. However, a few psychologists subscribe to the view that homosexuality represents either a sin or a mental illness and continue to publish alarmist works on the putative ill effects of gay parenting (e.g., Cameron and Cameron 1996; Cameron, Cameron, and Landess 1996). Even though the American Psychological Association expelled Paul Cameron, and the American Sociological Association denounced him for willfully misrepresenting research (Cantor 1994; Herek 1998, 2000), his publications continue to be cited in amicus briefs, court decisions, and policy hearings. For example,

the chair of the Arkansas Child Welfare Agency Review Board repeatedly cited publications by Cameron's group in her testimony at policy hearings, which, incidentally, led to restricting foster child placements to heterosexual parents (Woodruff 1998).

Likewise, Wardle (1997) draws explicitly on Cameron's work to build his case against gay parent rights. Research demonstrates, Wardle maintains, that gay parents subject children to disproportionate risks; that children of gay parents are more apt to suffer confusion over their gender and sexual identities and are more likely to become homosexuals themselves; that homosexual parents are more sexually promiscuous than are heterosexual parents and are more likely to molest their own children; that children are at greater risk of losing a homosexual parent to AIDS, substance abuse, or suicide, and to suffer greater risks of depression and other emotional difficulties; that homosexual couples are more unstable and likely to separate; and that the social stigma and embarrassment of having a homosexual parent unfairly ostracizes children and hinders their relationships with peers. Judges have cited Wardle's article to justify transferring child custody from lesbian to heterosexual parents.<sup>1</sup>

Wardle (1997), like other opponents of homosexual parenthood, also relies on a controversial literature that decries the putative risks of "fatherlessness" in general. Thus, Wardle cites books by Popenoe (1993, 1996), Blankenhorn (1995), and Whitehead (1993) when he argues:

[C]hildren generally develop best, and develop most completely, when raised by both a mother and a father and experience regular family interaction with both genders' parenting skills during their years of childhood. It is now undeniable that, just as a mother's influence is crucial to the secure, healthy, and full development of a child, [a] paternal presence in the life of a child is essential to the child emotionally and physically. (P. 860)

<sup>1</sup> In *J.B.F. v. J.M.F.* (Ex parte J.M.F. 1970224, So. 2d 1190, 1988 Ala. LEXIS 161 [1998]), for example, Alabama's Supreme Court quoted Wardle's (1997) essay to justify transferring custody of a child from her lesbian mother to her heterosexual father.

Wardle, like Blankenhorn, extrapolates (inappropriately) from research on single-mother families to portray children of lesbians as more vulnerable to everything from delinquency, substance abuse, violence, and crime, to teen pregnancy, school dropout, suicide, and even poverty.<sup>2</sup> In short, the few scholars who are opposed to parenting by lesbians and gay men provide academic support for the convictions of many judges, journalists, politicians, and citizens that the sexual orientation of parents matters greatly to children, and that lesbian parents represent a danger to their children and to society. Generally, these scholars offer only limited, and often implicit, theoretical explanations for the disadvantages of same-sex parenting—typically combining elements of bio-evolutionary theory with social and cognitive learning theories (e.g., Blankenhorn 1995). Cameron et al. (1996) crudely propose that homosexuality is a “learned pathology” that parents pass on to children through processes of modeling, seduction, and “contagion.” The deeply rooted hetero-normative convictions about what constitutes healthy and moral gender identity, sexual orientation, and family composition held by contributors to this literature hinders their ability to conduct or interpret research with reason, nuance, or care.

### THE CASE FOR LESBIAN AND GAY PARENTHOOD

Perhaps the most consequential impact that heterosexism exerts on the research on lesbian parenting lies where it is least apparent—in the far more responsible literature that is largely sympathetic to its subject. It is easy to expose the ways in which the prejudicial views of those directly hostile to lesbian parenting distort their research (Herek 1998). Moreover, because anti-gay scholars regard homosexuality itself as a form of pathology, they tautologically interpret any evidence that children may be more likely to engage in homoerotic behavior as

<sup>2</sup> The extrapolation is “inappropriate” because lesbian-parent families have never been a comparison group in the family structure literature on which these authors rely (cf. Downey and Powell 1993; McLanahan 1985).

evidence of harm. Less obvious, however, are the ways in which heterosexism also hampers research and analysis among those who explicitly support lesbian parenting. With rare exceptions, even the most sympathetic proceed from a highly defensive posture that accepts heterosexual parenting as the gold standard and investigates whether lesbian parents and their children are inferior.

This sort of hierarchical model implies that *differences* indicate *deficits* (Baumrind 1995). Instead of investigating whether (and how) differences in adult sexual orientation might lead to meaningful differences in how individuals parent and how their children develop, the predominant research designs place the burden of proof on lesbian parents to demonstrate that they are not less successful or less worthy than heterosexual parents. Too often scholars seem to presume that this approach precludes acknowledging almost any differences in parenting or in child outcomes. A characteristic review of research on lesbian-mother families concludes:

[A] rapidly growing and highly consistent body of empirical work has failed to identify significant differences between lesbian mothers and their heterosexual counterparts or the children raised by these groups. Researchers have been unable to establish empirically that detriment results to children from being raised by lesbian mothers. (Falk 1994:151)

Given the weighty political implications of this body of research, it is easy to understand the social sources of such a defensive stance. As long as sexual orientation can deprive a gay parent of child custody, fertility services, and adoption rights, sensitive scholars are apt to tread gingerly around the terrain of differences. Unfortunately, however, this reticence compromises the development of knowledge not only in child development and psychology, but also within the sociology of sexuality, gender, and family more broadly. For if homophobic theories seem crude, too many psychologists who are sympathetic to lesbian parenting seem hesitant to theorize at all. When researchers downplay the significance of any findings of differences, they forfeit a unique opportunity to take full advantage of the “natural laboratory” that the advent of

lesbigay-parent families provides for exploring the effects and acquisition of gender and sexual identity, ideology, and behavior.

This reticence is most evident in analyses of sexual behavior and identity—the most politically sensitive issue in the debate. Virtually all of the published research claims to find no differences in the sexuality of children reared by lesbigay parents and those raised by nongay parents—but none of the studies that report this finding attempts to theorize about such an implausible outcome. Yet it is difficult to conceive of a credible theory of sexual development that would not expect the adult children of lesbigay parents to display a somewhat higher incidence of homoerotic desire, behavior, and identity than children of heterosexual parents. For example, biological determinist theory should predict at least some difference in an inherited predisposition to same-sex desire; a social constructionist theory would expect lesbigay parents to provide an environment in which children would feel freer to explore and affirm such desires; psychoanalytic theory might hypothesize that the absence of a male parent would weaken a daughter's need to relinquish her pre-oedipal desire for her mother or that the absence of a female parent would foster a son's pre-oedipal love for his father that no fear of castration or oedipal crisis would interrupt. Moreover, because parents determine where their children reside, even one who subscribed to J. Harris's (1998) maverick theory—that parents are virtually powerless when compared with peers to influence their children's development—should anticipate that lesbigay parents would probably rear their children among less homophobic peers.

Bem's (1996) "exotic becomes erotic" theory of sexual orientation argues that in a gender-polarized society, children eroticize the gender of peers whose interests and temperaments differ most from their own. Most children thereby become heterosexual, but boys attracted to "feminine" activities and girls who are "tomboys" are apt to develop homoerotic desires. The impact of parental genes and child-rearing practices remains implicit because parents contribute genetically to the temperamental factors Bem identifies as precursors to a child's native activity preferences, and parental attitudes toward

gender polarization should affect the way those innate preferences translate into children's cognition and play. In fact, the only "theory" of child development we can imagine in which a child's sexual development would bear no relationship to parental genes, practices, environment, or beliefs would be an arbitrary one.<sup>3</sup> Yet this is precisely the outcome that most scholars report, although the limited empirical record does not justify it.

Over the past decade, prominent psychologists in the field began to call for less defensive research on lesbian and gay family issues (G. Green and Bozett 1991; Kitzinger and Coyle 1995; Patterson 1992). Rethinking the "no differences" doctrine, some scholars urge social scientists to look for potentially beneficial effects children might derive from such distinctive aspects of lesbigay parenting as the more egalitarian relationships these parents appear to practice (Patterson 1995; also see Dunne 2000). More radically, a few scholars (Kitzinger 1987, 1989; Kitzinger and Coyle 1995) propose abandoning comparative research on lesbian and heterosexual parenting altogether and supplanting it with research that asks "why and how are lesbian parents oppressed and how can we change that?" (Clarke 2000:28, paraphrasing Kitzinger 1994:501). While we perceive potential advantages from these agendas, we advocate an alternative strategy that moves beyond hetero-normativity without forfeiting the fruitful potential of comparative research. Although we agree with Kitzinger and Coyle (1995) and Clarke (2000) that the social obstacles to lesbian (and gay) parenthood deserve rigorous attention, we believe that this should supplement, not supplant, the rich opportunity planned

<sup>3</sup> In March 2000, Norwegian sociologist Oystein Holter (personal communication) described Helmut Stierlin's "delegation" theory (published in German)—that children take over their parents' unconscious wishes. Holter suggests this theory could predict that a child who grows up with gay parents under homophobic conditions might develop "contrary responses." We are unfamiliar with this theory but find it likely that under such conditions unconscious wishes of heterosexual and nonheterosexual parents could foster some different "contrary responses."

lesbigay parenthood provides for the exploration of the interactions of gender, sexual orientation, and biosocial family structures on parenting and child development. Moreover, while we welcome research attuned to potential strengths as well as vulnerabilities of lesbigay parenting, we believe that knowledge and policy will be best served when scholars feel free to replace a hierarchical model, which assigns "grades" to parents and children according to their sexual identities, with a more genuinely pluralist approach to family diversity. Sometimes, to bowdlerize Freud's famous dictum, a difference *really is* just a difference!

### PROBLEMS WITH CONCEPTS, CATEGORIES, AND SAMPLES

The social effects of heterosexism constrain the character of research conducted on lesbigay parenting in ways more profound than those deriving from the ideological stakes of researchers. First, as most researchers recognize, because so many individuals legitimately fear the social consequences of adopting a gay identity, and because few national surveys have included questions about sexual orientation, it is impossible to gather reliable data on such basic demographic questions as how many lesbians and gay men there are in the general population, how many have children, or how many children reside (or have substantial contact) with lesbian or gay parents. Curiously, those who are hostile to gay parenting tend to minimize the incidence of same-sex orientation, while sympathetic scholars typically report improbably high numerical estimates. Both camps thus implicitly presume that the rarer the incidence, the less legitimate would be lesbigay claims to rights. One could imagine an alternative political logic, however, in which a low figure might undermine grounds for viewing lesbigay parenting as a meaningful social threat. Nonetheless, political anxieties have complicated the difficulty of answering basic demographic questions.

Since 1984, most researchers have statically reproduced numbers, of uncertain origin, depicting a range of from 1 to 5 million lesbian mothers, from 1 to 3 million gay fathers, and from 6 to 14 million children of

gay or lesbian parents in the United States (e.g., Patterson 1992, 1996).<sup>4</sup> More recent estimates by Patterson and Freil (2000) extrapolate from distributions observed in the National Health and Social Life Survey (Laumann et al. 1995). Depending upon the definition of parental sexual orientation employed, Patterson and Freil suggest a current lower limit of 800,000 lesbigay parents ages 18 to 59 with 1.6 million children and an upper limit of 7 million lesbigay parents with 14 million children. However, these estimates include many "children" who are actually adults. To estimate the number who are dependent children (age 18 or younger), we multiplied the child-counts by .66, which is the proportion of dependent children among all offspring of 18- to 59-year-old parents in the representative National Survey of Families and Households (Sweet and Bumpass 1996).<sup>5</sup> This adjustment reduces the estimates of current dependent children with lesbigay parents to a range of 1 to 9 million, which implies that somewhere between 1 percent and 12 percent of all (78 million) children ages 19 and under in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau 1999) have a lesbigay parent. The 12-percent fig-

<sup>4</sup> These estimates derive from an extrapolation of Kinsey data claiming a roughly 10 percent prevalence of homosexuality in the adult male population. Interestingly, Michael et al.'s (1994) revisiting of Kinsey (Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin 1948; Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, and Gebhard 1953) suggests that Kinsey himself emphasized that different measures of sexual orientation yield different estimates of individuals with same-sex sexual orientations in the population. Had scholars read Kinsey differently, they might have selected his figure of 4 percent of the men in his sample who practiced exclusive homosexual behavior from adolescence onward, rather than the widely embraced 10 percent figure. In fact, the 10 percent number is fundamentally flawed: Kinsey found that of the 37 percent of the white men in his sample who had at least one sexual experience with another man in their lifetime, only 10 percent of them (i.e., 3.7 percent of the entire white male sample) had exclusively same-sex sexual experiences for any three-year period between ages 16 and 55.

<sup>5</sup> This assumes that the ratio of number of dependent children to total offspring among current lesbigay parents will be roughly the same as that for all parents and children.

ure depends upon classifying as a lesbigay parent anyone who reports that even the idea of homoerotic sex is appealing, while the low (1 percent) figure derives from the narrower, and in our view more politically salient, definition of a lesbigay parent as one who self-identifies as such (also see Badgett 1998; Black, Maker, et al. 1998).

Across the ideological spectrum, scholars, journalists and activists appear to presume that the normalization of lesbigay sexuality should steadily increase the ranks of children with lesbian and gay parents. In contrast, we believe that normalization is more likely to reduce the proportion of such children. Most contemporary lesbian and gay parents procreated within heterosexual marriages that many had entered hoping to escape the social and emotional consequences of homophobia. As homosexuality becomes more legitimate, far fewer people with homoerotic desires should feel compelled to enter heterosexual marriages, and thus fewer should become parents in this manner.

On the other hand, with normalization, intentional parenting by self-identified lesbians and gay men should continue to increase, but it is unlikely to do so sufficiently to compensate for the decline in the current ranks of formerly married lesbian and gay parents. Thus, the proportion of lesbian parents may not change much. Many women with homoerotic desires who once might have married men and succumbed to social pressures to parent will no longer do so; others who remained single and childless because of their homoerotic desires will feel freer to choose lesbian maternity. It is difficult to predict the net effect of these contradictory trends. However, as fewer closeted gay men participate in heterosexual marriages, the ranks of gay fathers should thin. Even if gay men were as eager as lesbians are to become parents, biology alone sharply constrains their ability to do so. Moreover, there is evidence that fewer men of any sexual orientation actually desire children as strongly as do comparable women (cf. Groze 1991; Shireman 1996), and most demographic studies of sexual orientation find a higher incidence of homosexuality among men than women (Kinsey et al. 1948; Kinsey et al. 1953; Laumann et al. 1994; Michael et al. 1994). Thus, although the ranks of inten-

tional paternity among gay men should increase, we do not believe this will compensate for the declining numbers of closeted gay men who will become fathers through heterosexual marriages. Hence the estimate of 1 to 12 percent of children with a lesbigay parent may represent a peak interval that may decline somewhat with normalization.

A second fundamental problem in sampling involves the ambiguity, fluidity, and complexity of definitions of sexual orientation. "The traditional type of surveys on the prevalence of 'homosexuality,'" remarks a prominent Danish sociologist, "are already in danger of becoming antiquated even before they are carried out; the questions asked are partially irrelevant; sexuality is not what it used to be" (Bech 1997:211). What defines a parent (or adult child) as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or heterosexual? Are these behavioral, social, emotional, or political categories? Historical scholarship has established that sexual identities are modern categories whose definitions vary greatly not only across cultures, spaces, and time, but even among and within individuals (Katz 1995; Seidman 1997). Some gay men, for example, practice celibacy; some heterosexual men engage in "situational" homosexual activity. Some lesbians relinquish lesbian identities to marry; some relinquish marriage for a lesbian identity. What about bisexual, transsexual, or transgendered parents, not to mention those who re-partner with individuals of the same or different genders? Sexual desires, acts, meanings, and identities are not expressed in fixed or predictable packages.

Third, visible lesbigay parenthood is such a recent phenomenon that most studies are necessarily of the children of a transitional generation of self-identified lesbians and gay men who became parents in the context of heterosexual marriages or relationships that dissolved before or after they assumed a gay identity. These unique historical conditions make it impossible to fully distinguish the impact of a parent's sexual orientation on a child from the impact of such factors as divorce, re-mating, the secrecy of the closet, the process of coming out, or the social consequences of stigma. Only a few studies have attempted to control for the number and gender of a child's parents before and after a

parent decided to identify as lesbian or gay. Because many more formerly married lesbian mothers than gay fathers retain custody of their children, most research is actually on post-divorce lesbian motherhood. A few studies compare heterosexual and gay fathers after divorce (Bigner and Jacobsen 1989, 1992). If fewer self-identified lesbians and gay men will become parents through heterosexual marriages, the published research on this form of gay parenthood will become less relevant to issues in scholarly and public debates.

Fourth, because researchers lack reliable data on the number and location of lesbian parents with children in the general population, there are no studies of child development based on random, representative samples of such families. Most studies rely on small-scale, snowball and convenience samples drawn primarily from personal and community networks or agencies. Most research to date has been conducted on white lesbian mothers who are comparatively educated, mature, and reside in relatively progressive urban centers, most often in California or the Northeastern states.<sup>6</sup>

Although scholars often acknowledge some of these difficulties (Bozett 1989; Patterson and Friel 2000; Rothblum 1994), few studies explicitly grapple with these definitional questions. Most studies simply rely on a parent's sexual self-identity at the time of the study, which contributes unwittingly to the racial, ethnic, and class imbalance of the populations studied. Ethnographic studies suggest that "lesbian," "gay," and "bisexual" identity among socially subordinate and nonurban populations is generally less visible or less affirmed than it is among more privileged white, educated, and urban populations (Boykin 1996; Cantu 2000; Carrier 1992; Greene and Boyd-

<sup>6</sup> The field is now in a position to take advantage of new data sources. For example, the 1990 U.S. census allows (albeit imperfectly) for the first time the identification of gay and lesbian couples, as will the 2000 census (Black, Gates, et al. 2000). From 1989 to the present, the U.S. General Social Surveys (<http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/GSS/index.html>) have also allowed for the identification of the sexual orientation of respondents, as does the National Health and Social Life Survey (Laumann et al. 1995).

Franklin 1996; Hawkeswood 1997; Lynch 1992; Peterson 1992).

Increasingly, uncloseted lesbians and gay men actively choose to become parents through diverse and innovative means (Benkov 1994). In addition to adoption and foster care, lesbians are choosing motherhood using known and unknown sperm donors (as single mothers, in intentional co-mother couples, and in complex variations of biosocial parenting). Both members of a lesbian couple may choose to become pregnant sequentially or simultaneously. Pioneering lesbian couples have exchanged ova to enable both women to claim biological, and thereby legal, maternal status to the same infant (Bourne 1999). It is much more difficult (and costly) for gay men to choose to become fathers, particularly fathers of infants. Some (who reside in states that permit this) become adoptive or foster parents; others serve as sperm donors in joint parenting arrangements with lesbian or other mothers. An affluent minority hire women as "surrogates" to bear children for them.

The means and contexts for planned parenthood are so diverse and complex that they compound the difficulties of isolating the significance of parental sexual orientation. To even approximate this goal, researchers would need to control not only for the gender, number, and sexual orientation of parents, but for their diverse biosocial and legal statuses. The handful of studies that have attempted to do this focus on lesbian motherhood. The most rigorous research designs compare donor-insemination (DI) parenthood among lesbian and heterosexual couples or single mothers (e.g., Chan, Brooks, et al. 1998; Flaks et al. 1995). To our knowledge, no studies have been conducted exclusively on lesbian or gay adoptive parents or compare the children of intentional gay fathers with children in other family forms. Researchers do not know the extent to which the comparatively high socioeconomic status of the DI parents studied accurately reflects the demographics of lesbian and gay parenthood generally, but given the degree of effort, cultural and legal support, and, frequently, the expense involved, members of relatively privileged social groups would be the ones most able to make use of reproductive technology and/or independent adoption.



In short, the indirect effects of heterosexism have placed inordinate constraints on most research on the effects of gay parenthood. We believe, however, that the time may now be propitious to begin to reformulate the basic terms of the enterprise.

### RECONSIDERING THE PSYCHOLOGICAL FINDINGS

Toward this end, we examined the findings of 21 psychological studies (listed at the bottom of Table 1) published between 1981 and 1998 that we considered best equipped to address sociological questions about how parental sexual orientation matters to children. One meta-analysis of 18 such studies (11 of which are included among our 21) characteristically concludes that “the results demonstrate no differences on any measures between the heterosexual and homosexual parents regarding parenting styles, emotional adjustment, and sexual orientation of the child(ren)” (Allen and Burrell 1996:19). To evaluate this claim, we selected for examination only studies that: (1) include a sample of gay or lesbian parents and children and a comparison group of heterosexual parents and children; (2) assess differences between groups in terms of statistical significance; and (3) include findings directly relevant to children’s development. The studies we discuss compare relatively advantaged lesbian parents (18 studies) and gay male parents (3 studies) with a roughly matched sample of heterosexual parents. Echoing the conclusion of meta-analysts Allen and Burrell (1996), the authors of all 21 studies almost uniformly claim to find no differences in measures of parenting or child outcomes. In contrast, our careful scrutiny of the findings they report suggests that on some dimensions—particularly those related to gender and sexuality—the sexual orientations of these parents matter somewhat more for their children than the researchers claimed.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> We chose to display the specific findings in each of the quantitative studies, rather than to conduct a meta-analysis, because at this stage of knowledge not enough studies are targeted to the same general “outcome” to enable a meta-analysis to reveal systematic patterns. The single meta-

The empirical findings from these studies are presented in Tables 1 and 2. Table 1 summarizes findings on the relationship between parental sexual orientation and three sets of child “outcome” variables: (1) gender behavior/gender preferences, (2) sexual behavior/sexual preferences, and (3) psychological well-being. Table 2 summarizes findings on the relationship between parental sexual orientation and other attributes of parents, including: (1) behavior toward children’s gender and sexual development, (2) parenting skills, (3) relationships with children, and (4) psychological well-being. Positive signs (+) indicate a statistically significant higher level of the variable for lesbian/gay parents or their children, while negative signs (–) indicate a higher level for heterosexual parents or their children. Zero (0) indicates no significant difference.

While Table 1 reports the results of all 21 studies, our discussion here emphasizes findings from six studies we consider to be best designed to isolate whatever unique effects parents’ sexual orientations might have on children. Four of these—Flaks et al. (1995), Brewaeys et al. (1997); Chan, Raboy, and Patterson (1998); and Chan, Brooks, et al. (1998)—focus on planned parenting and compare children of lesbian mothers and heterosexual mothers who conceived through DI. This focus reduces the potential for variables like parental divorce, re-partnering, coming out, and so on to confound whatever effects of maternal sexual orientation may be observed. The other two studies—R. Green et al. (1986) and Tasker and Golombok (1997)—focus on children born within heterosexual marriages who experienced the divorce of their biological parents before being raised by a lesbian mother with or without a new partner or spouse. Although this research design heightens the risk that in statistical analyses the effect of maternal sexual orientation may include the

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analysis that has been done (Allen and Burrell 1996) reached the typical “no difference” conclusion, but its conclusions were hampered by this very problem. The small number of studies available led Allen and Burrell to pool studies focused on quite different parent and child “outcomes,” heightening the risk that findings in one direction effectively offset findings in another.

effects of other factors, distinctive strengths of each study counterbalance this limitation. R. Green et al. (1986) rigorously attempt to match lesbian mothers and heterosexual mothers on a variety of characteristics, and they compare the two groups of mothers as well as both groups of children on a wide variety of dimensions.<sup>8</sup> Tasker and Golombok (1997) offer a unique long-term, longitudinal design. Their data collection began in 1976 on 27 heterosexual single mothers and 39 of their children (average age 10) and 27 lesbian mothers and 39 of their children (also average age 10) in England. Follow-up interviews with 46 of the original children were conducted 14 years later, allowing for a rare glimpse at how children with lesbian mothers and those with heterosexual mothers fared over their early life courses into young adulthood.

#### **CHILDREN'S GENDER PREFERENCES AND BEHAVIOR**

The first panel of Table 1 displays findings about the relationship between the sexual orientation of parents and the gender preferences and behaviors of their children. The findings demonstrate that, as we would expect, on some measures meaningful differences have been observed in predictable directions. For example, lesbian mothers in R. Green et al. (1986) reported that their children, especially daughters, more frequently dress, play, and behave in ways that do not conform to sex-typed cultural norms. Likewise, daughters of lesbian mothers reported greater interest in activities associated with both "masculine" and "feminine" qualities and that involve the participation of both sexes, whereas daughters of heterosexual mothers report significantly greater interest in traditionally feminine, same-sex activities

<sup>8</sup> Belcastro et al. (1993) point out that R. Green et al. (1986) did not successfully match heterosexual and lesbian single-mother families on the dimension of household composition. While 39 of R. Green et al.'s 50 lesbian single-mother households had a second adult residing in them by one-plus years post-divorce, only 4 of the 40 heterosexual single mothers did so. R. Green et al. (1986) note this difference, but do not discuss its implications for findings; nor do Belcastro et al. (1993).

(also see Hotvedt and Mandel 1982). Similarly, daughters with lesbian mothers reported higher aspirations to nontraditional-gender occupations (Steckel 1987). For example, in R. Green et al. (1986), 53 percent (16 out of 30) of the daughters of lesbians aspired to careers such as doctor, lawyer, engineer, and astronaut, compared with only 21 percent (6 of 28) of the daughters of heterosexual mothers.

Sons appear to respond in more complex ways to parental sexual orientations. On some measures, like aggressiveness and play preferences, the sons of lesbian mothers behave in less traditionally masculine ways than those raised by heterosexual single mothers. However, on other measures, such as occupational goals and sartorial styles, they also exhibit greater gender conformity than do daughters with lesbian mothers (but they are not more conforming than sons with heterosexual mothers) (R. Green et al. 1986; Steckel 1987).<sup>9</sup> Such evidence, albeit limited, implies that lesbian parenting may free daughters and sons from a broad but uneven range of traditional gen-

<sup>9</sup> Many of these studies use conventional levels of significance (e.g.,  $|t| > 1.96$ ,  $p < .05$ , two-tailed tests) on minuscule samples, substantially increasing their likelihood of failing to reject the null hypothesis. For example, Hoefler's (1981) descriptive numbers suggest a greater preference for masculine toys among boys with heterosexual mothers than those with lesbian mothers, but sampling only 10 boys in each group makes reaching statistical significance exceedingly difficult. Golombok, Spencer, and Rutter's (1983, table 8) evidence of a greater average tendency toward "femininity" among daughters raised by heterosexual mothers than those raised by lesbian single mothers does not reach statistical significance in part because their tabular crosscutting leads to very small cell counts (to meet conventional criteria the differences between groups would have to be huge in such cases). Single difference-tests that maximize cell counts (e.g., the percentage of children—male or female—in each group who report gender-role behavior that goes against type) might well yield significant results. Recent research on model selection shows that to find the best model in large samples, conventional levels of significance need to be substantially tightened, but that for very small samples conventional levels can actually be too restrictive (Raftery 1995).

**Table 1. Findings on the Associations between Parents' Sexual Orientations and Selected Child Outcomes: 21 Studies, 1981 to 1998**

Variable Measured	Direction of Effect
<i>Gender Behavior/Preferences</i>	
Girls' departure from traditional gender role expectations and behaviors—in dress, play, physicality, school activities, occupational aspirations (Hoeffler 1981; Golombok et al. 1983; R. Green et al. 1986; Steckel 1987; Hotvedt and Mandel 1982).	0/+
Boys' departure from traditional gender role expectations and behaviors—in dress, play, physicality, school activities, occupational aspirations (Hoeffler 1981; Golombok et al. 1983; R. Green et al. 1986; Steckel 1987; Hotvedt and Mandel 1982).	0/+
Boys' level of aggressiveness and domineering disposition (Steckel 1987).	–
Child wishes she/he were the other sex (Green et al. 1986).	0
<i>Sexual Behavior/Sexual Preferences</i>	
Young adult child has considered same-sex sexual relationship(s); has had same-sex sexual relationship(s) (Tasker and Golombok 1997).	+
Young adult child firmly self-identifies as bisexual, gay, or lesbian (Tasker and Golombok 1997).	0
Boys' likelihood of having a gay sexual orientation in adulthood, by sexual orientation of father (Bailey et al. 1995).	(+)
Girls' number of sexual partners from puberty to young adulthood (Tasker and Golombok 1997).	+
Boys' number of sexual partners from puberty to young adulthood (Tasker and Golombok 1997).	(–)
Quality of intimate relationships in young adulthood (Tasker and Golombok 1997).	0
Have friend(s) who are gay or lesbian (Tasker and Golombok 1997).	+
<i>Self-Esteem and Psychological Well-Being</i>	
Children's self-esteem, anxiety, depression, internalizing behavioral problems, externalizing behavioral problems, total behavioral problems, performance in social arenas (sports, friendships, school), use of psychological counseling, mothers' and teachers' reports of children's hyperactivity, unsociability, emotional difficulty, conduct difficulty, other behavioral problems (Golombok, Spencer, and Rutter 1983; Huggins 1989; Patterson 1994; Flaks et al. 1995; Tasker and Golombok 1997; Chan, Raboy, and Patterson 1998; Chan, Brooks, et al. 1998).	0
Daughters' self-reported level of popularity at school and in the neighborhood (Hotvedt and Mandel 1982).	+
Mothers' and teachers' reports of child's level of affection, responsiveness, and concern for younger children (Steckel 1987).	+
Experience of peer stigma concerning own sexuality (Tasker and Golombok 1997).	+
Cognitive functioning (IQ, verbal, performance, and so on) (Flaks et al. 1995; R. Green et al. 1986).	0
Experienced problems gaining employment in young adulthood (Tasker and Golombok 1997).	0

*Sources:* The 21 studies considered in Tables 1 and 2 are, in date order: Hoeffler (1981); Kweskin and Cook (1982); Miller, Jacobsen, and Bigner (1982); Rand, Graham, and Rawlings (1982); Golombok, Spencer, and Rutter (1983); R. Green et al. (1986); M. Harris and Turner (1986); Bigner and Jacobsen (1989); Hotvedt and Mandel (1982); Huggins (1989); Steckel (1987); Bigner and Jacobsen (1992); Jenny, Roesler, and Poyer (1994); Patterson (1994); Bailey et al. (1995); Flaks et al. (1995); Brewaeys et al. (1997); Tasker and Golombok (1997); Chan, Raboy, and Patterson (1998); Chan, Brooks, et al. (1998); and McNeill, Rienzi, and Kposowa (1998).

+ = significantly higher in lesbian/gay than in heterosexual parent context.

0 = no significant difference between lesbian/gay and heterosexual parent context.

– = significantly lower in lesbian/gay than heterosexual parent context.

( ) = borders on statistical significance.

0/+ = evidence is mixed.

der prescriptions. It also suggests that the sexual orientation of mothers interacts with the gender of children in complex ways to influence gender preferences and behavior. Such findings raise provocative questions about how children assimilate gender culture and interests—questions that the propensity to downplay differences deters scholars from exploring.<sup>10</sup>

Consider, for example, the study by R. Green et al. (1986) that, by our count, finds at least 15 intriguing, statistically significant differences in gender behavior and preferences among children (4 among boys and 11 among girls) in lesbian and heterosexual single-mother homes. Yet the study's abstract summarizes: "Two types of single-parent households [lesbian and heterosexual mothers] and their effects on children ages 3–11 years were compared. . . . No significant differences were found between the two types of households for boys and few significant differences for girls" (p. 167).<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, we note an arresting continuum of data reported, but ignored, by Brewaeys et al. (1997, table 4). Young boys (ages 4 to 8) conceived through DI in lesbian co-mother families scored the lowest on a measure of sex-typed masculine behaviors (the PSAI-preschool activities inventory, rated by parents), DI boys in heterosexual two-parent families were somewhat more sex-typed, while "naturally" conceived boys in heterosexual two-parent families received the highest sex-typed masculine scores. By

<sup>10</sup> Much qualitative work, particularly by lesbian feminist scholars, has been exploring these issues. For example Wells (1997) argues that, unlike what she refers to as "patriarchal families," lesbian co-mother families rear sons to experience rather than repress emotions and instill in daughters a sense of their potential rather than of limits imposed by gender. From a quantitative perspective, this is a "testable" hypothesis that has sizable theoretical implications but which researchers in the field do not seem to be pursuing.

<sup>11</sup> The R. Green et al. (1986) research was conducted in a context in which custody cases often claimed that lesbian motherhood would create gender identity disorder in children and that lesbian mothers themselves were unfit. It is understandable that their summary reassures readers that the findings point to more similarities than differences in both the mothers and their children.

our calculation, the difference in the magnitude of scores between DI boys with lesbian co-mothers and conventionally conceived sons with heterosexual parents is sufficient to reach statistical significance, even though the matched groups contained only 15 and 11 boys, respectively. Rather than exploring the implications of these provocative data, the authors conclude: "No significant difference was found between groups for the mean PSAI scores for either boys or girls" (Brewaeys et al. 1997:1356).

### **CHILDREN'S SEXUAL PREFERENCES AND BEHAVIOR**

The second panel of Table 1 shifts the focus from children's gender behavior and preferences to their sexual behavior and preferences, with particular attention to thought-provoking findings from the Tasker and Golombok (1997) study, the only comparative study we know of that follows children raised in lesbian-headed families into young adulthood and hence that can explore the children's sexuality in meaningful ways. A significantly greater proportion of young adult children raised by lesbian mothers than those raised by heterosexual mothers in the Tasker and Golombok sample reported having had a homoerotic relationship (6 of the 25 young adults raised by lesbian mothers—24 percent—compared with 0 of the 20 raised by heterosexual mothers). The young adults reared by lesbian mothers were also significantly more likely to report having thought they might experience homoerotic attraction or relationships. The difference in their openness to this possibility is striking: 64 percent (14 of 22) of the young adults raised by lesbian mothers report having considered same-sex relationships (in the past, now, or in the future), compared with only 17 percent (3 of 18) of those raised by heterosexual mothers. Of course, the fact that 17 percent of those raised by heterosexual mothers also report some openness to same-sex relationships, while 36 percent of those raised by lesbians do not, underscores the important reality that parental influence on children's sexual desires is neither direct nor easily predictable.

If these young adults raised by lesbian mothers were more open to a broad range of

sexual possibilities, they were not statistically more likely to self-identify as bisexual, lesbian, or gay. To be coded as such, the respondent not only had to currently self-identify as bisexual/lesbian/gay, but also to express a commitment to that identity in the future. Tasker and Golombok (1997) employ a measure of sexual identity with no “in-between” categories for those whose identity may not yet be fully fixed or embraced. Thus, although a more nuanced measure or a longer period of observation could yield different results, Golombok and Tasker (1996) choose to situate their findings within the “overall no difference” interpretation:

The commonly held assumption that children brought up by lesbian mothers will themselves grow up to be lesbian or gay is not supported by the findings of the study: the majority of children who grew up in lesbian families identified as heterosexual in adulthood, and there was no statistically significant difference between young adults from lesbian and heterosexual family backgrounds with respect to sexual orientation. (P. 8)

This reading, while technically accurate, deflects analytic attention from the rather sizeable differences in sexual attitudes and behaviors that the study actually reports. The only other comparative study we found that explores intergenerational resemblance in sexual orientation is Bailey et al. (1995) on gay fathers and their adult sons. This study also provides evidence of a moderate degree of parent-to-child transmission of sexual orientation.

Tasker and Golombok (1997) also report some fascinating findings on the number of sexual partners children report having had between puberty and young adulthood. Relative to their counterparts with heterosexual parents, the adolescent and young adult girls raised by lesbian mothers appear to have been more sexually adventurous and less chaste, whereas the sons of lesbians evince the opposite pattern—somewhat less sexually adventurous and more chaste (the finding was statistically significant for the 25-girl sample but not for the 18-boy sample). In other words, once again, children (especially girls) raised by lesbians appear to depart from traditional gender-based norms,

while children raised by heterosexual mothers appear to conform to them. Yet this provocative finding of differences in sexual behavior and agency has not been analyzed or investigated further.

Both the findings and nonfindings discussed above may be influenced by the measures of sexual orientation employed. All of the studies measure sexual orientations as a dichotomy rather than as a continuum. We have no data on children whose parents do not identify their sexuality neatly as one of two dichotomous choices, and we can only speculate about how a more nuanced conceptualization might alter the findings reported. Having parents less committed to a specific sexual identity may free children to construct sexualities altogether different from those of their parents, or it may give whatever biological predispositions exist freer reign to determine eventual sexual orientations, or parents with greater ambiguity or fluidity of sexual orientation might transmit some of this to their children, leading to greater odds of sexual flexibility.

#### **CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH**

Given historic social prejudices against homosexuality, the major issue deliberated by judges and policy makers has been whether children of lesbian and gay parents suffer higher levels of emotional and psychological harm. Unsurprisingly, therefore, children's “self-esteem and psychological well-being” is a heavily researched domain. The third panel of Table 1 shows that these studies find no significant differences between children of lesbian mothers and children of heterosexual mothers in anxiety, depression, self-esteem, and numerous other measures of social and psychological adjustment. The roughly equivalent level of psychological well-being between the two groups holds true in studies that test children directly, rely on parents' reports, and solicit evaluations from teachers. The few significant differences found actually tend to favor children with lesbian mothers (see Table 1).<sup>12</sup> Given some credible evidence

<sup>12</sup> Patterson (1994) found that children ages 4 to 9 with lesbian mothers expressed more stress

that children with gay and lesbian parents, especially adolescent children, face homophobic teasing and ridicule that many find difficult to manage (Tasker and Golombok 1997; also see Bozett 1989:148; Mitchell 1998), the children in these studies seem to exhibit impressive psychological strength.

Similarly, across studies, no relationship has been found between parental sexual orientation and measures of children's cognitive ability. Moreover, to our knowledge no theories predict such a link. Thus far, no work has compared children's *long-term* achievements in education, occupation, income, and other domains of life.<sup>13</sup>

Links between parental sexual orientation, parenting practices, and parent/child relationships may indicate processes underlying some of the links between parents' sexual orientation and the child outcomes in Table 1. Table 2 presents empirical findings about the parents themselves and the quality of parent-child relationships.

#### **PARENTAL BEHAVIOR TOWARD CHILDREN'S GENDER AND SEXUAL DEVELOPMENT**

The scattered pieces of evidence cited above imply that lesbigay parenting may be associated with a broadening of children's gender and sexual repertoires. Is this because lesbigay parents actively attempt to achieve these outcomes in their children? Data in the first panel of Table 2 provide little evidence

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than did those with heterosexual mothers, but at the same time they also reported a greater sense of overall well-being. Patterson speculates that children from lesbian-mother families may be more willing to express their feelings—positive and negative—but also that the children may actually experience more social stress at the same time that they gain confidence from their ability to cope with it.

<sup>13</sup> The only empirical evidence reported is Tasker and Golombok's (1997) finding of no differences in unemployment rates among young adults that are associated with their parents' sexual orientations. However, some of the children studied were still in school, and the authors provide no information on occupations attained to assess differences in long-term occupational achievements.

that parents' own sexual orientations correlate strongly with their preferences concerning their children's gender or sexual orientations. For example, the lesbian mothers in Kveskin and Cook (1982) were no more likely than heterosexual mothers to assign masculine and feminine qualities to an "ideal" boy or girl, respectively, on the well-known Bem Sex Role Inventory. However, mothers did tend to desire gender-traits in children that resembled those they saw in themselves, and the lesbians saw themselves as less feminine-typed than did the heterosexual mothers. This suggests that a mother's own gender identity may mediate the connection between maternal sexual orientation and maternal gender preferences for her children.

Also, in some studies lesbian mothers were less concerned than heterosexual mothers that their children engage in gender "appropriate" activities and play, a plausible difference most researchers curiously downplay. For example, Hoeffler's (1981) summary reads:

Children's play and activity interests as indices of sex-role behavior were compared for a sample of lesbian and heterosexual single mothers and their children. More striking than any differences were the similarities between the two groups of children on acquisition of sex-role behavior and between the two groups of mothers on the encouragement of sex-role behavior. (P. 536)

Yet from our perspective, the most interesting (and statistically significant) finding in Hoeffler (1981, table 4) is one of difference. While the heterosexual single mothers in the sample were significantly more likely to prefer that their boys engage in masculine activities and their girls in feminine ones, lesbian mothers had no such interests. Their preferences for their children's play were gender-neutral.

Differences in parental concern with children's acquisition of gender and in parenting practices that do or do not emphasize conformity to sex-typed gender norms are understudied and underanalyzed. The sparse evidence to date based on self-reports does not suggest strong differences between lesbigay and heterosexual parents in this domain.

**Table 2. Findings on the Associations between Parents' Sexual Orientations, Other Attributes of Parents, and Parent-Child Relationships: 21 Studies, 1981 to 1998**

Variable Measured	Direction of Effect
<i>Parental Behavior toward Children's Gender and Sexual Development</i>	
Mother prefers child engages in gender-appropriate play activities (Hoeffler 1981; R. Green et al. 1986; M. Harris and Turner 1986).	0/-
Mother classifies the ideal child as masculine (if boy) and feminine (if girl) (Kweskin and Cook 1982).	0
Mother prefers that child be gay or lesbian when grown up (Golombok et al. 1983; Tasker and Golombok 1997).	0
Child believes that mother would prefer that she/he has lesbigay sexual orientation (Tasker and Golombok 1997).	+
<i>Parenting Practices: Developmental Orientations and Parenting Skills</i>	
Mother's developmental orientation in child rearing and parenting skill (Miller et al. 1982; McNeill et al. 1998; Flaks et al. 1995).	0/+
Spouse/partner's developmental orientation in child rearing and parenting skill (Flaks et al. 1995; Brewaeys et al. 1997).	+
Spouse/partner's desire for equal/shared distribution of childcare (Chan, Brooks, et al. 1998).	+
Degree to which mother and spouse/partner share child-care work (Brewaeys et al. 1997; Chan, Brooks, et al. 1998).	+
Similarity between mother's and spouse/partner's parenting skills (Flaks et al. 1995).	+
Similarity between mother's and spouse/partner's assessment of child's behavior and well-being (Chan, Raboy, and Patterson 1998; Chan, Brooks, et al. 1998).	+
Mother allowed adolescent child's boyfriend/girlfriend to spend the night (Tasker and Golombok 1997).	0
<i>Residential Parent/Child Relationships</i>	
Mother's rating of quality of relationship with child (Golombok et al. 1983; M. Harris and Turner 1986; Brewaeys et al. 1997; McNeill et al. 1998).	0
Mother's likelihood of having a live-in partner post-divorce (Kweskin and Cook 1982; R. Green et al. 1986).	+
Spouse/partner's rating of quality of relationship with child (Brewaeys et al. 1997).	+
Child's report of closeness with biological mother growing up (Tasker and Golombok 1997; Brewaeys et al. 1997).	0
Child's report of closeness with biological mother's partner/spouse growing up (Tasker and Golombok 1997; Brewaeys et al. 1997).	0/+
Child felt able to discuss own sexual development with parent(s) while growing up (Tasker and Golombok 1997).	+
<i>Nonresidential Parent/Child Relationships</i>	
(Non-custodial) father's level of involvement with children, limit setting, and developmental orientation in child rearing (Bigner and Jacobsen 1989, 1992).	0/+
Mother's encouragement of child's contact with nonresidential father (Hotvedt and Mandel 1982).	0
Divorced mother's contact with children's father in the past year (Golombok et al. 1983).	+
Child's frequency of contact with nonresidential father (Golombok et al. 1983).	+
Child's positive feelings toward nonresidential father (Hotvedt and Mandel 1982; Tasker and Golombok 1997).	0/(+)

(Table 2 continued on next page)

(Table 2 continued from previous page)

Variable Measured	Direction of Effect
<i>Parent's Self-Esteem and Psychological Well-Being</i>	
Mother's level of depression, self-esteem (Rand et al. 1982; R. Green et al. 1986; Chan, Raboy and Patterson 1998; Golombok et al. 1983).	0/+
Mother's level of leadership, independence, achievement orientation (R. Green et al. 1986; Rand et al. 1982).	0/+
Mother's use of sedatives, stimulants, in- or out-patient psychiatric care in past year (Golombok et al. 1983).	0
Mother ever received psychiatric care in adult life? (Golombok et al. 1983).	+
Mother's level of self-reported stress associated with single-parenthood (R. Green et al. 1986).	0

Sources: See Table 1.

+ = significantly higher in lesbian than in heterosexual parent context.

0 = no significant difference between lesbian and heterosexual parent context.

- = significantly lower in lesbian than heterosexual parent context.

( ) = borders on statistical significance.

0/+ = evidence is mixed.

#### **PARENTING PRACTICES: DEVELOPMENTAL ORIENTATIONS AND PARENTING SKILLS**

The second panel of Table 2 displays findings about parenting skills and child-rearing practices—developmental orientations, parental control and support, parent/child communication, parental affection, time spent with children—that have been shown to be central for many aspects of children's development (introversion/extroversion, success in school, and so on) (Baumrind 1978, 1980). The many findings of differences here coalesce around two patterns. First, studies find the nonbiological lesbian co-mothers (referred to as lesbian "social mothers" in Brewaeys et al. [1997]) to be more skilled at parenting and more involved with the children than are stepfathers. Second, lesbian partners in the two-parent families studied enjoy a greater level of synchronicity in parenting than do heterosexual partners.

For example, the lesbian birth mothers and heterosexual birth mothers who conceived through DI studied by Flaks et al. (1995) and Brewaeys et al. (1997) scored about the same on all measures of parenting. However, the DI lesbian social mothers scored significantly higher than the DI heterosexual fathers on measures of parenting skills, practices, and quality of interactions with chil-

dren. DI lesbian social mothers also spent significantly more time than did DI heterosexual fathers in child-care activities including disciplinary, control, and limit-setting activities. In fact, in the Brewaeys et al. (1997) study, lesbian social mothers even scored significantly higher on these measures than did biological fathers in heterosexual couples who conceived conventionally. Similarly, in Chan, Raboy, and Patterson (1998), whereas the lesbian birth mothers and co-mother partners evaluated their children's emotional states and social behaviors in almost exactly the same way, heterosexual mothers and fathers evaluated their children differently: Fathers identified fewer problems in the children than did mothers (a similar pattern is observed in Chan, Brooks, et al. 1998, table 4).

These findings imply that lesbian co-parents may enjoy greater parental compatibility and achieve particularly high quality parenting skills, which may help explain the striking findings on parent/child relationships in the third panel of Table 2. DI lesbian social mothers report feeling closer to the children than do their heterosexual male counterparts. The children studied report feeling closer to DI lesbian social mothers as well as to lesbian stepmothers than to either DI fathers or stepfathers (measures of emotional closeness between birth mothers and children did not vary by mother's sexual ori-



entation). Children of lesbian mothers also report feeling more able than children of heterosexual parents to discuss their sexual development with their mothers and their mothers' partners (Tasker and Golombok 1997; also see Mitchell 1998:407). If lesbian social mothers and stepmothers have more parenting awareness and skill, on average, than heterosexual DI fathers or stepfathers, and if they spend more time taking care of children, they may be more likely to earn the children's affection and trust.

We believe (as do Brewaeys et al. 1997; Chan et al. 1998; Flaks et al. 1995) that the comparative strengths these lesbian co-parents seem to exhibit have more to do with gender than with sexual orientation. Female gender is probably the source of the positive signs for parenting skill, participation in child rearing, and synchronicity in child evaluations shown in the comparisons in Table 2. Research suggests that, on average, mothers tend to be more invested in and skilled at child care than fathers, and that mothers are more apt than fathers to engage in the kinds of child-care activities that appear to be particularly crucial to children's cognitive, emotional, and social development (Furstenberg and Cherlin 1991; Simons and Associates 1996). Analogously, in these studies of matched lesbian and heterosexual couples, women in every category—heterosexual birth mother, lesbian birth mother, nonbiological lesbian social mother—all score about the same as one another but score significantly higher than the men on measures having to do with the care of children.<sup>14</sup>

In our view, these patterns reflect something more than a simple "gender effect," however, because sexual orientation is the key "exogenous variable" that brings together parents of same or different genders. Thus, sexual orientation and gender should be viewed as *interacting* to create new kinds of family structures and processes—such as an egalitarian division of child care—that have fascinating consequences for all of the relationships in the triad and for child devel-

opment (also see Dunne 1999, 2000; Patterson 1995). Some of the evidence suggests that two women co-parenting may create a synergistic pattern that brings more egalitarian, compatible, shared parenting and time spent with children, greater understanding of children, and closeness and communication between parents and children. The genesis of this pattern cannot be understood on the basis of either sexual orientation or gender alone. Such findings raise fruitful comparative questions for future research about family dynamics among two parents of the same or different gender who do or do not share similar attitudes, values, and behaviors.

We know little thus far about how the sexual orientation of nonresidential fathers may be related to their relationships with their children (the fourth panel of Table 2) (and even less about that for custodial fathers). The Bigner and Jacobsen studies (1989, 1992) find similarity in parenting and in father/child relations among heterosexual nonresidential fathers and gay nonresidential fathers. Bozett (1987a, 1987b, 1989) found that in a small sample of children with gay fathers, most children had very positive feelings toward their fathers, but they also worried that peers and others might presume that they, too, had a gay sexual orientation (Bozett did not include a control group of children with heterosexual fathers).

#### PARENTAL FITNESS

The bottom panel of Table 2 demonstrates that evidence to date provides no support for those, like Wardle (1997), who claim that lesbian mothers suffer greater levels of psychological difficulties (depression, low self-esteem) than do heterosexual mothers. On the contrary, the few differences observed in the studies suggest that these lesbian mothers actually display somewhat higher levels of positive psychological resources.

Research on a more diverse population, however, might alter the findings of difference and similarity shown in Table 2. For example, the ethnographic evidence suggests that people of color with homoerotic practices often value racial solidarity over sexual solidarity. Boykin, Director of the National Black Gay and Lesbian Leadership Forum,

<sup>14</sup> Chan, Brooks, et al. (1998:415) make interesting connections between these kinds of findings and the theoretical perspectives developed in Chodorow (1978) and Gilligan (1982).

cites a 1994 University of Chicago study which found that among people who engage in homoerotic activity, whites, urbanites, and those with higher education were more likely to consider themselves gay or lesbian (Boykin 1996:36). If, as it appears, racial/ethnic solidarities deter disproportionate numbers of people of color from coming out, they might suffer greater psychological and social costs from living in the closet or, conversely, might benefit from less concern over their sexual identities than do white gay parents. We also do not know whether lesbian couples of different racial/ethnic and social class contexts would display the same patterns of egalitarian, compatible co-parenting reported among the white lesbian couples.

#### ***NO DIFFERENCES OF SOCIAL CONCERN***

The findings summarized in Tables 1 and 2 show that the “no differences” claim does receive strong empirical support in crucial domains. Lesbigay parents and their children in these studies display no differences from heterosexual counterparts in psychological well-being or cognitive functioning. Scores for lesbigay parenting styles and levels of investment in children are at least as “high” as those for heterosexual parents. Levels of closeness and quality of parent/child relationships do not seem to differentiate directly by parental sexual orientation, but indirectly, by way of parental gender. Because every relevant study to date shows that parental sexual orientation per se has no measurable effect on the quality of parent-child relationships or on children’s mental health or social adjustment, there is no evidentiary basis for considering parental sexual orientation in decisions about children’s “best interest.” In fact, given that children with lesbigay parents probably contend with a degree of social stigma, these similarities in child outcomes suggest the presence of compensatory processes in lesbigay-parent families. Exploring how these families help children cope with stigma might prove helpful to all kinds of families.

Most of the research to date focuses on social-psychological dimensions of well-being and adjustment and on the quality of parent/child relationships. Perhaps these vari-

ables reflect the disciplinary preferences of psychologists who have conducted most of the studies, as well as a desire to produce evidence directly relevant to the questions of “harm” that dominate judicial and legislative deliberations over child custody. Less research has explored questions for which there are stronger theoretical grounds for expecting differences—children’s gender and sexual behavior and preferences. In fact, only two studies (R. Green et al. 1986; Tasker and Golombok 1997) generate much of the baseline evidence on potential connections between parents’ and child’s sexual and gender identities. Evidence in these and the few other studies that focus on these variables does not support the “no differences” claim. Children with lesbigay parents appear less traditionally gender-typed and more likely to be open to homoerotic relationships. In addition, evidence suggests that parental gender and sexual identities interact to create distinctive family processes whose consequences for children have yet to be studied.

#### **HOW THE SEXUAL ORIENTATION OF PARENTS MATTERS**

We have identified conceptual, methodological, and theoretical limitations in the psychological research on the effects of parental sexual orientation and have challenged the predominant claim that the sexual orientation of parents does not matter at all. We argued instead that despite the limitations, there is suggestive evidence and good reason to believe that contemporary children and young adults with lesbian or gay parents do differ in modest and interesting ways from children with heterosexual parents. Most of these differences, however, are not causal, but are indirect effects of parental gender or selection effects associated with heterosexist social conditions under which lesbigay-parent families currently live.

First, our analysis of the psychological research indicates that the effects of parental gender trump those of sexual orientation (Brewaeys et al. 1997; Chan, Brooks, et al. 1998; Chan, Raboy, and Patterson 1998; Flaks et al. 1995). A diverse array of gender theories (social learning theory, psychoanalytic theory, materialist, symbolic inter-

actionist) would predict that children with two same-gender parents, and particularly with co-mother parents, should develop in less gender-stereotypical ways than would children with two heterosexual parents. There is reason to credit the perception of lesbian co-mothers in a qualitative study (Dunne, 2000) that they “were redefining the meaning and content of motherhood, extending its boundaries to incorporate the activities that are usually dichotomized as mother and father” (p. 25). Children who derive their principal source of love, discipline, protection, and identification from women living independent of male domestic authority or influence should develop less stereotypical symbolic, emotional, practical, and behavioral gender repertoires. Indeed, it is the claim that the gender mix of parents has no effect on their children’s gender behavior, interests, or development that cries out for sociological explanation. Only a crude theory of cultural indoctrination that posited the absolute impotence of parents might predict such an outcome, and the remarkable variability of gender configurations documented in the anthropological record readily undermines such a theory (Bonvillain 1998; Brettell and Sargent 1997; Ortner and Whitehead 1981). The burden of proof in the domain of gender and sexuality should rest with those who embrace the null hypothesis.

Second, because homosexuality is stigmatized, selection effects may yield correlations between parental sexual orientation and child development that do not derive from sexual orientation itself. For example, social constraints on access to marriage and parenting make lesbian parents likely to be older, urban, educated, and self-aware—factors that foster several positive developmental consequences for their children. On the other hand, denied access to marriage, lesbian co-parent relationships are likely to experience dissolution rates somewhat higher than those among heterosexual co-parents (Bell and Weinberg 1978; Weeks, Heaphy, and Donovan forthcoming, chap. 5). Not only do same-sex couples lack the institutional pressures and support for commitment that marriage provides, but qualitative studies suggest that they tend to embrace comparatively high standards of emotional inti-

macy and satisfaction (Dunne 2000; Sullivan 1996; Weeks et al. forthcoming). The decision to pursue a socially ostracized domain of intimacy implies an investment in the emotional regime that Giddens (1992) terms “the pure relationship” and “confluent love.” Such relationships confront the inherent instabilities of modern or postmodern intimacy, what Beck and Beck-Gersheim (1995) term “the normal chaos of love.” Thus, a higher dissolution rate would be correlated with but not causally related to sexual orientation, a difference that should erode were homophobia to disappear and legal marriage be made available to lesbians and gay men.

Most of the differences in the findings discussed above cannot be considered deficits from any legitimate public policy perspective. They either favor the children with lesbian parents, are secondary effects of social prejudice, or represent “just a difference” of the sort democratic societies should respect and protect. Apart from differences associated with parental gender, most of the presently observable differences in child “outcomes” should wither away under conditions of full equality and respect for sexual diversity. Indeed, it is time to recognize that the categories “lesbian mother” and “gay father” are historically transitional and conceptually flawed, because they erroneously imply that a parent’s sexual orientation is the decisive characteristic of her or his parenting. On the contrary, we propose that homophobia and discrimination are the chief reasons why parental sexual orientation matters at all. Because lesbian parents do not enjoy the same rights, respect, and recognition as heterosexual parents, their children contend with the burdens of vicarious social stigma. Likewise, some of the particular strengths and sensitivities such children appear to display, such as a greater capacity to express feelings or more empathy for social diversity (Mitchell 1998; O’Connell 1994), are probably artifacts of marginality and may be destined for the historical dustbin of a democratic, sexually pluralist society.

Even in a utopian society, however, one difference seems less likely to disappear: The sexual orientation of parents appears to have a unique (although not large) effect on children in the politically sensitive domain of sexuality. The evidence, while scanty and

underanalyzed, hints that parental sexual orientation is positively associated with the possibility that children will be more likely to attain a similar orientation—and theory and common sense also support such a view. Children raised by lesbian co-parents should and do seem to grow up more open to homoerotic relationships. This may be partly due to genetic and family socialization processes, but what sociologists refer to as “contextual effects” not yet investigated by psychologists may also be important. Because lesbian parents are disproportionately more likely to inhabit diverse, cosmopolitan cities—Los Angeles, New York and San Francisco—and progressive university communities—such as Santa Cruz, Santa Rosa, Madison, and Ann Arbor (Black, Gates, et al. 2000)—their children grow up in comparatively tolerant school, neighborhood, and social contexts, which foster less hostility to homoeroticism. Sociology could make a valuable contribution to this field by researching processes that interact at the individual, family, and community level to undergird parent-child links between gender and sexuality.

Under homophobic conditions, lesbian parents are apt to be more sensitive to issues surrounding their children’s sexual development and to injuries that children with nonconforming desires may experience, more open to discussing sexuality with their children, and more affirming of their questions about sexuality (Mitchell 1998; Tasker and Golombok 1997). It therefore seems likely, although this has yet to be studied, that their children will grow up better informed about and more comfortable with sexual desires and practices. However, the tantalizing gender contrast in the level of sexual activity reported for sons versus daughters of lesbians raises more complicated questions about the relationship between gender and sexuality.

Even were heterosexism to disappear, however, parental sexual orientation would probably continue to have some impact on the eventual sexuality of children. Research and theory on sexual development remain so rudimentary that it is impossible to predict how much difference might remain were homosexuality not subject to social stigma. Indeed, we believe that if one suspends the

hetero-normative presumption, one fascinating riddle to explain in this field is why, even though children of lesbian parents appear to express a significant increase in homoeroticism, the majority of all children nonetheless identify as heterosexual, as most theories across the “essentialist” to “social constructionist” spectrum seem (perhaps too hastily) to expect. A nondefensive look at the anomalous data on this question could pose fruitful challenges to social constructionist, genetic, and bio-evolutionary theories.

We recognize the political dangers of pointing out that recent studies indicate that a higher proportion of children with lesbian parents are themselves apt to engage in homosexual activity. In a homophobic world, anti-gay forces deploy such results to deny parents custody of their own children and to fuel backlash movements opposed to gay rights. Nonetheless, we believe that denying this probability capitulates to heterosexist ideology and is apt to prove counterproductive in the long run. It is neither intellectually honest nor politically wise to base a claim for justice on grounds that may prove falsifiable empirically. Moreover, the case for granting equal rights to nonheterosexual parents should not require finding their children to be identical to those reared by heterosexuals. Nor should it require finding that such children do not encounter distinctive challenges or risks, especially when these derive from social prejudice. The U.S. Supreme Court rejected this rationale for denying custody when it repudiated discrimination against interracial parents in *Palmore v. Sidoti* in 1984: “[P]rivate biases may be outside the reach of the law, but the law cannot, directly or indirectly, give them effect” (quoted in Polikoff 1990:569–70). Inevitably, children share most of the social privileges and injuries associated with their parents’ social status. If social prejudice were grounds for restricting rights to parent, a limited pool of adults would qualify.

One can readily turn the tables on a logic that seeks to protect children from the harmful effects of heterosexist stigma directed against their parents. Granting legal rights and respect to gay parents and their children should lessen the stigma that they now suffer and might reduce the high rates of depression and suicide reported among clos-

eted gay youth living with heterosexual parents. Thus, while we disagree with those who claim that there are no differences between the children of heterosexual parents and children of lesbian parents, we unequivocally endorse their conclusion that social science research provides no grounds for taking sexual orientation into account in the political distribution of family rights and responsibilities.

It is quite a different thing, however, to consider this issue a legitimate matter for social science research. Planned lesbian parenthood offers a veritable "social laboratory" of family diversity in which scholars could fruitfully examine not only the acquisition of sexual and gender identity, but the relative effects on children of the gender and number of their parents as well as of the implications of diverse biosocial routes to parenthood. Such studies could give us purchase on some of the most vexing and intriguing topics in our field, including divorce, adoption, step-parenthood, and domestic violence, to name a few. To exploit this opportunity, however, researchers must overcome the hetero-normative presumption that interprets sexual differences as deficits, thereby inflicting some of the very disadvantages it claims to discover. Paradoxically, if the sexual orientation of parents were to matter less for political rights, it could matter more for social theory.

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