

RESEARCH

ADULTS RAISED AS CHILDREN IN LESBIAN FAMILIES

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A longitudinal study of 25 young adults from lesbian families and 21 raised by heterosexual single mothers revealed that those raised by lesbian mothers functioned well in adulthood in terms of psychological well-being and of family identity and relationships. The commonly held assumption that lesbian mothers will have lesbian daughters and gay sons was not supported by the findings.

Findings from research on the long-term well-being of young people raised in lesbian families are of relevance to both theoretical debates about the importance of mothers and fathers to children's development and to public debates concerning parental rights for lesbian women and gay men (Patterson, 1992). Lesbians have been refused access to donor insemination and permission to adopt or foster children on the grounds that they would be less able than heterosexual parents to provide an optimal family environment (Golombok & Tasker, *in press*). In custody disputes, lesbian mothers are commonly denied custody of their biological children (Rivera, 1991) on the grounds that the children would show atypical gender development, would develop behavioral and emotional problems, and would experience difficulties in peer relationships; and that the mothers would not be effective parents (Editors of the *Harvard Law Review*, 1990; Green, 1992; Kleber, Howell, & Tibbits-Kleber, 1986). However, research on the psychological development of children raised by

lesbian mothers and on the quality of parenting in lesbian families has failed to provide empirical support for these assumptions (Falk, 1989; Patterson, 1992; Tasker & Golombok, 1991).

Studies of lesbian families have generally compared children in lesbian households with those in households headed by a single heterosexual mother (Golombok, Spencer, & Rutter, 1983; Green, Mandel, Hotvedt, Gray, & Smith, 1986; Hoeffler, 1981; Huggins, 1989; Kirkpatrick, Smith, & Roy, 1981). Although these two types of families differ in the sexual orientation of the mother, they are alike in that the children are raised by women in the absence of a father. Also, most of the children in these investigations were born into a heterosexual marriage, and thus shared the experience of parental separation or divorce. This research has examined the areas of child development that are the usual focus of concern in custody cases—gender development, emotional development, and social development—as well as the parenting ability of the mothers themselves.

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DEVELOPMENTAL ISSUES*Gender*

In examining the processes involved in gender development, a distinction is generally made between gender identity, gender role, and sexual orientation. Gender identity is the concept of self as male or female, gender role concerns the types of behavior and attitudes considered to be appropriate for males and females in a particular culture, and sexual orientation refers to sexual attraction to the opposite gender (heterosexual sexual orientation) or the same gender (lesbian or gay male sexual orientation). An association has been established between extreme cross-gender identity and behavior in childhood and later same-gender sexual orientation, particularly for boys (Zucker & Green, 1992).

The gender identity of children raised by lesbian mothers appears to be in line with their biological sex. None of the children studied to date, estimated by Patterson (1992) to be more than 300, had shown evidence of gender identity confusion; all the boys were sure that they were male, and all of the girls were sure that they were female. None of the children wished to be the other sex or consistently engaged in cross-gender behavior (Golombok et al., 1983; Green et al., 1986; Kirkpatrick et al., 1981).

In terms of gender role, no differences have been found between children in the two types of families. Examination of preferred toys, games, activities, and friendships has shown the children in both types of families to be quite conventional (Golombok et al., 1983; Green et al., 1986; Kirkpatrick et al., 1981). Lesbian mothers' greater preference than heterosexual mothers for an equal mixture of masculine and feminine toys for their children appears to have little impact on the toys and activities chosen by their children (Hoeffler, 1981).

One of the most commonly voiced assumptions in child custody cases involving a lesbian mother is that the children will grow up to be homosexual, an outcome that is generally considered to be undesir-

able by those involved in decision-making in courts of law. Until now, studies of lesbian families have focused on children rather than on adults, and sexual orientation has not been assessed. One exception is Gottman's (1990) study of adult daughters of lesbian and heterosexual mothers. About 16% of the young women reported same-gender sexual fantasies and 8% reported a female sexual object choice. The proportion of daughters who identified as lesbian was similar for the two types of families. However, it is important to note that Gottman measured only sexual fantasy and not sexual behavior. In a study of adolescent children of lesbian and heterosexual mothers, only one child—that of a heterosexual mother—identified as homosexual (Huggins, 1989).

Emotional

Two studies have examined the assumption that children raised in lesbian households experience emotional or behavioral difficulties as a result of their upbringing (Golombok et al., 1983; Kirkpatrick et al., 1981). The study by Golombok et al. assessed presence of psychiatric difficulties in the child by means of a standardized interview with the mother. The interview was designed specifically for this purpose, and its ability to reliably detect the most common childhood disorders had been demonstrated (Graham & Rutter, 1968). Each child was assessed for evidence of psychiatric disorder and, where disorder was present, was diagnosed for the type of disorder. To avoid bias, assessments were made by a child psychiatrist "blind" to the child's family type. No differences in psychiatric state were identified between children of lesbian and heterosexual mothers. In addition to the interview with the mother, school teachers were asked to complete the Rutter "B" Scale (Rutter, Tizard, & Whitmore, 1970), a questionnaire measure of children's emotional and behavioral problems. Again, no differences were found in incidence of problems in the

two groups of children. In relation to general population norms, the children of lesbian mothers were no more likely to show emotional or behavioral problems than were children in heterosexual families. Since mothers may have wished to conceal their children's problems, the information obtained from school teachers provided validation of the mothers' reports.

Similar findings regarding children's emotional well-being were reported in a study by Kirkpatrick et al. (1981). Ratings of psychiatric disorder, based on information obtained during a standardized interview with the mother, were made by a child psychiatrist who was unaware of the family background of the child. No difference was found between groups in the proportion of children rated as showing a disorder, with approximately 10% of children in both lesbian and heterosexual families receiving a psychiatric diagnosis.

The development of self-esteem is closely related to psychological well-being. No differences in levels of self-esteem have been demonstrated between the offspring of lesbian and heterosexual mothers, either in childhood (Puryear, 1983) or in adolescence (Huggins, 1989). It seems, therefore, from research on emotional well-being during childhood and on self-esteem during childhood and adolescence, that children in lesbian families are at no greater risk for emotional or behavioral problems than children raised in heterosexual households.

Social

An invariable objection to granting lesbian mothers custody of their children is that the children will be teased about their mother's sexual orientation and ostracized by their peers, and that this will be deeply upsetting to the children and will have a negative effect on their ability to form and maintain friendships. In a study by Golombok et al. (1983), systematic information on children's interactions with peers was obtained by interviews with their mothers.

This data was rated "blind" to the knowledge of family type. No differences in quality of friendships were identified between children raised in lesbian and heterosexual families. Two children in each group showed definite difficulties involving personal distress, social impairment, or restricted activities, and one-third in each group showed minor difficulties associated with shyness, difficulty in maintaining friendships, or quarreling. In Green et al.'s (1986) investigation, no group differences were found for children's perceptions of their popularity with peers or for mothers' ratings of their children's sociability and social acceptance. It seems that stigmatization by peers is not a major problem for children of lesbian mothers, or at least that exposure to teasing or ostracism does not prevent such children from forming meaningful and rewarding friendships.

PARENTING ABILITY

In courts of law, lesbian mothers have been deemed unsuitable as parents on a number of grounds: that they are emotionally unstable and prone to psychiatric disorder, that they are not maternal, and that they or their partner might sexually abuse their children. In fact, there is no evidence to support any of these claims. It is well established that lesbian women, whether or not they are mothers, are at no greater risk for psychiatric disorder than heterosexual women (Bell & Weinberg, 1978). It has also been demonstrated that lesbian mothers are just as child-oriented (Miller, Jacobsen, & Bigner, 1981), warm and responsive to their children (Golombok et al., 1983), and nurturant and confident (Mucklow & Phelan, 1979) as their heterosexual counterparts. Contrary to the view expressed in a number of custody cases that the mother's relationship with her female partner would take priority over child care, the day-to-day life of lesbian mothers is just as centered around their children as that of heterosexual mothers (Kirkpatrick, 1987; Pagelow, 1980). After divorce, les-

bian mothers are more concerned than heterosexual mothers that their children should have contact with men (*Kirkpatrick et al., 1981*), and their children see their fathers more frequently than do children raised by divorced heterosexual mothers (*Golombok et al., 1983*). While there are no empirical studies of sexual abuse of children by lesbian mothers, it is important to remember that in the large majority of cases of sexual abuse, the perpetrators are male (*Finkelhor & Russell, 1984*).

The goal of the present study was to provide insight into life in a lesbian family from the perspective of a group of young adults who grew up in one. With the exception of an investigation by *Gottman (1990)*, existing research has only studied lesbian families with school-age children. Little is known about the consequences of being raised in a lesbian family for psychological well-being, family relationships, and the formation of friendships and intimate relationships in adolescence and beyond.

METHOD

Sample

The sample of lesbian and heterosexual single mothers initially participated in a study of their general psychological status in 1976–1977 (*Golombok et al., 1983*). The two groups had been recruited through advertisements in lesbian and single-parent publications and contacts with lesbian and single-parent organizations. The criteria for inclusion were that the lesbian mothers regarded themselves as predominantly or wholly lesbian in their sexual orientation, and that their current or most recent sexual relationship was with a woman. The single-parent group was defined in terms of mothers whose most recent sexual relationship was heterosexual, but who did not have a male partner living with them at the time of the original study. Each group consisted of 27 mothers and their 39 children.*

In the initial study, the average age of the children was 9.5 years. For ethical reasons, it was necessary to locate their mothers and request permission to interview their children for the follow-up study in 1991–1992. Of the original 54 mothers, 51 were traced, mostly through the U.K. National Health Service Central Register. This meant that three children in the original sample could not be located. Also, one daughter had died prior to the follow-up study. From the remaining 74 potential recruits, 46 young adults aged 17–35 years were interviewed, representing a response rate of 62%. For 11 of the 12 nonparticipants from lesbian backgrounds, and 13 of the 16 from single-parent heterosexual backgrounds, mothers declined to allow participation. In the remaining four cases, children were contacted but did not wish to take part.

The demographic characteristics of the follow-up participants were compared to identify any systematic sampling biases. The groups consisted of eight men and 17 women raised by lesbian mothers and 12 men and nine women raised by single heterosexual mothers (Fisher's Exact Test; $p=.078$). The average age was 23.5 years for both groups, and no statistically significant differences were identified in ethnicity and educational qualifications. Nor were there differences in mothers' social class as assessed in the original study, although significantly more of the lesbian mothers (13 of 18) than of the single heterosexual mothers (5 of 16) had received further education (Fisher's Exact Test; $p=.020$).

Data from the first study were examined to ascertain the characteristics of the follow-up sample and possible reasons for sample attrition. No differences were found on most key variables from the first study (age and gender of children, mother's social class, mother's psychiatric history, quality of mother-child relationship, quality of children's peer relationships,

*The data from two children aged four years and one child aged 19 at the time of the original study were included at follow-up. This increased the pool of potential participants from 75 (*Golombok et al., 1983*) to 78.

children's gender role behavior, and presence of emotional or behavioral problems in the children).

However, nonparticipants tended to be more likely than participants to have experienced a period of separation from their mother prior to the original study (Fisher's Exact Test; $p=.086$). Since children were contacted via their mother for the follow-up, it is possible that those who had previously been separated from their mothers were less in contact with them as young adults. Within the lesbian mother group, children whose mothers reported greater interpersonal conflict with her cohabitee were also less likely to contribute to the follow-up study ($t=3.87$; $df=19$; $p=.001$). However, children who were aware of their mother's lesbian identity at the time of the original study tended to be more likely to participate ($t=-1.77$; $df=37$; $p=.085$). Indeed, only one child in the follow-up group remained in ignorance of her mother's lesbian relationships.

Measures

The main source of data was provided by individual interviews. Interviews took place either at the subject's home or at the City University, in London, lasted for 2.5 hours on average, and were conducted by a female. A semi-structured interview with a standardized coding scheme was developed for the study. The flexibility of the semi-structured approach allowed respondents to recount their own experiences and feelings, increasing the validity of the data collected in this previously uncharted research area, whilst the standardized coding procedure ensured that each variable was rated according to fixed criteria. The interview covered family relationships, peer relationships, sexual orientation, and psychological adjustment. The variables pertinent to the present article are described below; more detailed information about the rest can be found elsewhere (Tasker & Golombok, *in press*).

Family relationships. Participants were

asked to give a brief history of family relationships from the time that their mother and father separated. This brought the interviewer up to date with changes in family composition and established the extent of the young adult's knowledge of the mother's partners. Participants were then asked to recollect family relationships while their mother was with her main relationship partner, i.e. the partner remembered most clearly from the time when the participant lived at home. Information was also gathered on current family relationships. Ratings of family relationships (ranging from 1=very negative to 4=very positive) were made of the quality of relationship with the mother's partner during adolescence and the quality of current relationships with the mother's partner, the mother, and the father. Fourteen randomly selected interviews were coded by a second interviewer in order to calculate interrater reliability. Pearson's r for the four variables were 0.75, 0.81, 0.77, and 0.87, respectively.

An overall rating of contentment with familial identity in a nontraditional family was also assigned (excluding data relating to the quality of the participant's relationship with the mother's partner). A four-point rating scale was constructed on which subjects were classified as feeling "resentful," "embarrassed," "accepting," or "proud" of their family identity. Young adults in the heterosexual single-parent family control group were rated according to their feelings about their mother's identity as an unmarried heterosexual woman. Two ratings were made for each participant; the first focused on feelings about family identity during high school, and the second concerned current feelings. Interrater reliabilities were 0.80 and 0.87, respectively.

Peer relationships. Young adults were asked if they had ever been teased or bullied by other pupils during their elementary or high school years. Where peer group stigmatization had occurred, it was rated

either as an "isolated incident" or as a "prolonged episode." All participants were asked to recall whether they had ever been teased or bullied specifically about their sexuality (either labelled as gay/lesbian or as a sissy/tomboy), and whether they had ever been teased about their mother. Interrater reliabilities were: experience of teasing (1.00), extent of teasing (0.94), teasing about sexuality (0.73), and teasing about mother's lifestyle (1.00).

In addition, young adults from lesbian backgrounds were asked whether school friends had been aware of their mother's sexual orientation and, if so, how they knew about it. Responses were categorized as "friends had found out," "friends were assumed to have known because the family identity was obvious," or "friends were told by the subject." They were also asked about friends' responses to learning about their lesbian family background. Responses were rated as "all friends negative," "at least one friend negative at first," "friends neutral or accepting," or "friends positive." Interrater reliability agreements on friends' awareness of mother's sexual orientation and friends' responses were 0.96 and 0.84, respectively.

Sexual orientation. Data on participants' sexual orientation was gathered during the final section of the interview. To establish the extent of same-gender and opposite-gender attraction, participants were asked to recall their first crush and subsequent crushes from the beginning of puberty through their first sexual relationship. To further assess the presence or absence of same-gender attraction, participants were asked whether they had ever thought that they might be physically attracted to a friend of the same gender and whether they had ever had sexual fantasies about someone of the same gender. A chronological sexual relationship history was then given by each participant, detailing age when the relationship began, gender of their partner, level of sexual contact, and duration of the relationship.

The presence or absence of same-gender attraction was established from these data. Participants were also categorized according to whether they reported a same-gender sexual relationship (sexual behavior), and whether they identified themselves as lesbian or gay and expressed a commitment to lesbian or gay identity in the future (sexual identity). An additional variable was constructed to rate whether participants had ever thought that they might develop same-gender attractions or relationships. Interrater reliabilities for these variables were: same-gender attraction (1.00), same-gender sexual relationship (1.00), same-gender identity (1.00), and consideration of lesbian/gay relationships (0.90).

Psychological adjustment. Participants were asked to complete the Trait Anxiety Inventory (Spielberger, 1983) and the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) (Beck & Steer, 1987) to assess current levels of anxiety and depression. Both inventories have been shown to have good reliability and to discriminate well between clinical and nonclinical groups. After completing the inventories, participants were asked about current feelings of anxiety or depression, whether they had ever sought help from a health care professional for these problems, and whether they had ever consulted a medical doctor about psychosomatic indicators of stress such as alcohol, cigarette, or drug consumption, or insomnia. Participants were categorized according to whether they had ever sought professional help for psychological problems. The phi-coefficient for interrater reliability on seeking professional help for psychological problems was 1.00.

RESULTS

Family Relationships

By the time of the follow-up, all but one of the original group of single heterosexual mothers were reported by their children to have had at least one heterosexual relationship. Furthermore, in most cases (18 of 20) the new male partner had cohabited with

the mother while the children were living at home. Similarly, all but one of the children with a lesbian mother remembered their mother having at least one lesbian relationship, and in 22 of 24 cases their mother's female partner resided with them. Therefore, in the follow-up study most young adults from both types of family background could report on their experience of stepfamily relationships.

Almost all the young adults (41 of 44) were over ten years old at the time of their mother's main relationship, and in 17 cases their mother's main partner was her current one. Young adults who had been brought up in lesbian households described their relationship with their mother's partner significantly more positively than did those who had been raised by a heterosexual mother and her new male partner (see TABLE 1). This difference was apparent in recollections of the relationship during adolescence ($t=2.67, p<.05$), and in current feelings ($t=3.5, p<.01$). No significant difference was found between young adults from lesbian and heterosexual backgrounds in the quality of their current relationship with their mother and father.

Nor was any difference found between the groups in retrospective reports of their

feelings during adolescence about their mother's atypical relationships (see TABLE 1). In adulthood, however, young adults brought up by lesbian mothers were significantly more positive ($t=2.11; p<.05$) about their mother's nonconventional relationships than were those raised by single heterosexual mothers. The results of paired t -tests comparing changes in feelings about family identity between adolescence and young adulthood showed that children from lesbian families became more positive about their upbringing in a nontraditional household ($t=-5.82; p<.001$). There was also a trend toward more positive attitudes among children from heterosexual families ($t=-1.76; p<.1$).

Young adults brought up in lesbian families were more likely to be proud of their mother's sexual identity. They often viewed this as a political matter and would seek to inform public opinion on gay rights by giving their own family history. In contrast, young people from nonmarried heterosexual backgrounds tended to regard their mother's lifestyle as her personal choice and its details as a private family matter. Although the majority accepted their mother's identity as a single parent or as a remarried mother and were happy to

Table 1
YOUNG ADULTS' RELATIONSHIPS WITH FAMILY MEMBERS AND FEELINGS ABOUT MOTHER'S IDENTITY: COMPARISONS BY FAMILY TYPE

RELATIONSHIP	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Partner-child in adolescence					
Lesbian family	3.00	1.18	2.67	42	.011
Heterosexual family	2.15	0.87			
Partner-young adult					
Lesbian family	2.96	0.86	3.35	39	.002
Heterosexual family	2.06	0.83			
Mother-young adult					
Lesbian family	2.64	1.04	0.89	44	NS
Heterosexual family	2.38	0.92			
Father-young adult					
Lesbian family	2.56	0.92	1.41	27	NS
Heterosexual family	2.00	1.18			
FEELINGS					
Adolescents' about mother's identity					
Lesbian family	2.08	0.83	-1.41	42	NS
Heterosexual family	2.45	0.89			
Young adults' about mother's identity					
Lesbian family	3.21	0.78	2.11	41	.041
Heterosexual family	2.74	0.65			

talk about it with friends, none thought of it as an issue that they would be proud to discuss with casual acquaintances.

Peer Relations

Young adults from lesbian family backgrounds were no more likely to remember general teasing or bullying by their peers than were those from heterosexual single-parent homes. Furthermore, for those who reported such hostility there was no group difference in the recollected seriousness of the episode. TABLE 2 displays the proportion of young adults in each group who reported having been teased or bullied specifically about their own sexuality or their mother's lifestyle during adolescence, with subjects categorized according to its seriousness. With respect to teasing about their sexuality, those from lesbian families were more likely to recall having been teased about being gay or lesbian themselves (Fisher's Exact; $p=.091$). This appeared to be particularly true for boys from lesbian backgrounds; of the six who mentioned teasing, four reported being teased about their own sexuality in contrast to only one of nine boys from heterosexual backgrounds. However, the groups did not

differ with respect to the proportion who had been teased about their family background or mother's lifestyle.

Most of the 23 participants who were asked about their school friends' awareness of their mother's lesbian identity felt they had been in control of the information given to friends on the topic. Fourteen had felt comfortable enough to tell at least one close friend, either directly or by not hiding the situation. Five successfully concealed their mother's sexual orientation. Only four reported that friends (or friends' parents) had found out about their family background when they did not want them to know. For the 18 participants whose friends knew about their mother's lesbian identity, five had met with a negative response from friends (although in two cases the friends later became more positive). The young adults from single-parent heterosexual backgrounds were asked identical questions. All had told at least one friend about their mother being a single-parent who had a boyfriend, and in all cases friends had been accepting.

Sexual Orientation

No significant difference was found between young adults from lesbian and heterosexual single-mother households in the proportion who had experienced sexual attraction to someone of the same gender (9 of 25 vs 4 of 20 respectively). However, six young adults (five daughters and one son) from lesbian families who reported same-gender sexual attraction, had also been involved in a same-gender sexual relationship, whereas none of the participants from heterosexual single-parent backgrounds who reported same-gender sexual attraction had done so (Fisher's Exact: $p=.049$). These relationships ranged from a single brief encounter involving only kissing to cohabitation lasting over one year. All the men and women from lesbian as well as from heterosexual single-parent backgrounds had experienced at

Table 2
EXPERIENCE OF PEER GROUP
STIGMATIZATION

PEER GROUP STIGMA	FAMILY TYPE		FISHER'S EXACT p
	LESBIAN	HETERO- SEXUAL	
Existence			
Peer teasing	20	15	NS
No peer teasing	5	6	
Extent ^a			
Prolonged episode	12	7	NS
Isolated incident	8	8	
About Mother's Lifestyle ^a			
Peer teasing	9	3	NS
No peer teasing	11	12	
About Own Sexuality ^a			
Peer teasing	11	4	.091
No peer teasing	9	11	

^aThose who reported no peer group stigmatization of any kind were excluded from these analyses.

least one opposite-gender sexual relationship. With respect to sexual identity, the majority of young adults from lesbian backgrounds identified as heterosexual. Only two women were currently in a lesbian relationship and identified as lesbian.

Distinct from the experience of same-gender attraction is consideration of the possibility of a lesbian or gay relationship. The young adults from lesbian family backgrounds (four of seven sons and ten of 15 daughters) were significantly more likely to report having considered the possibility of becoming involved in a same-gender sexual relationship, compared with only two of ten sons and one of eight daughters from the heterosexual family control group (Fisher's Exact; $p=.003$).

Psychological Well-Being

No significant difference between young adults from lesbian and heterosexual single-parent homes was found for anxiety level as assessed by the Trait Anxiety Inventory; mean scores from lesbian and heterosexual family backgrounds were 41.4 (SD 10.8) for the lesbian family group and 38.4 (SD 9.6) for the heterosexual family group. The scores of young adults from both types of family background were closely comparable to those of working males and females age 19–39 in the United States (Spielberger, 1983).

Similarly, the groups did not differ in level of depression as assessed by the BDI. Mean scores for the young adults from lesbian and heterosexual family backgrounds were 8.2 (SD 6.1) and 7.2 (SD 4.6), respectively. Using the cut-off point recommended by Frank et al. (1991) to indicate the presence of depressive symptomatology, no group difference emerged between the proportion of young adults obtaining a score of 15 or above on the BDI. A similar proportion of participants from each type of family reported contact with health care

Table 3
PROFESSIONAL CONSULTATIONS FOR
PSYCHOLOGICAL PROBLEMS BY FAMILY
TYPE

PROBLEM	FAMILY GROUP		FISHER'S EXACT p
	LESBIAN	HETERO- SEXUAL	
Psychological Professional consultation	9	7	NS
None	16	14	
Beck Depression Inventory (BDI)			
BDI > 5	4	2	NS
BDI < 14	21	19	

professionals in connection with problems arising from anxiety, depression, or stress (see TABLE 3).

DISCUSSION

This follow-up study provided the first opportunity to ask young adults who had been raised in lesbian and heterosexual single-parent homes about their views on their family life. All the children in the sample had functioned well throughout childhood and adolescence. Those raised by lesbian mothers continued to do so in adulthood and experienced no long-term detrimental effects arising from their early upbringing. They were generally positive about their family identity. Although their retrospective reports indicated less positive feelings about their lesbian family identity during adolescence, this did not appear to be attributable to any difficulties in family relationships within the home, but to concern about presenting their family background to others. Most participants recalled some worry about ostracism if their peers discovered their mother's lesbian identity. Indeed, this is not surprising given the context of widespread prejudice against lesbian women and gay men.

Young adults from lesbian families were also generally positive about their relationships with their mother, father, and moth-

*Data on this variable could not be traced for six of the young adults, three from each family type.

er's partner. They had been able to forge closer relationships with their mother's new female partner than had children from heterosexual households with their mother's new male partner. Perhaps children from lesbian households could more easily accept a stepparent in their family constellation because she need not be seen as a direct competitor to their absent father. However, it is important to remember that the comparison between follow-up participants and nonparticipants indicated that the sample may have lost children from lesbian backgrounds whose mothers reported less positive relationships with their female partner.

Participants from lesbian families were no more likely than their counterparts from heterosexual single-parent families to experience peer stigma during adolescence and most were able to integrate close friends with family life. However, they were more likely to recollect peer group teasing about their own sexuality. Children from lesbian families may experience some aspects of "courtesy stigma" (prejudice by association) as reported by other researchers discussing stigmatization of lesbian women and gay men (*Goffman, 1963; Sigelman, Howell, Cornell, Cutright, & Dewey, 1991*). Alternatively, participants from lesbian backgrounds might have been more sensitive to casual remarks from peers about sexual orientation and, therefore, remembered incidents that were more quickly forgotten by subjects in the comparison group. When asked about their general experience of being teased or bullied by peers, young adults from lesbian families were no more likely to report victimization than were those from heterosexual single-parent homes. Young adults from lesbian households also distinguished between concern over the possible reactions to their family identity of peers in general and the more specific response of friends. Over half were able to inform a close friend who did not react in a negative

way or tell others. The findings thus give little support to the view that children's peer relationships would be adversely affected by being raised in a lesbian family.

Finally, men and women raised by lesbian mothers were no more likely than their peers from heterosexual single-parent homes to experience anxiety or depression. Scores on the depression and anxiety inventories fell within the normal range for both groups. Furthermore, young adults from lesbian families were no more likely than those from heterosexual single-parent backgrounds to have sought professional help for mental health problems.

With respect to sexual orientation, there was no difference between the proportion of young adults from lesbian and heterosexual single-parent homes who recounted at least one instance of same-gender sexual attraction. However, young adults from lesbian homes tended to be more willing to have a sexual relationship with someone of the same gender if they felt physically attracted to them. They were also more likely to have considered the possibility of developing same-gender sexual attractions or relationships. Having a lesbian mother, therefore, appeared to widen the adolescent's view of what constituted acceptable sexual behavior to include same-gender sexual relationships. However, the finding that 23 out of 25 young adults from lesbian backgrounds identified as heterosexual in early adulthood indicates that consideration of wider possibilities does not necessarily lead to a lesbian or gay identity. In contrast, participants from heterosexual single-parent backgrounds did not consider same-gender sexual relationships a possibility and their repertoires of sexual relationship options were generally limited to heterosexual relationships.

The commonly held assumption that lesbian mothers will have lesbian daughters and gay sons was not supported. Although estimates of the percentage of the general population who identify as gay or lesbian,

or who currently have a same-gender sexual relationship vary, the finding that only two daughters of lesbian mothers identified as lesbian is consistent with general population norms (Patterson, 1992). It is, of course, possible that participants were reluctant to admit a same-gender sexual identity (a common problem in surveys of sexual behavior). However, such underreporting seems more likely among men and women from heterosexual homes, since young adults from lesbian families appeared to be more comfortable in discussing gay and lesbian issues in general.

Due to limitations of sample size, it was not possible to assess definitively the effects of upbringing in a lesbian household for girls and boys separately. However, there was little evidence of a gender difference in most of the findings. None was discernible between the young men from either background on any of the measures of psychological adjustment or quality of family relationships. Similarly, none was observed between young women from heterosexual and lesbian families on these variables. Males from lesbian backgrounds were more likely to report having been teased about their own sexuality, but there were no other gender differences on the peer relationship measures. Young women from lesbian families appeared more likely to have a sexual relationship with another woman and to have considered lesbian attractions or relationships a possibility. However, they were no more likely than women from heterosexual homes to report being attracted to women. The fact that more daughters than sons were willing to enter into same-gender relationships may be explained by the more obvious parallel with their mother's lesbian lifestyle. Alternatively, it may simply reflect the higher representation of women than men from lesbian backgrounds in the sample.

Interview data is always open to criticisms of bias owing to self-presentation effects. Indeed, it is possible that lesbian

mothers would wish to portray an overly-positive picture of family life in view of the discrimination they often face in a predominantly heterosexual society. However, these motivations may apply less to young adults who have grown up in lesbian families. Steps were taken to minimize this potential source of bias. The flexible semi-structured interview schedule enabled the interviewer to probe any apparently contradictory answers, and the in-depth, open-ended approach allowed participants to register dissatisfaction with their upbringing. Thus, any major negative effects of upbringing in a lesbian household should have been identified. Nevertheless, minor effects on children's well-being could have remained undetected because of the relatively small sample size. Therefore, although discernible trends were identified, caution is required in interpreting these results.

It is also necessary to consider the generalizability of the findings in view of the self-selected nature of the sample. It is obviously not feasible to recruit a representative sample of lesbian mothers, given that many do not publicly declare their sexual identity. Instead, volunteers were contacted through various lesbian publications and groups. Similar procedures were used to recruit the heterosexual single mothers to control for self-selection biases. Both the lesbian and the heterosexual single-parent mother groups reflected a fair diversity of families nationwide, from different socioeconomic backgrounds and with different political perspectives. Since the control group consisted of young adults brought up by heterosexual single parents, it could be argued that subjects from both types of family may be atypical in comparison to their counterparts raised in heterosexual homes with both mother and father present. This possibility cannot be conclusively refuted, but the results from the study have been placed in the context of established population norms where these were available.

In recent years, public concern about lesbian women raising children has shifted from custody disputes involving the biological mother to the issues of whether lesbian women should be allowed to foster or to adopt children, or be given access to assisted reproduction procedures such as donor insemination or in vitro fertilization (Golombok & Tasker, 1994). Whereas fostering or adoption by lesbian women is permitted in the U.K. and in some states of the U.S., in practice this is an extremely difficult process, and when a lesbian couple wishes to adopt a child as co-parents, usually only one partner can be the legal mother. With respect to assisted reproduction, many clinics refuse to accept lesbian women even when they are allowed by law to do so. Although self-insemination provides a valid option for those who wish to become mothers, many are concerned about the transmission of HIV and other physical illness, and prefer to conceive their child using sperm from an anonymous donor who has undergone rigorous screening at a clinic. The findings of the present study relate most closely to lesbian families where the children were conceived within a heterosexual relationship and spent their early childhood living in the same household as their father. However, the results are also of relevance to children who are fostered or adopted by lesbian mothers, or who are born into a lesbian family.

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