

Do Lesbian Couples Make Better Parents than Heterosexual Couples?

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Abstract

There is no unanimity among child and family scholars and mental health practitioners on what family form, family processes, or environmental influences engender optimal child development. One of the currently controversies is if lesbian parents make better parents than their heterosexual counterparts. Is there any validity to the claim that lesbian parents may be more involved in child activities, are better listeners, less critical and judgmental, and more are flexible on gender identity and sexual orientation issues than heterosexual parents? The author challenges this conclusion and considers it too early for researchers to claim the null hypothesis: that there are no differences on a variety of psychosocial outcomes between children reared by homosexual parents and children reared by heterosexual parents. The data, to date, is ambiguous and has many research limitations including small, non-random samples, lack of longitudinal data, and the inescapable bias that most researchers on lesbian parenting are self-identified homosexuals.

Key Words: Lesbian families, heterosexual families, child well-being, parenting, researcher bias, homosexual parents and heterosexual parents.

In general, are lesbians better parents than their heterosexual counterparts? This claim has recently been made by well-respected family scholars Timothy Biblarz and Judith Stacey in their essay “How Does the Gender of Parents Matter” published in the prestigious *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, February 2010. The authors summarized their review of the literature by stating unequivocally that lesbians provide a “Double dose of middle-class feminine parenting” superior to heterosexual parenting (p. 11). “Lesbian co-parents seem to outperform comparable married heterosexual biological parents on several measures [of child development outcomes]” (p. 17). They conclude, “In fact, based strictly on the published science, one could argue that two women parent better on average than a woman and a man” (p. 17). Biblarz and Stacey add: “Research to date...does not support the claim that compared to other family forms, families headed by married, biological parents are best for children” (p. 16). That is quite a remarkable statement. If true it turns the notion of the traditional family as the preferred family model on its head.

In Table 1 of the Biblarz and Stacey article (p. 7-9) the authors display a long list of research studies that seem to indicate the superiority of lesbian mothers over heterosexual mothers and fathers. Yet, they make this curious statement at the end of Table 1: “For every finding of significant differences [between lesbian families and heterosexual families] there were roughly four or more findings of no significant difference that we do not display” (2010, p. 8). In other words, for every one study that indicates lesbian couples make better partners there are four or more studies that found no differences in child outcomes! Fiona Taser (2010) a prominent researcher on lesbian parenting commented on the Biblarz and Stacey paper:

[The authors] only briefly acknowledge that the majority of comparisons point to similarity of outcomes across family type [homosexual vs. heterosexual]. Counting only instances of difference and neglecting instances of similarity presents an incomplete or distorted picture, even without the additional consideration of the likely generation of Type I errors (p. 35).

Barring only 1 out of 4, Biblarz and Stacey proceed to extol the virtues of lesbian parents. First, they state that lesbian couples “enjoy greater equality, compatibility, and [relationship] satisfaction than their heterosexual counterparts” (p. 11). They continue, “Co-mothers typically bestow a double dose of caretaking, communication and intimacy” above and beyond heterosexual parents (p. 17).

They also claim that lesbian parents are more available to their children, set less strict limits on children, use less harsh discipline, show more respect for children's autonomy, are more aware of what's going on in their children's lives, spend more time in play with their children, are more open to acceptance of gender identity and sexual orientation diversity, and show more "warmth, affection, and attachment" (p. 7). The authors even assert that "growing up without a father did not impede masculine development but enabled boys to achieve greater gender flexibility"(p. 14). Does this imply that children raised by lesbian mothers are more likely to choose homosexuality and bisexuality in their future?

There are additional problems with many of the studies cited by Biblarz and Stacey to support their contention of the superiority of lesbian parents. First, "acquisition of parenthood" (i.e., my term) was infrequently explained in most of the studies. In other words, how did the lesbian couples obtain children: (1) by sex with a male (often a gay friend), (2) use of a sperm bank and in-vitro fertilization, or (3) by adoption, or (4) were the children part of a previous heterosexual marriage where the women at least at some point in time self-identified as heterosexual? Second, in the studies Biblarz and Stacey reviewed, differences in developmental outcomes between boys of lesbian parents versus girls of lesbian parents were rarely reported (Gartrell & Bos, 2010).

Third, the extent and amount of father or other male contact with the lesbians' children was not reported in most of the studies (cf., Goldberg & Allen, 2007; Kirkpatrick, 1987). Fourth, researchers did not often explain how "lesbian" was defined. Was a lesbian someone who only had sex with other women, and only had fantasies about sex with women, and also self-identified as lesbian? As part of the definition of a lesbian couple, researchers failed to categorize the type of lesbian couple; by that I mean what was the general gender behavior of the lesbians (Lev, 2010). For example, were both women primarily feminine, or was one feminine and one more masculine or androgenous as occurred in the Suzannah and Luz couple as reported by Lev in 2010; or was one butch and the other femme or were both genderqueer parents? The gender characteristics of the lesbians surely impact the development of the children, yet measurement of this was overlooked. These four factors become "confounds" in the studies. Confounding variables are factors not measured but may influence the outcome of the study and muddy the water of interpretation of results. Yet, Biblarz and Stacey never mentioned any of these caveats.

Biblarz and Stacey are not alone in their presumption of the superiority of lesbian parenting. For example, Alicia Crowl, Soyeon Ahn and Jean Baker (2008) conducted a meta-analysis of 19 studies comparing 564 children from same-sex families to 641 children reared in heterosexual families. Same-sex parents reported "better parent-child relationships than did heterosexual parents, but the children's perception of the parent-child relationship did not differ depending on the sexual orientation of the parents" (p. 396). The authors summarized: "Children raised by same-sex and heterosexual parents were found to not differ significantly in terms of their cognitive development, gender role behavior, gender identity, psychological adjustment, or sexual preference... Parent sexual orientation was not a salient predictor for children's development" (p. 398, c.f., Fisher, 2008; Patterson, 2005; Saffron, 1998).

Crowl and colleagues (2007), however, pointed out limitations of lesbian and gay research as articulated by Walter Schumm (2004). "First, it is difficult to obtain a random, representative sample of gay and lesbian parents... Second, much of research is based upon small sample sizes and this leads to low statistical power, increasing the likelihood of failing to reject the null hypothesis (i.e., in this case, the null hypothesis states there are no differences between groups of children reared by same-sex or opposite sex parents... [and] the samples [of lesbian families] are fairly homogeneous: white, middle-class, urban, and well-educated" (p. 388). These sampling restrictions bias research results comparing children raised in lesbian families and heterosexual families because the heterosexual families are not matched well to the lesbian families in terms of parent's education, employment, salary, and mental health.

Schumm (2011, 2012) explains other problems including statistical limitations of the lesbian research such as not reporting *effect sizes* (which are more important than just a significant p value), the *social desirability* problems with lesbian mothers reporting on the well-being of their own children, and marginalizing any study that shows adverse results for children of lesbians. Comparing the children from such discordant groups is not appropriate and gives advantage to the lesbian parent's children. In general, sampling issues have plagued gay and lesbian research studies for decades (cf., Carroll & Dollahite, 2008).

Scandinavian researchers Anderssen, Amilie and Ytteroy (2002) reviewed 23 studies conducted during 1978-2000 that met the following inclusion criteria.

The articles (1) must assess seven child outcomes: “emotional functioning, sexual preference, stigmatization, gender role behavior, behavioral adjustment, gender identity and cognitive functioning” (p. 336); (2) were published in peer-reviewed journals; (3) children were non-clinical samples, and, (3) the children were raised by one of more lesbian or gay parents (Note: only 3 studies used gay fathers). The total number of children reared by lesbian or gay fathers was 615, and the number of control children was 387. Not surprisingly, 91% of the sample was convenient, non-random participants, 91% were cross-sectional and not longitudinal, and in 91% the purpose of the study was revealed to the adult parents or was not reported. The researchers in these 23 studies used interviews (70%), questionnaires (48%), some psychometric tests and observations (40%).

Overall the results were similar to other reviews. No differences were found on children’s emotional or cognitive functioning between the children raised by lesbians and those raised by heterosexual parents. None of the studies reported that “sexual preferences in offspring varied with parental sexual preferences” (p. 344). Children in both groups tended to choose gender-typical toys, games, and activities. Neither group reported more or less child behavior problems. None of the studies found that children of lesbian mothers had specific problems with gender identity (i.e., I am a female; I like being a girl, etc.). In general, children reared by lesbian mothers or gay fathers did not systematically differ from children raised by heterosexual parents in any of the seven child developmental outcomes. Limitations of the 23 studies were noted that decreased their internal and external validity including small, non-random samples, selection bias favoring lesbian mothers, and the comparison parents were poorly matched to the lesbian couples on important demographic characteristics (p. 348). These limitations raise serious questions about accuracy and generalization of the data (Price & Murnan, 2004).

Bos and Gartrell (2010) stated that “a growing body of empirical data demonstrate that children of lesbian parents fare as well in emotional, cognitive, and social functioning as do children of heterosexual parents” (p. 561). However, their evidence for such a claim is based upon data from the *National Lesbian Family Study* (see <http://www.nllfs.org/>). This study was begun by Nanette Gartrell, Jan Hamilton, Amy Banks and others in 1996. The original sample was obtained by “informal networking and word of mouth referrals, participants were solicited via announcements at lesbian events, in women’s bookstores, and in lesbian newspapers” (p. 274). Only 39 girls and 39 boys were recruited. The lesbian parents were informed of the purpose of the study. They knew their children would be evaluated for physical and mental health. It could be argued that only those lesbian women who had functional and healthy children volunteered to participate (Tasker, 2010). Yet, this research project has spawned numerous publications over the past decade but carries the same limitation: selection bias (e.g., Bos, Gartrell, Peyser, et al., 2008; Gartrell, Bos, Goldberg, 2011; Gartrell, Bos, Goldberg, 2010; van Gelderen, Gartrell, Bos, et al. 2009; van Gelderen, Bos, Gartrell et al., 2012).

Another concern with the studies from the *National Lesbian Family Study* is that the well-being of the children was most often self-reported by the mothers with no collaboration from outside sources such as teachers or counselors. Lesbian mothers could over-rate the mental health of their own children so they look good to the researchers. In other *National Lesbian Family Studies* the children of these lesbian mothers (93% white, and only 7% minorities) were compared to convenient samples of children from heterosexual families who were poorer, less educated, and included more minorities (e.g., black, Hispanics and mixed race comprised 32% of the sample). While most of the lesbian mothers had high status career jobs in professional or managerial roles, the mothers or fathers of the comparison sample. Yet the two groups of children were considered to be comparable did not.

One study used a national representative sample of children from same-sex and opposite sex families was done by Wainwright and Patterson (2004). They compared 44 adolescents living with lesbian parents to 44 teens living with heterosexual parents. Data obtained from the prestigious National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) used a large, random, representative sample of adolescents throughout the U.S. The authors reported no significant differences between the two groups of teens in terms of the following: self-esteem, anxiety, grade point average, trouble in school, parental warmth and care, peer relationships, substance use, and delinquency. The authors concluded that “the gender of parent was not an important predictor of adolescent well-being or adjustment” (Teltingator & Paterson, 2008; p. 1366). Nevertheless, there are concerns with the Add Health data. The many variables that were and are measured usually are operationalized with only 1-2 items with unproven content validity and reliability. Such limited measures may not capture a true understanding of many complex psychosocial variables. Hence, even the Add Health data appears limited by the possibility of measurement error (Carroll, Rupert, Stefanski & Crainiceanu, 2006).

Some Exceptions to the Null Hypothesis: Sexual Orientation of Children Raised by Lesbian Mothers

Some research indicates that children reared by lesbian parents are more likely to question their sexual orientation and more likely to experiment with same-sex relationships (Bos & Sandfort, 2010; Schumm, 2010b). For example Golombok and Tasker (1996) studied 27 lesbian mothers and their 39 children and a control group of 27 heterosexual *single mothers* and their 39 children. The families were thought to be similar because “the children were being raised by women in the absence of a father but differed with respect to the sexual orientation of the mother” (p. 5). The author used a convenient sample recruited primarily through lesbian venues, single-parent publications, and lesbian and single parent organizations. The two groups were matched by age and social class of the mothers, and all children had been conceived *within heterosexual relationships*.

The amazing limitation of this study is that the authors compare child outcomes from two-parent lesbian families to heterosexual families with only ONE parent. The authors fail to acknowledge the fact that two caretakers are usually better than one caretaker regardless of sex of caretaker. The children of the lesbian couples are automatically advantaged by the sheer number of caregivers. But this fact is completely overlooked. It may simply be the number of caretakers is critical in child outcome irrespective of the sex of those parents.

Golombok and Tasker then contacted the children who now averaged 23.5 years of age. Surprisingly, 51 of the 54 mothers from the original study were found, and 25/37 of the lesbian reared children were interviewed (8 men and 17 women) as were 21/37 heterosexual reared children (12 men and 9 women). By the time of the follow up, 90% of the single mothers had live-in boyfriends (another confounding variable) and 91% of the lesbians still had live-in partners. Sexual orientation of the young adult children was measured with several questions about the number of “crushes” (i.e., sexual attractions) since puberty, who they had sex with, frequency of sexual fantasies, and if they ever thought they might be gay, lesbian, or bisexual. The authors found that those children raised by lesbians had more open and accepting attitudes towards homosexual relationships and indicated they would be more likely to engage in a lesbian or gay relationship.

Bos and Sandfort (2010) studied the gender identity and other variables in lesbian and heterosexual two-parent families in the Netherlands. There is little social stigma to homosexuality in Dutch society. It was the first country to legalize same-sex marriage with support of 82% of the adult population (Vonk, 2004). Authors recruited participants by gaining access to files in the Medical Center for Birth Control by contacting Dutch gay/lesbian parent groups and by advertising at Dutch healthcare centers. The sample was convenient and non-random. The comparison heterosexual families were recruited from population registers in two cities and through contact with several primary schools. The method of sampling in those venues was not explained. At the time of the first study the children were between 4 and 8 years old.

When contacted again four years later, 63% of the lesbian families agreed to participate but only an average of 36% of the heterosexual families continued participating. Note that the different response rate (63% vs. 36%) presents a selection bias favoring the lesbian couples. The children were now between the ages of 8 and 12 years old. The authors concluded that children in lesbian families felt less parental pressure to conform to gender stereotypes, and were less likely to experience their own gender as superior” (p. 20) and were more likely to question if they would marry a man, have a family with a man, live together in love with a man, and were more likely to consider same gender relationships in the future.

Gartrell, Bos and Goldberg (2010) using data from the National Longitudinal Lesbian Family Study (with its original flawed sample favoring lesbian parents as previously discussed) asked 39 adolescent girls and 39 adolescent boys—who were conceived through donor insemination and raised by lesbian mothers—to complete an online questionnaire. Teens were asked if they were ever abused and what form of abuse, how they labeled their sexual orientation, age at first intercourse and lifetime sexual partners. Results revealed that none of the teens had been physically or sexually abused. Nearly 80% of the girls and 92% of the boys self-identified as predominantly heterosexual, but incidentally bisexual. None of the girls but 5% of the boys self-identified as predominantly or exclusively homosexual. Nineteen percent of girls and 3% of boys self-identified as bisexual. In general the authors agreed with others that “the offspring of lesbian and gay parents might be more open to homoerotic exploration and same-sex orientation” (p. 116), especially if you measure sexual orientation of children in lesbian families when they are young adults, not just in teenagers.

These rates of homosexuality are approximately double what would be found in the general U.S. population: only 1-2% of American adults self-identify as homosexual, and only 2-3% of men self-identify as homosexual (Black, 2000). If the reader combines the results of the three studies (Golombok & Tasker, Bos & Sandfort, Gartrell, Bos & Goldberg), it could appear that the sexual orientation of children appear to be influenced by the sexual orientation of the parents. This only makes sense as hundreds of child socialization studies have demonstrated that behavior, attitudes, and values learned in childhood effect the behavior, attitudes and values of grown children (Berns, 2012; Handel, Cahill, & Elkin, 2006).

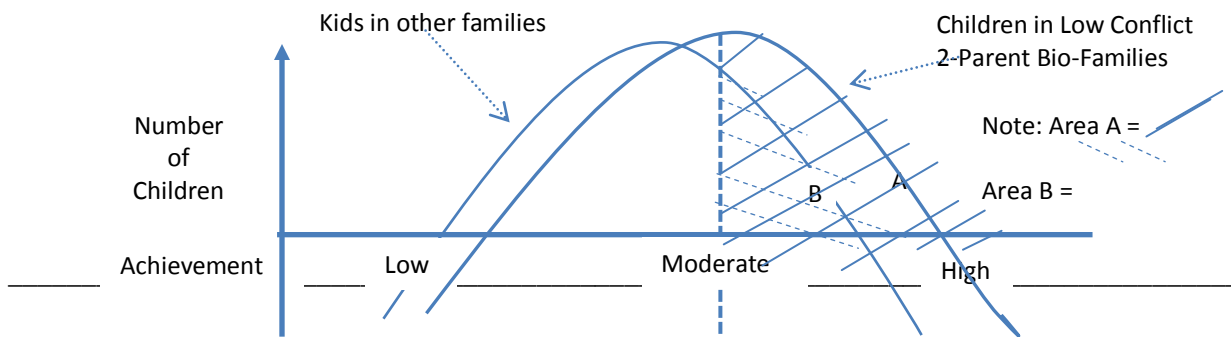
This is no surprise and sexual orientation is just one of many things children come to learn about. If one thinks rationally and dispassionately about child socialization, it would seem quite plausible that children reared by lesbians or gay men are, on average, more likely to consider or to be engaged in homosexual relationships themselves when they are adults (cf. Brown, 1995). Otherscholars disagree and cite data that supports the null hypothesis: no difference in sexual orientation between children raised by homosexual and heterosexual couples (Lev, 2010; Patterson, 2004, 2006).

The Family Turned Upside Down

The research on same-sex couples conducted by Biblarz and Stacey, Bos and Gartrell, Tasker, Golombok, Patterson, Kurdek, van Gelderen, and others has seriously challenged the long-held assumption that children flourish best in families with two biological heterosexual parents. Their conclusions counter what was once considered a truism in family studies that children who grow up in two-biological-parent families do better, on average, than children reared in other environments(Booth, Scott & King, 2010; Fineman, 1993; Mallers, Neupert, Charles, & Almeida, 2010; Peres, Rutherford, Borges, Hudes& Hearst, 2008). Steven Baskerville (2009) reminds us: "Twenty-four million American children now grow up without fathers, a phenomenon that is directly linked to every major social pathology of our time, from violent crime to substance abuse" (p. 178). The criticism of past research is that comparison were *always* made between heterosexual families and single parent families, and few appraisals compared heterosexual families and stable, loving lesbian families.

Over the past 50 years of research in child development and family studies there are hundreds, if not thousands, of studies that seem quantify the value of married heterosexual parents to the psychosocial well-being of children (Amato, 2005; Amato & Rivera, 1999; Aufseeser, Jekielek, &Brown, 2006; Ben-Arieh & George, 2010;Cowan, Cowan, Pruett, Pruett, & Wong, 2009; Davidov & Grusec, 2006; Flouri, 2005; Flouri & Buchanan, 2004; Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997; Holmes, Galovan, Yoshida, & Hawkins, 2010; Lamb, 2010; Lewis & Lamb, 2003; Lanton & Berger, 2011; McLanahan, 1998; Moore & Lippman, 2005; Orthner, et al., 2009; Parker & Benson, 2004; Popenoe, 2009; Pruett, 2001; Raikes, Summers & Roggman, 2005;Ram & Hou, 2003; Zeider, Roosa, & Tein, 2011).

Figure 1 is the author's interpretation of these past research studies. There are two bell curves in Figure 1, one representing children from two-biological heterosexual parent families, and one curve representing children in all other types of families. The vertical axis indicates the number of children beginning at zero at the bottom running up to thousands at the top. The horizontal axis represents child achievement (low, moderate, high) in any area of psychosocial, cognitive, physical or interpersonal functioning. Achievement could be school grades, relationship with peers, parent-child harmony, and entry into college, self-esteem, volunteerism, or low rates of alcohol, delinquency, and drug use. The pattern depicted shows that children from two-biological heterosexual parent families, on average, do better than children reared in other environments (Acs, 2007).

Figure 1: Child Outcomes by Family Type

The So-Called Demise of the Traditional Parent Family

Many child and family researchers once believed the two-biological parent family was the optimal environment for raising children. Furthermore, they assumed that children needed mothers and fathers for healthy well-rounded development (Amato, 2005a; Byrd, 2010; Brody, Murry, Gerrard, et al., 2004; Doherty, Galston, Glenn, Gottman et al., 2002; Kindlon & Thompson, 2000; Marks, Lam, & McHale, 2009). In our multicultural and politically correct society, things have certainly changed.

Recently, many child and family scholars have written about the pathology and dysfunction in classic nuclear families with a working father, a full-time homemaker mother and dependent children (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010b). The oppression of women in the classic nuclear family is one of their main complaints (Hochschild & Machung, 2003; Kristof & WuDunn, 2010). Presently, most social and behavioral researchers caution that we should not hold up the traditional nuclear family as the ideal model for raising children (Blume, & Marks, 2005; Harding, 2007; Knapp & Williams, 2005).

In academia, in the medical and mental health fields, in the government, in religion, and in the entertainment media many professionals and lay individuals predict the demise of the traditional nuclear family. For example, Rabbi Balfour Brickner (2004) stated:

The nuclear family as we once knew it has crumbled. In its place a new understanding of family is emerging. That mythic television family of yesteryear, the happily married monogamous wife and husband, two drug-free children and a dog, living in a three-bedroom, two-bath house in a quiet suburban neighborhood, hardly exists anywhere, anymore. In fact, the reality is radically different... The most recent US census reveals that the marriage rate is declining precipitously, only 24 percent of households are made up of a married couple and children... the number of unmarried couple households continues to rise... over 40% of babies are born outside of marriage... It is almost the norm for gay, and straight couples to live together unmarried, and more widowed or divorced older folk find new partners and cohabit without marriage... gay marriages have erupted across the land creating gay families that raise children in familial settings where, much to the dismay of braying religious fundamentalists, the kids are doing just fine with two mommies or two daddies.

Dr. Katherine Rake the British government chief spokesperson on children and families and head of the UK's Family and Parenting Institute warned in 2009 that the traditional family model is no longer the norm and any government attempts to rescue it are futile (cited in Borland, 2009). In the age of sophisticated science and in a society that values diversity, pluralism, and political correctness, many believe it is irresponsible and disingenuous to hold on to old stereotypes and ideals about traditional families (Marsh, 2009; Redding, 2001). Professionals concerned with children and families (e.g., doctors, therapists, lawyers, teachers, social workers) should not put the traditional nuclear family on a pedestal and hold it up as the ideal family type (Johnson, Moore & Judd, 2010; Schudson, 1993; Shucksmith, Hendry & Glendinning, 2002; Smith, Cowie & Blades, 2008). Many family scholars believe that heterosexuality is not the "normative and natural blue print for the construction of families" (Lev, 2010, p. 270).

The New Normal: Are Fathers Irrelevant to Children's Development?

Gay scientists and homosexual activists dismiss five decades of research that shows that fathers and mothers make unique and distinctive contributions to child development (Amato & Rivera, 1999; Cowan, Cowan, Pruett, Pruett, & Wong, 2009; Davidov & Grusec, 2006; Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997; Holmes, Galovan, Yoshida, & Hawkins, 2010; Lewis & Lamb, 2003; McLanahan, 1998; Parke, 1996; Popenoe, 2009; Pruett, 2001; Raikes, Summers & Roggman, 2005). It is quite clear that Biblarz and Stacey, Crowl and colleagues, Tasker and Golombok, and Bos and Gartrell believe that fathers are not essential to child development (cf., Silverstein & Auerbach, 1999; Goldberg, & Allen, 2007). Alicia Crowl et al., (2007) stated in her meta-analysis comparing children reared in heterosexual and non-heterosexual families: "Children raised by same-sex and heterosexual parents were found to not differ significantly in terms of their cognitive development, gender role behavior, gender identity, psychological adjustment, or sexual preference" (p. 398). Case closed: fathers not needed!

Yet, on the other hand, research published in scientific journals, presented in professional scientific meetings, and written in scholarly books needs to stand up to scrutiny. Scientific data always has limitations (Callahan, Wears, Weber, Barton & Young, 1998; Price & Murnan, 2004; Shipman, 1981). Readers assume researchers and authors are *unbiased and objective* and that their statistics have not been *manipulated* to support a personal theory; nevertheless, some researchers seek to advocate or support a social and political agenda. If scientists choose their samples and use preferred measurement instruments and statistics, a researcher can find support for whatever he or she is looking for (Cummings & O'Donohue, 2008; Sherif, 1998). Scientists and scholars are human and inevitably have biases and personal values that influence their work--whether they admit it or not (Alcock, 2009; Sherif, 1998; Slife & Reber, 2009; Slife & Whoolery, 2004). Psychologists have "shared, professional values not empirically backed" that they use to promote their social and political agendas (Martel, 2009, p. 110). *Their public statements on gay and lesbian issues may be grounded more in personal belief rather than in empirical data* (Martel, 2009).

Walter Schumm (2011) reviewed much of the literature on lesbian and gay parenting and concluded, "It appears clear that value biases have dramatically influenced how social scientists evaluate scientific literature, how they develop their theoretical models, and how they conduct their research in the area of lesbian and gay parenting" (p. 25). The point is this: Social science research has flaws and limitations and cannot be completely trusted to be unbiased and objective.

The Chilling Effect of Political Correctness

Study of controversial topics (e.g. single parent families, gay families, sexual orientation, re-orientation therapies, adolescent sexual behavior, women as abusers) are often discouraged by professional organizations, journal editors, and book publishers because the research might violate the established politically correct position on those topics. Nicholas A. Cummings (a past president of APA) and his colleague William O'Donohue (2008) commented:

Politically correct proclamations, no matter how well meaning, prematurely end debate and slam the door on skeptical research, which is the very essence of all science. These proclamations have become an unfortunate hallmark of mental health organizations, causing our science to be questioned and even discredited. If our profession is to be spared continued decline, it is imperative that political correctness is once and for all eradicated from the science and practice of psychology (p. 221).

The authors further lament the effect of political correctness on psychology: "This has damaged the APA's credibility as a scientific/professional body. It [the APA] is increasingly viewed as just another political advocacy group that speaks from ideology rather than science" (p. 197). Buttrell and Carney (2006) present a series of papers that suggest that political correctness has stymied research on women as perpetrators of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse because it is not politically correct to blame women for abuse when most abuse is committed by men. Hope, Milewski-Hertlein and Rodriguez (2001) elucidate how political correctness can hamper family therapy by (a) limiting the types of questions therapists can ask, (b) interfering with interventions that might be appropriate for the client, and (c) by limiting the therapist's ability to meet client's needs (e.g., such as bringing up the patient's obesity as a factor in the client's psychopathology). The authors conclude: "Political correctness has become too much of a good thing."

The important beliefs and practices of political correctness, such as sensitivity, awareness, and tolerance, have reached pathological proportions. This pathology has sparked silence, discomfort, and whitewashing within the therapy room” (p. 36).

What Is Often Ignored and Over Looked by Gay and Lesbian Researchers

Gay and lesbian researchers downplay the fact that lesbian and gay couples, especially male couples, have higher rates of breakup, infidelity, substance abuse, and spouse abuse than married heterosexual couples—and this must have adverse effects on their parenting (Alexander, 2001; Kerby, Wilson, Nicholson, & White, 2005; Kurdek, 2005; Kurdek, 1998; McKenry, Serovich, Mason, & Mosack, 2006; Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007; Potoczniak, Mouro, Crosbie-Burnett, & Potoczniak, 2003; Smith, Markovic, Danielson, et al., 2010; Wang, Hausemann, Ajdacic-Gross et al., 2007). And when a family breaks apart, children are at greater risk for a variety of ills (Brown, 2004; Cavanagh & Huston, 2006; Oman, Vesely, Tolma & Aspy, 2007; Simons Lin, Gordon et. al., 1999).

Walter Schumm (2010a) in a recent review of relationship stability of lesbian mothers and heterosexual mother families concluded that after about 10 years in a couple relationship, “37.8% of lesbian couples separated compared with 15.7% of heterosexual couples...It appears that the odds of lesbian couples breaking up are over three times greater than the odds of heterosexual couple breaking up” (p. 504). Gay couple relationships are even shorter lived than lesbian couples because of their disregard for monogamy and preference for flexible and open sexual relationships (Patterson, 2004; Peplau & Spalding, 2003).

In addition, gay and lesbian researchers fail to take an ecological perspective on child development and disregard how environmental factors affect how children turn out (Buffardi, Thomas, Holmes & Manhart, 2008; Kotchick, Shaffer, Forehand, & Miller, 2001). Graphic A in the Appendix shows a variety of family structures, but structure alone does not a healthy child make. Graphic B shows a variety of family processes which exist inside every family type and recent research indicates that healthy family processes may be more important than family structure (Bradley & Corwyn, 2004; Davis, & Friel, 2001). A child resides within a specific family structure that is either an advantage or disadvantage and is influenced by various family processes that aid or hinder development. Note that both structure and family processes change over time so children are affected differently as they age depending upon what happens in the family. Yet, *structure and processes* exist within a larger *ecological environment* of friends, schools, the entertainment media, the internet, religion, and the macro level cultural norms and behavioral expectations (Mandara, Murray, & Bangi, 2003). Thus, one cannot say with confidence that a particular family *structure* (e.g., lesbian family) is the optimal child environment. It is much more complex and child outcomes (healthy or unhealthy) result from an interaction of (1) *structure*, (2) *function* (i.e., family processes), and (3) *environmental influences* as presented in Graphic C.

As part of an ecological perspective, there is another element that is rarely or never considered by social and behavioral scientists as a determinate of human behavior (including sexual orientation) and that factor is human agency: the freedom to choose one’s thoughts, emotional responses, and course of action (Baumeister, Bauer, & Lloyd, 2010; Kuczynski & Parkin, 2006). A child’s development is not just an outcome of what others do to the child, but a child (after about the age of 8) possesses agency, the ability to make independent choices and decisions regardless of past conditioning and current environmental constraints (Bandura, 2006; Church, 2009). Yes, past family and environmental factors restrict and constrain a child’s choices but future moral behavior is not absolutely determined by the past or present contributors to child development.

Children (after about age 8) can make choices and decisions independent of past or present conditioning (Schwartz & Begley, 2003; Shenk, 2010). So, it should be noted that teenage children and young adults can contribute directly to their gender identity and sexual orientation by the choices they make. Byne and Parsons (1993) state: “Conspicuously absent from most theorizing on the origins of sexual orientation is an active role of the individual in constructing his or her own [sexual] identity” (p. 236). Lisa Diamond (1998) concludes: “individual [sexual] behavior remains flexible when responding to environmental influences, and free choice must also be considered” (p. 67). Thus, when one considers how children turn out—gay, straight or somewhere in between—researchers need to consider the entire ecological environment in which the child is raised and also include the fact that older children, teens and young adults can make subtle (even unconscious) choices that lead them towards a heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, or some other sexual orientation (Vrangalova & Savin-Williams, 2012) independent of the parents influence.

A Different Approach to the Study of Children's' Development

Research and theory in family studies seems to indicate that child development occurs (1) in a variety of *family types* or structures (some healthier than others), (2) when exposed to a variety of healthy or unhealthy *family processes* (e.g., authoritative versus permissive parenting), (3) and influenced by healthy or harmful *environmental factors* (e.g., poor, high crime neighborhoods, toxic air, food, and water; inadequate schools, anti-social peers, pornographic media; or high quality schools, benevolent religions, enlightened educational media, high functioning peers, and compassionate government child and family policies. These three factors influence how a child turns out and may be as significant in development as the gender of the parents.

It may be more fruitful to discover optimal child environments in another way. If the question is: "What are (or is) the best environment for optimal child development?" then the answer begins with defining healthy, functional child outcomes most wanted by parents and by society. All environments produce outcomes, but not all outcomes are equally regarded as desirable by all parents, psychologists, teachers, government officials, religious leaders, and social scientists. For example, in the Biblarz and Stacey (2010a) article, a featured outcome of lesbian parenting is *the child's freedom to experiment with both gender identity and sexual orientation*. That would not be considered a positive or healthy outcome by some Christian, Jewish or Islamic parents (Springer, Abbott, & Reisbig, 2009).

Suppose scientists recruited groups of high achievement and well-adjusted adolescents and young adults with high grades, who are at low risk for depression or suicide, have positive peer relationships and healthy interactions with adults, have definite career and job aspirations, and are self-disciplined, independent and motivated. If researchers could find such samples, they could then ask the youth, using interviews or self-report questionnaires, the following questions: (1) What *family structure* did you spend most of your growing years in, (2) What *family processes* were most helpful to your development, and (3) What other *environmental factors* outside the immediate family were helpful to your development (Zeiders, Roosa, & Tein, 2011)?

A few years ago I published just such a paper entitled, "Family Predictors of High-Functioning Teens" (Abbott, Hall & Meredith, 2005). We sent out 300 surveys to the teens that were listed in local newspapers as being outstanding because of four desirable characteristics: (1) a high GPA (82% had a 4.00 GPA), (2) involvement in extra-curricular activities, (3) leadership qualities, and (4) high moral character and/or integrity as perceived reference letters from high school teachers.

Ninety-six percent of these high achieving teens came from families with two-biological heterosexual parents. Moreover, the teens in this study rated their parents high on "parental warmth and support". In this study, the primary family structure was "two biological parent families", one important family process was "parental warmth and support", and one environmental benefit was having mentors and the opportunities to engage in extra-curricular activities. It should be noted that the teens in this study considered their fathers as *instrumental not incidental* to their development and achievements (c.f., Brotherson & White, 2007). Of course, one study does not prove a point, but it's an example of looking at the question of what family environment is most likely to produce children with positive psychosocial development.

If this research strategy was used more often, I believe we would find more direct answers to the question of what is the optimal environment for children. This type of research might cut through all the smoke and mirrors of social science research that tends to show few if any differences in child outcomes for children raised in a variety of family forms (Fomby & Cherlin, 2007; Florsheim, Tolan & Gorman-Smith, 1998). Such data may support the proposition that healthy, high functioning children are most often found in the two-biological heterosexual parent families (c.f., Booth, Scott, & King, 2010; Clarke-Stewart, McCartney, Vandell, Owen, & Booth, 2000; Halpern-Meekin, 2008).

Certainly, children in other family types can and do excel emotionally, socially, physically, and intellectually (as depicted in Figure 1), but I believe that such positive outcomes are less likely to occur in other family types. There are, however, many who would disagree, and they will cite numerous published studies to support their view that alternative family forms are just as good (if not better) than the traditional two-biological heterosexual parent family (Biblarz & Evren, 2010; Biblarz & Stacey, 2010; Coontz, 1992; Cowl, et al., 2008; Hansen, 2005; Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007; Tasker, 2005, 2010).

Conclusions

Many social scientists believe there is sufficient evidence to support the null hypothesis: there are no differences--on a variety of social, emotional, and cognitive measures--between children raised by homosexual and heterosexual parents. However, the data they employ is flawed in many ways: small, biased, non-random samples (Hawkins, 2007; Lerner & Nagai, 2001); the failure to differentiate the type of lesbian family (i.e., created by divorce, by in-vitro fertilization, or by adoption); too little data on children raised by gay fathers to make any preliminary conclusions about those families; and not enough longitudinal data to report on how the children of lesbian and gay parents turn out emotionally, socially, and in long-term intimate relationships when they become adults (c.f., Schumm, 2011).

Finally, much of the data on lesbian/gay parenting has been collected by researchers who self-identify as gay or lesbian, and this inescapable conundrum may facilitate built-in bias into the research process. It cannot be ignored that approximately 50% of the lesbian/gay research is done by homosexuals with a vested interest in the outcome. It is implied that the gay researchers seek data to support the null hypothesis (i.e., of no differences between children) so that society will accept the premise that homosexual parents do not adversely influence their children's psychosocial development (Bruce, 2001).

On some controversial issues such as homosexuality where emotions are high and values vary, often the data does not really matter. The resolution of a research question may be more about the values and beliefs of the researchers invested in the child or family phenomenon. If they collectively believe something to be true, then a mountain of data that disconfirms their belief will not matter one whit. They have taken a position; they have drawn a line in the sand and it is well expressed by Arlene Istar Lev (2010):

Families who deviate from the normative structure of two-parent, heterosexual, same-race couples with biological offspring can rear healthy and well-adjusted children...Indeed, all the extant research unequivocally shows that the children of LGBT parents are psychologically stable, establishing without a shadow of a doubt that LGBTQ parenting is in the best interest of children...The research has indisputably affirmed that children of lesbian parents express traditional gender roles and behaviors, and are almost always heterosexual" (p. 270).

This declaration is the politically correct position of the academic elites (i.e., those well-educated professionals who believe they are unbiased, unmotivated by personal values or agendas, are fair-minded, accepting, compassionate, tolerant, and above all they are **just**--because they are not blinded by bigotry, ignorance, or dogmatic religious ideology. Furthermore, if a scholar dares to cross that line and question their interpretation of the data that person will be labeled a bigot, a racist, a chauvinist, a dogmatist, a racist, a homophobe, or an ignorant religious fanatic (Alcock, 2009, Bruce, 2001). Organizations such as the American Psychological Association, The National Council on Family Relations, The American Association of Marriage and Family Therapists, the National Education Association and many other organizations and their journal editors brook no dissent and make it difficult to present or publish contradictory opinions.

In general, some lesbian and gay scholars (and their supporters) have too eagerly accepted the null hypothesis without sufficient evidence. The efficacy of homosexual parenting is still up for debate, even though many academics and members of the helping professions and those in the entertainment media (e.g. see the ABC comedy show *Modern Family*) believe that any family form and any kind of nurturing caretaker is suitable and sufficient as "a family" and can produce an ideal environment for a child's development (Hansen, 2005). In general, this is the position taken by all major mental health and medical organizations.

Discrediting the two-biological heterosexual family seems to be the in-thing to do these days in the field of family studies, but the weight of evidence does not justify its dismissal so easily or quickly. When family scholars accept my challenge and recruit high achievement, well-adjusted, mentally healthy teens and young adults and then do in depth interviews asking about their families; the results may reveal that children reared in two-biological heterosexual families outperform those raised in alternative ways.

Returning to the original question of this paper, "Are lesbian parents superior to heterosexual parents", the data is simply insufficient to affirm that position. There are too many unmeasured factors in most of the lesbian/gay research.

Some of the confounding factors include the type of personal and relational characteristics of the lesbian couples (i.e., there is not one kind of lesbian couple); how the children were conceived, the extent of child interaction with related or unrelated adult males, the problem of matching lesbian couples with heterosexual couples on important demographic characteristics such as education, income, and race. And most important, more longitudinal research must be done to track the children into adulthood for that is the time when sexual orientation is most likely to be formulated and expressed.

In addition, little commentary has been made about the instability of lesbian and gay relationships which are often temporary (often lasting only 3-5 years) and then children are exposed to multiple parental sex partners who don't stick around (though obviously there are exceptions). Parental divorce or relationship break-up has certainly shown many adverse effects on children, but this fact is hardly mentioned by the lesbigay researchers.

In summary, it is too early to make a blanket generalization that lesbian parents are superior to their heterosexual counterparts. Schumm (2011) summarizes, "It appears clear that value biases have dramatically influenced how social scientists: evaluate scientific literature, develop their theoretical models, and conduct their research in the area of lesbigay parenting" (p. 117). From this author's point of view it is presumptuous to do so, and doing so merely exposes the personal values and political biases held by many scholars in child development and family studies (Groseclose, 2012; Yancey, 2011).

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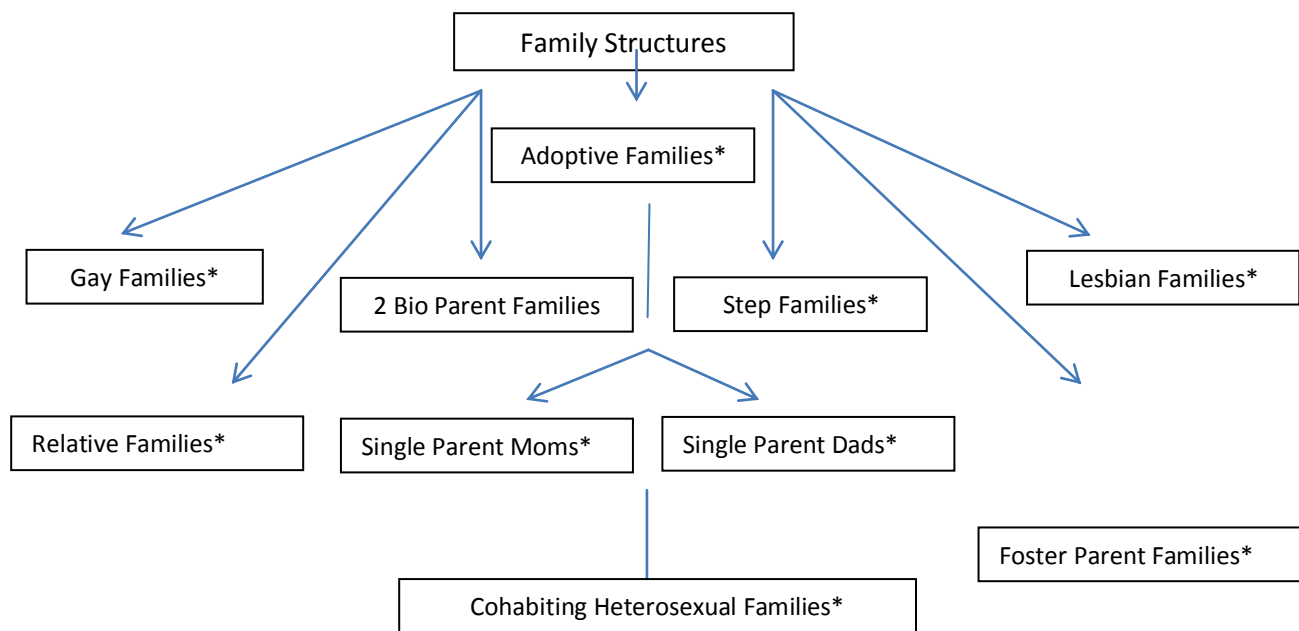
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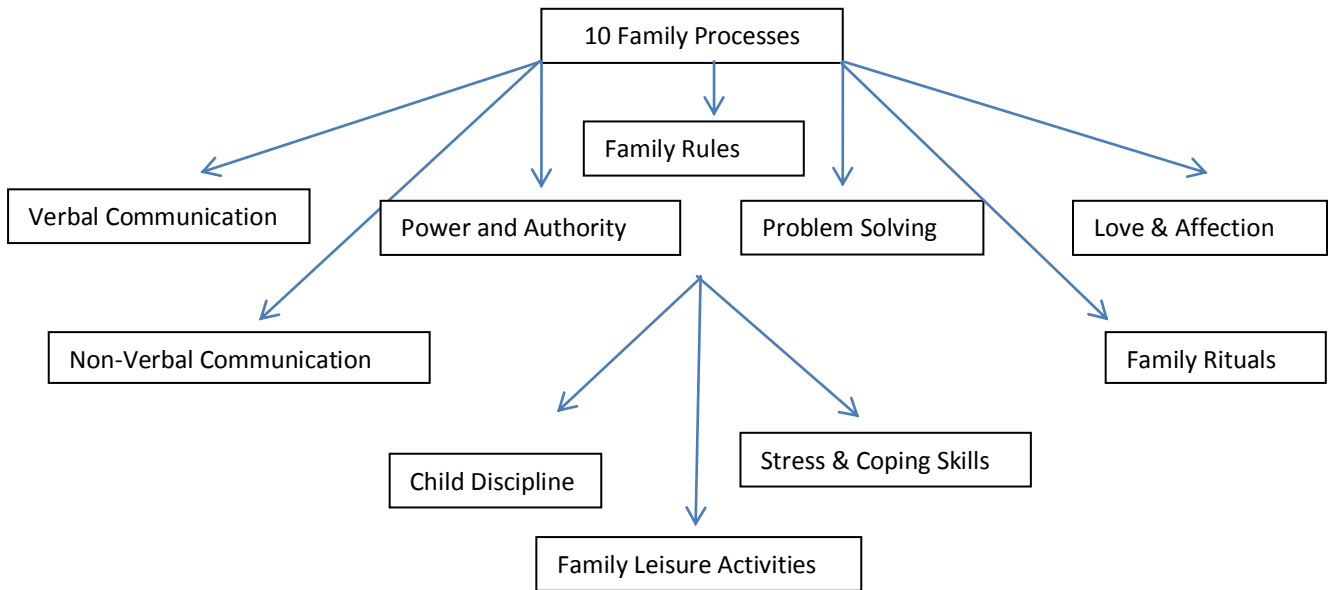
Appendices

Graphic A: Children Living in Various Family Structures with Numerous Variations

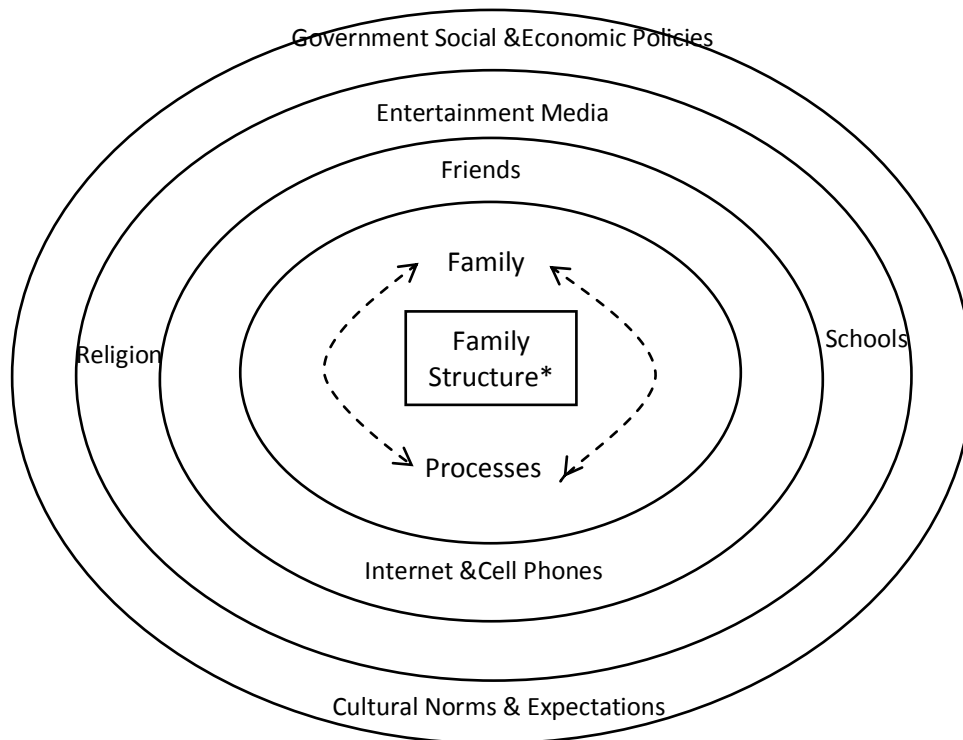


Further structural complexities: Families could include children living with aunts and/or uncles, with grandparents, or being taken care of solely by an older sibling. Stepfamilies could be composed of one never married partner without any children married to a previously divorced spouse with children or both partners could have been divorced and both bring children to the blended family. Single parent families could be living alone or living with grandparents, or the single mother could have a live in boyfriend. Heterosexual cohabiting couples could have children from one or both partners. Foster parent families could have only foster children or natural children and foster children. Adoptive families could have only adopted children, or adoptive and natural children. Gay and lesbian families could have been created due to divorce of previously heterosexual individuals, or by invitro fertilization, or by adoptions.

GraphicB: Family Processes



Graphic C: Environmental Influences on Child Development



*Family structure could be represented by various shapes. For example:

- △ = Single parent,
- = Lesbian or gay couple,
- ▭ = Stepfamily,
- ◡ = Adoptive family