

Children of Lesbian and Gay Parents: A Review of the Literature

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ABSTRACT. The purpose of this paper is to review the research literature concerning the development of children with gay and lesbian parents. It begins by discussing some of the social, theoretical, and legal implications of studying this population, and critiques a number of the assumptions guiding this research. The review then proceeds to include studies on children of divorced lesbian and gay parents, as well as studies conducted on children of gay and lesbian families that are planned. The body of literature generally concludes that children with lesbian and gay parents are developing psychologically, intellectually, behaviorally, and emotionally in positive directions, and that the sexual orientation of parents is not an effective or important predictor of successful child development. The paper also includes a discussion of the limitations of these studies, provides suggestions for future research, and discusses the challenge these families pose for the meaning and definition of family. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: getinfo@haworthpressinc.com <Website: <http://www.haworthpressinc.com>>]*

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Studies on children of lesbian and gay parents first started to appear in the 1970s, mostly out of a need for evidence in custody cases showing that these children were just as "normal" as kids with heterosexual parents. These studies were few in number and they began with case studies such as those by Osman (1972), Mager (1975), and Weeks, Derdeyn and Langman (1975). In

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In the late '70s and early '80s, as more gay and lesbian parents ended their marriages and sought custody of their children, larger empirical studies began to be conducted, also in an effort to dispel myths and stereotypes concerning gays and lesbians. As these studies clearly indicated, the number of gay and lesbian parents was large and the characteristics of these families were widely diverse. It is estimated, for example, that there are between 2-6 million gay/lesbian parents who have 6-14 million children (Bozett 1987, Editors of the Harvard Law Review, 1990, Gottman, 1989, Patterson, 1992, Pennington, 1987). The fact that such estimates range so widely results from the difficulty of establishing exact numbers for a population that is largely invisible due to homophobia and the threat of losing custody. The diversity of their families and their desire to have children is not unlike their heterosexual counterparts. Some gay/lesbian families are formed after the dissolution of a heterosexual marriage, which can result in single-parent homes or stepfamilies. Others are planned families that are formed after the individual has already "come out." This latter form is established in a variety of ways, such as through artificial insemination by a known or unknown donor, adoption, surrogacy, or foster parenting.

When discussing the results of previous studies, therefore, the above distinction is maintained, with the children of divorced lesbian/gay parents being discussed first, followed by a review of studies dealing with planned lesbian/gay families. This distinction between "divorced" and "planned" families is made because the studies themselves have generally been identified as one or the other. The importance of these categories is due mainly to the possible significance of very early family experiences on later gender and social development of children. Consequently, a common argument proceeds as follows: Children who were originally raised in heterosexual households who not only had male and female parents, but who also experienced divorce and single parenting, may then develop differently from children raised by lesbian and gay parents since birth (Golombok & Tasker, 1994). The remaining sections of the paper will address the limitations of these studies, provide suggestions for future research, and discuss the challenge these families pose for the meaning and definition of the concept family. But first, I would like to address some of the social, theoretical, and legal implications of studying children with lesbian and gay parents.

Why is it important to study this population? First of all, as mentioned above, this is a fairly large population that helps to represent the wide diversity of current family forms. The large numbers and diversity of these families alone should warrant further study so that we may better understand families in general. These families are also intricately connected to our society as a whole, both resisting the dominant culture that takes a negative view of lesbians and gays. Such adverse views are directed especially at the desire of gays and lesbians to become parents and contribute to the ongoing transformation of these families. As Laura Benkov writes:

The process of invention interweaves social and personal change. As lesbians and gay men create new family forms, they work within the set of limits and possibilities of the cultural context. In this process, they also feed back into the culture, transforming the set of constraints and possibilities therein. (1994:13)

Another important issue raised by research on gay and lesbian parenting relates to the theoretical implications of these studies in the sense of potentially posing a challenge to psychological theories of child development. Questions are raised about the importance of having parents of each sex in order for normal development to occur. As Patterson (1997) indicates, theories of psychological development, such as psychoanalytic and social learning, emphasize the importance of having both a mother and a father for healthy social development. Consequently, these theories predict a negative outcome for children who are not raised in such an environment. "An important theoretical question thus concerns the extent to which such predictions are sustained by results of research on children of gay and/or lesbian parents" (p. 238).

These families also contest the role of the state and legal institutions in regulating our personal relationships. How much influence should the state and the judiciary have in defining what a family is or should be? Should we follow former President George Bush's declaration that "homosexuals raising children is not normal" (quoted in Benkov, 1994)? These studies, then, which for the most part are assessing the "normality" of these children, have important ramifications in custody cases and in public policy debates around adoption and foster parenting. For example, there are still five states that have *per se* precedents that guide all lesbian and gay custody rulings (Benkov, 1994). This precedent establishes an irrefutable presumption that homosexuality in and of itself constitutes unfitness. A 1988 Tennessee appellate court case expressed its opinion that a parent's homosexuality will adversely affect the morality of the child. "Homosexuality has been considered contrary to the morality of man for well over two thousand years. It has been and is considered to be an unnatural, immoral act" (quoted in Doolley 1990:414). Under this approach, the courts' presumptions preempt the need for serious and accurate appraisal of the parents' capabilities and of the needs of the child. As Theodore Stein (1996:445) writes, "The moral arguments offered to justify a *per se* rule are little more than an effort to cloak prejudice and to legitimize discrimination. Such decision making substitutes abstract references to morality for sound legal reasoning."

Increasingly most jurisdictions, in turn, do follow the "best interests of the child" standard, utilizing a nexus approach. The nexus approach is a step forward in that it does away with presumptions of the gay parents' unfitness, but continues to state that custody can be denied if a parent's homosexuality

can be proven to adversely affect the child. Thus it retains the dubious assumption that homosexuality may be harmful to children (Dooley, 1990; Patterson & Redding, 1996).

During most custody cases, the courts often are concerned with several issues surrounding the social and psychological development of children being raised by gay or lesbian parents. A few of these issues include a concern that the parent's homosexuality will adversely affect the child's gender and emotional development; a likelihood of social stigma or peer rejection due to parental homosexuality; and a fear that there is an increased likelihood for the child to become homosexual. The validity of these concerns will be addressed in the following two sections which first look at studies of children with divorced lesbian or gay parents and examine those families in which gays or lesbians planned and conceived children after having come out.

An important caveat is necessary that is concerned with my feelings about the importance of critically addressing the assumptions that guide the research and language used by most of the following studies. These comments pertain to the notion that certain gender identity traits exist that are deemed 'appropriate' or 'normal' for both males and females. This notion is problematic through its normalizing tone that reinforces hegemonic gender roles, fails to allow for differences, and refrains from challenging the existing oppressive gender order. Although I do believe that these studies are contributing in a positive way to debunking myths and stereotypes about gay parents and their children, they are acquiescing to hegemonic ideas of masculinity and femininity. The promotion of gender hegemony is accomplished by judging 'appropriate' child development in terms of such outcomes as girls wearing dresses and being emotionally supportive, and boys playing with trucks and displaying independent, aggressive behavior. Sandra Pollack (1987:321) writes,

A number of the comparison studies focus on the sex roles of children. Again, my reservation is the underlying assumption that there are appropriate sex roles for boys and girls. What these studies really examine is whether the children conform to acceptable societal norms. Yet this very assumption of appropriate roles is what feminists are committed to eliminating . . . While we might use these studies as a courtroom tactic because the children 'do just fine,' we must remain aware of the acceptance of sex-role stereotyping on which such an argument is based.

This reinforcement of oppressive, hierarchical, socially constructed gender identities is highly constraining and detrimental to both men and women. Assumptions of this kind denigrate those who do not conform to the dominant gender order, which contributes to limited self-expression and to ongo-

ing prejudice and discrimination. A more constructive approach is to discuss children's development in terms of how successful they are in areas of self-management, adjustment, self-esteem, and how well they are equipped to maneuver through life, rather than if they exhibit traditional, 'normal' gender-role behavior.

The related question as to whether or not the children of homosexuals are more likely to be gay themselves is immensely problematic for obvious reasons in the sense that to be gay or lesbian is assumed to be a negative, unwelcome outcome. This position tends to reinforce homophobia, even if unintentionally. Nancy Poltkoff (1987:326) emphasizes this when discussing lesbian mothers:

When we constantly assert in the public arena that we will raise our children to be heterosexual, and that we will protect them from the manifestations of our sexuality . . . we essentially concede it is preferable to be heterosexual, thereby foreclosing an assertion of pride and of the positive value in homosexuality.

Thus I urge the reader to keep these comments in mind as they read through the following studies.

CHILDREN OF DIVORCED LESBIAN AND GAY PARENTS

Gender Development

When discussing issues of traditional gender development, a distinction is usually made between gender identity, gender-role behavior, and sexual orientation. Gender identity concerns a person's self-identification as male or female. Gender-role includes behaviors and attitudes that are regarded by a particular culture as appropriately male or female. Sexual orientation refers to a person's attraction to sexual partners as homosexual, heterosexual, or bisexual (Golombok & Tasker, 1994).

Of the investigators who have examined the gender identity of children with lesbian mothers, none have found any evidence of gender identity confusion. For example, Green (1978), using protective measures such as toy, game, clothing and peer group preferences, found that 36 out of 37 children were developing along typical lines for their sex. Similarly, Kirkpatrick, Smith, and Roy (1981) found no indication of differences in gender identity between a group of children being raised by lesbian mothers and a group being brought up by single heterosexual mothers. These researchers evaluated the sex of first-drawn figure, the history of play preferences, and behavior exhibited in the playroom, all of which resulted in the conclusion that there

were no identifiable differences between the two groups. Green, Mandel, Holvødt, Gray, and Smith (1986) also conducted a study comparing the two different types of single-parent households, reporting that their data did not support the fear that lesbian mothers would produce gender identity conflict in their children. Golombok, Spencer and Rutter (1983), using systematic standardized interviews with 37 children and their lesbian mothers, and 38 children and their heterosexual mothers, along with parent and teacher questionnaires, found no significant differences between the psychosexual and gender identity development of the two groups. Other studies also have come to the same conclusion that a parent's sexual orientation does not detrimentally affect or confuse their children's formation of what is deemed by dominant Western medical-scientific discourses to be an appropriate gender identity (Gottman, 1989; Holvødt & Mandel, 1982; Schwartz, 1986).

The above studies also conducted research on gender-role behaviors that resulted in similar findings. Specifically, the general result was that no significant difficulties existed for children of homosexual parents to display what is considered suitable gender behaviors and attitudes (Golombok et al., 1983; Gottman, 1989; Green, 1978; Green et al., 1986; Holvødt & Mandel, 1982; Kirkpatrick et al., 1981; Schwartz, 1986). Moreover, both Kveskin and Cook (1982) and Hoeffer (1981) compared the sex-role behaviors of children of lesbians and children of heterosexual single mothers, with the conclusion being that the two groups exhibited no significant differences. Hoeffer stated that the most notable thing about her findings was not the differences, but the similarities between the two groups in their acquisition of sex-role behavior. Moreover, regardless what the mother's sexual orientation was, both boys and girls preferred toys that were traditionally associated with their gender.

The third dimension of gender development, sexual orientation, has also received empirical investigation to examine if a greater instance of homosexuality exists among children being raised by homosexual parents. All of the studies conducted thus far, with one exception (Cameron & Cameron, 1996), indicate that gay and lesbian parents are no more likely to produce gay and lesbian children than their heterosexual counterparts. A study conducted by Bailey, Bobrow, Wolfe, and Mikach (1995) examined 55 gay or bisexual fathers' reports of their 82 sons' sexual orientations. Results indicated that 90% of these sons were heterosexual, suggesting that having a gay father does not substantially increase the likelihood of sons becoming gay adults. Furthermore, sexual orientation was not a positive correlate of the amount of time that sons lived with their fathers, again suggesting that environmental transmission of homosexuality cannot be corroborated in this sample.

Huggins (1989) studied 36 children who ranged in age from 13 to 19 years of age. Half of the children had lesbian mothers and half had heterosexual mothers. The major finding was that only one of these adolescents self-identi-

fied as homosexual and this particular youth was the child of one of the heterosexual mothers.

Golombok and Tasker (1996) conducted one of the few longitudinal studies to investigate the impact on children raised by lesbian mothers. The data were collected in 1977 from 25 children of lesbian mothers and a control group of 21 children of heterosexual single mothers with follow-up data collected in 1992. The average age of the children at the two times of data collection were 9.5 and 23.5 years of age, respectively. The researchers used standardized interviews to obtain data on sexual orientation, which resulted in the finding that a substantial majority of children who grew up in lesbian families self-identified as being heterosexual. However, some interesting additional findings were evident:

Although no significant difference was found between the proportions of young adults from lesbian and heterosexual families who reported feelings of attraction toward someone of the same gender, those who had grown up in a lesbian family were more likely to consider the possibility of having lesbian or gay relationships . . . However, the commonly held assumption that children brought up by lesbian mothers will themselves grow up to be lesbian or gay is not supported by the findings of the study; the majority identified as heterosexual in adulthood. (p. 8)

Saffron (1996) also indicates that the children of lesbian and gay parents whom she interviewed had a more open and accepting attitude toward diverse sexual identities.

Parents who are comfortable with their homosexual identity are likely to impart a liberal understanding of sexuality to their children . . . Some [of the children] expressed uneasiness with labels and the limits they impose on people's understanding of each other . . . Many spoke of their willingness to question their own sexuality. (p. 195)

Several other studies have arrived at the same conclusion as the above studies. Specifically, *the incidence of homosexuality is no higher if one is raised by a gay or lesbian parent, than if one is raised by a heterosexual parent* (Golombok et al., 1983; Gottman, 1989; Green, 1978; Green et al., 1986; Miller, 1979; Schwartz, 1986).

The fact that a vast majority of homosexuals had heterosexual parents is an additional indication that sexual orientation is not learned from the parent, nor a result of having only one male or one female as primary caregivers. As Marciano (1985:300) writes:

The absence of consistent same-sex and opposite-sex models does not

produce gay children. Those in widow-headed households, homes of divorce or desertion, do not have consistent models and there is little talk of their gay vulnerabilities.

Moreover, concern over the issue of whether or not children of gays or lesbians are more likely to become gay or lesbian and tendencies to deny custody based solely on this issue, carry with them implicit moral judgments that gay children are less desirable than heterosexual ones.

In conclusion, all of the studies cited above, with one exception, indicate that these children of lesbian and gay parents do not exhibit more frequent nonconventional gender-role behaviors than do their counterparts being raised by heterosexual parents. Moreover, these children usually develop what is considered to be, by the dominant and often repressive, Western medical/social-scientific community, an appropriate psychosexual identity and a typical heterosexual orientation.

Emotional Well-Being and the Development of Self-Esteem

The extant research on children's emotional and personal development also reveals that concerns over their development being in some way abnormal is not substantiated. No significant differences were found between children of lesbian and gay parents and children of heterosexual parents in reference to the development of self-concept, behavioral problems, intelligence, and psychiatric evaluations.

Huggins (1989) conducted a study of 36 adolescent children who were equally divided into two groups according to their mothers' sexual orientation and then were further divided by sex within each group. She administered the SEI (Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory) to assess each group's self-esteem. Her findings indicated that there were no significant statistical differences between the SEI scores of the two main groups, with daughters of heterosexual mothers having the highest mean score, and sons of heterosexual mothers having the lowest. In addition, she found that children of both lesbian and heterosexual mothers had higher scores if their mother was living with a lover or was remarried. "These data therefore seem to bring into question the validity of denying child custody to a lesbian mother" simply because she is living with her female partner.

Tasker and Golombok (1995), in their longitudinal study concerning the sexual orientation of children in lesbian families, found that young adults from these families were generally positive about their relationships with their mother, father, and mother's partner. Moreover, children with lesbian mothers had been able to establish closer relationships with their mother's partner than children from heterosexual households had with their mother's male partner. This study also reported that young adults from lesbian versus

heterosexual households did not differ in their likelihood of experiencing anxiety or depression. Other investigators of children with lesbian and gay parents also have concluded that the healthy emotional and self-concept development of children occurs normally and does not differ significantly from that which occurs with heterosexual parents (Golombok et al., 1983; Gottman, 1989; Green et al., 1986; Puryear, 1983; Smith, 1982).

Social Development

The last issue of this section addresses concerns frequently expressed over children's social development, relationships with peers, and the potential for exposure to feelings of being stigmatized. In several studies the majority of children of gay and lesbian parents demonstrated evidence of positive peer relationships and social development, and reported feeling popular both in their neighborhoods and in schools (Golombok et al., 1983; Green et al., 1986; Hotvedt & Mandel, 1982; Schwartz, 1986). Tasker and Golombok (1995) also assessed their sample for recollections of being teased or bullied by their peers, with results indicating that children from lesbian families were no more likely to experience these consequences than were their heterosexual counterparts. In contrast, children from lesbian families were more likely to remember peer group teasing about their own sexuality, but not differ from heterosexual counterparts on the proportion who had experienced peer stigma due to their family backgrounds or mothers' lifestyles. Four studies have reported, in turn, that the children from lesbian homes often were affected by the perceived need for secrecy where custody was a concern. Moreover, these children also reported being affected by feelings that their parents' homosexuality must be kept secret due to being afraid of teasing and name-calling by peers (Atfal Javard, 1993; Bozett, 1987; Lewis, 1992; Paul, 1987). These findings suggest, of course, that the real problem is not with the parent's sexual orientation, but instead with the legal system's and society's prejudices.

Schulenberg (1985), in a questionnaire distributed to several children under age 12, asked about whether or not they had experienced any peer stigma due to their parent's homosexuality. She noted that, of those children who indicated that other people knew their parent was gay, only one child reported being harassed. As these studies indicate, compared to other kids, children of lesbian and gay parents are not necessarily being stigmatized disproportionately simply because of their particular family form. Moreover, as Dooley (1990) indicates, courts will deny custody by relying on the presumption that these children will, at some point, experience prejudice and stigmatization. As such, these decisions are based not on actual incidences of harassment, but only on presumptions, that the above studies indicate do not happen on a regular basis. "Using potential stigmatization of the child as a reason for

denying custody to the gay parent, courts are giving allegiance to societal prejudices, which is disallowed under equal protection" (1990:418). Thus, courts are actually reinforcing the stigmas that they find so damaging in the first place.

In summary, the studies to date provide no empirical evidence that the children of lesbian and gay parents are 'different' from other kids. Children reared in homosexual households do not have problems with their conventional gender development, emotional and social development, nor in their relationships with peers as a result of their parent's homosexuality. These studies suggest that the sexual orientation of parents is not a meaningful predictor of successful child development.

PLANNED LESBIAN AND GAY FAMILIES

A growing trend for both lesbians and gays is to choose to become parents after coming out. Fostered by donor insemination and adoption, the larger number of lesbians who have chosen motherhood since the 1980s has been referred to as a "lesbian baby boom" (Clunis & Green, 1995; McCandlish, 1987; Ratkin, 1990; Weston, 1991). Because this is a fairly recent phenomenon, much less research has been conducted on planned families than on families headed by divorced lesbian and gay parents. The few studies that have been conducted all conclude that children in these families are developing in a positive manner.

Steckel (1985) compared the process of separation-individuation among preschool children, of which 11 were born to lesbian couples and 11 were born to heterosexual couples. She utilized structured parent interviews, parent and teacher Q sorts, as well as a Structured Doll Technique in order to assess independence, ego functions, and object relations of these children. She found much similarity in the children's development within both groups, with neither family experience revealing greater psychopathology or difficulties in separation-individuation. She also reported, however, that differences existed in the experiences of separation, with children of heterosexuals having a more aggressively tinged separation. Specifically, these children viewed themselves as more aggressive and were correspondingly characterized by both parents and teachers as more assertive, bossy, dominating, and negativistic. In contrast, she describes the children of lesbian mothers as possessing a more lovable self-image, with parents and teachers describing these children as more affectionate, responsive, and protective of younger children. She concluded that the presence of a female co-parent, rather than a father, does not negatively affect a child's process of intrapsychic separation, but that it does contribute to a qualitatively different separation experience.

Another study by McCandlish (1987) provided a qualitative research prof-

ect consisting of comprehensive family interviews with five lesbian couples who were raising seven children born to them through donor insemination. These preschool children formed secure attachments to both mothers, showed no psychological or behavioral difficulties, and displayed what is considered to be conventional gender identities.

More recently Patterson (1994) conducted a study on children between the ages of 4 and 9 years old, who were born to or adopted by lesbian mothers, in order to assess their psychosocial development. Comparing their social competence, behavior adjustment, and sexual identity with available standardized norms, she found that these children scored within normal ranges. These children did differ from youngsters of heterosexual parents, however, by reporting more negative reactions to stress (such as anger and fear), while at the same time reporting a greater sense of well-being (such as joy and contentment) about themselves. Patterson offers two possible interpretations of these results. The first is that children of lesbian mothers actually experience more stress in their daily lives than do other children. Patterson (1994: 169-170) notes:

As a result of heterosexual, homophobic, and/or other aspects of their environment, children with lesbian mothers may actually encounter more stressful events and conditions than do children with heterosexual mothers . . . their more frequent reports of emotional responses to such stress might simply reflect the more stressful nature of their experience.

A second interpretation, in turn, is that these children, regardless of actual stress levels, may be more willing to acknowledge and report a variety of strong emotional experiences, both negative and positive. This finding does not replicate Steckel's (1985) results which indicated that children of lesbian mothers see themselves as less aggressive and more sociable than children of heterosexual parents. Despite these differences, Patterson's main conclusion is that the children of the lesbian baby boom in this sample had experienced an ordinary process of psychosocial development.

An additional study found many similarities between children raised by lesbian couples who had conceived through donor insemination and a matched sample of children from two-parent heterosexual families (Traks, Ficher, Masterpasqua, & Joseph, 1995). Children's cognitive functioning and behavioral adjustment were assessed for 30 children, divided equally between the two groups. Results for all the hypotheses tested failed to reveal statistically significant main effects for parental sexual orientation, with 17 of the 24 comparisons between the two groups actually suggesting tendencies that favored the children of lesbian parents.

Although few in number, these studies nevertheless demonstrate consistent results which indicate that children of lesbian mothers are developing

psychologically, intellectually, behaviorally, and emotionally in positive directions. As Flacks et al. (1995) indicate, the implications of this research suggest that, for healthy child development to occur, neither father presence nor parental heterosexuality are critical. Moreover, as Pollack (1987) emphasizes, an important thing to keep in mind is the intention of these studies to demonstrate that few differences exist between homosexual and straight families. This demonstrates, in turn, that

neither lesbians nor their children have pathological problems that are very different from heterosexual single mothers and their young. My concern centers on the underlying assumption that the lesbian mother should be judged on how well she compares to the heterosexual. (p. 320)

Dolores Maggioro (1992:xxv) continues this criticism by stating that comparison studies tend to

[hold] up the model of heterosexual mothers, their mothering, and their families and, in so doing, casts the lesbian and her family in second-class status, accepting the 'sanctity' of the heterosexual model and the patriarchal family. Thus, one does nothing to change the system, validate the lesbian family, or affirm the right of a lesbian to raise her family as she wishes.

LIMITATIONS OF STUDIES AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Many of these studies suffer from similar limitations and weaknesses, with the main obstacle being the difficulty in acquiring representative, random samples on a virtually invisible population. Many lesbian and gay parents are not open about their sexual orientation due to real fears of discrimination, homophobia, and threats of losing custody of their children. Those who do participate in this type of research are usually relatively open about their homosexuality and, therefore, may bias the research towards a particular group of gay and lesbian parents (Bozett, 1987; Victor & Irish, 1992).

Because of the inevitable use of convenience samples, sample sizes are usually very small and the majority of research participants end up looking quite homogeneous—e.g., white, middle-class, urban, and well-educated. Another pattern is the wide discrepancy between the number of studies conducted with children of gay fathers and those with lesbian mothers. The few studies of children with gay fathers are most likely due to maternal custody patterns, which reflect the fact that fathers, gay or nongay, are less likely to be custodial parents (Bozett, 1987).

Another potential factor of importance is the possibility of social desirability bias when research subjects respond in ways that present themselves and their families in the most desirable light possible. Such a phenomenon does seem possible due to the desire of this population to offset and reverse negative images and discrimination. Consequently, the findings of these studies may be patterned by self-presentation bias (Gartrell, Hamilton, Banks, Mosbacher, Reed, Sparks, & Bishop, 1996; Lott-Whitehead, & Tully, 1992; Tasker & Golombok, 1995; Turner, Scadden, & Harris, 1990).

In summary, faced with these frequent methodological difficulties, the generalizability of these studies is limited and overall, they can best be described as descriptive and suggestive, rather than conclusive. As Patterson and Redding (1996) indicate, since the problem of obtaining representative, random samples on this population will likely remain an issue, "it is not the results obtained from any one specific sample but the accumulation of findings from many different samples that will be most meaningful" (p. 44).

Keeping this in mind, research is needed in which larger sample sizes are acquired whenever feasible and where multiple methodologies are utilized. Longitudinal studies are needed "which seek to assess not only child adjustment over time, but also the family processes, relationships, and interactions to which child adjustment may be linked. Family processes, in turn, should be viewed in the context of surrounding ecological conditions of family life" (Patterson, 1992, 1039). Pollack makes a similar suggestion stating that "studies that look at the actual lives of [these] children may be more useful than those focusing on sex-role identities" (1987:322). There is additional need for intergenerational research involving reports and interviews with children of various ages and adults. Greater diversity is needed in future studies, both in terms of demographic characteristics and in various family forms such as adoptive and foster parenting, stepfamilies, planned lesbian families, and gay families with co-parents.

Another important area of research is needed to examine how homophobia affects children in lesbian and gay families, or, more specifically, how the young and their families cope with our heterosexist, homophobic society. As Allen and Demo (1995) write, "detailed investigations of lesbian and gay families will help family researchers shed new light on such little-understood phenomena as the . . . ability of families to cope with stigma while fostering permanent, enduring bonds without societal support" (p. 124). Finally, sociology's minimal contribution to the study of families of gays and lesbians, as pointed out by Allen and Demo's review article, needs to be remedied not only in terms of quantity, but quality as well.

We concur with other commentators that heterosexism underlies the limited information accumulated to date about lesbian and gay families and the impact of sexual orientation on family life . . . extant sociologi-

cal work treats homosexuality as deviant, focuses on sexual behavior and attitudes, and ignores the family context and family relations of lesbians and gay men . . . This distortion . . . is not harmless or value-free. Our silence as family researchers on this issue contributes to a general climate of intolerance and to maintenance of the status quo. (1995:121-124)

CONCLUSION

At the beginning of this paper, I discussed some of the possible theoretical implications of research on children of lesbian and gay parents and specifically on the effect it may have on psychoanalytic and social learning theories of child development. As Patterson (1997) wrote, "An important theoretical question thus concerns the extent to which such [negative] predictions are sustained by results of research on children of lesbian and/or gay parents" (p. 238).

If, as I have stated throughout this review, the presence of a heterosexual parent of each gender is not crucial to healthy child development, then the traditional psychoanalytic and social learning theories necessarily come into question. I do not mean to suggest that these theories are now somehow irrelevant, but it does seem important that they adapt to the findings of these studies on nontraditional families. As Flaks et al. (1995) state, "it would appear that theories of child development will have to take into account the preeminence of process variables over structural ones in predicting the most desirable family environment for raising children" (p. 113). However, it is important to determine which types of structural variables would be considered less relevant than process variables to examine (e.g., number, gender, or sexual orientation of parent(s) and the legal and/or biological relationships between parent and child), and which structural variables may still be quite pertinent (such as race, ethnicity, and class). Process and form should not necessarily be considered as opposites, but as variables that often influence each other. In short, a more holistic approach that takes both issues into account may be the most constructive.

These results also have important legal implications for gays and lesbians and their families. Because these studies consistently indicate that parental homosexuality is not detrimental to children's healthy growth and development, the legal community must not support policies of outright denial of rights to such things as adoption, foster parenting, reproductive technology, or retention of custody, simply on the basis of sexual orientation. Furthermore, planned lesbian and gay families should also be afforded the same legal protections and benefits as heterosexual families. For example, the non-biological parent or the second same-sex parent in an adoption, should be granted full parental status, with all the rights and responsibilities therein

(Editors of the *Harvard Law Review*, 1990; Flaks et al., 1995; Patterson, 1994).

More recently, significant progress was made regarding second parent adoptions when a gay couple both became the legal parents of a boy they had been foster parenting. This groundbreaking legal case occurred in New Jersey, which became the first state to allow homosexual couples the right to adopt children on an equal basis with heterosexual married couples. Hopefully, in the future a parent's sexual orientation or preference will no longer be considered an important factor bearing on adoption and parents' sexual orientation will not be addressed in discussions of custody. But until that time, it is important that more research be conducted which addresses the limitations noted in the studies reviewed in order to provide more accurate information and to dispel existing myths and stereotypes regarding parenting in gay and lesbian families.

The theoretical and legal implications generated by studying nontraditional families raises an important question and challenges to family researchers and to the society as a whole—What is a "family" and how should it be defined? How do the current dominant definitions affect children in these nontraditional families?

The formation of openly gay- and lesbian-headed families demonstrates that there are many unique family forms which challenge the traditional portrait of who parents are and what families look like (Clunis & Green, 1995). Gay and lesbian families challenge the traditional model by "raising fundamental questions about the relation between gender and parenting, the significance of biological versus social connections, and the role of the state in family life" (Benkov, 1994:6). These families point us toward concentrating on the quality of relationships within a family, rather than on how the household is structured. Lesbian and gay families dispute one of the central notions of family, namely the obligatory and strict linking of biological kinship with who constitutes being included in a definition of family. In many cases membership in lesbian and gay families is not primarily based on blood relationships or necessarily on legal ties, but on a collective commitment to sharing, loving and taking care of one another (Clunis & Green, 1995; Safron, 1996). As Laura Benkov (1994:6-7) writes:

I have serious trouble with rhetoric that idealizes traditional "family values." When people frame the nuclear family as morally superior, they focus on the shape of families (how many parents? Of what gender composition?) rather than on the quality of the relationships both within and beyond the family. At the same time, idealizing the traditional family obscures the violence and gender inequity often hidden behind closed doors. Perhaps most important, the emphasis on "family values" diverts

attention from societal problems such as poverty and racism by locating all difficulties in "the breakdown of the family." (pp. 6-7)

In conclusion, I feel it is important to note that several of these studies have also indicated that significant positive outcomes may result from growing up with a gay or lesbian parent. For example, a more open climate usually exists in these families for discussing issues relating to sexuality and for exposure to new and diverse points of view that allow for varied role models for children. Greater potential also exists for more egalitarian family relationships to develop that are not based on strict, often repressive definitions of gender roles (Cluniss & Green, 1995; Lewis, 1992; Lott-Whitehead & Tully, 1992; Ratkin, 1990).

Dorothy Riddle (1978) writes,

Rather than posing a menace to children, gays may actually facilitate important developmental learning . . . children have the possibility of learning that it is possible to resist traditional sex-role socialization . . . children become exposed to the concept of cultural and individual diversity as positive rather than threatening. (as quoted in Pollack, 1987: 322)

Many of these children can take advantage of being a part of a nontraditional family that teaches increased empathy, tolerance for others, and a healthy respect for all kinds of difference. Miller (1992) suggests that children from these families are more socially responsible because they become aware of and are concerned with inequality and prejudice not only with respect to sexual orientation, but also in terms of gender, race, and class. Saffron (1990) also makes an important point:

Children are growing up in a changing society, where there are few certainties and no blue-prints for living. In this society, at this time in history, there is a wealth of sexual identities, cultures, lifestyles, types of families and values. The most important lesson for our children is to teach them to value diversity, to be empathic with people who are oppressed and not to be afraid of difference . . . (p. 192) . . . parents teach these values by the way they live their lives. If they are comfortable with their sexuality, they model pride and self-acceptance. If they know a variety of people and types of families, they teach children to value diversity and to understand that there are many routes to happiness and self-fulfillment. (p. 179)

Finally, what the research suggests is that gay and lesbian parents are completely capable of providing a positive home environment in which to

raise children. A parent's sexual preferences do not matter nearly as much as helping and encouraging children to become self-reliant and self-respecting adults, and providing surroundings in which love, respect, and emotional support predominate.

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