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Research on Lesbian and Gay Parenting: Retrospect and Prospect

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Abstract

Lesbian and gay parenting is a fertile research field with many important new developments in content and methodology over the last decade. Lesbian and gay parenting occurs in a wide diversity of family constellations, yet the cultural context of lesbian and gay parenting is a neglected topic. The relative depth of knowledge of lesbian parenting is contrasted with the lack of research on gay parenting across different routes to parenthood. Lesbian and gay parenting researchers have employed a wide variety of methodological designs in their investigations and the field has benefited from the employment of quantitative and qualitative techniques to investigate developmental outcomes for children and increase understanding of the variety of experiences of lesbian and gay parenthood. This review highlights significant developments in the field and suggests new directions.

Key words: child development, lesbian mothers, gay fathers, parenting.

Recent decades have seen an increase in both the quantity and quality of research on lesbian and gay parenting. The field has been enriched by a variety of perspectives from many researchers and commentators across the social sciences. Our aim in this paper is not to provide an exhaustive review of the field (see instead Anderssen, Amlie, & Ytteroy, 2002; Bigner & Bozett, 1990; Patterson, 2000, 2006; Perrin, 2002; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001; Tasker, 1999, 2005) but instead to provide an overview of significant developments and suggest future directions. First, we consider lesbian and gay family formation and the many routes through which lesbians and gay men become parents. We then review family relationships from the perspectives of lesbian and gay parents and their children and from this move to discussing how lesbian mother and gay father families describe their families to others outside their family circles. We then focus on the substantial body of work on the personal development and sexual identity of children of lesbian or gay parents. Methodological developments and future directions are highlighted in the final sections of this review.

Routes to Lesbian and Gay Parenting: A Growing Community of Lesbian Mothers and Gay Fathers.

The family arrangements of lesbian mothers and gay fathers are many and varied. Diversity arises not only in how living a lesbian and gay identity influences family living arrangements but also as this intersects with cultural and religious identities.

Socioeconomic status, occupational grouping, and ability/disability further contextualize family life and interconnect with the way in which a lesbian or gay identity can be lived.

Variation in age and cohort in terms of era of lesbian and gay emancipation will likely

influence how comfortable lesbian mothers and gay fathers and their children are with being identified as a lesbian mother or gay father family. It is also likely that different aspects of identity are salient in different contexts for instance, at home, with extended family, in relation to the child's school, or parental work (Fukuyama & Ferguson, 2000).

As yet research has rarely addressed how cultural variations influence the context of family life for lesbian mother or gay father families. A couple of personal accounts have explored the impact of disability on lesbian motherhood (D' Aoust, 1995; the accounts of 'Dale' and 'Kat' in Drucker 1998). Bowen (1995) discusses identity and choice in relation to her own experiences of motherhood as a black lesbian feminist. One empirical paper contrasts the child-rearing attitudes of Black lesbian mothers with those of heterosexual mothers recruited through Black women's groups and reported few differences between the two groups except for greater flexibility about family rules, more tolerant attitudes about their children's sexuality, and less traditional attitudes towards stereotypical feminine roles among the Black lesbian mothers (Hill, 1987).

One aspect of lesbian motherhood and gay fatherhood that has been relatively well documented is variation in the route to parenthood. Many lesbian and gay parents had children within a previous heterosexual relationship. Some may continue to parent within an ongoing heterosexual relationship. For both parents and children in these households family relationships may involve a complex network of both opposite gender and same gender past and present relationships, and a series of family changes that may include separation, divorce, death and re-partnership.

In recent years the number of children with lesbian, gay or bisexual parents has increased with more lesbians and gay men having children in the context of a lesbian or

gay identity. Children have been born to or adopted by lesbian mothers or gay fathers (Patterson, 1992; 2006). These families have variously been called families of the lesbian baby boom, planned lesbian mother or planned gay father families (eg. Bos, van Balen & van den Boom, 2003; Golombok, Murray & Tasker, 1997; Patterson, 2000) or *de novo* families (McNair, 2004; Perlesz, Brown, McNair, Lindsay, Pitts & de Vaus, 2006a). Many of the children in these families were born to lesbian mothers through donor insemination at a clinic, or via self-insemination, using donor sperm. Various family arrangements with the sperm donor have been reported: Some donors remain anonymous, some donors are known to the family, and some donors become involved in family life to a greater or lesser extent (Donovan, 2000; Martin, 1993; Saffron, 1994).

Gay men have become fathers through co-parenting arrangements with lesbian mothers. Some gay fathers have become known sperm donor for lesbian mothers, while others have no genetic connection with children they co-parent. Surrogacy agreements also have enabled gay men to become fathers (Martin, 1993; Lev, 2006). Both traditional surrogacy (where the surrogate mother is genetically related to the baby) and gestational surrogacy (where the baby carried in pregnancy by the surrogate is genetically related to another woman who has donated the egg) are emotionally and legally complex. If arrangements are made through an agency, they can also be expensive. Gay fathers conceiving children through surrogacy arrangements have reported choosing surrogacy over adoption for various reasons: wanting a biological connection with their child, having more control over surrogacy processes, being assured of raising the child from birth, wanting to continue contact with the surrogate or egg donor for their children, finding that surrogacy was legally less complicated than adoption in their locality, and

feeling that their child could be spared potential emotional difficulties through not having been “given up” for adoption (Lev, 2006).

Gay men and lesbians also have become parents, or parental care givers, through adopting or fostering children. Research comparing adopted children placed with lesbian, gay or heterosexual parents found no group differences in children’s behavior in the three types of family (Erich, Leung & Kindle, 2005). Furthermore, parental sexual orientation was not associated with either adoptive family functioning or parental perceptions of the helpfulness of their extended family support networks. Opportunities for adoption by prospective lesbian and gay adopters seem to be expanding, at least in the US. A survey of agencies found that 60% of adoption organizations that responded indicated that they accepted applications from lesbians and gay men, and approximately 40% of agencies had actually placed a child with a lesbian or gay parent (Brodzinsky & Staff of the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2003). Agencies dealing with foster care tended to be more open to placing children with lesbian or gay foster parents than were adoption agencies. However, lesbians and gay men who have applied to foster or adopt sometimes report rejection, suspicion or homophobic attitudes on the part of agencies or social workers, or the child’s family of origin (Hicks & McDermott, 1999; Riggs, 2006; Spivey, 2006).

Another source of variation that has been considered in the academic literature on lesbian and gay parenting is the number of parents involved in the child’s life. Some parenting arrangements for children of lesbian or gay parents are bi-parental with a lesbian or a gay couple living together. Others involve parents living apart, or single parenting by a lesbian mother or a gay father. Some are multi-parental with several sets

of parents who are not co-resident (Gross, 2006) and some involve polyamorous relationships (Bettinger, 2005; Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2006). Like other families, the families of lesbians and gay men take many forms.

Estimates of the numbers of lesbians and gay men parenting. Estimates of the numbers of lesbians and gay men involved in parenting have proved difficult to provide, in part because of the complexity of parenting arrangements described above. In the US estimates of the number of children with lesbian or gay parents range widely (Patterson and Friel, 2000). The numbers vary between lower estimates from data collected in the National Health and Social Life Survey (NHSLs) which included only biological parents who identify as lesbian or gay, and higher estimates (also from NHSLs data) which included identification of lesbian and gay parents through relationship history or desire, as well as through identity. Estimates of the numbers involved in lesbian and gay parenting not only vary with the definition of lesbian and gay sexual orientation employed, but also with differences in the way in which parenthood can be interpreted by survey participants and the methods of questioning employed by researchers (Patterson and Friel, 2000).

Nationally representative surveys have often failed to ask questions about sexual orientation. In the US Census (2000) data were collected on nearly 600,000 same-gender unmarried-partner couples (US Census Bureau, 2003). In these households 34% of lesbian couples and 22% of gay male couples described themselves as involved in parenting. However, because single lesbian and gay parents were not identified, and because no questions directly concerned sexual orientation, these figures probably underestimate the actual number of lesbians and gay men involved in parenting.

Other estimates of the proportions of lesbians and gay men involved in parenting originate from community surveys. One national US survey found that approximately one in five lesbians identify as mothers and about one in ten gay men identify as fathers (Bryant and Demian, 1994). An earlier survey based in the San Francisco Bay Area also arrived at similar results (Bell and Weinberg, 1978). However, LGBT community surveys may not access lesbians and gay men involved in parenting. Furthermore, surveys may not have picked up the wide variety of informal parenting or caregiving arrangements that lesbians and gay men engage in, as revealed by qualitative studies that have used in-depth interviews (Weeks, Heaphy & Donovan, 2001; Swainson and Tasker, 2005). Given these complexities, it is difficult to obtain reliable estimates of the number of lesbian and gay parents.

Family Relationships.

Studies of the relationships with adults among the children of lesbian and gay parents have resulted in a generally positive picture (Brewaeys et al., 1997; Bozett, 1987; Golombok et al., 1983; Harris & Turner, 1985/86; Kirkpatrick et al., 1981; Miller, 1979; Wainright et al., 2004). For example, adolescent relationships with their parents have been described as equally warm and caring, regardless of whether parents have same- or opposite-sex partners (Wainright et al., 2004). Golombok and her colleagues (1983) found that children of divorced lesbian mothers were more likely to have had recent contact with their fathers than were children of divorced heterosexual mothers. Another study, however, found no differences in this regard (Kirkpatrick et al., 1981).

So far little is known about parenting children in planned gay father families, but we do know something about the parenting of gay fathers who had children previous

heterosexual relationships. Bigner and Jacobsen contacted the members of various parenting groups in the US to survey gay and heterosexual fathers parenting children after divorce (Bigner & Jacobsen, 1989a&b; 1992). Like the heterosexual fathers surveyed the gay fathers were non-resident parents reporting similar difficulties in keeping up their parenting relationships with their children. However, in their responses to a parenting inventory there were indications that compared with the heterosexual fathers surveyed the gay fathers tended to be more responsive to their children's needs, reported employing more reasoning strategies with them, but also saw themselves as stricter in setting appropriate standards for their children's behaviour. Gay fathers also tended to be more careful than the heterosexual fathers in showing physical affection to their partner when their children were present.

If a divorced gay father has formed a new same-sex relationships, this may be associated with more positive parenting. For instance, the extent to which a new gay partner had become included in family life was the factor most associated with high ratings of family satisfaction by divorced gay fathers, gay male partners, and their children (Crosbie-Burnett & Helmbrecht, 1993).. Data from the fathers participating in the British Gay and Bisexual Parenting Survey also suggest that gay fathers with partners (and especially men who lived with their lover) were more successful at meeting a range of common parenting challenges (Barrett & Tasker, 2001).

Several different research studies have highlighted the importance of the co-mother, or non-birth parent, in lesbian-led families. Young adult offspring of divorced lesbian mothers described themselves as communicating more openly with their mothers and with their mothers' current partners than did adult children of divorced heterosexual

parents (Tasker & Golombok, 1997). Some research on younger children brought up in planned lesbian-led families has found that lesbian couples tend to split childcare more evenly than do heterosexual couples (Chan, Brooks, Raboy & Patterson, 1998; Patterson et al., 2004; Tasker & Golombok, 1998; Vanfraussen, Ponjaert-Kristoffersen & Brewaeys, 2003) but other studies have found a tendency for birth mothers to perform more childcare than co-mothers (Ciano-Boyce & Shelley-Sireci, 2002; Patterson, 1995).

Two separate studies have found an association between the equality of division of childcare between lesbian partners and higher scores on measures of children's psychological adjustment (Chan et al., 1998; Patterson, 1995). Children in two parent lesbian-led families tend to report being equally close to both mothers irrespective of childcare division (Gartrell et al., 1999; 2000). Ciano-Boyce and Shelley-Sireci (2002) compared lesbian adoptive parents, lesbian couples where one mother gave birth and heterosexual couples who adopted a child. Like other investigators, they found that lesbian couples were more egalitarian in their division of childcare than heterosexual couples.

Research has also focused on children's contacts with members of the extended family, especially grandparents (Fulcher et al., 2002; Patterson et al., 1998). Patterson and her colleagues found that most children of lesbian mothers were described as being in regular contact with grandparents (Fulcher et al., 2002; Patterson et al., 1998). In one study, that included both children of lesbian and heterosexual parents, there were no differences in the frequency of contact with grandparents as a function of parental sexual orientation (Fulcher, Chan, Raboy & Patterson, 2002). Gartrell and her colleagues (2000) have also reported that most grandparents

acknowledged the children of lesbian daughters as grandchildren. Thus, available evidence suggests that inter-generational relationships in lesbian mother families are satisfactory.

Children's contacts with adult friends of their lesbian mothers have also been assessed (Fulcher et al., 2002; Golombok et al., 1983; Patterson et al., 1998). All of the children in these studies were described as having contact with adult friends of their mothers, and most lesbian mothers reported that their adult friends were a mixture of homosexual and heterosexual individuals. Children of lesbian mothers were no less likely than those of heterosexual mothers to be in contact with adult men who were friends of their mothers (Fulcher et al., 2002). Thus, findings to date suggest that children of lesbian mothers have contact with many different adults.

Lesbian and Gay Parenting: The World Outside the Home.

One important aspect of lesbian and gay parenting concerns how family members disclose their identity as part of a lesbian mother or gay father family unit, and how visible this is to others in different contexts. Recent decades have seen major shifts in the sociopolitical context of lesbian and gay rights, not least in respect of the recognition and acceptance of lesbian and gay parenting (see Bigner & Tasker, introduction to this special issue) The context for disclosure has shifted rapidly in recent years, yet while cultural changes have meant that some groups are more accepting of lesbian and gay parenting other groups remain resistant. As Stacey suggests, we are living in "a transitional and contested period of family history" (Stacey, 1990, pp.18).

When deciding whether or not to disclose, family members weigh the benefits of being open against the risks to safety that may be associated with disclosure (Perlesz et al., 2006b). Furthermore, in any family unit, different family members may be more or less comfortable with different levels of "outness." In particular parents and children may sometimes have different viewpoints.

Being 'out' as a lesbian or gay parent. One of the main questions that any lesbian or gay parent faces is when to disclose one's sexual identity to others. Judging whether, when, and how to disclose is a complex task. When disclosure is not just an individual matter but involves family relationships, the complexities multiply (Malley & Tasker, 2002; Laird, 1998).

Disclosure dilemmas are especially heightened for lesbian and gay parents as they weigh the need to acknowledge same gender relationships against the risks of discrimination. This process is complicated by consideration of children's needs and desires. For the British lesbian and gay parents interviewed by Weeks, Heaphy and Donovan (2001) commitment to children was viewed as an absolute, taking precedence in family life. In trying to protect their children from the hazards of a potentially hostile world parents sometimes reported making compromises with their children as to how openly they could be identified as lesbian or gay,

Lesbian and gay parents appear to weigh the pros and cons of disclosure dilemmas differently in different contexts. Among Australian lesbian parents, a variety of parental disclosure strategies have been identified ranging from "proud" to "private", and from "passive" to "selective" (Perlesz et al., 2006b). Perlesz and colleagues (2006b) reported that some lesbian-led families used a passive or acquiescent strategy in a healthcare setting; they were indifferent to whether or not the healthcare professionals knew or not, and while they were prepared to disclose if asked, said they did not mind if their sexual identity was not discussed. Adopting a passive strategy seemed to be linked to the intermittent nature of contact with healthcare services. Families may use different disclosure strategies in different public settings, for example, hospital or school settings.

In contrast to their passive strategy in healthcare settings, the families in Perlesz's et al.'s sample often adopted an active but selective approach within school settings; they chose to

disclose to some people but not to others (Perlesz et al., 2006b). The expected reactions of children's peers and their thoughts about their children's disclosure preferences influenced parental decisions, although judgments about the sensitivity of a particular school also played an important part.

Casper and Schultz (1999) similarly found that judgments about peers, children's preferences, and the particular culture of their child's school played a part in the school disclosure decisions of lesbian and gay parents in the United States. In Casper and Schultz's (1999) study in-depth interviews with both lesbian and gay parents and elementary school teachers suggested that open communication was central to parents' decision-making, in terms of whether it was begun, how it progressed, and whether participants were satisfied with process and outcome.

Casper & Schultz (1999) found that lesbian and gay parents who had chosen to disclose to their child's school were more likely to be middle class and had children attending private rather than state funded schools, often with a diverse corpus of staff and pupils and an ethos of acceptance and inclusion. In these settings parents tended to come out in an individual or small-group setting rather than to a large group of teachers or other parents, and parents felt more comfortable if disclosure was of their choosing rather than forced upon them.

Aside from the constraints or opportunities for disclosure offered by particular settings, other features connected with family history and demographic factors have been associated with disclosure or discretion. Different routes to parenthood seem to influence the different disclosure strategies adopted by families. Lesbians with children from previous heterosexual families tended to report using private strategies whereas lesbians with planned lesbian-led families tend to report being more open (Perlesz et al., 2006b; van Dam, 2004).

Various reasons for this difference have been suggested. In a planned lesbian-led family, identity has been established prior to parenting. In these families, disclosure dilemmas are often considered in-depth prior to having children (Perlesz et al., 2006b). In a lesbian post-divorce family the transition from heterosexual to lesbian parenting meant that a lesbian identity was added on to parenting and the implications of disclosure for relationships are more complex (Perlesz et al., 2006b). Weeks et al. (2001) also suggest that making the transition between heterosexual parenting and lesbian or gay parenting leads some parents to feel the need to compensate for their child's loss of heterosexual "normality". These parents may allow their children to take the initiative in how they present family relationships, particularly with respect to school and peers. Findings from van Dam's (2004) study indicate that while instances of actual victimization were few, lesbian mothers with children from previous heterosexual relationships reported more incidents (both to themselves and their children) than did mothers in planned lesbian-led families. The lesbian mothers with children from previous heterosexual relationships also perceived less support from extended family, friends, or community groups.

Australian lesbian-led families who lived in more liberal urban areas are more likely than others to report positive experiences when disclosing within school settings (Perlesz et al., 2006a). Those living in more working class areas often experience their neighborhoods as less accepting than do those living in middle class areas (Lindsay et al., in press). Contextual factors are clearly important in this regard.

Children of lesbian and gay parents: 'out' at school? The children of lesbian and gay parents also have to balance authenticity and safety concerns when presenting their family to the world outside their home. The children may be subjected to the effects of homophobia because of their parents' sexual identity, even though most do not share their parents' sexual orientation

(Patterson, 2005). Writing about her own school days, Paechter (2000) points to the parallels between her experiences in coming out as the daughter of a lesbian mother and the more commonly understood process of coming out about one's own sexual orientation.

Just like their lesbian or gay parents, children may be concerned about the possibility of their family background becoming the target of teasing, harassment, or exclusion at school. This is most likely to be the case as children approach and enter adolescence. Ray and Gregory (2001) described the five to eight-year-olds in their Australian study as being less aware than older children of heterosexist discourses defining family, with some children resolutely stating that they had two mothers despite incredulity from peers. On the other hand, older children and adolescents reported being more secretive and guarded about how they described their lesbian mother, or gay father family, because they were tired of having to "explain" their family, or at worst had experienced or feared being bullied (Ray & Gregory, 2001). Fears about losing friends, "being judged" and hearing peers make anti-gay remarks have been reported in other studies of the adolescent offspring of lesbian mothers (Gartrell et al., 2005; Lewis, 1980; O'Connell, 1993). The children of gay fathers interviewed by Bozett (1987) and Miller (1979) also expressed concerns about being ostracized by peers.

Despite children's fears, children of lesbian and gay parents do not actually seem to be teased or bullied more than their peers. Recent reports from a large national sample of adolescents in the United States found that those adolescents in families led by a same-sex couple had not been subjected to more physical victimization than had those in families led by opposite-sex couples (Wainright & Patterson, 2006). These adolescents also tended to feel more integrated at school than did the matched group of adolescents parented by opposite-sex couples (Wainright et al., 2004).

Other studies have collected data from self-selected samples, but have asked more different kinds of questions about experiences of verbal teasing and bullying, and assessed the quality of friendships, as well as considered physical victimization. Two studies have found no differences when systematically comparing the quality of peer relationships experienced by children in post-divorce lesbian mother families with those reported by children of single heterosexual divorced mothers, with most school-aged children and their mothers reporting positive relationships and predominantly same-sex peer groups and best friends (Golombok et al., 1983; Green et al., 1986). In young adulthood the sons and daughters of lesbian mothers first interviewed as children by Golombok and colleagues were no more likely than young adults in the comparison group to recall having been teased or bullied during their high school years (Tasker & Golombok, 1995; Tasker & Golombok, 1997). However, when asked specifically about having been teased or bullied about their own sexuality daughters, and especially sons, from lesbian mother family backgrounds tended to be more likely than those in the comparison group to recall instances of this.

Children in planned lesbian-led families do not generally appear to be vulnerable to peer relationships difficulties (Patterson, 2005). The findings of a British community study based on a representative sample of seven-year-old children from the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children found that while the lesbian mothers surveyed showed a slight tendency to report that their children were experiencing more peer relationship difficulties, their sons and daughters reported no more difficulties than did children in the comparison groups. The results of questionnaires administered to children's class teachers also supported a finding of no difference (Golombok et al., 2003). A Belgian study of ten-year-old children found that children from lesbian-led families were generally no more likely than children with heterosexual parents to report being teased by peers (Vanfraussen et al., 2002). British data from children, mothers, and teachers also indicate that

twelve-year-old children in planned lesbian-led families were no more likely than children in single or two-parent heterosexual families to experience peer relationship problems (MacCallum & Golombok, 2004).

It seems then that children of lesbian and gay parents expend a lot of time worrying about the possibility of peer prejudice but are not more likely than their peers to be victimized. Writing about lesbian-led families with pre-school children, Almack (in press) highlights the distinction between felt stigma and enacted stigma. In this view, the fear of teasing and having to manage it correspond to felt stigma, and episodes of teasing or harassment correspond to enacted stigma remain rare. In these terms, one might say that children in lesbian and gay parent families apparently more felt stigma than enacted stigma.

It is likely that children avoid being victimized in part because they adopt strategies that prevent them being targeted. Some choose to keep their family background a secret (O'Connell, 1993) or effectively implement "boundary control" strategies, such as avoiding showing any gay signifiers or displaying affection (Bozett, 1987). Children also manage to avoid being teased or bullied by selectively disclosing information about their family to some peers but not all, for example, by carefully "testing" peers as to whether they were likely to be homophobic before making friends or bringing them home (Tasker & Golombok, 1997). However, all these strategies are coping with or managing prejudice, few parents or children feel in a position to challenge homophobia itself (Clarke et al., 2004; Ray & Gregory, 2001). Many of the children in Ray and Gregory's study (2001) did not feel confident in their teachers' responses to homophobia with most teachers described as doing nothing about it or unable to stop it, while some teachers even joined in the jeering.

Children with Lesbian and Gay Parents: Sexual Identity and Personal Development.

Three major types of concerns about the development of children with lesbian and gay parents have guided a great deal of the research. Each one compares children of lesbian and gay parents with those of heterosexual parents, and suggests that those with non-heterosexual parents will be disadvantaged. The first is that development of sexual identity will be impaired among children of lesbian and gay parents. A second category of concerns involves aspects of children's personal development other than sexual identity, such as self-esteem. A third category of concerns is that children of lesbian and gay parents may experience difficulty in social relationships within the family, with other adults, or with peers. None of these concerns is supported by the results of empirical research.

Sexual Identity.

Research has considered three aspects of sexual identity: *gender identity*, which concerns a person's self-identification as male or female; *gender-role behavior*, which concerns the extent to which a person's activities, occupations, and the like are regarded by the culture as masculine, feminine, or both; and *sexual orientation*, which refers to a person's choice of sexual partners, who may be homosexual, heterosexual, or bisexual. Research relevant to each of these three major areas of concern is summarized below.

Gender Identity. In studies of children and adolescents, results of projective testing and related interview procedures have revealed that development of gender identity among children of lesbian mothers follows the expected pattern (Green, 1978; Green, Mandel, Hotvedt, Gray & Smith, 1986; Kirkpatrick, Smith & Roy, 1981). More direct assessment techniques to assess gender identity have been used by Golombok, Spencer & Rutter (1983) with the same result; all children in this study reported that they were happy with their gender, and that they had no wish to be a member of the opposite sex. No evidence has been reported in any of the studies to

suggest difficulties among children of lesbian mothers, but no data have yet been reported in this area for children of gay fathers.

Gender-Role Behavior. A number of studies have reported that gender-role behavior among children of lesbian mothers fell within typical limits for conventional sex roles (Brewaeys et al., 1997; Golombok et al., 1983; Gottman, 1990; Green, 1978; Green et al., 1986; Hoeffler, 1981; Kirkpatrick et al., 1981; Kweskin & Cook, 1982; Patterson, 1994a). For instance, Kirkpatrick and her colleagues (1981) found no differences between children of lesbian versus heterosexual mothers in toy preferences, activities, interests, or occupational choices.

Gender-role behavior of children was assessed by Green and his colleagues (1986). In interviews with the children, no differences between the 56 children of lesbian and 48 children of heterosexual mothers were found with respect to favorite television programs, favorite television characters, or favorite games or toys. There was some indication in interviews with children themselves that the offspring of lesbian mothers had less sex-typed preferences for activities at school and in their neighborhoods than did children of heterosexual mothers. Consistent with this result, lesbian mothers were also more likely than heterosexual mothers to report that their daughters often participated in rough-and-tumble play or occasionally played with “masculine” toys such as trucks or guns, but they reported no differences in these areas for sons. Lesbian mothers were no more and no less likely than heterosexual mothers to report that their children often played with “feminine” toys such as dolls. In all cases, children’s sex-role behavior was seen as falling within the expected range.

More recently, Brewaeys and her colleagues (1997) assessed gender-role behavior among children who had been conceived via donor insemination by lesbian couples, and compared it to that of those who had been conceived via donor insemination by heterosexual couples, and to

that of those who had been naturally conceived by heterosexual couples. They used the Preschool Activities Inventory (Golombok & Rust, 1993), a maternal report questionnaire designed to identify 'masculine' and 'feminine' behavior among children, and found no significant differences between children of lesbian and children of heterosexual parents on preferences for gendered toys, games, and activities (Brewaeys et al., 1997).

In summary, the research suggests that children of lesbian mothers develop patterns of gender-role behavior that are much like those of other children. No data are available regarding gender-role behavior for children of gay fathers.

Sexual Orientation. A number of investigators have also studied a third component of sexual identity, sexual orientation (Bailey, Bobrow, Wolfe & Mickach, 1995; Bozett, 1980, 1982, 1987, 1989; Gottman, 1990; Golombok & Tasker, 1996; Green, 1978; Huggins, 1989; Miller, 1979; Paul, 1986; Rees, 1979; Tasker & Golombok, 1997). In all studies, the great majority of offspring of both lesbian mothers and gay fathers described themselves as heterosexual. Taken together, the data do not suggest elevated rates of homosexuality among the offspring of lesbian or gay parents. For instance, Huggins (1989) interviewed 36 adolescents, half of whom had lesbian mothers and half of whom had heterosexual mothers. No children of lesbian mothers identified themselves as lesbian or gay, but one child of a heterosexual mother did; this difference was not statistically significant. Bailey, Bobrow, Wolfe & Mickach (1995) asked gay fathers whether their adult sons were heterosexual, bisexual, or gay and found that the large majority were heterosexual with only 9% considered as gay or bisexual.

Golombok and Tasker (1996; Tasker & Golombok, 1997) studied 25 young adults reared by divorced lesbian mothers and 21 young adults reared by divorced heterosexual mothers. They reported that offspring of lesbian mothers were no more likely than those of heterosexual

mothers to describe themselves as feeling attracted to same-sex sexual partners. If they were attracted in this way, however, young adults with lesbian mothers were more likely to report that they would consider entering into a same-sex sexual relationship, and they were more likely to have actually participated in such a relationship. They were not, however, more likely to identify themselves as non-heterosexual (i.e., as lesbian, gay, or bisexual). These results were based on a small sample, and should be interpreted with caution. At the same time, the study is the first to follow children of divorced lesbian mothers into adulthood, and it offers a detailed and careful examination of important issues.

Other Aspects of Personal Development.

Studies of other aspects of personal development among children of lesbian and gay parents have assessed a broad array of characteristics. Among these have been separation-individuation (Steckel, 1985, 1987), psychiatric evaluations (Golombok et al., 1983; Kirkpatrick et al., 1981), behavior problems (Brewaeys et al., 1997; Chan et al., 1998; Flaks, et al., 1995; Gartrell, Deck, Rodas, Peyser & Banks, 2005; Golombok et al., 1983, 1997; Patterson, 1994a; Tasker & Golombok, 1995, 1997; Wainright et al., 2004), personality (Gottman, 1990; Tasker & Golombok, 1995, 1997), self-concept (Golombok, Tasker & Murray, 1997; Gottman, 1990, Huggins, 1989; Patterson, 1994a; Puryear, 1983; Wainright et al., 2004), locus of control (Puryear, 1983; Rees, 1979), moral judgment (Rees, 1979), school adjustment (Wainright et al., 2004), and intelligence (Green et al., 1986). Research suggests that concerns about difficulties in these areas among children of lesbian mothers are unwarranted (Patterson, 1997, 2000; Parks, 1998; Perrin, 1998, 2002; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001; Tasker, 1999). As was the case for sexual identity, studies of these aspects of personal development have revealed no major differences

between children of lesbian versus heterosexual mothers. No studies of children of gay fathers have yet collected data on any aspects of personal development.

Methodological retrospect and prospect.

In the past much of the research on lesbian and gay parenting has been open to criticisms that samples were self-selected, and that neither participants nor interviewers were 'blind' to the research aims investigated (Tasker, 2005). Without exception studies of lesbian mothers and gay fathers who conceived their children in previous heterosexual relationships contacted participants through advertising within the lesbian and gay community. The parents and children who participated in these studies may have had particular reasons for volunteering and so may not be typical representatives of families led by lesbian mothers or gay fathers. Some studies of planned lesbian-led families have been able to use fertility clinic records to contact a sample (Chan et al., 1998; Brewaeys et al., 1997). However, the findings from these studies may not be representative of children in planned lesbian-led families conceived with donor sperm since many lesbians do not use fertility clinics (Tasker, 2005). Most of the research has been conducted with the assistance of lesbian and gay parents who are White, college educated, employed in professional occupations and generally 'out' about their sexuality. We clearly need more research with Black, Asian and Hispanic lesbian and gay parents and other ethnic groups, taking into account the intersection of multiple and often marginalized identities.

One advance of recent years has been the use of large nationally representative data sets to recruit a sample of lesbian mother families without advertising and self-selection. General findings that children in lesbian mother families do not differ from children in two-parent heterosexual families as reported by researchers using data from the National Longitudinal

Survey of Adolescent Health in the United States (Wainright et al., 2004; Wainright et al., in press) and ALSPAC in the UK (Golombok et al., 2003) have increased confidence in conclusions of earlier research.

Recruiting lesbian mother and gay father families via national data sets is a considerable step forward in achieving a representative sample. Nevertheless, further steps would be helpful. If national surveys included information about multiple indicators of sexual identity, more fine-grained assessments of sexual orientation would be possible. For instance, it would be helpful to compare data on assessments of sexual desire, behavior, and identity. This would increase the precision that would be possible in future research.

Another advance has been the increased number of longitudinal studies on lesbian parenting. This has enabled follow-up observations of children in early adolescence to find that sons and daughters raised in lesbian-led families generally continue to do well in adolescence, despite the increased potential for encountering peer group prejudice (MacCallum & Golombok, 2004; Vanfraussen et al., 2003). The American National Lesbian Family Study has also produced a wealth of qualitative data on the lives of lesbian mothers and their children from pregnancy through to adolescence (Gartrell et al., 1996, 1999, 2000, 2005). However, few studies have attempted to see how earlier variation within the lesbian mother family group relates to later child development (eg. Golombok & Tasker, 1996; Tasker & Golombok, 1997) and none have been able to use short wave repeated measures designs to control for earlier outcomes.

Studies of gay fathers and their children remain few compared to the growing number of studies considering lesbian mothers and their children. This may be because many gay fathers do not reside with their children (Barrett & Tasker, 2001). There also have been few attempts to

compare data on gay father and lesbian mother families directly by including both groups in the same study (eg. Harris & Turner 1986; Turner, Scadden & Harris, 1990). Knowledge about similarities and differences in lesbian and gay parenting and the influence of parental sexual orientation on children's developmental outcomes would be enhanced by studies that employed research designs that recruited separate study groups of lesbian mothers and gay fathers, alongside a demographically matched heterosexual parent comparison group, to contrast gender of parent and sexual orientation.

One of the difficulties encountered in reviewing studies of lesbian and gay parenting is that while there is good agreement on the aspects of parenting to be considered, and areas of child development to be examined, researchers do not always use the same methods. One of the few measures that has been consistently used by a number of different research teams is the Child Behavior Check List (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983) used in the States (eg. Chan et al., 1998) and Belgium (Brewaeys et al., 1997; Vanfraussen et al., 2002, 2003) enabling direct comparison across studies and with established population norms (Gartrell, Deck, Rodas, Peyser & Banks, 2005; Patterson, 1994). For other outcomes a wide variety of measures have been used from checklists to interview ratings and many of these measures lack supporting evidence of validity or reliability. In some cases the absence of agreement on measurement may be ascribed to different points of views as to the best way to measure an outcome. Furthermore, many measures do not have established translation for effective international use. Nevertheless using common measures would facilitate the pooling of findings.

The field would also benefit from use of a wider variety of methods of data collection. Most of the collected data derive from parental report supplemented by the psychometric testing

of children. Some studies also collate independent reports from teachers on the psychological adjustment of children (eg. Chan et al., 1998; Golombok et al, 2003). However, independent reports have not been collated on other aspects of child development and observational data have rarely been used (Tasker, 2005).

The field has also been advanced by an increasing number of studies employing qualitative analyses. These studies have highlighted the contexts of lesbian and gay parenting. They have also revealed the insights and experience of lesbian and gay parents and their children. Qualitative data have been used to describe decision making and children's progress in lesbian-led families (Gartrell et al., 1996; 1999; 2000; 2005). Qualitative data also have been gathered to contextualize the experiences and feelings of lesbian and gay parents interacting with school systems (Casper & Schultz, 1999). Inclusions of children and grandparents in multi-generational family interviews have given a systemic perspective on how members of lesbian-led families 'do family' (Perlesz et al., 2006a). Clarke has used a feminist social constructionist standpoint to consider the construction of lesbian and gay parenting both in media representations and in interviews with lesbian and gay parents to highlight accounts of normalization and resistance (Clarke, 2002). Studies employing qualitative analyses have benefited from the application of Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) used by Perlesz and colleagues (Perlesz et al., 2006a&b) and discourse analysis (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter & Wetherell, 1987) used by Clarke (Clarke 2002, 2006; Clarke, Kitzinger & Potter, 2004).

Conclusions.

We have highlighted key aspects of the growing body of knowledge on lesbian and gay parenting. We have considered the perspectives of lesbian and gay parents and their children. In

addition to outcomes, we have focused on studies of family process. Taken together, results of the available research offer considerable insight into the experiences of families parented by lesbians and by gay men.

The many studies examining developmental outcomes report few significant differences between the development of children with lesbian or gay parents and children with heterosexual parents, in terms of gender or sexual identity or the many aspects of personal identity development so far considered. However, we know far less about the development of the children of gay fathers than we do about the children of lesbian mothers.

Results of research to date suggest that children of lesbian and gay parents have positive relationships with peers and that their relationships with adults of both sexes are also satisfactory. The picture of lesbian mothers' children that emerges is one of general engagement in social life with peers, with fathers, with grandparents, and with mothers' adult friends — both male and female, both heterosexual and homosexual. Fears about children of lesbians and gay men being ostracized by peers, alienated from grandparents, or isolated in single-sex lesbian or gay communities have received no support from the results of existing research. Research on lesbian-led families indicates that co-mothers tend to be more actively involved in daily parenting than many fathers in heterosexual families. However, lesbians and gay men who are not biologically related to their children sometimes must struggle for recognition outside the family. Issues related to disclosure are a continuing challenge for some but not all families. Many avenues for future study can be discerned. Although research on lesbian and gay parenting has come a long way, much remains to be learned.

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