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# Lesbian and Gay Parenting Post-Heterosexual Divorce and Separation

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## Pioneering Lesbian and Gay Parenting

Lesbian and gay parenting after a heterosexual relationship ends in separation or divorce was established as a field of research in the 1980s. Most of our knowledge about whether or not parental sexual orientation influences children's development is derived from studies of children raised by their lesbian mother and her new female partner after the child's mother and father separated. Lesbian and gay parenting post-heterosexual separation has not been a prominent topic in either published research or media headlines in recent years, as research interest has moved on to planned parenting by lesbians and gay men. Nevertheless, tantalizing questions of definition and fluidity both of sexuality and of parenting remain to be explored, and these are questions that speak to the heart of post-identity politics in a new era.

In reviewing the field I first contextualize lesbian and gay parenting post-heterosexual separation, noting difficulties of definition within our limited knowledge of the demographic profile of nonheterosexual parenting. Using U.S. Census data from 2000, Gates and Ost (2004) have estimated that about a quarter of same-gender

couples had children (under age 18 years) residing with them, with proportionately more children living in female couple-headed households than male couple-headed households. Gates (2008) has reasoned that a large proportion of these children were conceived in prior heterosexual relationships, as gay men and lesbians in same-gender couples who recorded previous heterosexual marriages were nearly twice as likely as those previously unmarried to have children. However, as Gates and Romero (2009) have explained, the U.S. Census did not ask a direct question about sexual identity, sexual behavior, or route to parenthood, and would have missed single lesbians or gay men or those with non-cohabiting partners. The Census used traditional definitions of the ending of a heterosexual marital relationship in divorce and the formation of stepfamily—thus confounding new partnership, co-residence, and stepparenting in presuming that a cohabiting same-gender partner would be involved in parenting and a non-cohabiting partner would not. Lesbian and gay parenting post-heterosexual separation does not necessarily fit traditional heterosexual patterns.

In the main body of this chapter I consider key published studies of lesbian and gay parenting post-heterosexual separation that have been undertaken, viewing them from a social constructionist position as situated within the sociohistorical context of various theoretical, legal, and social debates that have influenced the field. I have grouped the studies according to their thematic concerns: concerns about parental

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separation or divorce and child well-being, hearing the voices of lesbian and gay parents, coming out, and acknowledging new partners. To highlight both theoretical perspectives and methodological aspects of the studies reviewed, I also have noted the academic discipline most associated with each thematic grouping as this too has contextualized the research.<sup>1</sup>

I conclude with a final section on new trends and future directions in which I consider an integrative perspective on the field, in particular drawing on the frameworks of life course theory (Bengtson & Allen, 1993; Elder, 1998), social constructionism (Gergen, 2009), and family systems theory (Broderick, 1993). These perspectives highlight (a) the importance of improving definition and measurement in quantitative research, (b) the need to contextualize lesbian and gay parenting by investigating intersectionality, and (c) the significance of queering the field and speaking the unspoken.

Where possible, I have prioritized studies that collect data from lesbian and gay parents themselves, and considered the often hidden perspectives of their same-gender partners, rather than dwelling on the more numerous studies on the perspectives and experiences of the children raised in these families. Children's perspectives are considered elsewhere in this volume (and see also Goldberg, 2010; Tasker & Patterson, 2007). Here I have aimed to direct attention to the diverse positions of lesbians and gay men engaged in parenting post-heterosexual separation or divorce.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In attempting to place the academic origins of particular studies I have undoubtedly simplified the complex multiple positions of scholars investigating lesbian and gay parenting. Nonetheless, discernable waves of research have ebbed and flowed upon particular theoretical and thematic currents navigated by investigators from particular academic disciplines.

<sup>2</sup> Post-heterosexual parenting takes place after the ending in separation or divorce of a heterosexual relationship in which children were conceived or adopted and the parent redefines their sexual orientation as nonheterosexual. In considering the published literature in the field I have focused on the position of lesbian and gay parents parenting post-heterosexual separation or divorce. Researchers in the field have sometimes noted the particular circumstances of their participants but most have not.

## Concern About Parental Separation and Divorce: Influences from Child Psychology and Psychiatry

Clinicians working with children and their families were the first set of professionals to publish research on lesbian and gay parenting. Beginning in the 1970s and 1980s, papers by psychiatrists began to be published giving concise accounts of issues highlighted in case notes from individual sessions with lesbian mothers or gay fathers and their children. These papers tended to emphasize the difficulties children faced in lesbian- or gay-parent families post-heterosexual separation or divorce (Agbayewa, 1984; Weeks, Derdeyn, & Langman, 1975) or used psychoanalytic theory to examine children's psychosexual development (Javaid, 1983, 1993). Authors contextualized many of the issues encountered as similar to those faced by other children of separated or divorced heterosexual parents who had begun new sexual relationships. This work opened the door to later empirical work using control groups of children brought up by a single heterosexual parent after parental separation or divorce.

Initial studies of same-gender parenting were launched largely by developmental psychologists and child psychiatrists to empirically investigate pragmatic concerns raised by divorce settlements in the 1970s and 1980s restricting residence and visitation by lesbian mothers (e.g., Golombok, 2002). At this time observations were being made about the salience of father absence after parental divorce (e.g., Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980), and earlier conclusions regarding factors that constituted maternal deprivation were being reassessed (Rutter, 1981).

Studies also addressed theoretical questions on the influence of parenting on children's social development, testing out theories that emphasized the importance for children's development of having two resident parents of the opposite gender. Psychoanalytic theories emphasized the salience of the father's active presence in helping to resolve oedipal dilemmas for both sons and daughters (Socarides, 1978). Social learning theorists delineated not only the significance of

same-gender role models for identity development but also the importance of both positive and negative reinforcement in shaping children's social behavior (Bandura, 1977). In contrast, social cognitive theories stressed the importance of the way children themselves organized knowledge about the world rather than parental influences per se (Martin & Halverson, 1981). These theories were evident in the studies as they focused attention on particular factors that might mediate the influence of lesbian parenting on children's developmental outcomes (Golombok & Tasker, 1994). Psychoanalytic theories drew attention to the amount of contact children had with their father subsequent to parental separation as moderating the influence of upbringing by a lesbian mother. Social learning theories indicated the significance of how the mother responded to her child's preferences related to gender and psychosexual development. Social cognitive theories highlighted children as active agents in their own social development and the salience of peer group norms rather than parental sources.

Beginning in the early 1980s, studies were published that examined the family relationships of children of separated or divorced lesbian mothers by comparing parent-child relationships in a group of lesbian-led families with a group of families headed by a single heterosexual mother. These studies carefully matched participants' characteristics between groups or statistically controlled for additional variables to rule out factors associated with the experience of parental separation or divorce. The most rigorous of these studies also used multiple measurements and independent reporters together with statistical techniques that calculated the probability of a finding being definitive beyond the particular sample that generated it (e.g., Golombok, Spencer, & Rutter, 1983; Green, Mandel, Hotvedt, Gray, & Smith, 1986).

Studies of this genre concentrated more on the parenting of the lesbian mother than on the parenting of her new same-gender partner and invariably concluded that lesbian mothers were just as warm, caring, and child-focused as heterosexual mothers (Golombok et al., 1983; Green et al., 1986;

Hoeffler, 1981; Kirkpatrick, Smith, & Roy, 1981; Lott-Whitehead & Tully, 1992; Mucklow & Phelan, 1979). Yet irrespective of this, lesbian mothers were more likely than heterosexual mothers to fear the loss of custody of their children (Lyons, 1983). The studies also concurred in finding that children raised by lesbian mothers after heterosexual separation or divorce were just as well adjusted as children raised in other post-divorce households. Specifically, these children showed no more evidence of psychological distress than population norms, generally had good relationships with their peers, displayed typical gender development patterns, and later most identified as heterosexual young adults (for reviews see Anderssen, Amlie, & Ytteroy, 2002; Tasker, 2005).

Knowledge of gay men's parenting has lagged behind knowledge of lesbian parenting post-heterosexual separation or divorce, perhaps in part because it has been difficult to recruit samples of gay men who had shared or full custody of their child after separating from the child's mother. Community surveys of gay fathers in the UK and USA confirmed that gay fathers and their new partners are more likely to have children visiting than they are to have children residing with them (Barrett & Tasker, 2001; Wyers, 1987). Further, unlike studies on lesbian motherhood, studies of gay fathers often have not included children as respondents and so have not systematically assessed developmental outcomes for children (Golombok & Tasker, 2010). Nevertheless, some studies have compared questionnaire data from nonresidential gay fathers and nonresidential heterosexual fathers. For example, Bigner and Jacobsen (1989a, 1989b, 1992) found that the divorced gay fathers they surveyed faced similar challenges to heterosexual divorced fathers in maintaining relationships with their children who lived apart from them. Compared with the heterosexual fathers surveyed, the gay fathers reported that they were more cautious in showing affection to their partner in front of their child, used a more child-centered approach to discipline, and set stricter limits on their child's behavior. One of the few studies to use questionnaire and interview data to compare 13 lesbian

mother- and 10 gay father-headed families tentatively indicated that gay fathers reported less problematic relationships with their ex-spouse and were more likely to encourage their children to play with gender-typed toys than were lesbian mothers (Harris & Turner, 1985; Turner, Scadden, & Harris, 1990). At the same time, this study found that lesbian mothers tended to indicate more possible benefits to their children from their new family environment (Harris & Turner, 1985; Turner et al., 1990).

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### **Hearing the Voices of Lesbian and Gay Parents: Activists and Feminists Critiquing the Frameworks of Debate**

It is important not to neglect the invaluable perspective provided by lesbian mothers and gay fathers themselves on post-heterosexual separation or divorce families, who point to the diversity of family structures and unique advantages and challenges of living lesbian motherhood or gay fatherhood. Many of these voices were acknowledged by feminist activists and scholars and collected together in insightful anthologies. For example, the Boston Lesbian Psychologies Collective published reviews and research to highlight issues such as the diversity of women's sexual identities and experiences (Golden, 1987; Nichols, 1987) and vitally noted how motherhood, sexuality, ethnicity, and other cultural contexts intertwined (Espin, 1987; Hill, 1987). Other authors have stressed how children in these families, by seeing openly gay men and lesbians, would learn about the possibilities of nontraditional lives and appreciate diversity as positive rather than threatening, and so become more accepting of their own individual sexual behavior (Bigner, 1996; Riddle, 1978).

Increasing social tolerance and the push from the gay, lesbian, and feminist liberation movements, together with empirical findings from studies discussed in the previous section of this chapter, were influential in positively changing the context for legal decisions about custody and access post-heterosexual separation (Falk, 1989).

Nonetheless, in legal cases, particular research findings were highlighted that coincided with less accepting social attitudes toward nonheterosexual parenting. Legal cases and social debates in the USA were dominated by nexus test cases (Logue, 2002). Under nexus judgments, parental sexual orientation was considered irrelevant to child custody decisions unless a direct link could be made between the parents' sexual behavior and negative child outcomes. Nexus judgments not only considered particular child outcomes to be paramount, but also viewed these child outcomes in isolation from the context of familial and wider social, cultural, and historical systems that surrounded them. The criteria used in the "best interests of the child" debates focused attention on the child's individual developmental outcomes: That is, the child should not differ from population norms on well-being and peer relationships, lesbian or gay parenting should be equivalent to heterosexual parenting, and continued contact with the child's heterosexual opposite-gender parent should occur. Moreover, it was thought that the child's gender development should be prescribed by his or her biological sex, and that children should grow up to become heterosexual adults. Clarke, Ellis, Peel, and Riggs (2010) have argued that drawing the above distinctions between acceptable and unacceptable outcomes regulated the lives of many lesbian mothers, who felt compelled to present themselves as "good" mothers by downplaying their sexuality, providing male role models for their children, and remaining neutral about their child's sexual identity.

Several authors have contended that engaging with the best interests of the child debate constrained research in the field within the limitations of a liberal humanist agenda, anxious to promote justice by arguing from a "no difference" perspective on sexual orientation (Clarke, 2002; Malone & Cleary, 2002; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). Confusing issues of justice and fair treatment with equal needs, and ignoring cultural or contextual differences, has been a problem in other research fields too, such as (dis)ability (Mulderigg, 2007) and cross-cultural counseling (Pedersen, 2003).

Certainly the research questions investigated in the first wave of studies were dominated by empirically investigating whether children brought up by lesbian mothers were disadvantaged; for example, most studies measured only the presence or absence of psychological distress (for a review see Tasker, 2005) with only two published studies measuring more positive indices such as self-esteem (Gershon, Tschann, & Jemerin, 1999; Huggins, 1989). Nevertheless this research opened up areas for further exploration; the two-tailed hypotheses used not only tested for disadvantage but also could suggest advantage. Further, in some studies, multivariate within-group analyses of lesbian- or gay-parented families revealed a more nuanced picture. For example, the studies by Huggins (1989) and Gershon et al. (1999) indicated evidence for a bimodal distribution of self-esteem scores in the small samples of adolescents from the post-heterosexual separated or divorced lesbian mother families they recruited. Namely, self-esteem scores were generally higher than control group scores for children who felt positively about their mother's lesbian identity (Huggins, 1989) and adolescents who perceived little stigma associated with having a lesbian mother (Gershon et al., 1999).

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### **Coming Out: Sociologists and Psychotherapists Delineate Identity Pathways and Resources**

In contrast to the controlled quasi-experimental studies focused on child outcome measures described previously, other empirical papers generally authored by those trained in sociology, psychotherapy, or social work focused on the lived experiences of lesbian mothers and gay fathers themselves. Authors described the motivations for forming and exiting heterosexual relationships and the process of coming out as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. Research in this tradition not only outlined the challenges experienced by lesbian and gay parents but also gave insight into the resources that parents drew upon and the resilience of family members.

These studies produced rich qualitative data outlining how women and men who identified as lesbian or gay had become parents through a heterosexual relationship. Findings from these investigations suggested that lesbian and gay parents often entered into a heterosexual relationship for a wide variety of reasons. Some women and men recalled earlier feelings of same-gender attraction, but in addition experienced intense interpersonal pressure to marry from an opposite-gender partner (Buntzly, 1993; Dunne, 2001) or their family of origin (Miller, 1979). Others felt the weight of societal expectations upon them to marry (Buntzly, 1993; Pearcey, 2005; Wyers, 1987) or desired the cultural status associated with marriage and parenthood (Bigner & Jacobsen, 1989a). Some reported thinking that a lesbian or gay identity was incompatible with parenthood or said they could not see a reflection of themselves in the negative stereotypes of lesbians or gay men they had encountered (Dunne, 2001). Several had hoped that marriage would move their sexual desires away from others of the same gender (Dunne, 2001; Ross, 1990; Wyers, 1987). Others had very little or no awareness of sexual interest in the same gender until after marriage (Bozett, 1981a; Coleman, 1990; Miller, 1979). Some cited more positive reasons for their heterosexual relationship, such as the desire to have children (Wyers, 1987) or a genuine affection for their partner (Coleman, 1990; Dunne, 2001; Miller, 1979; Ross, 1990; Wyers, 1987).

While authors such as Coleman (1990) have noted the absence of literature on bisexual and lesbian women "coming out" in heterosexual marriages, retrospective studies by sociologists Bozett (1981a, 1981b) and Miller (1978, 1979) have outlined the multifaceted identity careers of gay fathers. Miller (1978) suggested that fathers who were in the process of identifying as gay men increasingly found heterosexual marriage to be a difficult commitment to sustain; the turning point for many gay fathers often hinged on the development of an ongoing intimate relationship with another man. In Miller's terminology, men in this situation were at various stages in moving from seeing themselves as a *trade husband* (a man who opportunistically had sexual experiences with men),

a *homosexual husband* (a man who had begun to acknowledge a nonheterosexual identity only to himself), a *gay husband* (a man who had acknowledged a gay identity to himself and to key others, including his wife), and a *faggot husband* (a man who had acknowledged his identity as an out gay father with pride and maintained an ongoing relationship with his children). Other authors have indicated that some opposite-gender couples in mixed orientation marriages may stay together many years, for instance by not responding to or avoiding external pressures to split up, enhancing the companionate nature of their own relationship, and finding kin and friends who will sustain their family rather than undermine it (Buxton, 2005).

A variety of experiences of coming out to their children were noted by the gay fathers in Benson, Silverstein, and Auerbach's (2005) qualitative study of 25 gay fathers. Some of the gay fathers described coming out as a transformative experience that increased honesty and closeness in their relationships generally. Other fathers decided not to disclose to their family because they worried about problems that disclosure might bring, or felt obligated to their wife or other family members not to tell on the marriage. Bozett (1981a) concluded that gay fathers experienced a fear of rejection in trying to conjoin both their identities as a separated or divorced father and as a gay man. Bozett argued that disclosure to others who affirmed both identities supported the gay father's own self-acceptance. Long-term individual psychotherapy with gay fathers has suggested that the emotional distress surrounding the coming out process can last for several years (Bigner, 1996).

Papers describing the resilience of lesbian-mother families and gay-father families also outlined the reasoning, strengths, and resources that family members drew upon. On the one hand, reports by Hall (1978) and Lewis (1980) on lesbian motherhood have suggested that some of the difficulties that children experienced in accepting their mother's new female partner were linked to resolving their feelings about the ending of their mother's and father's relationship. The 10 gay fathers interviewed by

Turner et al. (1990) also thought that any distress or problems their children had were more connected to parental separation or divorce than adjusting to having a gay parent. On the other hand, Lewis (1980) pointed out how some of the 21 children with lesbian mothers whom she interviewed did not feel ambivalent about their mother and in fact were proud of her for "standing up for what she believed" (p. 203) and permitting them also to break with conventional gender roles if they desired.

The issues faced by lesbian- or gay-parented families post-heterosexual separation or divorce were sometimes similar to those faced in families led by heterosexual parents post-separation or divorce, but also crucially different because of social stigma. Particular studies in the social work tradition gave insights into the fears expressed by adolescent sons and daughters that they would be judged and possibly rejected by their peers at school because of having a lesbian mother (Lewis, 1980; O'Connell, 1993) or a gay father (Bozett, 1987b). From her own experience running a psychotherapy clinic, Pennington (1987) highlighted that the most serious challenges faced by children and lesbian mothers were how to manage the heterosexism and homophobia they encountered in their daily lives at school, at work, and in their neighborhoods. Pennington stressed that the constraint and secrecy imposed by ignorance and prejudice outside the family could engender mistrust in family relationships.

Other authors have emphasized how isolating the experience of lesbian parenthood can be. Crawford (1987) found that lesbian mothers experienced separation from the social world of (presumed heterosexual) motherhood, while as mothers with children from heterosexual relationships their lesbian identity was sometimes doubted by lesbians without children. Other studies analyzing data from large community surveys of lesbian and bisexual women or gay men have found that parents who had children before identifying as lesbian, bisexual, or gay were significantly older than their peers when they first questioned their sexuality, had their first same-gender sexual experience, or first

talked to someone about their sexual identity (Henehan, Rothblum, Solomon, & Balsam, 2007; Morris, Balsam, & Rothblum, 2002). Using the concept of a social clock highlighted by life course theorists (Bengtson & Allen, 1993), the findings of these studies suggest that adjustment to membership of a lesbian or gay community could be particularly challenging for lesbian mothers or gay fathers who had children before coming out, since they are going through developmental milestones “off-time” compared with lesbian or gay peers.

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### **Acknowledging New Partners: Employing Stepfamily Dynamics to Investigate Parenting Post-Heterosexual Separation or Divorce**

One unresolved issue that stood out in many early studies of lesbian and gay parenting post-heterosexual separation or divorce was the seeming absence of a same-gender partner; the lesbian or gay parent may be partnered but rarely did partners appear in studies focused on lesbian and gay parents. In part the specific research focus on children and biological parenting can be held culpable; nevertheless, this absence should be contextualized alongside more general societal pressures that have conspired to keep partners as “invisible members” of newly formed post-heterosexual divorce families. For instance, a household is more visibly headed by a lesbian or gay parent if a same-gender partner cohabits, and many jurisdictions placed residence or access restrictions on a lesbian or gay parent if the partner was present (Logue, 2002). Further, if a partner became involved in parenting, families faced a variety of issues to resolve: What roles would the partner take on in the family? And how would she or he be known—as a co-parent, a stepparent, or a special family “friend?” Authors also have come up against the problem of terminology; as Nelson (1996) has discussed, no term is problem free. In this review I have followed Nelson and used stepparent as the literal term to denote the married, cohabiting, or non-cohabiting partner of their biological parent.

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### **Lesbian and Gay Stepparented Families: Archetypal Incomplete Institutions and Families of Choice?**

Two theoretical advances in particular have inspired research on lesbian and gay stepparented families. First, Cherlin (1978) proposed the sociological concept of the incomplete institution to describe stepfamily relationships, and later identified stepfamily relationships, rising rates of cohabitation, and the advent of same-sex marriage and civil partnerships as key aspects in the weakening of social norms around marriage per se (Cherlin, 2004). Second, in her anthropological research on lesbians and gay men’s conceptualization of family, Weston (1991) crucially expanded the concept of kinship networks to consider fluidity and meaning, not just biological and marital ties. Both theoretical concepts have been employed to investigate the internal and external social relationships of lesbian and gay stepparented families.

The stepfamily led by a same-gender couple has been described as an archetypal example of an incomplete institution (Erera & Fredricksen, 1999; Hall & Kitson, 2000; Hequembourg, 2004). As participants in an incomplete institution, same-gender stepfamily members encounter an absence of terminology for family relationships and the lack of legal or public acknowledgement of their family relationships. Conceptualizing the same-gender couple stepfamily as an example of an incomplete institution has highlighted the lack of definition and recognition surrounding same-gender stepfamily membership as a separate issue, distinct from, albeit connected with, prejudice against lesbian and gay parents. Crawford (1987) has described how the lack of language and cultural rites of passage can serve to work against and render invisible otherwise loving family relationships. Crawford further describes how invalidation can foster anxiety and insecurity leading to secrecy on the part of families. This invalidation and secrecy may in turn render the family being vulnerable to and unable to resist outside intrusion, for example, by ex-husbands or family of origin members feeling that they should

have prior claim on the children. Finding terms to describe the relationship or role between a parent's new partner and the parent's child is complex. Ainslie and Feltey (1991) have described how no simple term described the variation in parenting roles that lesbian mothers ascribed to their partner and how partnership status often went unmarked or lacked recognition. While acknowledging the difficulties that absence of terminology presented, Ainslie and Feltey paradoxically noted that the absence of terminology also could free relationships from cultural assumptions, thus enabling these relationships to develop as family members deemed appropriate. Hequembourg's (2004) study also indicated that while lesbian-led stepfamilies can experience internal dynamics that have much in common with those reported within heterosexual stepfamilies, lesbian-led stepfamilies additionally encounter incomprehension and prejudice during their external interactions (e.g., with schools, the law) because their incompletely institutionalized position eluded recognition.

Ethnographic research by Weston (1991) detailing kinship networks first headlined the importance of nonbiological kin in "families we choose," emphasizing the importance of current partners, ex-partners, and those who are more than good friends in providing socioemotional, practical, and financial support for lesbians and gay men. Supportive networks, including family of choice as well as traditional kin, have been seen as particularly important for lesbian- and gay-parented families formed post-heterosexual separation, in dealing with the implications of both stigmatization and incomplete institutionalization. For example, Oswald (2002) has suggested two main family-supporting strategies employed in kin networks that center on lesbians and gay men: choosing supportive kin and selectively disclosing kin to others outside the family circle (intentionality); and using political action, such as changing surnames and legal deeds, to recognize kinship relationships (redefinition). Nevertheless two small qualitative studies that have explored kinship networks have yielded contradictory findings. Ainslie and Feltey (1991) highlighted

how lesbian feminist mothers parenting post-heterosexual separation described the importance of family of choice relationships that crucially helped out at critical points when usual household resources were stretched. In contrast, Gabb (2004), in her UK study of 13 post-heterosexual separation or divorce lesbian-led middle- and working-class families, reported that "'friends as family' neither represented the reality of their kinship networks nor was an ideal to which they aspired" (p. 169).

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### Same-Gender Stepparented Families: Similarities

Some authors have delineated the similarities of gay- and lesbian-led stepfamilies with stepfamilies led by heterosexual couples. Children in both types of stepfamilies have more of an emotional tie to their parent than their stepparent; they also tend to have a closer tie to their nonresident parent than their stepparent (Baptiste, 1987; Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Current-Juretschko and Bigner (2005) argued that the descriptions of stepfather roles and daily stepfamily life given by five gay stepparents living with their partner's biological children differed little from those provided by heterosexual stepfathers in other studies of stepfamily life.

Certainly there are structural similarities between same-gender couple and opposite-gender couple stepfamilies. First, the relational building block from which the stepfamily has taken shape is the relationship between parent and child that pre-dates that of parent and stepparent. Second, the stepfamily will have to consider the relationship of the parent's ex-partner to the child and manage the implications of this in family life. Third, separation and re-partnership have important implications for financial resources that go into maintaining a household; while some family members may gain resources as a result of household transitions most will lose, and some badly. Aspects of these three dynamics can be seen as having influence on stepfamily life in the studies



detailed below. Nevertheless the particular implications of stepfamily dynamics depend on whether children are not resident or resident full or part-time and crucially are moderated by gender.

Other studies of gay fathers have highlighted the role that a new partnership can play in satisfaction with family life. For example, the British Gay and Bisexual Parenting Survey (GBPS) of 101 fathers, many of whom were parenting non-resident children from a previous heterosexual partnership, compared self-report ratings given by single gay fathers with ratings from gay fathers who had a male partner (Barrett & Tasker, 2001). This survey found that men with partners, particularly those who were cohabiting, rated themselves as more successful than single gay fathers at managing common household and parenting challenges. In another study of 48 families, the factor that was associated most with high levels of satisfaction with family life (as rated by gay fathers, male partners, and children) was the extent to which a new male partner had been integrated into family life (Crosbie-Burnett & Helmbrecht, 1993).

In contrast to the 23 post-heterosexual separation or divorce lesbian and gay parents in her sample, Lynch (2004a) reported that most of their lesbian and gay partners had not been involved in parenting prior to commencing that particular relationship; thus, how to be a stepparent to their new partner's child was a major question for them. Becoming a parent to a partner's child has been highlighted as a challenging issue faced by stepparents in other studies too, particularly in counterpoint to the issues faced by lesbian mothers in letting another "mother" her child (Ainslie & Feltey, 1991; Baptiste, 1987; Hall, 1978; Nelson, 1996).

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### Same-Gender Stepparented Families: Differences

While there are undoubtedly some similarities between same-gender and opposite-gender partnership stepfamilies in terms of stepfamily

dynamics, there are important differences in terms of the legal recognition of the stepparent. Second-parent adoptions have been used in many states in the USA to give legal recognition to the stepparent's relationship with the child. However, second-parent adoption orders (which allow the stepparent to take parental responsibility for legal decisions for the child) are more commonly registered for resident heterosexual stepparents than lesbian or gay stepparents (Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Hequembourg & Farrell, 1999). Second-parent adoptions can be fraught with legal complications because state adoption laws generally require that the child's nonresident genetic parent has legally relinquished his or her parenthood before a second-parent adoption (as yet most jurisdictions refuse to allow a child having more than two legal parents and many require the stepparent to be married to the child's biological parent).

Studies by developmentalists have investigated how family life (including stepparent-child relationships) developed for children in lesbian parent-led families post-heterosexual separation or divorce. For example, most of the children in both groups of separated or divorced lesbian mothers and heterosexual mothers who were interviewed by Golombok and colleagues in the 1970s (Golombok et al., 1983) were reinterviewed in early adulthood, by which time over 80% of the mothers in both groups had cohabited with a new partner (Tasker & Golombok, 1995, 1997). Sons and daughters described a variety of different ways in which their mothers' female partners fit into family life in these lesbian stepparent families: sometimes female partners took on a major role in child care and were described as a second mother, while in other cases the young person described their mother's partner as more like a big sister, or an important family friend. The sons and daughters of lesbian mothers generally depicted their mother's female partner as integrating with existing family relationships rather than dividing them, whereas some of the young people with re-partnered heterosexual mothers regarded their stepfather with some hostility or resented him trying to take on a

father's role. Perhaps women partnering with women with children from a prior heterosexual relationship "do stepparenting" differently than men partnering with women with children.

There are further crucial differences between same-gender and opposite-gender partnership stepfamilies in the degree of stigmatization that family members likely encounter. From his findings from a focus group study of six partnered lesbian mothers, Berger (1998a, 1998b) argued that lesbian stepfamilies are vulnerable to triple stigmatization (a) by mainstream society for identifying as lesbians, (b) for stepfamily membership, and (c) by the lesbian and gay community for being involved in parenting. Prejudice by nonparenting lesbians and gay men potentially could cause particular distress for lesbian and gay parents and their partners, because it creates distance between them and a source of community support.

Coming out as a same-gender couple-headed stepfamily can present an important challenge for parents and stepparents. Most of the 23 parents in Lynch's (2004b) study had gone simultaneously through the processes of self-identifying as lesbian or gay, coming out to others, dealing with stigma, separating from their spouses, and beginning stepfamily relationships. In the same study, many of the lesbian or gay partners described entry into stepfamily life as a second coming out process with different parameters and implications from their earlier disclosures because they had to make decisions as a family (Lynch, 2004a). Dealing with the possibility of their children experiencing prejudice from peers was of paramount importance in most lesbian and gay stepparenting families: Both parents and stepparents often held back disclosure to avoid prejudice despite the difficulties this posed for their couple relationship (Lynch & Murray, 2000). Changes in household composition post-heterosexual separation also may make a lesbian- or gay-parented family more visible and so more vulnerable to prejudice (Van Dam, 2004). Studies with gay fathers have pointed to the compromises that they made in exercising boundary control to compartmentalize their lives. For example, some of the 14 fathers interviewed by Bozett (1987a)

described hiding any possible gay signifiers to avoid unwanted disclosure to their children's friends. The ongoing problem of social stigma and its impact on daily family life has been underscored by Robitaille and Saint-Jacques (2009) in their qualitative study of 11 sons' and daughters' experiences growing up in post-heterosexual separation or divorce lesbian and gay stepparented families.

Families led by lesbians or gay men where one or both of the same-gender partners had children from a previous heterosexual relationship seem to "do" family not only in different ways to heterosexual stepfamilies but also in different ways than same-gender couples who had or adopted children together (Perlesz et al., 2006). Planned gay or lesbian parenthood allows couples to plan and organize their parenting together in a process that often begins long before a child's arrival. Forming a same-gender relationship when a partner, or both partners, already have a child is complicated by preexisting family relationships including ex-partners and possibly extended family members; this complication may be particularly difficult if there has been a high level of conflict between ex-partners.

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## New Trends and Future Directions

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, a number of scholars have interrogated the field of lesbian and gay parenting. Some researchers have highlighted the importance of continuing to conduct outcome-based research, but also pointed to ways to develop the rigor of quantitative research (Goldberg, 2010; Tasker & Patterson, 2007). Other authors have suggested a more radical overhaul of the field to deploy social constructionist, queer theory, and psychoanalytic paradigms to consider the different social realities experienced by children growing up with LGBT parents (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010; Clarke et al., 2010; Malone & Cleary, 2002; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). As I review below, these ideas all have exciting, and sometimes competing, implications for the field, some of which are already beginning to be taken up by researchers.

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## Improving Definition and Measurement in Quantitative Research

Over the last decade, there have been important steps in both sampling and measurement that have improved the quality of quantitative outcome based research (for reviews see Goldberg, 2010; Tasker & Patterson, 2007). Most empirical studies have sampled mainly White and middle-class self-selected samples of lesbian mothers. Thus, understanding of gay-father families, bisexual-parented families, and the impact of ethnicity and social class on LGB family life still lags far behind (Golombok & Tasker, 2010; Tasker & Patterson, 2007).

Recruiting lesbian-mother and gay-father families through national data sets has been a considerable step forward in our knowledge of the demographics of lesbian and gay parenting. Nevertheless, using national data sets may not necessarily address the issue of how representative those surveyed are of families with a lesbian or gay parent, since many such families slip through the net of traditional survey questions (see Chap. 22). In particular, the lack of clear criteria for defining lesbian or gay parenthood has presented a serious problem. While the sons and daughters of lesbian and gay parents have been extensively questioned about their sexual orientations, most studies have taken self-identification as a lesbian or gay parent to be the criterion for inclusion in the survey study group (Tasker & Patterson, 2007). The problem of self-identification is compounded further as many of the comparative studies reviewed above also relied on the presumption that none of the members of the heterosexual parent comparison groups had ever experienced same-gender attractions or relationships. The reluctance of epidemiological researchers to ask the general public questions about sexual orientation has meant that recent research studies benefiting from nationally representative samples have had to compromise on specificity and rely instead on extensive data checking to deduce that children in the study group were indeed being raised in a lesbian-led

family (Wainright & Patterson, 2006; Wainright, Russell, & Patterson, 2004).

Another issue of sampling definition is ensuring that researchers routinely collect adequate data on different pathways to parenthood. Regrettably, there are no methods of distinguishing between planned or post-heterosexual separation or divorced lesbian- or gay-parented families in the Add Health data set used by Wainright et al. (2004) and Wainright and Patterson (2006). Small-sample qualitative studies that can detail route to parenthood and family relationships have raised intriguing questions in the field, but these studies may produce contradictory findings. For example, earlier in this chapter I noted differences between the findings reported by Ainslie and Feltey (1991) and Gabb (2004) with regard to the importance of family of choice kinship networks between couples parenting in post-heterosexual separation lesbian-led stepfamilies. Without properly controlled quantitative comparison studies it is not possible to ascertain the strength of different associations in the data and discover whether or not findings constitute a predictable, or indeed a general, pattern.

Measurement reliability, validity, and comparability across different studies have also remained an issue for quantitative studies, and how to pool findings across studies has been a challenge for meta-analytic and narrative reviews alike (Crowl, Ahn, & Baker, 2008; Tasker & Patterson, 2007). Further, only a few studies gather and compare data from multiple family members, use independent observers blind to family type, and collect prospective data to attempt to discern causal pathways (Tasker, 2005). New models of association both between and within different types of families await to be discerned in future quantitative research employing rigorous measurement standards.

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## Deconstructing and Contextualizing Lesbian and Gay Parenting

Social constructionist ideas have emphasized the crucial importance of considering the particular intersections of demographic characteristics, to

take into account the complexities of cultural context in creating a diversity of subject positions and subjective experiences. Sexuality has been underinvestigated in gender studies and class analysis (Taylor, 2011) while studies of race and ethnicity have considered mostly men who are presumed to be heterosexual (Glenn, 2000). While queer theoretical approaches have placed diversity and fluidity in the foreground, they have often sidelined the gender- and class-based materiality of sexuality (Jackson, 2011). These complex intersections challenge us to move beyond additive accounting of advantage versus disadvantage to consider group-, process-, and system-centered understandings of interactions (Choo & Ferree, 2010).

Future research should take into account the complex intersections of gender, sexuality, (dis)abilities, racial or ethnic differences, and routes to parenthood in creating particular patterns of parenting in families led by LGBT parents. U.S. census data have revealed that African-American and Hispanic women and men in same-gender couples are, respectively, two and three times more likely than White Americans to be bringing up children (Gates, 2008) yet samples recruited to research same-sex parenting have not reflected these proportions (see Chap. 9). Without representative sampling we do not know the cultural parameters of parenting. For example, previous research on lesbian couples who had planned lesbian parenthood together found that women aspired to and attained a feminism-inspired egalitarian division of child care and household labor (Patterson, 1995; Sullivan, 2004). However, this pattern may be particular to the mainly White, middle-class couples engaged in planned lesbian parenthood. Moore (2008) used a mixed methods approach to collect data on household decision making of Black lesbian couples where one partner was the mother of a child from a previous heterosexual relationship. Both partners contributed financially to the household; however, biological mothers earned less than their partner, did more of the household work, and exercised more authority over bringing up the children and family finances. Lesbian mothers mainly attributed their authority to their feelings of responsibility for

their children and the importance of preserving their economic independence; both of these positions could be linked to African-American women's cultural heritage. Nonetheless findings from Hare and Richards's (1993) and Gabb's (2004) qualitative studies have indicated that this pattern may also pertain to White lesbian mothers parenting post-heterosexual separation where the custodial lesbian mother's relationship remained central to her child's life in contrast to the more peripheral role played by her partner in parenting.

An exciting new crossover into the field has been from clinicians bringing formulations derived from social constructionism and systemic practice with families into research on lesbian and gay parenting (Tasker & Malley, 2012). For example, previous authors had considered coming out as a step toward authenticity for the gay or lesbian parent (e.g., Dunne, 1987). In contrast, Lynch and Murray (2000), working from a family systems perspective, point out that coming out decisions raise other considerations for lesbian and gay parents bringing up children from previous heterosexual relationships as they consider the multiple systems that contextualize their lives. Lynch and Murray crucially viewed coming out not as an individual parental decision but a fluid family process centered around the child's needs and adapted to circumstances. Other researchers have considered multiple systemic perspectives in qualitative analyses of individual interviews with young adult sons and daughters of separated or divorced gay fathers to explore how young persons' awareness of their father's sexual identity has been contextualized by the ending of their mother and father's marriage and their awareness of their father's same-gender partnerships. Young adults' own tales of coming out to others about their father were influenced both by variations in their feelings about their father and consideration of the potential responses of different audiences (Tasker, Barrett, & De Simone, 2010).

Perlesz et al. (2006) have drawn on a systemic perspective, together with social constructionist ideas regarding the ability of language to empower and disempower (Shotter, 1993), in their work. They interviewed members of 25 different

lesbian-led family networks to explore the complexities of coming out issues for children, lesbian couples, and extended family members. For example, Brown and Perlesz (2007) counted 45 different terms used to describe the lesbian parent who has not given birth to some or all of her children—depending on the term used and linguistic context, her parenting role was either placed in the foreground, sidelined, or disappeared.

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### **Queering the Field and Speaking the Unspoken**

Other authors have made intriguing links between queer theory and Lacanian psychoanalytic thinking to argue that the exclusionary binary of gay/lesbian versus heterosexual paralyzes research on lesbian-led families, such that if the family is deemed to be “acceptable” then sexual signifiers are absented (Malone & Cleary, 2002). Malone and Cleary (2002) suggested that researchers “carefully scrutinize the meanings of families as well as the unconscious and psychological dimensions of the family as a vehicle for intergenerational perpetuation” (p. 273). Without this scrutiny, lesbian-led families appear to fulfill the fantasy of the perfect, equal, companionate couple with no differences in power, living an ideal that is only seen to be troubled by homophobia. Malone and Cleary have argued that other power differentials exist, for example, a power differential between an established identity of motherhood and the otherness that challenges it. It is this power differential that may be particularly pertinent to same-gender couple stepfamilies formed after post-heterosexual separation when the child’s relationship with the parent pre-dates the partnership and previously heterosexual styled parenting is challenged by the arrival of new expectations.

One example of work that has been enlivened by new paradigms of social constructionism and queer theory has been scholarship that examines the implications of queer parenting for queering the gender and sexual development of their children. Studies have suggested that some adult offspring engaged in a more open-minded consideration of

their own psychosexual development, while others reported current or previous worries that their own or a partner’s sexual identity might unpredictably change (Goldberg, 2007; Tasker & Golombok, 1997). Both types of stance may be seen at present as querying, but not necessarily queering (Lev, 2010), while some offspring of lesbian or gay parents have intentionally embraced a queer perspective on their own lives (Kuvallanka & Goldberg, 2009) the majority identify as heterosexual (Goldberg, 2007; Tasker & Golombok, 1997).

Interesting questions remain as to how parental sexual orientation may link into children’s psychosexual development. First, the large majority of adult sons and daughters studied to date spent at least some of their childhood growing up in the matrimonial home with two ostensibly heterosexual parents before either their mother and/or father began to identify as lesbian or gay. Perhaps we see a particular linkage between the lesbian or gay parent’s transitioned sexual identification and their children’s questioning, which may or may not be manifest in the psychosexual developmental pathways of children brought up within planned gay or lesbian-led families.

Second, many members of the first wave of out lesbian mothers identified their sexual identity through their engagement with the feminist movements of the 1970s and 1980s. Studies intentionally sampled feminist lesbian mothers (e.g., Ainslie & Feltey, 1991) or had a noticeable group of participants who clearly identified with feminist ideas (e.g., Harris & Turner, 1985; Hoeffler, 1981). For example, some of the lesbian mothers in Hoeffler’s (1981) study clearly avoided promoting gender stereotypes in their nominations of the toys they preferred for their children; however, no differences were evident in the gender-typical behavior and toy choices of the children of lesbian mothers and the comparison group of children of heterosexual single mothers. Perhaps any influences from the attitudes conveyed by feminist mothers remain latent until adolescence or adulthood when associations emerge in a more open-minded consideration of psychosexual development particularly among daughters (Tasker & Golombok, 1997).

Queer theory may provide a particularly useful lens through which to explore how lesbian and gay parents who came out of (or indeed remained in) opposite-gender relationships critique and position their own sexuality. As noted earlier, researchers have not specifically explored parental self-identification of sexual orientation yet studies have suggested a wide variety of different paths to heterosexual parenthood among lesbian and gay parents who had children prior to coming out. The heterosexual relationships recorded in studies to date seem to encompass a vast range of very different experiences from exploitative or abusive encounters, an enjoyable sampling of an opposite-gender relationship, or a long-term committed relationship that partners leave and grieve. Other fields of research have pointed to the particular fluidity of women's sexual identification (Diamond, 2008; Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995; Peplau & Garnets, 2000). What difference does transitioned sexual orientation make to parenting? Research is yet to explore this question specifically with LGBT parents themselves.

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## Conclusion

On the one hand, much of our knowledge of LGBT parenting is based on studies of lesbian and gay parents who had their children in previous heterosexual relationships. On the other hand, our knowledge of same-gender parenting post-separation or divorce remains partial with few studies addressing gay fatherhood, limited consideration of research questions other than those focused on developmental outcomes for children, and little investigation of the intersection of parental sexual orientation with cultural variation and the plurality of identity positions that LGBT parents may occupy over time. The research field awaits consideration of how transitioned lesbian and gay parenting post-heterosexual separation or divorce may differ from parenting planned by LGBT parents. Future research studies will need to conceptualize diversity and fluidity in parental sexual orientation and consider contextual variation in parenthood utilizing a variety of different

theoretical frameworks and research methodologies to collect quantitative and qualitative data.

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