

The mamas and the papas: the invisible diversity of families with same-sex parents in the United States

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This literature review is intended for administrators, educators, and counselors to generate discussion and awareness of the issues facing families with same-sex parents in the United States, a demographic that is rapidly growing and needing service and attention from its communities. To provide educators with background into how these families are formed, research exploring the emotional and legal dynamics of conception and adoption is included. In the context of school settings, disclosure of family structure to teachers and peers is discussed, with consideration for the effects of homophobia and heterosexism. Speaking to a highly contested issue, the literature indicates that children raised by same-sex parents are not disadvantaged compared with their peers raised in households headed by heterosexual parents. In fact, more than biological or legal status, research points to the quality of relationships with caregivers as the greatest predictor of outcomes in a child's development. While the research has been confounded by bias and limited demographics, the needs of this population and the discrimination it experiences appear to be minimized by observers and the families themselves, a factor that may compromise existing research and requires further study. With the gay population progressively becoming more visible, a body of research is slowly emerging that includes children born to and raised by established same-sex couples. This review focuses primarily on research from the United States but the issues presented are increasingly relevant internationally. As these children and their parents join school communities, it is vital for administrators, educators, and counselors to create curricula with sensitivity to the issues facing this new generation of families, and to actively participate as collaborators in safety, respect, and understanding within the school environment and in connection with parents.

Introduction

With the changing face of the traditional family, the issues facing families with same-sex parents are relevant to education, policy-making, clinical work, and the study of social development. A growing body of research reflects the global impact of this population, with studies conducted in countries such as Belgium on children's experience and function in lesbian families (Vanfraussen, Ponjaert-Kristoffersen, and Brewaeys 2002, 2003), the Netherlands on minority stress in lesbian families (Bos, Van Balen, and Van Den Boom 2004a, 2004b), Scandinavia on children with lesbian and gay parents (Anderssen, Amlie, and Ytteroy 2002), and, particularly, the United Kingdom on issues such as bullying, decision-making, and unique longitudinal dynamics facing these families (Clarke, Kitzinger, and Potter, 2004; Mooney-Somers and Golombok 2000; Golombok and Tasker 1996; Touroni and Coyle 2002). This review will focus primarily on research from the United States where, according to the US Census Bureau (2000), eight to ten million children are

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being raised in households headed by gay parents. Additionally, 49% of the self-identified gay respondents expressed a desire to become parents, with 8% already holding parent or legal guardian status and 11% already living with children. Furthermore, the 2000 Census showed 33% of cohabitating females and 22% of cohabitating males had minors living in their homes (US Census Bureau 2000). Such statistics suggest that a growing number of gays and lesbians are pursuing their right to be parents, for which they will require corresponding social and legal support. This means an increased presence of these families in the school systems, requiring educators to be prepared to recognize, include and support them. As such, administrators, teachers, and school counselors must raise their awareness of the concerns facing gay couples with, or desiring of, children. Because these couples grapple with the options of conception and adoption when starting a family, legal questions come into play, specifically which parent or parents have legal and physical custody, often centering on whether children are served as well by homosexual parents as by heterosexual parents (Herek 2006). However, regardless of legal and custodial outcomes, families with same-sex parents are joining the community and the schools.

The US Department of Education (1996) defined parents and families as ‘all of the various configurations of primary caregiving units to which children belong.’ Further, the National Education Goals Panel, an intergovernmental body of officials serving to aid in the improvement of education in the United States, mandated that ‘schools will promote parental involvement and participation’ (1999, 1). In addition, the American Psychological Association opposes any discrimination of parenting rights based on sexual orientation, and supports the right of same-sex parents to raise children (Paige 2005). These tenets of inclusion for families with same-sex parents suggest that schools, counseling centers, and other community resources are mandated to support this growing population. Yet, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation (2001), 47% of respondents in a random sample in the United States believed that same-sex couples should not be allowed to adopt children, suggesting that the benefits of these directives may not yet apply to all families. However, as of January 2004, Florida was the only state that actually banned homosexuals from adopting children, a statute currently being challenged in federal court (National Center for Lesbian Rights [NCLR] 2000)¹. With the legal rights of gay couples and their children called into question, the research serves to demonstrate whether or not having gay parents or the stigma of gay parents is detrimental to a child’s development.

According to Casper, Schultz, and Wickens (1992), families with same-sex parents are conflicted by a desire to live their lives openly and an intense anxiety and fear surrounding the decision to disclose their family structure to their schools. In today’s school environment, teachers are probably left to their own resources to understand the issues facing these unique families. As such, this review provides a look at the literature on the intricacies involved in forming a family headed by same-sex parents, including conception and adoption concerns; the involvement of these families in the school system; the role of homophobia, heterosexism, gender identity, and sexual orientation in the lives of these family members; and the emotional and developmental issues of children with same-sex parents versus those with heterosexual parents. In addition to offering insight to educators and counselors working with families with same-sex parents, these studies may extend empirical

support to such families seeking legal status. While the literature overwhelmingly demonstrates that same-sex parents can provide a supportive and healthy environment as much as their heterosexual counterparts, the research is limited by small samples, narrow demographics and the bias of reporting to serve or change the existing laws. Recommendations include how future research might be better served by reaching out to different ethnic and socioeconomic strata, including more gay fathers, incorporating more input from the children, considering the impact of minimization of this demographic, and increasing safety, support, and nurturance for families with same-sex parents in schools and communities.

Definition of terms

There are several concepts that may be useful to identify before exploring these issues, beginning with a clear understanding of heterosexism and homophobia as presented in this literature. Pachankis and Goldfried defined homophobia as 'hostility and prejudice' towards gays and lesbians (2004, 228). This is distinguished from the less intentional bias of heterosexism, perhaps more accurately named 'heterocentrism,' which suggests a failure by mainstream culture to account for diverse sexual orientation (Pachankis and Goldfried 2004). Furthermore, 'internalized homophobia,' which Pachankis and Goldfried (2004) identified as the manifested shame in an individual struggling with gay identity issues, may apply to children with same-sex parents. Whether or not they identify as gay themselves, these children may be subject to the same intentional or unintentional discrimination associated with their parents' gay minority status. Complicating matters is the invisible nature of the minority status that children with same-sex parents face.

A counterpart to internalized homophobia, 'gender role strain,' refers to the conflict between the existing cultural norm for gender roles and an emerging paradigm that offers non-traditional functions (Pleck 1995). Accordingly, parenting becomes 'degendered,' which Schacher (2002) described as the process by which parental responsibilities are determined by familial democracy, rather than the mandates of the dominant cultural discourse.

It may also be helpful to understand how to conceive of non-biological or 'social parents' when working with these families. Second-parent adoption is a term created by Delaney (1991) to describe same-sex partners of legal parents seeking state recognition of their relationships with their partners' children, which will entitle them to participate in legal decisions regarding the children. Regardless of legal status, Dalton and Bielby (2000) contend that social parents must construct their roles as caregivers, sometimes without social precedent, which may be a helpful consideration for educators looking to include co-parents in a child's school experience.

Forming families

According to Fox (2007), in order to welcome and include families with same-sex parents into their communities, it is not enough for educators and counselors to make changes to daily practices; they must also have an understanding of the issues facing these families, beginning with how they are formed legally and biologically. To begin, the literature indicates that while at one time children with gay parents may have been the product of a gay parent's heterosexual relationship prior to

'coming out' as homosexual, planned parenting is on the rise among gay couples in the context of established relationships (Perrin 2002). Current research examines conception and adoption choices and what it means to be a non-biological gay parent. For example, gay men looking to become fathers can choose between adoption and surrogacy or biological unions with women (Silverstein and Auerbach 2002). Gay men opting for conception can arrange for a surrogate mother or can participate as donors, with varying levels of co-parent involvement (Perrin 2002). Similarly, lesbians choosing conception can decide between anonymous or known donors. In their study of 18 lesbian parents, Touroni and Coyle (2002) found this issue raised questions about children knowing the identity of their biological fathers and having relationships with them. As a result, more lesbian couples opted for a known donor, which they thought afforded them more control over the conception process and the opportunity to have the father involved in the child's life (Touroni and Coyle 2002).

If opting for conception, lesbian couples must determine which woman will bear the child – which introduces questions around being a biological parent as opposed to a social parent. Touroni and Coyle (2002) found that lesbian couples were concerned about whether a child would bond with the social parent as much as the biological parent. Couples in this study worried that the child might not recognize the parental status of his or her non-biological mother and/or that the social parent might feel excluded. A study by Vanfraussen, Ponjaert-Kristoffersen, and Brewaeys (2003), designed to explore family functioning in lesbian donor-insemination families utilizing parent and child reports, found that some social mothers expressed jealousy and competitiveness surrounding bonding with their children. As a result of such concerns and competition, some lesbian families are opting for adoption over pregnancy not because they are unable to have children biologically but as a means of creating symmetry within the family from a biological standpoint (Bennett 2003).

Recent research continues to confirm that it is the quality of the parent–child relationship that is the strongest predictor of outcomes in a child's development (Bennett 2003; Bos, Van Balen, and Van Den Boom 2004a, 2004b; Vanfraussen, Ponjaert-Kristoffersen, and Brewaeys 2003; Wainright, Russell, and Patterson 2004). Specifically, Vanfraussen, Ponjaert-Kristoffersen, and Brewaeys (2003) found that time spent with the child was the most significant factor in bonding, with biological relationship rated second. Similarly, Bos, Van Balen, and Van Den Boom (2004b) found that there was no difference between biological and social mothers in lesbian families as regards the quality of parent–child interactions. Also, there were no significant differences between biological and social mothers in the emotional experience of parenthood (Bos, Van Balen, and Van Den Boom 2004b). In addition, Bennett (2003) contends that, more than legal or biological status, it is the quality of care that most saliently contributes to a child's connection to a parent.

Therefore, despite the social parents' reported fear of a qualitative difference in parent–child interaction, studies indicate that a biological link is not essential in the parent–child relationship. For educators and counselors working with these families, as well as traditional families with adopted or foster children, understanding parent–child relationships in this way may be helpful in honoring both parents and their children, regardless of custodial or biological status.

However, legal parental status of the social parent is a source of contention despite the presence of important relationships for both biological and social parents

in families with same-sex parents. As a means of securing the rights of the non-biological parent, second-parent or co-parent, adoptions allow the same-sex parent to adopt her or his partner's biological child without terminating the biological parent's legal status (Delaney 1991). According to the NCLR (2000), this provides the child with the legal security of having two legal parents. This also protects the parental relationship of the social parent, should the biological parent become incapacitated or should the couple's relationship terminate, which might become an important custodial consideration for school administrators. In her study with 20 gay parents who obtained second-parent adoptions, Connolly (2002) found that legal status increased confidence when dealing with schools, hospitals, insurance companies, and other institutions that require a legally defined family. Second-parent adoptions have been approved or granted in 26 states in the United States, with seven states – prohibiting such adoptions, and 17 states remaining unclear on the issue of second-parent adoptions (NGLTF 2008).

However, adoption without the ongoing presence of a biological parent may prove more complicated. A wave of campaigns in the mid-1990s led to unfavorable legislation prohibiting adoption by same-sex couples in nine states (NCLR 2000). Conversely, while adoption was historically a practice reserved for Caucasian, heterosexual couples, policies have expanded to include minorities such as single parents. Such policies are incongruous with research that found few differences between single heterosexual mother families and lesbian mother families (Bos, Van Balen, and Van Den Boom 2004a, 2004b; MacCallum and Golombok 2004). In fact, MacCallum and Golombok (2004) found there were no differences except that there was more disciplinary aggression from the single heterosexual mothers, possibly because greater numbers of lesbian mothers had co-parents to share in the disciplining of the children. Yet, according to the Administration for Children and Families (2006), there are approximately 513,000 children in foster care in 2005 in the United States, with 114,000 children waiting to be adopted. In the meantime, the laws continue to exclude gay couples from participating as a resource for fostering or adoption (NCLR 2000). Therefore, in the current climate, it is likely that complicated custodial issues will arise for many school administrators and teachers.

Furthermore, even when petitions are possible, Connolly (2002) found that the proceedings did not respectfully account for the experience of same-sex parents. Specifically, gay parents reported that home studies conducted by social workers were rife with ignorance and hostility, despite their efforts to frame the petitions around the children's best interests, rather than a proxy for gay rights. In addition, Connolly (2002) reported that both judges and social workers imposed suppositions about what the adoption should mean on an emotional level for the families; that a legal decree was what made them a legitimate family. That is to say that their existing families were dismissed and their meaningful relationships minimized, suggesting that legal systems did not account for the research that shows that the quality of parental relationships is more salient in a child's development than legal or biological ties. As such, hard-won legal status was still a point of ambivalence for these parents who saw their parenting rights determined by the subjective accounts of judges and social workers, rather than objective legal analysis (Connolly 2002).

Such ambiguity highlights the conflict of fighting to become visible in a marginalizing, discriminating culture. Despite some state laws permitting gay and lesbian adults to adopt children, second-parent adoptions are often ultimately

determined by county-level judges (Pawelski et al. 2006). Despite the research indicating otherwise, legal justifications for denying second-parent adoptions are frequently grounded in the belief that the children would be stigmatized, compromised in their social relationships, and at risk for impaired emotional and psychosocial development (Perrin 2002). Recently, Pawelski et al. (2006) called into awareness that prohibiting the rights of same-sex parents will not inhibit their growing numbers but, rather, will impair their ability to access the best legal and financial resources for the healthy development of their families.

Families with same-sex parents in schools

Regardless of legal rights and biological status, children with same-sex parents are entering the school systems, generating questions for these families and the faculty working with them. Children with same-sex parents were found to be more connected to their school communities compared with their peers with heterosexual parents (Wainright, Russell, and Patterson 2004), suggesting the importance of making school a safe and welcoming place. Yet, according to Ryan and Martin (2000), most schools were not prepared to support these families. Faculty had limited knowledge of families with same-sex families, were fearful of administrative repercussions for supporting these families, or struggled such as their own homophobia, heterosexism, or a desire to seem open-minded – which, ironically, impeded their ability to acknowledge what they did not understand (Ryan and Martin 2000).

Because having same-sex parents is not a visible trait, both students and their parents are confronted with the question of whether or not to disclose their non-traditional family structure to teachers, administrators, and other families (Casper, Schultz, and Wickens 1992; Casper and Schultz 1999; Goldberg 2007; Litovich and Langhout 2004; Ryan and Martin 2000; Wainright, Russell, and Patterson 2004). As parents and educators grapple with how to communicate with each other and their student bodies, these children are confronted with if, how, when, and with whom to share their families (Casper, Schultz, and Wickens 1992; Casper and Schultz 1999; Goldberg 2007; Litovich and Langhout 2004; Ryan and Martin 2000; Wainright, Russell, and Patterson 2004). Perrin (2002) reported that children with same-sex parents manage to effectively understand and describe their families to their communities. However, Litovich and Langhout (2004) contend that while these children start school feeling proud of their families, negativity and disapproval lead them to become silent, necessitating that parents prepare their children for heterosexism and homophobia, from peers and teachers alike. Casper, Schultz, and Wickens (1992) pointed out that being discriminated against or excluded from the family norm at school denies these children a sense of legitimacy and inhibits their sense of future potential, as they are minimized and subjected to heterosexism and homophobia. Because such events can negatively impact a child's well-being, it is incumbent upon educators to prepare their schools to include and account for the experiences of these children, not leaving the children responsible for educating their teachers and advocating for their own inclusion and tolerance.

Studies support the notion that many parents are fearful that their families would experience discrimination should they disclose their sexual orientation to schools (Casper, Schultz, and Wickens 1992; Casper and Schultz, 1999; Fox, 2007;

Litovich and Langhout, 2004; Ryan and Martin, 2000). Context plays a major role in a parent's decision to come out to teachers and administrators (Casper, Schultz, and Wickens 1992; Casper and Schultz, 1999; Goldberg, 2007; Ryan and Martin, 2000). Casper, Schultz, and Wickens (1992) studied administrators, teachers, and gay parents and found that factors such as economic class, race, and visibility of the homosexual population influenced whether or not parents chose to actively inform their schools. Results from this study suggested that gay parents living in communities with a strong, visible gay presence had more confidence compared to counterparts in more socially conservative communities (Casper, Schultz, and Wickens 1992). In addition, some families would not let their children attend a school unless they were assured of support and safety in regard to their nontraditional family status (Casper, Schultz, and Wickens 1992).

Research has explored whether it is the responsibility of the parents to come out to the school or whether teachers and administrators should be able to piece information together (Casper, Schultz, and Wickens 1992; Casper and Schultz 1999; Ryan and Martin 2000). In their study, Casper, Schultz, and Wickens (1992) found some parents opted for indirect but clear methods such as showing up as two caring, same-sex parents to a meeting or simply scratching out and writing in applicable changes on forms, while other parents opted for more direct tactics such as disclosing their sexual orientation to teachers and administrators during the admissions or enrollment processes. In other cases, sexual orientation was disclosed or discovered by faculty, which some parents experienced as their school's staff being sensitive to diversity, while others felt they were inappropriately 'outed,' often in uncomfortable contexts (Casper, Schultz, and Wickens 1992). This confusion and uncertainty is also reflected in a study focused on teachers, in which some teachers felt they should change their lessons and practices to be more inclusive of children with same-sex parents, while others made no changes or would only make the changes if specifically asked (Fox 2006). The latter possibility is interesting in light of the study by Casper and Schultz (1999), which found that one of the biggest concerns for gay parents was getting the teachers to ask questions. These conflicts underscore the need to improve communication between faculty and these emerging families, both as a means to make an inclusive curriculum and to facilitate sensitivity and understanding.

Another question explored by Casper, Schultz, and Wickens (1992) was how to navigate ideas about appropriate role models, when traditional thinking has suggested that children need to identify with a role model of their own sex. This rests on assumptions that sons being raised by lesbian mothers do not have substantial contact with men, and that daughters raised by gay fathers do not have substantial contact with women. It further assumes that children must have a parent of their own sex for successful development. Casper, Schultz, and Wickens (1992) found that gay parents defended this argument citing heterosexist norms and the fact that their children's lives were not peopled exclusively by one sex. At the same time, these parents acknowledged that gender is an issue in their lives, a point the teachers in this study also recognized but did not discuss as deeply. When pushed further on the subject, those teachers reported that children sought out more attention, such as hugs and conversations, from teachers of the sex they did not have at home, a dynamic they also observed in children from single-parent families (Casper, Schultz, and Wickens 1992).

To provide collaborative growth opportunities for families with same-sex parents, teachers, faculty and administrators may need to increase their comfort with this population, encouraging the use of words such as ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ (Casper, Schultz, and Wickens 1992), considering language that includes social parents on applications, letters, and other correspondence and forms, improving the quality of communication with these parents, suggesting teacher preparation programs to increase knowledge, and opening curricula to these issues (Casper, Schultz, and Wickens 1992; Ryan and Martin 2000; Victor and Fish 1995). The results of research in this area demonstrate slow progress. For example, teachers reported feeling unprepared for difficult questions their students asked both in class conversation and in play (Casper, Schultz, and Wickens 1992; Ryan and Martin 2000). Casper, Schultz, and Wickens (1992) found that the most effective responses from teachers focused on helping the children to broaden definitions: an experience of difference is not necessarily an experience of sadness or loss. One indication that might suggest openness to incorporating issues important to families of same-sex parents in school curricula is the Kaiser Family Foundation (2001) poll, where 71% of participants reported they would allow their children to attend a high school with an openly gay or lesbian teacher. Another study also recommended that parents take the initiative to talk with educators openly about their family configurations, honoring their fears but opening the doors for understanding (Casper, Schultz, and Wickens 1992).

Homophobia, heterosexism and social struggle

Although there is an increase in same-sex couples raising children now compared with the 1980s, homophobia and heterosexism remain prevalent and continue to be socially-relevant and politically-charged issues for these families, due to their use in undermining parenting rights and social support. The research of Miller, Miller, and Stull (2007) found that faculty attitudes, such as prejudice, directly affect discriminating behavior, with higher rates of heterosexism than racism or sexism. They accounted for this by looking at the programs designed to train counselor educators in cultural sensitivity, which have addressed issues of ethnicity but not sexual orientation, perhaps because the gay rights movement is still not considered part of mainstream culture. Miller, Miller, and Stull (2007) suggested that faculty and administrators must be vigilant about their own biases and work to change institutional policies that allow discrimination. Ryan and Martin (2000) found that even teachers who considered themselves ‘liberal’ had heterosexist biases, which they struggled to recognize.

Homophobic bullying was a key focus of discussion for the research subjects of one study because of its contentious role in challenging their parenting rights (Clarke, Kitzinger, and Potter 2004). Because Clarke, Kitzinger, and Potter (2004) feared such politics might influence the reports from their subjects, their research reflected a discursive approach looking at how bullying is talked about and what role it plays, rather than seeking a universal truth about bullying. Even with this approach, there were conflicting reports from family members, perhaps informed by an underlying dilemma that to acknowledge oppression and difference would be to concede to the pathological discourse of gay identity. As a result, Clarke, Kitzinger, and Potter (2004) found some parents worked to challenge the notion that lesbian families uniquely experience bullying, insisting that all children are subject to

'everyday' bullying to some degree. Still other parents, often within the same families, would report accounts of homophobic bullying, to whatever degree minimized. There were no maximized reports of bullying. This indicated a dilemma in reporting as respondents may have sought to protect their position rather than accurately report incidents of homophobia (Clarke, Kitzinger, and Potter 2004).

Despite the more open and prominent presence of gay culture, homophobic bullying is still a significant issue for school-aged children, particularly for adolescents, living in lesbian and gay households (Clarke, Kitzinger, and Potter 2004; Perrin 2002). Such children might be subjected to harassment, ostracism, stigmatization, taunting, and rejection from their peers and schoolmates and the assumption that they are of the same sexual orientation as their parents. Anderssen, Amlie, and Ytteroy (2002) found that although children with gay parents did not seem stigmatized, they were teased more than their peers. In addition, boys with lesbian mothers reported being teased about being gay more than boys with heterosexual mothers. In their study with lesbian couples, Litovich and Langhout (2004) found that while parents claimed not to experience incidents rooted in heterosexism, they did report that their own sexual orientation was a source of some social struggle for their children. According to this study, as with the study by Clarke, Kitzinger, and Potter (2004), the families minimized these experiences, prohibiting an accurate understanding of how bullying may be affecting these families and raising questions about the impact minimizing has on self-concept for families facing fears of discrimination and having rights compromised. While in the study by Litovich and Langhout (2004) participants acknowledged fears of what was said behind their backs, indicating their awareness of existing heterosexism and homophobia, and more direct experiences, Anderssen, Amlie, and Ytteroy (2002) found few serious incidents of bullying due to having a gay parent.

Litovich and Langhout (2004) found a negative correlation between experiencing stigma and self-esteem, and a positive correlation between positive coping and self-esteem. This highlights the importance of having support in coping with heterosexism and homophobia, and the need for schools to participate in protecting and advocating for these students. According to Armesto (2002), the pressures of holding multiminority status, being a gay parent in a community of heterosexual parents and being a parent in a gay community, can be negotiated with interpersonal and community support. To that end, gay parents seek out other gay parents to counter their own internalized homophobia (Pachankis and Goldfried 2004), and a gay parent's disclosure of sexual orientation can promote tolerance by modeling acceptance (Cramer 1986). Similarly, children interviewed in the study by Vanfraussen, Ponjaert-Kristoffersen, and Brewaeyts (2002) reported that it was important to know other children who were part of families with same-sex parents.

Promoting discussion about heterosexism from an early age helps to give children the tools to have such conversations throughout their development and to correct misinformation from their peers, despite the fear of ridicule (Litovich and Langhout 2004; Ryan and Martin 2000). Specifically, Litovich and Langhout (2004) found that families educated their children on the vocabulary of sexual orientation in the same ways and degrees that heterosexual parents might inform their children about relationships and sexuality, with added precautions about encountering prejudice in the world. For example, children in the study by Vanfraussen, Ponjaert-Kristoffersen,

and Brewaeys (2002) reported telling peers that they had two mothers, although they were more selective in sharing their mothers' sexual orientation. In addition, Vanfraussen, Ponjaert-Kristoffersen, and Brewaeys (2002) found that these children were comfortable to invite friends to their homes.

Incidents of homophobic bullying and stigmatization are used to erroneously support the position that children are harmed by having gay parents (Litovich and Langhout 2004; Vanfraussen, Ponjaert-Kristoffersen, and Brewaeys 2002). The lack of societal tolerance implicated in laws prohibiting gays and lesbians from parenting may be perpetuating the same marginalization, ridicule, and harassment from which such laws purport to protect children. Furthermore, schools and other organizations that exclude families with same-sex parents, even by default, may be inadvertently colluding with such discrimination. Same-sex parents cannot spare their children from such challenges, but research has established that it is not a parent's sexual orientation that determines or undermines the healthy development of a child (Perrin 2002).

Gender identity and sexual orientation

Because gay parenting is frequently linked to 'faulty' parenting (Armesto, 2002), gender identity is pulled into both the political and clinical discussion regarding children with same-sex parents. Stereotypes suppose that gay women are less maternal than heterosexual woman, when in reality many lesbians are nurturing, loving mothers (Paige 2005). For father-absent or mother-absent households, degendering parental roles and restructuring power sharing may create the pressure of gender-role strain (Schacher 2002; Silverstein and Auerbach 2002). For example, gay men becoming fathers must engage in nurturing and childcare, which have traditionally been considered women's work (Silverstein and Auerbach 2002). Patrick (2006) described the cultural assumption that being a gay man precludes being a parent. According to Armesto (2002), the belief that effeminacy in gay fathers inhibits children's healthy gender identity development is the strongest predictive factor contributing to the perception that gay fatherhood is damaging to children. In turn, the research examines whether children are negatively impacted by such reconstruction of traditional gender roles, examining their engagement in gender-typical activities, such as games and toys, at home and at school. Studies repeatedly find no statistically significant differences for such gender-typed behaviors (Anderssen, Amlie, and Ytteroy 2002; Golombok et al. 2003; Golombok and Tasker 1996; Mooney-Somers and Golombok 2000; Pachankis and Goldfried 2004; Paige 2005; Pawelski et al. 2006; Perrin 2002).

However, MacCallum and Golombok (2004) found there were differences in femininity for boys raised in father-absent homes, with those boys scoring higher on the femininity scale compared with boys from father-present homes. It is notable that they found no difference in scores between boys with single heterosexual mothers and boys with lesbian mothers. In addition, MacCallum and Golombok (2004) reported no distinctions on the masculinity scale. It is also worth noting that Golombok and Tasker (1996) found children with gay or lesbian parents held more flexible views of acceptable gender behavior than their peers. As Armesto (2002) pointed out regarding gay fathers, a man's expression of femininity, including traits traditionally honored in mothers, might be an asset in parenting.

The sexual orientation of children of same-sex parents is often used as a means to advocate against parenting rights for same-sex partners. This is erroneous because it embodies the assumption that gay fathers and mothers necessarily raise gay children and, more saliently, that there is something intrinsically wrong with homosexuality (Herek 2006). According to the American Psychological Association, homosexuality is not a psychological disorder (Conger 1975). Moreover, there is no evidence to support the notion that children raised by homosexual parents are more likely to have sexual or romantic attraction to the same sex than children raised by heterosexual parents (Golombok et al. 2003; Golombok and Tasker 1996; Pawelski et al. 2006; Wainright, Russell, and Patterson 2004).

Emotional functioning of children with same-sex parents versus children with heterosexual parents

The debate questioning the rights of gay parents looks to the literature to determine whether children raised by same-sex parents are indistinguishable from children raised by heterosexual parents, all else being equal. However, this debate is more realistically served by research that seeks to question whether there are any significant differences important to the well-being of the children (Herek 2006; Perrin 2002). To that end, the research shows that there are no significant differences across a spectrum of dimensions including emotional functioning, gender identification, sexual orientation, and social relationships (Anderssen, Amlie, and Ytteroy 2002; Golombok et al. 2003; Golombok and Tasker 1996; Pawelski et al. 2006; Vanfraussen, Ponjaert-Kristoffersen, and Brewaeyts 2003; Wainwright, Russell, and Patterson 2004). Furthermore, Perrin (2002) reported that overall there are more similarities than differences in parenting styles between heterosexual and homosexual parents. Despite the unique challenges facing same-sex parents, current research does not offer any reasons to deny their parental rights based on their sexual orientation given that children with one or more gay parents did not differ from peers raised by two heterosexual parents (Pachankis and Goldfried 2004).

The research shows no significant differences between the two groups along the dynamic of emotional functioning (Anderssen, Amlie, and Ytteroy 2002; Golombok et al. 2003; Golombok and Tasker 1996; MacCallum and Golombok 2004; Pachankis and Goldfried 2004; Pawelski et al. 2006; Perrin 2002; Vanfraussen, Ponjaert-Kristoffersen, and Brewaeyts 2002; Wainright, Russell, and Patterson 2004). Emotional functioning was accounted for by a variety of phenomena, including self-esteem (MacCallum and Golombok 2004; Pawelski et al. 2006; Wainright, Russell, and Patterson 2004). Pawelski et al. (2006) also reported that adolescents raised with same-sex partnered mothers had positive family relationships, including parental warmth. These children also had relatively high grade point averages and low levels of trouble in school (Wainright, Russell, and Patterson 2004). MacCallum and Golombok (2004) found no significant differences in psychiatric disorders, utilizing the Social Adjustment Inventory for Children, which evaluates both physical self-esteem and global self-esteem. The consensus throughout the literature states that children raised by same-sex parents showed no significant differences in psychiatric disorders and psychological problems (Golombok et al. 2003; Golombok and Tasker 1996; MacCallum and Golombok 2004; Mooney-Somers and Golombok 2000; Wainright, Russell, and Patterson 2004).

Since much of this research is based on subjective reporting, it is notable that teachers, who were ostensibly independent observers, did not report a higher incidence of psychological problems (Golombok et al. 2003; Perrin 2002) or abnormal behavior (Golombok et al. 2003) for their students being raised by same-sex parents, corroborating the reports of the parents. However, some reports from teachers expressed that children from lesbian families exhibited more attention problems, a difference that may be accounted for by the teachers' stereotypes of children from non-traditional families (Vanfraussen, Ponjaert-Kristoffersen, and Brewaeys 2002). Such bias may be particularly problematic for students experiencing school-based harassment from their peers if their teachers and other faculty are not safe resources with whom they can share experiences or concerns of discrimination.

Limitations and implications for future research

Despite the growing subject pool, there are still confounding factors: all things are not equal for families with same-sex parents compared with the heterosexual family norm, which may be a helpful consideration for educators and counselors working with these families. The body of research has expanded from children of parents leaving heterosexual relationships to children born to established same-sex couples (Herek 2006; Perrin 2002). Regarding the outcomes of the former scenario, research may not account for the hardships and stressors of divorce (Herek 2006; Perrin 2002). In both scenarios, while these families can reach out to other non-traditional families, they may experience less social support from their own extended families (Herek 2006), which may indicate a need for increased resources from schools and other community networks. Gender role strain (Pleck 1995) may also create an imbalance between the two types of family groups. Furthermore, in his review of literature exploring the competence of gay fathers, Armesto (2002) noted that same-sex parents may also endure additional parenting stressors as members of a marginalized and stigmatized group, deprived of rights such as marriage, inheritance benefits, and other legal protections that may be afforded to heterosexual parents.

While the field of education has worked to acknowledge the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students, there is little effort focused on students with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender parents – with more studies on this population available through the lens of psychology.

The bias of the reporting participants to which most of these studies are subject confounds the research and, perhaps most saliently, reflects the unfairness of discrimination and the struggle to develop visibility and voice in a community. While teachers were influenced by heterosexism in their accounts according to Ryan and Martin (2000) and Vanfraussen, Ponjaert-Kristoffersen, and Brewaeys (2002), such bias is of particular concern in the area of parents reporting homophobic incidents (Clarke, Kitinger, and Potter 2004; Litovich and Langhout 2004). Currently, the studies do not go far enough on examining the effects of minimization on self-esteem and other vital dynamics of childhood development. A failure to recognize such minimization by educators, clinicians, and researchers serves to collude with this ongoing marginalization and discrimination, and indicates that these issues are at risk of being dismissed. With teachers making instructional decisions daily that impact the way students perceive themselves and others, it is important for educators

to develop strategies for confronting stereotypes and misinformation, or face the danger of perpetuating them (Bossert 1981; Merryfield 2002).

Demographics also pose a confounding factor across the research. Lesbian couples are studied more often as compared with gay male couples (Anderssen, Amlie, and Ytteroy 2002). Armesto (2002) suggested that this mirrors our cultural attitudes about men and, particularly, gay men, as fathers – a concept fairly unrecognized until recently. Additionally, the research does not explore issues that may be specific to bisexual parents or single homosexual parents. Furthermore, there is very little research available that accounts for the opinions and experiences of children (Vanfraussen, Ponjaert-Kristoffersen, and Brewaeys 2002), whose best interests are being claimed by both sides of the legal debate.

Many of the research samples reflect limited socioeconomic strata, focusing on subjects from financially privileged, Caucasian backgrounds with higher education (Bos, Van Balen, and Van Den Boom 2004b; MacCallum and Golombok 2004; Pachankis and Goldfried 2004). This might create inequality between groups as well. Yet, with domestic policy restricting same-sex couples from adopting, gay and lesbian parents may be limited to adopting so-called ‘unadoptable’ children. Such children may have histories including HIV infection, drug abuse, or the developmental disorders of malnourishment and neglect (Herek 2006), factors that might impact academic performance and social connection. Recently, Matthews and Cramer (2006) put forth the suggestion that ‘less desirable’ children are relegated to ‘less desirable’ parents. Such profoundly confounding factors may further skew the outcomes compared with other groups. Additionally, with small, qualitative samples, the validity of the findings may not be generalized to broader populations. Longitudinal and developmental follow-up might address the concerns created by such volunteer samples (Mooney-Somers and Golombok 2000). This could also allow for a richer understanding of the long-term impact of the parent–child relationships in these families (Bennett 2003). Expanding the subjects of these studies to encompass a more diverse ethnic and socioeconomic sample, with more children and gay fathers, will strengthen the external validity and generalizability of this research. Rather than minimizing differences, honoring the unique experiences of families with same-sex parents would create space for more reliable reporting, so that the research can be of service to those working with this increasingly visible and empirically supported population of families.

Conclusion

Most saliently, the literature reviewed demonstrates that there are no significant differences that would detrimentally impair the development of children raised in families with same-sex parents compared with children raised in traditional family models, which gives educators and counselors the endorsement to include and account for this population in curricula, community, and practice. The research overwhelmingly demonstrates that it is the quality of parent–child relationships, more than biological or legal status, which has an impact on children’s development, underscoring the importance of increasing awareness and understanding for teachers and counselors, as they too provide relationships that are vital to growth. Although most of this research supports the position that same-sex parents should be afforded the same rights as heterosexual parents (Paige 2005), as suggested by Armesto

(2002), those studying and working with these families might also acknowledge the differences between gay and straight families, respecting the distinct qualities of this burgeoning population (Armesto 2002; Connolly 2002). Honoring these differences may serve to acknowledge the perspectives of families with same-sex parents. For example, according to Connolly (2002), gay parents petitioning second-parent adoptions did not envision themselves as similar to heterosexual families, but instead recognized that their issues were different. These parents did not want to conform to adoptions designed to build the 'normative' family. As Connolly (2002) pointed out, family structures and roles are socially constructed and therefore variable. Furthermore, more than family structures, family processes and relationships strongly influence children (Pawelski et al. 2006; Perrin 2002). The way in which administrators, educators, and counselors contribute to this process may also have a vital impact. Overall, the research indicates that same-sex parents are as likely as heterosexual parents to create healthy experiences for their children (Paige 2005). Administrators, educators, and counselors can support these families with the confidence exhibited by this body of research.

Note

1. Since this article went to press the Florida law that banned homosexuals for over three decades was declared unconstitutional in November 2008.

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