

Why Do Children Do So Well in Lesbian Households?

Research on Lesbian Parenting

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Les familles lesbiennes sont un récent phénomène et n'ont pas été souvent exploitées en littérature. Cette recherche montre que ces familles fonctionnent aussi bien et même mieux que leur contrepartie hétérosexuelle. Pourquoi? Cet article est une revue des écrits autour de ce thème et discute des implications de sa recherche.

How can it be that in a world in which lesbians and gays are subjected to invisibility, silence, homophobia, and other forms of prejudice and discrimination, so many of these individuals, couples, families, and children seem to be doing as well as everyone else? ... Could it be that lesbians and their families have special experiences and special strengths that give parents and children alike the courage to master adversity? (Laird qtd. in Anderson and Sussex 122)

Lesbian-led families are a relatively new phenomenon and have thus not been well explored in the literature. The research that does exist however consistently finds equal or superior developmental outcomes for children raised in lesbian families compared with children raised in heterosexual two-parent families or in single-parent families (Fitzgerald; Lambert; Parks; Stacey & Biblarz). This paper will review some of the literature on lesbian-led families to explore the reasons why these families function so well.

Research on Lesbian-Led Families With Children

Articles published on lesbian-led families have generally fallen into two major categories—psychological outcome studies of children being raised in lesbian-led families (most of whom were conceived in a previous heterosexual union) and second, studies of the experiences of lesbian couples and their families (Allen and Demo; Goldfried; Stacey and Biblarz). The first category has made up the bulk of the scarce literature. The majority of these studies

compare lesbian-led families to “traditional” families (Lambert). By doing this, they view lesbian-led families through a heterosexist and homophobic lens and thus fail to include the unique traits of lesbian-led families in research findings. As Laura Benkov states:

These studies did not describe families headed by lesbians in any rich detail—they did not give any indication of what life in these families was like. Instead they focused on what was not true about lesbian headed families—what the children were not. (52)

Much of the early research on lesbian-led families focuses on lesbians who had had children in a heterosexual relationship and who came out as a lesbian after they left the relationship. Although there are a growing number of these studies, all are less than 30 years old as before that point lesbians were almost always denied custody, and often even access, as a result of their sexual orientation (Kim; Polikoff). The majority of early research studies and many of the current studies on lesbian-led families and lesbian motherhood compared these families with two-parent heterosexual families and families headed by single heterosexual women (Parks; Nelson 1996, 1999; Dalton and Bielbey; Patterson 1992, 1995b; Tasker; Golombok, Tasker and Murray; Dundas and Kaufman; Siegenthaler and Bigner).

Some of the key findings are that children in lesbian-led families develop gender identities and gender roles normally (Patterson 1992; Golombok *et al.*); develop normal peer relationships (Patterson 1992; Tasker); exhibit normal emotional/behavioural development (Patterson 1992; Dundas and Kaufman); have fewer issues regarding their sexual identity (Tasker); and are no more likely to grow up gay or lesbian than the children raised in heterosexual families (Patterson 1992). In other words, these children are “normal,” and functioning well in all aspects of their life. It seems clear that these children have not been

harmed by their parents' lesbianism.

As compared to children from heterosexual two-parent or single-parent families (some of which have undergone alternative insemination or assisted conception) children from lesbian-led families were reported to: experience greater warmth and were more securely attached in the family (Tasker and Golombok); see themselves (and others saw them) as more loveable and affectionate and less aggressive (Patterson 1992); and have more regular contact with their biological father (if they were conceived in a heterosexual relationship) than children of heterosexual

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divorced mothers (Patterson 1995b). In addition, children of lesbian-led families seem to be more accepting of their mothers' lesbianism if the mothers were politically active in lesbian organizations (Tasker and Golombok). The research showing that children of lesbians have more contact with their biological father (if known) than children raised by heterosexual mothers (Patterson, 1995b) is a sad commentary about the often vindictive nature of divorce or separation among heterosexuals in which children get caught in the middle.

When lesbian-led families are compared to heterosexual families (two-parent or single-parent) studies also report a number of other significant findings. Social mothers were significantly more involved in all aspects of parenting as compared to biological fathers (Brewaeys and van Hall) and lesbian parents had more equitable social interaction with the children compared to biological fathers (childcare, discipline, etc.) (Patterson 1995a). Lesbian parents reported higher relationship satisfaction than heterosexual couples (Chan, Brooks, Raboy and Patterson). Lesbian parents were more aware of the skills necessary to be effective parents (Flaks, Ficher, Masterpaqua and Joseph) and were significantly more likely to have told or plan to tell their child they were conceived through alternative insemination or assisted conception (Brewaeys, Ponjaert, Van Hall, and Golombok; Dundas and Kaufman). Lesbian stepmothers had significantly better and more positive relationships with the children in the home compared to heterosexual stepmothers (Tasker). While lesbian mothers spent more time outside the home working than heterosexual mothers (although the social mother tended to be more involved in outside work than the biological mother) (Patterson 1995b), lesbian mothers still had more family time together than their heterosexual counterparts (Patterson 1995a). Although some

studies did find that lesbian-led families and/or children were not functioning as well as those in heterosexual families, further research showed this was a result of a previous heterosexual divorce, and its negative effect on the child, and not related to being raised in a lesbian-led family (Patterson 1995b) or to the sexual orientation of the parent.

In addition, Charlotte Patterson (1992) found that families where the mothers were "out" to themselves as well as to extended family, at work, and in the community, there was an even higher psychological well-being in both mothers and children than in closeted lesbian-led families.

Despite findings of such statistical significance, no study, however, clearly articulated that children raised in a home with a lesbian birth mother and social mother were *better* adjusted than children raised in other types of homes. I can only speculate why this might have happened. I believe that the authors may have either not felt comfortable making such a statement given the heteronormative nature of society or possibly journal editors may not have allowed such a radical statement in their publication. Nevertheless, it seems clear from a review of the literature on lesbian mothers, lesbian parenting, children raised in lesbian-headed household, and lesbian families, that lesbians and their families function as well, if not better than, heterosexual-led families (see, for example, Parks; Tasker; Brewaeys; Patterson 1992). Lesbian-led families can thus be seen

not as families on the margins to be compared to a central norm, but rather, as people on the cutting edge of a key social shift, from whom there was much to be learned about the meaning of family and about the nature of social change. (Benkov 58)

I argue that the time has come to use a research lens that views lesbian-led families as a unique entity apart from their heterosexual counterparts and that can be studied for their potential to offer positive parenting roles models to society at large (Morningstar).

Weaknesses of the Literature

I would be remiss, however, if I did not identify a number of limitations to the above research. Importantly, very little research on lesbian-led families has been done in Canada. Two exceptions to this are Fiona Nelson (1996, 1999) and Katherine Arnup (1995, 1999).

In addition, the bulk of the research overlooks the diversity of forms of lesbian-led families. It is important to remember that lesbian-led families are not all created equal and can vary significantly in their origins, structure, and functioning. This is crucial to understanding and researching lesbian-led families. All too often lesbian-led families ARE grouped together as though being a lesbian means that one shares a large number of unifying proper-

ties with other lesbians and their families. Assuming homogeneity in research can introduce errors or bias into the results.

Furthermore, most of the studies reviewed were conducted on small sample sizes and focused on white, middle- to upper-class, well-educated, urban, out, non-addicted, and socially connected lesbians living in North America, Britain, or Europe (Parks). These demographics leave out the bulk of lesbian-led families and thus the ability to generalize these findings to those families that are also marginalized by race, class, culture or disability is extremely limited. It is also important to note that historically only a very select group of lesbians have had access to alternative insemination through the medical system. For this reason, I believe that the above noted sample demographics most likely represent the majority of lesbians and lesbian couples who have conceived a child together through alternative insemination in their relationship. I refer to these types of families as planned two-mother families.

Also of note, in the majority of the studies the sex of the children in the families is not specified. Although families were matched on a number of variables such as age of parents, income, etc., it is not clear if sex of the children involved in the studies was a determining factor in the match.

Limited access in the past to alternative insemination means that planned two-mother families generally only have children who are preschool or public school age so there is very limited research on these families with adolescent or adult-aged children. Also, much of the literature has not distinguished between lesbian families that are the result of divorce and those that are planned. AS Susan Golombok and Fiona Tasker state:

Children who were originally raised in heterosexual households who not only had male and female parents, but who also experienced divorce and single parenting, may develop differently from children raised by lesbian ... parents since birth. (qtd. in Fitzgerald 58).

Finally, much of the research that has been done on lesbian families have limited their study to only a part of the family such as the family of choice or family of origin. Few studies have looked at families as multigenerational.

Why Do Children Do So Well in Lesbian-Led Families?

One of the reasons that children fare so well and maybe better in lesbian-led households than in their heterosexual counterparts are the higher relationship satisfaction that lesbian couples report having as compared to heterosexual couples (Chan *et al.*). Lesbian couples ALSO reported a more even allocation of household and parenting duties as

well as higher relationship satisfaction when compared to a matched group of heterosexual couples (Chan *et al.*). I would like to suggest that because parents in lesbian-led families feel more fulfilled in their relationship and are satisfied with the division of household and paid work activities, they in turn are happier parents, which in turn lead to better adjustment in the children. Raymond Chan, Risa Brooks, Barbara Raboy, and Charlotte Patterson hypothesize that from a family systems perspective the subsystems within the lesbian-led family function together with one another. Thus, greater satisfaction at the

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couple subsystem leads to greater satisfaction at the parent/child subsystem.

I would also like to suggest that by virtue of being outside the mainstream, lesbian-led families have a higher tolerance for differences and individuality in its members. It can be argued that lesbians have no relational scripts, no parental or family role modes and, in a sense, most continuously reinvent themselves and their family cultures. (Laird). Having said this, lesbian couples and families, because they can live outside the patriarchal assumptions of how a family functions, have the opportunity to create roles within the couple and family that suit them. For this reason, lesbian-led families tend to be more egalitarian and are often more nurturing and empathic, contributing significantly to the well-being of the children in the family. By not being constrained by societal definitions of what makes a family successful, lesbian-led families can arrange themselves in a way that works for those involved, thus leading to members feeling more connected, more loved, and feeling greater warmth.

Another reason why I believe children fare well, or better than their heterosexual family counterparts, is that the studies demonstrate that both parents in lesbian-led families spend more quality time with the children (Patterson 1995a). This was especially true of the social or stepmother when compared to the biological father. This extra time children spent with their parents left them feeling more positive about themselves. In addition, for children who were conceived in a previous heterosexual relationship or through a known donor, these children had more access to their non-custodial parent leaving them feeling less like the separation was their fault or that the other parent did not love or care enough to spend time with them (Patterson 1995b).

For the children in lesbian-led families who were con-

ceived through artificial insemination, there is a higher level of honesty regarding their conception and access to donor information than in matched heterosexual families (Brewaeys, Ponjaert, Van Hall, and Golombok; Dundas and Kaufman). This may again lead children to feel more connected to the family and thus better adjusted.

Because mothers in the lesbian-led families are keenly aware there is no male role model in the home for the child I have found through my doctoral research that they often seek out a positive male role model for the child from family or friends or through an organization that provides mentorship to children. In this way the child is left feeling they have a special person to do things with, the mothers are left knowing that they have provided a positive male role model for their child, and the mothers are also left with some child-free time to re-energize to parent more effectively.

Lastly, women tend to be more relational and family focused as compared to men. Carol Gilligan reported that "women's identity formation is characterized by attachment and emotional relatedness.... Such a socialization-developmental framework might predispose women to embody nurturing, caregiver roles" (qtd. in Chan *et al.* 415). Thus, when there are two women parenting in the family, there is usually more emphasis on meeting the emotional needs of the child, leaving the child feeling more secure and therefore better able to cope with what life has to offer them.

Implications of These Findings for Policies and Laws

The findings of this research on lesbian-led families can have significant implications if reviewed and taken seriously by government and community agencies in Canada. Currently in Canada many of the laws and policies related to children and families are handled at the provincial level and thus vary greatly from province to province. An example is the policy on adoption. Some provinces, like Ontario, readily allow same-sex couples to adopt, while other provinces, like Alberta, still limit or disallow such adoptions. Other laws and policies, like the marriage law, are federal jurisdiction and thus impact lesbian-led families across Canada. While a thorough review of family policy in Canada as it relates to same-sex families is needed to accurately determine the impact of this research on federal and/or provincial laws and policies, given the fact these studies clearly demonstrate that lesbian-led parents, and the children in those families, fare as well, and even better, than their heterosexual counterparts, I would like to suggest that:

- All discriminatory policies regarding lesbians adopting, fostering, or undergoing artificial insemination or new reproductive technologies should be abolished.

- Lesbian-friendly policies should be written regarding lesbian parenting issues.

- Policy should allow lesbians to give their children hyphenated last names of the two mothers, allow both parents' names on the birth certificate, and allow second parent adoptions by lesbian step or social mothers.

- More articles and studies on lesbian families in the journals on the family (e.g. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *Family Relations*, *Family Process*) should be published.

- More research into the wide range of lesbian-led families should be funded to see if these results hold up when the sample is not such a privileged group.

And, I would venture to suggest that lesbian mothers should also be encouraged to run courses for heterosexual parents on effective parenting!

Conclusion

Although there has been recognition of new family forms, family literature for the most part has tended to ignore lesbian and gay families. As William J. Doherty, Pauline G. Boss, Ralph Larossa, Walter R. Schumm, and Suzanne K. Steinmetz report, the research on gay and lesbian-led families is one of the "major streams of family scholarship that have not yet influenced mainstream family science" (16). Furthermore, sexist and heterosexist assumptions still underlie the majority of the research on families. Katherine Allen and David Demo have concluded that although there has been a gradual increase in the number of articles about same sex families in family research journals, lesbians are still "commonly ignored, poorly understood, stigmatized, and problematized" (117). Moreover, they state that examining family structure is not enough; attention must be placed on family process including "attitudes and beliefs about childrearing, decision-making and conflict resolution strategies, and parental support and discipline" (112).

Given the comparative nature of the vast majority of studies on lesbian-led families and the fact that most have been done using standardized measures with non-random populations there are many questions that remain unanswered. Many of these questions can only be answered by researchers interested in delving deeply into the essence of what lesbians and their families deem to be relevant and viewing these families as central to the research rather than marginal (Stacey and Biblarz). Most of the past studies on lesbian and gay families have worked on trying to disprove homophobic and heterosexist assumptions, about them, but in doing this they have made these assumptions the central part of their study.

"Studies on hidden populations raise a number of specific methodological questions usually absent from research involving known populations and less sensitive

subjects" (Faugier and Sargeant 791). The social invisibility, heterosexism, and homophobia toward lesbian-led families makes it difficult to sample them. Research is further "hindered by practices that maintain the so-called invisibility of lesbian/bi/queer women in the name of protection" (Luce 3). An example of this is that large scale studies on the family often make the assumption that if a child is not living with both parents than the children are from a "broken home" rather than taking the time to clarify if the children are possibly in an intact, planned two-mother home. Furthermore, when lesbian-led families are conceptualized as marginal and compared to heterosexual nuclear families in a normative family model, the research may miss the essence of what life can be like for children growing up in a non-heterosexual family (Benkov). I concur with Laura Benkov when she states:

Lesbian and gay parents have much to teach the culture as a whole about different possibilities for intimacy, about creating change, and about the reciprocal relationship between individuals and society. (63)

Although the amount, depth, and methodologies used in the literature on how children fare in these families is less than ideal it has been consistent in its findings: children raised in lesbian-headed households and lesbians families fare as well, if not better than, heterosexual-led families (Parks; Tasker; Brewaeys; Patterson). Clearly, there are many implications for governmental departments, but I believe it may take court challenges and/or complaints to the human rights commission to make many changes in certain provinces, since not all provinces are willing to accept same sex families as equal to heterosexual families. I hope that very soon equal access to services such as adoption, marriage, and infertility clinics will be available to all lesbians and their families across Canada. This increased access can only benefit children since it seems that children in lesbian-led families do so very well!

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