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## Same-Sex Parenting and Child Development: Reviewing the Contribution of Parental Gender

Biblarz and Stacey (2010) have raised many interesting points in their consideration of how the gender of parents matters. They have amassed two types of evidence pertinent to this question: comparisons of families led by same-sex couples versus heterosexual couples and comparisons of families led by single (heterosexual) mothers versus single (heterosexual) fathers. To do justice to Biblarz and Stacey's points regarding parenting by lesbians and gay men, my commentary initially focuses on whether same-sex parenting does indeed make a difference and then considers how this might be.

### *Assessing Whether Parental Gender Matters in Studies of Same-Sex Parenting*

Before asking how parental gender matters in relation to same-sex parenting we should assess *whether* it does matter. In Table 1 of their paper and in associated text, Biblarz and Stacey (2010) have chosen to emphasize differences in outcome for children raised by lesbian or gay parents in comparison to those raised by heterosexual parents and only briefly acknowledge that the majority of comparisons point to similarity of outcomes across family type (pp. 8, 13). Counting only instances of difference and neglecting instances of similarity presents an incomplete or distorted picture, even without the additional consideration of the likely generation of Type I errors (Allen & Burrell, 2002). Biblarz and

Stacey also have limited their review to consider planned parenting by lesbian or gay couples; this has provided a sharper contrast to heterosexual parenting but does not reflect the heterogeneity of nonheterosexual parenting (Tasker & Patterson, 2007).

How many of Biblarz and Stacey's (2010) differences are actual differences? Another way to detect difference in a field of small sample sizes is to aggregate studies statistically within a meta-analysis, thus reducing Type II errors and simultaneously avoiding an increase in Type I errors. Three meta-analyses have been published examining whether parental sexual orientation is associated with particular developmental outcomes for children (Allen & Burrell, 1996, 2002; Crowl, Ahn, & Baker, 2008). The number of studies available in the field has only just reached an acceptable level for meta-analysis; therefore, meta-analysis investigators have used broader inclusion criteria than did Biblarz and Stacey, including studies of lesbian and gay single parenting and families where children were the offspring of a previous heterosexual relationship.

The meta-analysis by Crowl et al. (2008) investigated differences between children raised by same-sex and heterosexual couples across 19 studies in relation to six developmental outcomes. No differences were found between children raised by heterosexual or same-sex parents in the following four areas: cognitive development, psychological adjustment, gender identity, or sexual partner preference. My commentary on Biblarz and Stacey's (2010) review next focuses on the two areas identified

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by Crowl and colleagues where possible differences were found: parent-child relationship and children's gender development.

*Same-Sex Parenting and the Quality of Parent-Child Relationships*

Findings from Crowl et al.'s (2008) meta-analysis produced a very clear result only in one area: nonheterosexual parents on average indicated significantly better relationships with their children than did heterosexual parents. In contrast, parental sexual orientation was not associated with differences in the quality of parent-child relationships when children's data were analyzed. Using a different meta-analysis technique, Allen and Burrell (2002) also pointed to the distinction between the different perspectives of parents and children. Ratings from parental report slightly favored lesbian and gay parenting over heterosexual parenting (although the difference was not statistically significant), but children's data yielded no differences between family types. On the one hand, these findings concur with Biblarz and Stacey's (2010) conclusion on the comparative strength of parent-child relationships in same-sex couple families. On the other hand, the meta-analyses point more specifically at the crucial importance of *who* is reporting on the quality of parent-child relationships. Parental self-report, of course, may be biased. It is plausible to argue that, in a prejudiced social climate, lesbian and gay parents may have more at stake in presenting a positive picture, yet it would certainly be to the detriment of our understanding if we failed to hear the voices of parents themselves. Future studies need to consider using additional sophisticated measures to rule out potential biases such as the possibility that female raters may be more likely to recognize (or attribute) parental warmth to mothers rather than fathers.

If we do indeed have a genuine difference in the quality of parent-child relationships between families parented by nonheterosexual parents compared with those parented by heterosexual parents, why might this be? Crowl et al. (2008) argued that the reports of significantly better parent-child relationships may be attributable to the predominance of female same-sex couples in the studies of nonheterosexual parenting used in their meta-analysis. As Biblarz and Stacey (2010) point out, perhaps mothers' warmth toward their children shone through from lesbian

couples and was generated from the "double dose" of maternal involvement in childrearing. How would this conclusion be altered if we knew more about gay fathers' parenting: Do gay couples divide parenting equally, does one male partner specialize in child care, or do they rely on outside help to cover child care? If gay male couples are less likely than lesbian couples to share parenting and direct involvement in child care does indeed make the crucial difference to warmth, then we would not expect the same levels of warmth in parent-child relationships to be shown when gay fathers are the respondents. Although, given the meta-analyses findings of Crowl et al. (2008) and Burrell and Allen (2002) predicating difference dependent on the source of data, we might expect children to be unaffected by this.

Another factor that might explain the close nature of parent-child relationships in families led by same-sex parents may be that, in seeking to protect their children from any homonegativity, parents express greater warmth. If parent-child relationships are close in order to manage intolerance, then we would expect parent-child relationships in gay father families to be as close as those in lesbian mother families—possibly closer, if gay fatherhood is indeed more visible and publically contended than lesbian motherhood, as some have suggested might be the case (Golombok & Tasker, in press).

Differences between same-sex parenting and heterosexual parenting also could be partially accounted for by variations in commitment to parenting generated by different routes to parenthood. As Biblarz and Stacey (2010) have reminded us, lesbians self-select into parenthood, so those having children will be highly motivated to do so and may be relatively affluent and well resourced. These factors may be even more important in selecting gay men into planned gay fatherhood. Parents in lesbian-led and gay-led families surmount much to achieve parenthood, overcoming varying degrees of prejudice and discrimination, making potentially difficult decisions about who will have the biogenetic connection with each particular child, and negotiating "who is going to do what" in terms of child care in the absence of traditional heterosexual gender assumptions.

The use of assisted reproductive techniques to achieve pregnancy of itself may also increase the levels of motivation for parenthood among lesbian couples, for example, in renewing

the commitment to having a baby with every attempt at pregnancy and disappointed failure. This motivational factor also applies to heterosexual couples having a baby through donor insemination (DI), and research on this highlights how much more emotionally involved these couples generally are with their children compared to heterosexual couples with naturally conceived children (Golombok et al., 2004).

A number of the studies of planned lesbian-led families that have pointed to differences between the parenting style of lesbian parents and heterosexual parents, particularly when contrasting lesbian comothers with heterosexual fathers, have not controlled for method of conception in matching family groups. Studies by Flaks, Ficher, Masterpasqua, and Joseph (1995) and Vanfraussen, Ponjaert-Kristoffersen, and Brewaeys (2002, 2003), like those of Bos, van Balen, and van den Boom (2004, 2007), recruited planned lesbian-led families through donor insemination clinics and community sources and compared them with population or school-based samples of heterosexual two-parent families. These families not only differed on route to parenthood but also often differed on other factors associated with use of assisted reproduction, such as parental age and number of children in the family, which in turn may have influenced the quality of parent-child relationships.

Studies that have carefully controlled for route to parenthood through recruiting from the same fertility center have tended to emphasize similarities between families led by lesbian or heterosexual parents. For example, Chan, Raboy, and Patterson (1998) compared lesbian DI families with heterosexual DI families and found no group differences in scores on measures of parent-child relationships or child adjustment. Children's psychological adjustment was, instead, inversely related to level of parenting stress and parental relationship quality in a similar fashion across both groups, indicating the importance of general family processes for children's well-being rather than parental sexual orientation. Two other reports have directly compared children in planned two-parent lesbian-led families with a matched group of children conceived to heterosexual couples via DI alongside a control group of naturally conceived children with two heterosexual parents (Brewaeys, Ponjaert, Van Hall, & Golombok, 1997; Tasker & Golombok, 1998). In the study by Brewaeys et al., data gathered from parental questionnaires

indicated that the average quality of the interaction between lesbian comothers and their children was rated more highly than that of fathers and children in both groups of heterosexual families. Similarly, the lesbian comothers in Tasker and Golombok's (1998) study were found to be more involved in daily caregiving than were fathers in heterosexual families, although group differences were reduced, but not removed, when controlling for method of conception. Both studies found that children's perceptions of their family relationships were remarkably similar across all three family types. It seems that children's perceptions of the quality of parent-child relationships are not influenced by parental gender differences in levels of involvement in parenting (at least not influenced during middle childhood in households where there are high levels of child care generally within the home).

Biblarz and Stacey (2010) are right to suggest studies of adoptive parenting as a way to progress our knowledge of the possible influence of same-sex parenting on child development. Future studies would need to not only control for parental characteristics but also carefully match the adopted children's profiles across each group of families. This is particularly important given the possibility that lesbian and gay adoptive parents may be given "hard to place" children (Brooks & Goldberg, 2001).

#### *Same-Sex Parenting and Children's Gender Development*

In their meta-analysis of the field of same-sex versus opposite sex parenting, Crowl et al. (2008) noted some evidence of differences in children's gender development. Differences in gender development of children raised by lesbian or gay parents depended on the following factors: whether boys or girls were being considered and the type of behavior measured. Further, Crowl et al. noted considerable noise in the data, which they attributed to inconsistencies in the reliability of methods employed across studies. Biblarz and Stacey (2010) also note some variability of findings in this area, yet their emphasis on difference leads them to suggest that "fatherlessness might remove pressure toward gender conformity that heterosexual fathers impose particularly on sons" (p. 14).

Given the lack of clarity in the field it would be wise to be cautious before concluding what influence parental sexual orientation had on

children's gender development. Any possible effects are likely to be subtle and contingent on the particular measures used, the gender of the child, cultural context, and variations within the particular family context. From their empirical work Fulcher, Sutfin, and Patterson (2008) concluded that parental attitudes and behaviors (e.g., conveying more liberal attitudes about gender and displaying a more egalitarian division of labor in the home) may have more influence than parental sexual orientation per se. We clearly need further investigations of these factors in households led by heterosexual parents as well as in families led by same-sex couples. Golombok et al. (2003) have distinguished between core aspects of gender development (gender identity and children's gender-related behavior) and attitudinal aspects (e.g., occupational choices). Many of the differences between children brought up in lesbian-led families and their peers that Biblarz and Stacey (2010) have highlighted relate to attitudinal rather than core aspects of gender development. For children raised in lesbian-mother families it might be that the absence of a resident father matters little for core aspects of gender development. Why could this be?

Some lesbian mothers may have compensated in other ways to foster masculinity in sons and femininity in daughters depending on their perceptions of and responses to the social demands of the wider cultural context. Through contacts with extended families, nonrelated adults, peer groups, and even through media images, children can pick up on cultural images of masculinity outside their home. Fulcher, Chan, Raboy, and Patterson (2002) found that children conceived via DI to lesbian mothers or heterosexual mothers did not differ on the extent to which they had contact with their extended family members or nonrelated adults; these children were not isolated from contact with men.

Research on lesbian couples spanning the transition to parenting through DI has indicated that mothers mostly desire some level of male involvement for their children and especially for their sons (Goldberg & Allen, 2007). In Goldberg and Allen's study, most of the lesbian couples participating included men in their children's lives in various novel ways; often specific men were named as suitable male contacts, including the women's brothers, fathers, gay and heterosexual male friends, and sperm donors.

Some lesbians expressed ambivalent attitudes toward male involvement, yet societal norms, wanting to be fair to their child, and appreciation of diversity necessitated their acknowledgment of the relative importance of male role models within their wider cultural environment. Goldberg and Allen argued that these lesbian mothers were not envisaging "fathers" for their children but they were facilitating male involvement in their children's lives. One study comparing Swedish and Irish lesbian parents has indicated that cultural context, in particular public campaigns to emphasize participatory fatherhood and perception of legal security of lesbian partnerships and child custody, made a difference to decisions around DI (Ryan-Flood, 2005). In both countries, most of the lesbian mothers interviewed wanted a known donor, but it was predominantly the Swedish mothers who wanted a known donor to act as a male role model in their child's life, whereas the Irish mothers often wanted a known donor so that knowledge of their child's biogenetic origins would be available.

The possible influence of same-sex parenting on children's gender development merits further exploration, preferably with additional refinements in measurement and larger samples, including gay fathers and lesbian mothers tracked longitudinally to examine the possible interaction of gender of parent with gender of child. We should be mindful of the possibility that children's expressions of interest may influence parental interpretation and provision for their children. For example, Goldberg and Allen (2007) noted that some lesbian mothers had changed their views about the need for male involvement after the birth of their child because of their perceptions of their developing child's needs and interests.

We need further work on same-sex parenting particularly in relation to the intersectionality of child's gender, parental sexual orientation, class, ethnicity, and sociolegal context. Possibly, this may help to explain variability of findings between studies examining children's gender development. To date, analyses of data from adolescent school-based samples support the conclusion of no differences in adjustment between adolescents raised by same-sex female couples and opposite-sex couples and the importance of general family processes irrespective of parental sexual orientation, across socioeconomically and ethnically representative

samples (see Telingator & Patterson, 2008, for a review). Most studies, however, aggregate children from Black and minority ethnic groups rather than examine specific cultural differences. One of the very few studies to specifically explore the childrearing attitudes of Black lesbian mothers in the United States suggests that this group reported views similar to those of Black heterosexual mothers, but they also may be more flexible about family rules, show greater tolerance of their children's own sexuality, and hold less traditional attitudes toward stereotypical feminine roles (Hill, 1987).

National variations in the sociolegal context with the introduction of same-sex marriages and civil partnership legislation have enabled investigators to begin to address how lesbian parenthood might be influenced by this. For example, one study found fewer worries about legal status and discrimination and depressive symptoms expressed by lesbian mothers residing in Canada than in the United States (Shapiro, Peterson, & Stewart, 2009). Future work could investigate whether Biblarz and Stacey (2010) are justified in saying that lesbian coparents are more at risk of separation and whether marriage or partnership rights make a difference to this.

#### *Similarities, Variability, and Glimpses of Difference*

Where we catch glimpses of difference between families led by lesbian parents and those led by heterosexual couples has been in reports of parenting practices that favor the double maternal involvement in child care that lesbian couples offer. Although further methodological refinements are needed, there have been improvements in the field, and studies are starting to explore the variability within lesbian-led families to give clues as to how women's parenting is different in same-sex partnerships. Nevertheless, lesbian parenting makes negligible difference to children's reports of the quality of family relationships, and numerous studies have demonstrated the similarity of children of lesbian mothers and children of heterosexual parents on measures of psychological adjustment. Too few studies have investigated parenting by gay fathers for us to be able to conclude whether or how fatherhood might be done differently by gay men. Biblarz and Stacey (2010) have enlightened the debate on the contribution that parental gender makes and drawn attention to the

potential of studies of parental sexual orientation to broaden our knowledge of parenting.

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