

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Parenting

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Abstract

Introduction

According to US census data, an estimated 270, 313 American children were living in households headed by same-sex couples in 2005, and nearly twice that number had a single lesbian or gay parent (Romero, Baumle, Badgett, & Gates, 2007). For the last two decades, a quiet revolution has been blooming in the LGBT community. More and more LGBT people from all walks of life are becoming parents. LGBT people become parents for some of the same reasons that heterosexual people do. Some pursue parenting as a single person and others seek to create family as a couple, still other LGBT people became parents when they were in a heterosexual relationship (Martin, 1993). Although there are many common themes between LGBT parenting and heterosexual parenting there are also some unique features.

Unlike their heterosexual counterparts, who couple, get pregnant, and give birth, most LGBT individuals and couples who wish to parent must consider many other variables in deciding whether to become parents, as birth option alone is not the only option.

Definitions

LGBT individuals and couples who wish to parent will have to give more careful consideration to how they will become a parent, and at the outset will be open to different ways of becoming a family and parenting children. Although many LGBT people are parent through the birth of a child, LGBT people have become parents through a number of avenues:

- Adoption
- Foster Care
- Kinship Care

- Surrogacy
- Donor insemination
- Birth from a heterosexual union
- Shared parenting from a custody agreement between lesbians and gay men
- Shared parenting with gay men and a heterosexual mother

Some LGBT people chose to parent as a couple, and some parent as single persons. Those who choose to parent as single parents will face stresses more to do with single parenting than with their sexuality. Those who parent as a couple will also face challenges to their status as a couple or a family. On the positive side, LGBT people who choose to create families have the advantage of redefining and reinventing their own meaning for family and parenting, precisely because they exist outside of the traditionally defined “family.” They have the unique opportunity to break out of preconceived gender roles and be a new kind of father or mother to a child. Most LGBT people who parent are not invested in raising LGBT children as suggested by some, but to raise children who will be authentic, happy, self-confident and have the ability to support them regardless of their child’s expressions of gender or sexual orientation.

It is important to recognize that although there are many similarities, LGBT parenting families also differ from the heterosexually-parented family. The conventional notion of a family presumes there will be two parents, one of each gender, that they will share a loving relationship and live under one roof, that they will both be biologically related to the children they raise and recognized legally as a family. This mom-and-dad nuclear family is the baseline model in Western culture against which all other models of family are measured, and it is assumed by most to be the optimal family environment for child development, compared to which all other types of families are viewed as deficient in some way.

This model, however, does not apply to most families with a LGBT parent(s). In families with a LGBT couple, usually there is at least one parent who has no biological relationship to the child. There is almost always a parent-child relationship not recognized or protected by the law.

Demographics

It is inaccurate to talk about a LGBT community as if it is uniform or easily identifiable. As with all communities, the LGBT community is diverse in terms of how individuals wish to define themselves and live their lives. LGBT people are as diverse as any other subgroup of the general population, and they are part of every race, culture, ethnic group, religious group, socioeconomic affiliation, and family in the United States today.

Although in recent years there has been greater visibility, LGBT people are frequently socialized to hide their sexual orientation, and therefore, many still form part of an invisible population. According to an Urban Institute Report (Smith & Gates, 2001), the 2000 U.S. Census Bureau figures for same-sex unmarried partner households provide researchers and policy makers with a wealth of information about a LGBT headed families. Revised estimates from the 2010 Census (US Census, 2011) indicate that there were 131,729 same-sex married couple households and 514,735 same-sex unmarried partner households in the United States. The results of the 2010 Census revised estimates are closer to the results of the 2010 American Community Survey (ACS) for same-sex married and unmarried partners. The 2010 ACS estimated same-sex married couples at 152,335 and same-sex unmarried partners at 440,989 (US Census Bureau, downloaded October 31, 2012, http://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/2010_census/cb11-cn181.html)

According to analysis by Gates (2011b) demographic data show significant diversity among same-sex couples with children. These families live throughout the country: of same-sex couples by region, 26% in the South, 24% in New England, and 21% in the Pacific states are raising children. Childrearing is substantially higher among racial/ethnic minorities and African-Americans, in particular, are 2.4 times more likely than their White counterparts to be raising children. Further, among individuals in same-sex couples who did not finish high school, 43% are raising children, and 20% of children raised by same-sex couples live in poverty. These data provide policy makers at every level of government compelling arguments for why they need to take care of the policy needs of LGBT families as they live in nearly every corner of every county in America. The geographical diversity of where LGBT families are living is striking. From

big cities to small farming towns, from the deep South to the Pacific Northwest, LGBT families are part of every American landscape. These facts will help us dispel stereotypes and present a fuller, more accurate picture of the LGBT family in America.

Interestingly, Gates points out in his analysis that the proportion of same-sex couples raising children has begun to decline. In Census 2000, more than 17% of same-sex couples were raising children. That proportion peaked at 19% in 2006 and has declined to 16% in 2009. Despite the decline, the number of same-sex couples raising children is still much higher today than ten years ago since many more couples are reporting themselves in Census Bureau data. In 2000, the Census reported about 63,000 couples raising children. Today, the figure is now more than 110,000

According to a Williams Institute survey conducted in April 2011, approximately 3.5% of American adults identify themselves as lesbian, gay or bisexual, while 0.3% are transgender—approximately 11.7 million Americans (Gates, 2011). However, a significantly higher percentage acknowledge having same-sex attraction without identifying as LGB. This makes it difficult to accurately record the demographics of LGBT people in the US.

Just as no one knows how many people self identify as LGBT, no one knows exactly how many LGBT parents are raising children in the United States. One study by Gates and colleagues (2007) made the following findings that shed some light on the statistics associated with lesbians and gay men who parent or wish to parent:

- More than one in three lesbians have given birth and one in six gay men have fathered or adopted a child.
- More than half of gay men and 41 percent of lesbians want to have a child.
- An estimated two million GLB people are interested in adopting
- An estimated 65,500 adopted children are living with a lesbian or gay parent.
- More than 16,000 adopted children are living with LGBT parents in California, the highest number among the states.

- LGBT parents are raising four percent of all adopted children in the United States.
- Same-sex couples raising adopted children are older, more educated, and have more economic resources than other adoptive parents.
- Adopted children with same-sex parents are younger and more likely to be foreign born.

Currently there are 400,540 children and youth who live in foster care in the United States and more than 104,000 foster children await adoption (USDHHS, 2011). States must recruit parents who are interested and able to foster and adopt children. Three states currently restrict LGBT individuals or couples from adopting. It is up to each state to decide whether to allow LGBT people to become licensed as adoptive or foster parents. Although the majority of states no longer officially deem lesbians and gay men as unfit to rear a child, each state decides independently who can adopt, and legislators more for political reasons, than for reasons having to do with child well-being, continue to introduce bills barring adoptions and foster parenting by LGBT people into state legislatures every year.

Theory, Research and Best Practices

Historically, in the area of practice with LGBT parents, the social work knowledge base has relied on theoretical applications from child development, child welfare, and psychology. LGBT history indeed is rooted in decades of hiding and secrecy, when the mere whisper that one was not a stalwart heterosexual could destroy a career or a life. The keepers of public morals sought to keep those who strayed from this position, firmly in line. But there have also been consequential shifts over time in cultural openness to LGBT people to take note of.

A trio of events including, the ground-breaking work of the late Dr. Evelyn Hooker in the 1950s and 1960s which presented rigorous scientific research to provide indisputable evidence that homosexuality is not a mental illness; the advent of the Stonewall Rebellion of 1969 in New York City, generally regarded as the birth of the LGBT liberation movement; and the elimination of homosexuality from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental

Disorders in 1973, caused society to begin, slowly, to change its perceptions of homosexuality. Concurrently, throughout the late 1970's, as social activism in the LGBT communities were nurturing the growth of a new sense of dignity among lesbians and gay men; adult lesbians and gays became increasingly willing to identify themselves openly. The 1980s were focused mainly on a community struggling with the realities of HIV and AIDS. The 1990s focused on issues of LGBT parenting, while the early 21st century spotlighted LGBT marriage rights. In light of this ostensible openness, many social work practitioners have become increasingly aware of the existence of LGBT parents.

In the past thirty years, the theoretical underpinnings of practice with LGBT people has shifted from the professional view that a LGBT identity was equal to a diagnosis of mental illness to the more LGBT affirming approaches of contemporary 21st century social work practice. Although there has been ongoing progressive change, undeniably the social work profession continues to grapple with the reality of LGBT parenting.

Theory and Research

The nature and scope of research studies on LGBT headed families continues to grow. The earliest documentation on lesbian mothers and gay fathers mostly explored in the context of children born in heterosexual marriages which ended in divorce. Such early studies have been replaced by those focusing on children in planned LGBT headed families without the confounding variable of divorce and the coming out process of the parents. There are, as with all research, some limitations to the research in the area of LGBT parenting. Since not all LGBT persons are “out” random representative sampling of LGBT parents is a challenge to methodology. This is particularly so as there is no reliable data on the number and whereabouts of LGBT parents in the general population in the U.S., or elsewhere. In the existing, limited research there are also biases towards white, urban, well-educated and mature lesbian mothers and gay fathers. The relatively small samples which do exist in the research are recruited through community networks.

One of the most consistent findings over the past fifteen years is that same-gendered couples with and without children tend to establish a more even distribution of household tasks in comparison to heterosexual couples. Without socially prescribed

guidance on gendered roles, LGBT parents tend to value equality in partnership and structure an equitable division of labor in housework, childrearing, and in work outside the home. Even though this repeated finding seems to be well known in the mental health community, it has not been discussed in the mainstream dialogue about the pros and cons of LGBT parenting.

Stacey and Biblarz (2001) identify parental gender to be predictive of parenting skill. All mothers (heterosexual and lesbian) are more likely than fathers to be more invested and skilled at caring for children. Therefore, when two women co-parent, gender and sexual orientation interact, with two mothers both committed to and working together toward creating an equitable and mutually caring environment that provides a loving and supportive foundation for their child's developing self-esteem.

In their follow up study Biblarz and Stacey (2010) found that "The argument that children need both a mother and father presumes that mothering and fathering involve mutually exclusive capacities. That is not the case. Research shows that men can perform traditional "women's work" and women can perform "men's work" perfectly well. As many as one in five fathers of young children are now providing their primary care. The bottom line is that committed, responsible parenting involves spending time with children, caring about what they're involved in, and providing structure, limits, guidance and affection. Good parenting is good parenting, whatever package it comes in. The gender of parents only matters in ways that shouldn't matter at all to policymakers, judges, and anyone else who cares about the welfare of children."

The research on biological gay fathers and their children is extremely limited. Two studies (McPherson, 1993; Sbordone, 1993) show similar parenting styles and skills between gay and heterosexual fathers. Mallon's study (2004) of the parenting process in a group of twenty self-identified gay fathers found they were more likely to endorse a nurturing role for fathers, less likely to emphasize the importance of economic support, and less likely to show affection to their partner in front of the children (Barret and Robinson, 2000). Further results indicate that gay fathers are as effective as heterosexual fathers in caring for their children. They have been shown to be more consistent in limit-setting with their children than are heterosexual fathers. They have also been found to be more emotionally expressive and nurturing with their children, less likely to prioritize

their “breadwinner” functions over their parenting roles and less interested in conventional gender-role behaviors than heterosexual fathers (Mc Garry, 2006).

The most recent large scale research on lesbian parents (Gartrell & Bos, 2010) expands our understanding of psychological well-being in adolescent biological offspring of lesbian mothers and therefore has implications for the pediatric care of these adolescents and for public policies concerning same-sex parenting. The study's results showed that the 17-year-olds of lesbian mothers were rated significantly higher in social, school/academic, and total competence and significantly lower in social problems, rule-breaking, aggressive, and externalizing problem behavior than their age-matched counterparts. This publication prompted international media attention.

Fears about LGBT parents

Although there has been a growing body of literature about LGBT parenting since the mid-1980s the idea of a LGBT person as a primary nurturing figure rearing children is still remarkable to many. Many social work professionals still hold firm to a belief system grounded in the ubiquitous, negative myths and stereotypes about LGBT persons. Those who oppose the idea of LGBT persons as parents base their thinking on a number of fears, for example that:

- the child will be bullied or ostracized because of having an LGBT parents
- the child might become LGBT because of having a LGBT parental role model
- living with or having contact with an LGBT parent may harm the child’s moral well-being (these beliefs may have their foundation in religious texts that condemn relationships that are other than heterosexual)
- the child will be abused (based on the myth that all LGBT persons are sexual predators).

None of these rationales are borne out or supported by evidence (Patterson, 1996; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). Numerous studies show that the qualities that make good fathers or good mothers are universal and not related to sexual orientation or gender. The need for fathers to be involved in the lives of their children has been very clearly established. The ability to love and care for a child is not determined by one's sexual

orientation. Furthermore, the desire to parent is not exclusive to heterosexuals, but is one shared by many LGBT persons.

According to the meta-analysis of the relevant research spanning two decades conducted by Stacey and Biblarz (2001) none of the significant differences in parenting as reported in the research apply to children's self-esteem, psychological well-being or social adjustment. Nor were there differences in parents' self-esteem, mental health or commitment to their children. In other words, even though there are differences, they were not identified as deficits.

A few studies reported some differences which could represent advantages of lesbian parenting. For example, several studies found that lesbian co-mothers share family responsibilities more equally than heterosexual married parents, and some research hints that children benefit from egalitarian co-parenting. A few studies found that lesbians worry less than heterosexual parents about the gender conformity of their children. Perhaps that helps to account for a few studies which found that sons of lesbians play less aggressively and that children of lesbians communicate their feelings more freely, aspire to a wider range of occupations and score higher on self-esteem. Most professionals would see these differences as positive elements, but some critics of these studies have misrepresented these differences as evidence that the children are suffering from gender confusion.

Finally, some studies reported that lesbian mothers feel more comfortable discussing sexuality with their children and accepting their children's sexuality – whatever it might be. More to the point are data reported in a 25-year British study (Golombok and Tasker, 1996). Few of the young adults in this study identified themselves as gay or lesbian, but a larger minority of those with lesbian mothers did report that they were more open to exploring their sexuality and had at one time or another considered or actually had a same-sex relationship.

Although most research to date on LGBT parenting is based on those who are biological parents, researchers looking at LGBT parenting have reached the same, unequivocal conclusions. That is, the children of LGBT parents grow up as successfully as the children of heterosexual. Since 1980 more than 20 studies conducted and published in the US, Australia, the Netherlands, and the UK have addressed the way in

which parental sexual orientation impacts on children parents (Golombok et al, 1983; 1987, 2003; Vanfrauseen et al, 2002, 2003; Wainright & Patterson, 2006; Wainright et al, 2004). Not one study has found that the children of LGBT parents face greater social stigma. There is no evidence to support the belief that the children of LGBT parents are more likely to be abused, or to suggest that the children of these parents are more likely to be gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender themselves. Children will, in fact, be who they are. It is important to bear in mind that the majority of LGBT persons have been raised by heterosexual parents.

Best Practice

Social Workers have a key role to play in the lives of LGBT parents. From direct practice with family systems to policy and legislative advocacy the array of opportunities for social workers in practice with LGBT parents continues to broaden. As LGBT parents are increasingly more out and open in many geographic locations of the country, LGBT parents can no longer viewed as an invisible population. Although heterosexual privilege continues to dominate mainstream consciousness, assuming that all children live within the context of heterosexually headed families, working with lesbian or gay headed families is an experience that most social workers will encounter at some point in their practice.

Best practices suggests that social workers need to accept the premise that it is quality of care, and not family constellation, which determines what is optimal for children's healthy development. The ability of LGBT parents to provide for the social and emotional health of their children just as adequately as heterosexual parents. Social workers must also examine our own notion of family and further learn to identify what constitutes family based on the loving bonds of responsibility that have been both intended and fulfilled, and not solely on biological, legal or conventional definitions.

Best practices for professional social workers who work with LGBT parents involve a LGBT affirming approach to practice. These strategies might include working with lesbian or gay individuals to assess their desire to become a parent, working to support lesbian or gay persons who are in various stages of pursuing parenting; supporting those who have already become parents deal with the everyday reality of

parenting; and assisting couples and families in more traditional couples or family therapy situations.

Policy practice is the responsibility of all social workers. Within the specialization of practice with LGBT parents, professional social workers partner with or represent the interests of persons and families who request assistance in advocating for policy or legislative changes. Such activities might include: advocating on the local, state or federal levels for changes in fiscal allocations and services, speaking with legislators or bureaucrats, gathering data for policy analyses and performing such analyses, or navigating a person through the complex delivery system. The most effective policy practice activities involve consumer advocates who are most knowledgeable regarding gaps in services, unmet needs or solutions from their experience. Within the area of practice with LGBT persons, the lesbian or gay person and/or family are usually the “experts” when it comes to best practices. It is the responsibility of social workers to identify needs, assist in procuring services, navigate the maze of services, and promote policies and services to better serve this population.

Future Trends and Practice Implications

Discussion and debate about parenting by LGBT persons occurs frequently among child welfare policymakers, social service agencies, and social workers. All need better information about LGBT parents and their children as they make individual and policy-level decisions about the lives of children with LGBT parents.

Recent government surveys demonstrate that many lesbians and gay men are already raising children, and many more LGBT people would like to have children at some point. A report from the Urban Institute (Gates et al. 2007) estimates that two million LGBT people have considered adoption as a route to parenthood. Since prior research shows that less than one-fifth of adoption agencies attempt to recruit adoptive parents from the LGBT community, findings of the Urban Institute Report (Gates et al, 2007) and others (Evan B. Donaldson, 2003; Mallon, 2006) suggest that LGBT people are an underutilized pool of potential adoptive parents.

Future trends in practice with LGBT parents will be most affected not only by the increasing numbers of LGBT men who chose parenting, but by the heightened self awareness and development of LGBT affirming practice approaches of social workers who work with these parents. In addition, there are legislative and legal initiatives in some states that seek to limit parenting opportunities for LGBT men. Social workers must balance their own personal attitudes toward lesbians and gay men as parents with the reality that research suggest that lesbians gay persons do make good parents.

Future Trends

Considerable controversy surrounds the issue of parenting by gays and lesbians, and it seems certain to escalate in the years to come. It is a critical component of the debate over whether lesbians and gay men should be permitted to marry, and it continues to divide policymakers in the United States – as well as in Canada and other countries – as they formulate laws and practices relating to workplace benefits, foster care, adoption, and an array of other important social and personal questions surrounding parenting.

Even as these discussions proliferate on the legislative and rhetorical levels, however, reality on the ground is outstripping the pace of the debate. That is, a growing number of lesbians and gay men are becoming parents and are living as families every day, irrespective of what the policymakers or practitioners do or say.

LGBT men are becoming mothers and fathers in many ways, but primarily through alternative insemination, surrogacy and adoption. The latter alternative, which is becoming increasingly popular, provides critical insights into the cultural changes taking place in two major ways: demonstrating that parenting of children by lesbians and gay men is an ongoing, unabated practice; and showing that Americans' attitudes are evolving.

Solid research, to help inform and shape the dialogue, is increasing. There have been studies, for example, finding that LGBT men's parenting capacity and their children's outcomes are comparable to those of heterosexuals. Further research assists in dispelling myths about lesbians and gay men as parents. Numerous professional societies have provided positive statements from their membership supporting LGBT parents,

among them are: Child Welfare League of America, National Association of Social Workers, American Psychological Association, American Psychiatric Association, American Academy of Pediatrics, American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry; American Medical Association, American Bar Association, and the North American Council on Adoptable Children.

For society, the bottom line is clear: Lesbians and gay men are becoming parents in growing numbers. For lesbians and gay men wishing to become parents, there are many avenues to fulfill that desire. Although stereotypes and misconceptions still perpetuate policy, legislation and practice, from a child-centered perspective, the willingness of social services agencies to accept LGBT adults as parents means that more children will have loving and permanent families.

Social Work Practice Implications

There may continue to be a steep learning curve for some professional social workers engaged in practice with LGBT parents. Moving toward the development of an affirming practice with LGBT parents will require intensive continuing education. As social work practitioners working with LGBT parents it is essential for professionals, to read the research, and to analyze, interpret and discuss the research findings and practice implications for effective practice with this population. It is incumbent upon the professional community that we are clear about the facts, able to rebut the misinformation presented by those who may not see LGBT persons as “appropriate” resources for children in need of homes and nurture the narratives of truth that we have witnessed through our practice (see NRCPPFC, 2012 a, b, c, d). Research findings and their interpretation have enormous impact in many influential arenas, including court cases for custody and visiting rights, judges, child advocates, professionals in the health and mental health communities, and those charged with developing and enacting legislation that guides our laws. In the midst of a politically charged environment in which negative stereotypes and ideological assertions can easily gain status as “truth,” it is essential for social work practitioners, to become familiar with what is known and not known from the research studies and practice implications so that LGBT parents work with and be supported by informed and competent social work practitioners.

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Key Words

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