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Conceiving Identity: Bisexual, Lesbian and Gay Parents Consider their Children's Sexual Orientations

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This study demonstrates the inadequacy of the traditional theory of childhood socialization and identity formation, which holds that children are socialized to internalize the key parameters of their parents' identities. The lesbian, gay and bisexual parents studied were willing actively to foster a sexual identity different from their own in their children. This illustrates that parents may seek to shape the process of internalization so that their children are able to develop identities fundamentally different from their own. The implication for social work is that adoptive or birth parents may successfully instill identities in their children which differ from their own.

Introduction

Numerous studies of lesbian, gay and bisexual parents and their children have concluded that these families are indistinguishable from families with straight parents. In this study I demonstrate that bisexual, lesbian and gay families can indeed be distinguished from straight families.¹ Unlike their straight counterparts, the gay parents studied consider it likely that their children's sexual identities will differ from their own. This study also demonstrates the inadequacy of the traditional understanding of childhood socialization and identity formation. Socialization theorists usually state that children internalize the key parameters of their parents' identities—such as race, class, gender identity, sexual orientation, and even political party affiliation—in an unconscious, transparent manner. In fact, as this study illustrates, parents may become much more conscious of their role in shaping their children's identities, and may in fact become determined to

rupture the process so that their children may develop identities fundamentally different from their own.

I explored bisexual, gay and lesbian parents' expectations about their children's sexual identity development and the role they intended to play in that process through interviews with eighteen queer parents of prepubescent children. Although the sample is small and the findings must be treated as preliminary, the striking similarity in the attitudes of the interviewees regarding their children's sexual identities indicates the significance of the findings.

Review of the Literature

The Literature on Socialization

Sociologists have always been interested in the question of whether social cohesion arises out of similarity or difference between individuals. Ever since Durkheim associated mechanical solidarity with the "primitive" ties of kin and clan and organic solidarity with the "advanced" ties arising out of the division of labor, sociologists have associated hegemony with the solidarity of the family. (1984 [1893])

Since Mead (1936), socialization theorists have stated that children adopt the attitudes and identities of significant others, especially their parents, through an unconscious process of identification and internalization. Socialization theory predicts and explains similarities between parent and child by treating the child almost as a *tabula rasa* upon which the parent unconsciously inscribes social identities such as race, class, and gender. While socialization theorists do assert that the child actively participates in socialization processes, they emphasize the asymmetry of the parent-child relationship and the determinative nature of parental power. (e.g., Berger & Berger, 1979; Damon, 1983)

Socialization theorists downplay the significance of parent-child difference and conflict, even during adolescence. (See, e.g., Feldman & Gehring, 1990; Montemayor, 1990) As stated in the *Handbook of Socialization Theory and Research*,

[T]here is overwhelming evidence of congruity between, illustratively, parents' social class and the social class of the adolescent's

date and friends; between parents' frequency of church attendance, or their religious belief systems, and the religious condition of the adolescent; between parents' education and adolescents' educational plans, aspirations and performance; between the political party preferences and voting behavior of the parents and their offspring; and between the racial views of parents and children. The list might be continued indefinitely. (Campbell, 1969: 827)

Socialization scholars report a vast body of evidence of familial hegemony; moreover, they tend to treat differences in the social identities of parents and children as something they should not seek to explore. As one theorist put it, "it is not a problem of socialization to explain the uniqueness of individuals." (Elkin, 1960: 5)

Since socialization theory states that elements of parental identity are internalized by children, it would seem to predict that parents with homosexual or bisexual identities would raise children with similar identities. Judges, social workers, politicians and homophobic activists have cited this theoretical prediction in arguing against permitting lesbian, gay and bisexual people to have custody of children. (See, e.g., *Harvard Law Review*, 1989; du Mas, 1979) A large body of literature has been generated examining the prediction that gay parents raise children who also become gay; I examine this literature below. First, however, I will examine another literature relating to children being socialized by parents who are "different": the sociological and social work literatures on transracial adoption.

The specter of parents socializing children to have "inappropriate" identities has been raised in the transracial adoption controversy. As the rising availability of contraception and abortion have reduced the number of white children available for adoption over the past several decades, more white parents have sought to adopt children of color, and child placement agencies have softened policies against transracial adoption. Some members of the African American community, including social scientists and social workers, have lobbied against the upsurge in transracial adoption, arguing that white parents cannot socialize their adoptive children to have a black racial identity. (See, e.g., Chimezie, 1975; Howard et al., 1977; Simon, 1978) Other authors have argued that parents can consciously choose to socialize their children to

acquire an identity different from their own. (See, e.g., Jones & Else, 1979; Silverman, 1993) They believe that socialization is not merely an unconscious transmission of essentialist identities, but a process that can be shaped by parental intent.

Studies have shown that many white parents who adopt African American children want their children to identify their race as "human" rather than black. (Johnson et al., 1987; Ladner, 1977) In a study by Johnson et al. comparing black children adopted transracially and intraracially, 11 of 26 sets of adoptive white parents wanted their children to identify as black. The remaining white parents "wished their children to identify with the white race, the human race, or neither race." (p. 51) While only half of the children raised by white parents who preferred some identity other than black had a black self-identity, 82% of the children whose white parents wanted them to identify as black did in fact have a black self-identity. Of the children adopted by African American parents, 80% had a black self-identity. This study indicates that if parents choose to make the effort, they can effectively socialize their children to have a racial identity different from their own.

Socialization theory and research have focused on a model of the family in which family members share the same racial background, religious affiliation, (hetero)sexual identity, etc. In this context researchers have found socialization to be a transparent, generally unconscious process, leading children to adopt identities similar to those of their parents. But as studies of transracial adoption show, in multiracial contexts parents may become much more conscious of their role in shaping their children's identities, and may in fact become determined to work to allow their children to develop a racial identity different from their own. Perhaps this is a singular exception to the general rule of socialization. However, if lesbian, gay and bisexual parents can be shown similarly to work to allow their children to adopt a sexual identity different from their own, it would provide evidence that socialization theory must be fundamentally reconsidered. It would indicate that socialization need not dictate hegemony within the family, but can instead facilitate the adoption of dissimilar identities. To hearken back to Durkheim, socialization could lead to organic as well as mechanical solidarity in the family.

Besides being interesting on a purely theoretical level, the issue of whether bisexual, lesbian and gay parents transmit their sexual identities to the children they raise has important implications for social work. Many social service agencies have formal policies discouraging the placement of foster or adoptive children with gay parents which are based upon the assumption that such children would be placed "at risk" of becoming gay themselves via socialization. If doubt is cast upon the premise upon which these policies are based, then the policies themselves should be reevaluated.

The Literature on Bisexual, Lesbian and Gay Families

Research on heterosexual parents with gay, lesbian and bisexual offspring demonstrates that heterosexual parents act as traditional socialization theory would predict. While they do not devote much conscious consideration to the matter when raising their children, they assume that their children will adopt "appropriate" heterosexual orientations by modelling their parents' behavior. When their gay children reveal their sexual identities, a family crisis is precipitated, and the heterosexual parents feel a sense of guilt, blaming themselves or their spouses for failing properly to socialize their children. (Javaid, 1993; Silverstein, 1977) Heterosexual parents also feel anger and disappointment at what they view as a rejection of them and their values. (Id.) Heterosexual parents who find out that their children's sexual identity differs from theirs also feel that their children's revealed sexual orientation negates their previous family role as good children. (Strommen, 1989)

Research on heterosexual parents supports the claims of traditional socialization theory: that parents normally transmit the parameters of their identities to their children without conscious effort; that this creates a familial hegemony of identities that is the source of familial solidarity; and that any departure from this replication of parental identities is abnormal and disrupts the solidarity of the family. Hence not only socialization theory but also the experience of heterosexual parents have led many to predict that bisexual, lesbian and gay parents would transmit their sexual identities to their children, and would reject their children if they expressed a heterosexual identity. This prediction has

been the basis of social welfare policies which deny child custody to lesbian, gay and bisexual parents. (Whitehead & Tully, 1993)

Others have reviewed the extensive literature demonstrating, counter to the predictions of socialization theory, that children of queer parents are indistinguishable from the children of straight parents. (O'Connell, 1993; Patterson, 1992) Centrally, and most significantly, numerous studies have shown that the children of lesbian, gay and bisexual parents grow up to express a heterosexual identity as frequently as do children of straight parents (e.g. Gibbs, 1989; Huggins, 1989). Research also indicates that children of homosexual parents have no gender identity problems (e.g. Hoeffler, 1981; Kirkpatrick et al., 1981), and demonstrate normal psychological and intellectual development (e.g. Green, 1986; Golombok, 1983). Other studies show that lesbian, gay and bisexual parents are "good" parents: they do not abuse their children (e.g. Jones & MacFarlane, 1980; Sarafino, 1979); they have high quality relationships with both their male and female children (e.g. Keating & Brigman, 1986); and they involve adults of the opposite sex in their children's activities (e.g. Golombok, 1983; Kirkpatrick, 1987). One researcher claims that the women she studied "segregated" their lesbian and maternal identities, so that there was nothing subversively lesbian about their mothering. (Lewin, 1994) The conclusion of all this literature is that there is nothing that distinguishes queer families from straight families.

This conclusion is incorrect: gay families are distinguished from straight families. There is copious evidence that the children of gay parents are distinguished from their straight counterparts because they do not tend to adopt the same sexual identity as their parents. What is lacking is evidence indicating whether lesbian, gay and bisexual parents are distinguished from straight parents. Do the majority of the children of gay parents adopt a heterosexual identity despite unarticulated parental socialization pressure similar to the type exerted by heterosexual parents? Or do bisexual, lesbian and gay parents intentionally seek to avoid exerting socialization pressure upon their children to adopt a bisexual or homosexual identity—which would deeply distinguish them from heterosexual parents?

It is my hypothesis that lesbian, gay and bisexual parents' treatment of their children's sexual orientations is distinguished

from that of heterosexual parents, and that this is due to the lesbian, gay and bisexual parents' experiences in coming out to their own heterosexual parents. Having faced the trauma of parental dismay and disapproval upon revealing their sexual orientations to their families of origin, I hypothesize that bisexual, gay and lesbian parents are determined not to exert unarticulated socialization pressure upon their own children as they develop their own sexual identities. Instead, I posit, they wish to guide their children in a conscious process of self-discovery, assuring them that parental love is not conditioned on the sexual orientation they adopt. If confirmed, this will not only show that gay parents are distinguished from straight parents, but will also bring into question some of the basic premises of socialization theory—premises upon which social welfare policies have been based.

Methods

I interviewed 18 bisexual, lesbian and gay parents. I met 3 of these parents by attending a Berkeley lesbian/bisexual mothers' support group in the spring of 1995, 4 by marching with the queer parents' contingent in the San Francisco Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgender Freedom Day Parade in June of 1995, and 6 by attending the San Francisco Queer Family Day Celebration in June of 1995. I also solicited volunteers by placing an advertisement in the *San Francisco Bay Guardian*; 3 of my interviewees were respondents to that advertisement. The remaining 2 subjects were solicited by women I had already interviewed, and were members of lesbian mothers' groups attended by the earlier interviewees. All were parents of young children who were being raised solely in queer families. A brief description of each interviewee and his or her family appears in Appendix I. (The names assigned to each parent and child are fictional.) I interviewed both partners in 3 couples, accounting for 6 of the total of 18 subjects. Fourteen of the interviewees were women and 4 were men.² Ten interviewees described themselves as white; 2 described themselves as Jewish; 2 described themselves as African American; 2 described themselves as mixed Japanese and white; 1 described himself as mixed Chinese and white; and 1 described himself as mixed Latino and Anglo. Two of the interviewees were single parents and 16 had

coparents. The subjects' ages ranged from 24 to 48 years, with a mean of 36.3 years. Their incomes ranged from under \$10,000 per year to \$80,000 per year, with a mean of \$39,000.

The parents I interviewed had a total of 17 children. Two interviewees had 2 children, and the remainder had 1 child each, including 6 interviewees who were in coparenting dyads with one child per couple. The children included 7 children of color: 1 African American; 2 mixed African American and white; 1 mixed African American and Puerto Rican; 2 mixed Japanese American and white; and 1 mixed Chinese American and white.³ The children's ages ranged from 3 months to 9 years, with a mean of 3.2 years. They were conceived in a variety of ways. Ten were conceived via donor insemination; 3 were born in legal marriages (2 in intergendered bisexual unions and 1 in a marriage between a gay male subject and his heterosexual wife); 2 were adopted; 1 was conceived via coparent insemination between a lesbian and a gay man; and 1 was conceived in a prior heterosexual relationship that was terminated before the birth of the child.

The interviews themselves were conducted between February and September of 1995, and ranged from 45 minutes to over six hours in length. I typically spent about 2 hours with each interviewee, in a location of their choice. The interviews were semi-structured in nature. (They were typically made rather less structured by the presence of children—the interviewees' and/or my own—playing, eating, requesting assistance, and occasionally adding their own comments.) The interviews covered 4 general areas. The first area was the interviewee's folk theory of sexual identity. The second was the relationship of the interviewee to her/his family of origin: the interviewee's experiences in coming out to the family of origin; the interviewee's relations with the family of origin after coming out; and the relations between the family of origin to the interviewee's partner (if any) and child. The third area consisted of questions aimed at revealing the interviewee's attitudes about his/her child's eventual sexual identity: whether the interviewee had considered the matter of his/her child's eventual sexual identity; the interviewee's attitudes towards the possibility that the child grow up to be straight; the interviewee's attitudes towards the possibility that the child grow up to be lesbian, gay or bisexual; the interviewee's concerns

regarding her/his child's sexual identity development; the interviewee's expectations about his/her parental role in this process; the interviewee's preferences regarding the child's sexual identity; the interviewee's expectations regarding the child's sexual identity; and the interviewee's beliefs about the effect of his/her sexual identity upon the child's sexual identity. The fourth area included general questions regarding the interviewee's hopes regarding the child's relationship to the gay and straight communities as an adult; the interviewee's expectations regarding how his/her child will deal with issues of identity in general; expectations regarding the challenges the child will face due to the fact that s/he has queer parents; and expectations regarding any special advantages that will accrue to the child due to the fact that s/he has queer parents. In addition to covering these four areas and collecting demographic information (age, race, income, etc.), I also asked each interviewee if there was anything else they felt I ought to know.

Findings

Coming Out to Families of Origin

As expected, most interviewees reported that revealing their sexual orientations to their families of origin was a traumatic experience. Three of the interviewees have never come out to their parents for fear of alienation of parental affection. Of the 15 remaining subjects, all but one described traumatic coming out experiences. Parents were shocked, and typically told the interviewees that their sexual identities were unnatural, morally wrong and/or dangerous to their health and welfare. The parents of three subjects, Darcy, Irena and Sammi (all names used here are pseudonymous), took very strong measures to separate them from girlfriends and peers whom they believed were "converting" their daughters. Fights typically ensued over who was "to blame" for what was deemed a poor parenting outcome by the interviewees' heterosexual parents. For example, Irena stated,

My mom burst into tears—"How could you do this to me? What have I done wrong?"

Similarly, Christy reported,

My father wanted to know if it was all his fault, having left the family when I was 15, or if it was my mother's fault, because she was so domineering.

The interviewee's response to the negative reactions of their families of origin was to feel self-doubt and pain, but also a certain amount of understanding. As Willa put it,

You want your kids to be, quote, "normal," and when someone asks, "How's Willa doing?" you don't want to say, "Well, she's a lesbian."

Some of the interviewees later came to question the degree to which they accepted the negative reactions of their families of origin. Sheila said,

They had a hard time with it, and blamed my friends for "making" me a lesbian. They prayed for me as diligent Catholics. But they didn't even let my lesbian cousin Penny into the house, so I felt they were taking a big positive step. I just didn't know I had the right to ask for more at that point in my life.

Whether they felt that the reactions of their families of origin were understandable or not, all but one of the subjects who came out to their parents reported emotional distance, sometimes accompanied by physical distance, developing as an immediate consequence of coming out.

Julie was the only subject who stated that she came out to her parents without any trauma. She reported,

The didn't really have a problem with it. I mean, they weren't pleased, but that was only because I told them because we were going to be on the "Geraldo" show—they were doing an episode on bisexuality. And my parents hate the "Geraldo" show—they think it's tacky. So that's why they had a problem.

It is possible that Julie's attribution of parental disapproval solely to the "Geraldo" show venue reflects some wishful thinking on her part. But her assessment may well be accurate. Unlike all the other subjects, she came out in the context of a marriage to a person of the opposite sex. She was already 35 and the mother of a 2-year-old child. Much of the threat to parental values which undergirds the coming out trauma was thus attenuated in her case, which would explain why her parents may not have reacted with much distress to her announcement of bisexuality.

Ongoing and Current Relations with Families of Origin

The traumatic rupture in relations with families of origin reported by most subjects was repaired over time in the case of many. Of the 14 who came out to parents and reported trauma, 10 experienced a gradual rapprochement, and now report close and satisfying relations with at least some members of their families of origin. Both the 10 who now feel close to their families of origin and the 4 who express ongoing difficulties tied their feelings of closeness or distance to whether their families of origin have accepted their partners and children as a family of destination. For example, Jenny, who deems her relationship to her parents fairly close, stated

They won't talk about my sexuality directly, so I wouldn't say they deal with it *well* now, but they do accept Cora at family events and treat her as part of the family. But they still struggle with it internally, and still worry about me living as a second-class citizen.

Compare this to the statement made by Talia, who calls her relationship with her mother "troubled":

I guess my mom is trying. I mean, she likes Laurel, but she doesn't think of her as equivalent to my sister's husband. She refuses to invite Laurel over for the holidays, and says it's "inappropriate" for me to bring her to visit our relatives. It makes me angry, but I know other people have it worse. I mean, Laurel's family doesn't even speak to her.

While both Jenny and Talia express mixed emotions about their parents' attitudes, Jenny evaluates her relationship with her parents, who include her partner in family celebrations, to be satisfactory, while Talia evaluates her relationship with her mother, who excludes her partner, to be unsatisfactory.

The interviewees expressed a need for their parents to acknowledge the interviewees' own parental status. This need was felt especially strongly by subjects without a biological relationship to their children. For example, Sammi stated,

My mom is OK now; she's really fond of Martin. But she doesn't really treat us as a real family—two women adopting some child doesn't seem real enough to her.

Similarly Cora, whose partner bore their daughter, complained,

My brother doesn't treat me like a real mom. I've been very disappointed, because he didn't send a gift or even a card on Erica's birthday. He hasn't really acknowledged her.

Those interviewees whose parents did acknowledge and visit their children emphasized that point in the interviews. Willa said,

My parents probably don't feel as attached to Gillian and Wesley as if they were their biological grandkids, but I guess about 95% as if they were mine. They visit their grandkids twice a month, which I think is very important.

To sum up, of the 18 interviewees, 3 have never come out to their parents due to an extreme anxiety over the reaction they anticipate from their parents, 1 came out without experiencing much of a negative reaction from her parents, 4 came out and experienced a traumatic rupture in relations with their families of origin that was ongoing at the time of the interview, and 10 had traumatic experiences in coming out to their families of origin, but now have satisfactory relations with at least some family members. For all but one subject, sexual identity has played a prominent role in their relations with their families of origin.

Considering Children's Sexual Identities

To determine whether the issues I wished to discuss were salient to my interviewees, I asked them whether they thought about their children's eventual sexual identities. All but one interviewee said yes. Often subjects rolled their eyes or laughed, indicating not only that this was a key issue for them, but that they needed to relieve some tension before discussing something that is a quasi-taboo subject.⁴ The one interviewee who said she hadn't really thought about her child's sexual identity was Cora, who stated, "I'll get around to it when Erica's older." Cora felt that she didn't have to worry about the issue now because it wasn't likely to be a problem area for her daughter.

Unconditional Acceptance of Children's Sexual Identities

I asked the interviewees whether they had considered that their children might grow up to be straight; if so, whether they thought it might be hard for them to help their children become comfortable with a straight sexual identity; whether they thought

their children might be lesbian, bisexual or gay; and if so, whether it might be in some way easier or more satisfying to help their children become comfortable as queer. In responding to these questions, all of my interviewees unanimously emphasized that they would accept their children, no matter what their eventual sexual identities turned out to be. As Talia succinctly put it, "Nathan gets *real* unconditional love."

Several themes emerged in the subjects' universal assertion that they would accept their children whatever their sexual orientations might be. One theme was that the role of a good parent is to aid children in a process of self-discovery. As Lillian stated,

In raising our kids, the most important foundation we want to lay for them is clarity about who they are. Helping Seth find that clarity is my job—not the content of who he is.

Another common theme was an emphasis on good communication between parent and child. Darcy said,

By talking a lot and being open and honest, and by my accepting her as she's always been, Linden will be made comfortable being who she is regardless of who she is . . . whether she wants a husband or a lesbian as a partner.

The parents I interviewed related their commitment to accepting their children regardless of sexual orientation to a general commitment to accept people in all their diversity. As Shiela put it,

The important thing is that Saul be happy. People are people. There are parts of us in everybody, so I try to accept people as they are. Saul's sexual orientation isn't the important thing; it doesn't make any difference. To me, Saul is Saul, and who he is will just unfold. The most important thing to me is that he grow up to be accepting and nonviolent.

A final theme which subjects reiterated in emphasizing that they will accept their children no matter what sexual identities they adopt was that this acceptance distinguished the subjects from their parents. Sammi stated,

We love Martin for being Martin, and we'll keep doing that. We don't want to love some model, some kind of perfect image. We love our son as a person. Who he decides to love is his own business. I guess

your question is about the idea that queers convert children, which is a ridiculous stereotype. My mom thought I was “converted,” but that was just, you know, because it was easier for her to believe than the fact . . . which was that I loved women because it was what I wanted. So Martin must be free to love who he wants. That’s one mistake I won’t make with him—though I’m sure I’ll make my share of others. [laughs]

In sum, all of the interviewees stated that they would accept their children no matter what their sexual orientation turned out to be, and themes of the necessity of self-discovery, of open communication, and of accepting diversity emerged.

Preferences Regarding Children’s Sexual Identities

I asked the interviewees what sexual identities they would ideally like their children to develop. Their answers were all heavily qualified by their assertions of accepting their children regardless of sexual orientation, and even when pushed, 10 were unwilling to state a preference. Of the remaining 8, 4 stated a preference for their children to be gay, lesbian or bisexual, and 4 stated a preference for their children to be straight. Thus, while the interviewees all said that they would accept any sexual identity in their children, they expressed a wide spectrum of preferences qualified by that broad acceptance.

What is notable about those interviewees who expressed a preference for their children to be lesbian, gay or bisexual is that they did not base their preference on a claim of inherent superiority of queer identity or on a desire that their children to be like them. Christy simply said,

I would prefer a lesbian lifestyle for Eva because that is my personal concept of happiness.

Elise explained her preference in pragmatic terms:

I’d feel more comfortable if Eva identifies as lesbian because, in my experience, most men mistreat women. But it would be no better if Eva chose a woman partner who mistreated her.

And Al emphasized honesty and self-knowledge:

Everyone is essentially bi, but most people don’t admit it, and to have a child that knows and admits it would probably be a source of pride.

Similarly, those interviewees who expressed a preference for their children to be straight did not base their preference on a claim of inherent superiority of straight identity. Cora explained her preference in pragmatic terms:

If society continues as it is, I'd have a preference for Erica to be straight, because it'll just be a lot easier for her.

Jenny added her wish to avoid homophobic criticism:

I would prefer Erica to be straight, because I know from experience that it's simply harder to be gay. I would prefer her to live a lifestyle that's more accepted. And I wouldn't want society to judge how she was raised, and say, "They ruined her," or "They converted her." If she grows up to be straight, everyone will say we raised her right.

Dexter voiced concerns about racism in explaining his preference:

It would be easier on me if he was straight, because it would be easier on him. In a racist nation, he'll have enough to deal with. Being straight is easier for a black man.

In short, in contrast to the common expectation that gay people want their children to be gay, the subjects expressed a range of preferences regarding their children's sexual identities, with most expressing no preference and equal minorities preferring a straight or a queer identity. Moreover, all subjects emphasized that they would accept their children no matter what sexual identity they developed.

Expectations Regarding Children's Sexual Identities

I asked the interviewees whether they thought their children were more likely to develop a straight or gay identity. Only one interviewee thought his child was likely not to identify as straight (he predicted that she would be more likely to identify as bisexual). Of the remainder, 13 felt their children would probably identify as straight, and 4 said that they did not know. As in the responses to the questions above, the interviewees emphasized that they would accept their children regardless of sexual orientation, and that other values were more important. Abby stated,

I don't know, and it's just not the most important thing. It's more important that he be secure, loving and nonabusive.

Al, the lone interviewee to predict a queer identity for his daughter, believed in universal essential bisexuality, and felt that a combination of family context and growing social acceptance of queer sexual identity would allow his daughter to acknowledge her bisexual identity:

Nadia will probably identify as bi. It's easier with each passing generation.

The 13 interviewees who believed it likely that their children would identify as straight were split into two camps: those who based their prediction on folk essentialist logic and those who based their prediction on folk constructionist logic. Unlike Al, the other subjects utilizing folk essentialist logic did not believe in universal bisexuality, but invoked a statistical model which seemed to assign sexual orientation according to the roll of some cosmic die. Rick asserted,

The odds are 90% in favor of being straight.

Similarly, Sheila stated,

Statistically, Saul has a 1 in 10 chance of being gay. Maybe there's a 2 in 10 chance he'll be bi.

And Jenny stated,

I know the statistics, that children who grow up in gay families grow up to be gay in the same percentages as other children.

The folk essentialist logic used by these subjects implies that their parenting is irrelevant to their children's sexual identities because sexual orientation is randomly assigned.

The folk constructionists among my interviewees used very different logic to come to the same conclusion—that their children will probably develop a straight identity. Sammi stated,

Martin will probably be straight. The world pushes that.

Christy elaborated,

I think that society bombards us with images of heterosexual couples. And I think a lot of our sexuality is learned. And so I think it's real probable that Eva will gravitate toward the norm. I'd think that of any child.

These subjects do assert that socialization shapes sexual identity, but they state that it is society at large rather than the family setting that dominates socialization. Therefore they, just like the folk essentialists, believe that their children will probably grow up to be straight.

Attitudes Regarding the Impact of Parental Sexual Identities on Children's Eventual Sexual Identities

Only one of the interviewees believed that it was likely that his child would share his sexual orientation, while 13 of the interviewees thought it was likely that their children would be straight. Nevertheless, the subjects did believe that their sexual identities would have an impact upon their children. Every one of the interviewees stated that being raised by queer parents would have some positive socialization effect upon their children, generally framed in terms of high levels of acceptance of self and others.

The interviewees emphasized that they would serve as positive role models of self-acceptance for their children. Some attributed this directly to their sexual identities, like Darcy:

I hope my sexual identity will have an effect on Linden. I hope it helps her realize that we need to be true to ourselves, no matter who we are.

Others attributed it only indirectly to their sexual identities, like Willa:

I don't think my lesbianism will influence my kids, but the fact that I know who I am and am not ashamed to be that, and feel really good about myself, will.

A common theme reiterated by the interviewees was that their children would benefit from the strong and open communication that the interviewees would foster. Irena said,

I don't think Nigel will have any problem at all, because I think he has a very good core sense of himself. He's really good at communicating his feelings and figuring out what he wants . . . We have a very conscious process of making him comfortable with himself and his desires.

One of the benefits which the interviewees tended to believe would accrue to their children due to the open communication

they planned to foster was that it would be a tool which their children could use in a process of self-discovery. Interviewees contrasted this open communication and fostering of self-discovery to the behavior of their own parents. Julie said,

It took me a long time to recognize my sexual orientation because my parents never talked about sex. Having awareness and acceptance from early on will give Kimo more ability to act on his feelings, and to realize it if he has homosexual impulses.

But the interviewees were also wary of implying that the fact that their sexual identities and parenting values differed from those of their own parents implied that their children would be influenced to be queer. As Cristy said,

Well, my parents are straight, and they ended up raising a lesbian daughter, so I can't really say that our sexual identity will have an effect. I think that Eva is going to have more permission, and she's going to see more alternatives . . . but I don't know how much influence that will have on her ultimate decision.

In fact, most of the interviewees made a point of stating that they would take active steps to ensure that their children felt no pressure to conform to their parents' sexual identities. Rick said,

I don't want Cesar to be gay because he thinks he's supposed to be. I feel because I'm gay he'll have more confusion at the beginning of adolescence. I'll give him awareness and broad acceptance. More freedom is good, but it also means more confusion. If I didn't notice any tendencies, I'd worry about it. We'd have to do a lot of talking.

Interviewees reaffirmed that they wanted their children to be true to themselves rather than copies of their parents. Sheila stated,

I imagine at some point Saul will wonder if I want him to be gay. I just have to reassure him he doesn't have to do something to make me happy—he just needs to know for himself who he is.

And Abby said,

Our job is to counter social pressure—not put more pressure on him.

Finally, many subjects also believed not only that they would raise their children to possess self-knowledge and self-acceptance,

but that they would raise their children to accept others, regardless of identity. They seemed to feel that being raised in a queer family would serve as an inoculation against all bigotry. To give a pair of examples, Dexter said,

Jesse is being raised to have healthy respect for all people. Race, sexual preference, language—he'll know these aren't the measure of worth.

And Sarah said,

Amber is being raised in a home without bigotry or sexism. I'm teaching her to educate herself and be openminded and respectful to all people.

In sum, the interviewees felt that because of their sexual identities, they would serve as role models of self-acceptance for their children. They planned to create a family environment of open communication that would foster self-discovery, and hoped that by modelling tolerance they would raise children who would accept people of all backgrounds. They intended that their children feel no unarticulated pressure to imitate the interviewees' sexual identities, and in fact intended to make it clear to their children that they wanted them to become themselves rather than copies of their parents.

Discussion

The findings of this study regarding the relationship between the lesbian, gay and bisexual interviewees and their families of origin are those predicted by the literature. The interviewees related that their parents assumed that they were transmitting a heterosexual identity to the interviewees, although they never discussed this overtly. The subjects further related that when they revealed the fact that their sexual identities did not conform to their parents', familial solidarity was disrupted. All but one of the interviewees reported that the issue of coming out to their families of origin was a traumatic issue for them. Three of these subjects have never revealed their sexual identities to their parents because they believe that this would cause a permanent rupture of familial relations. The families of the remaining fourteen reacted very negatively to the interviewees' revelation of their

sexual orientations. They viewed the subjects' nonconformity to parental sexual orientation as a negative parenting outcome, and attempted to assign blame for the apparent socialization failure. This response is consonant with traditional socialization theory.

The findings of the study regarding the interviewees' attitudes towards their own children, however, contradict the predictions of traditional socialization literature. Unlike their heterosexual parents, the subjects related that they were devoting significant consideration to the matter of their children's sexual identities. Also unlike their parents, the interviewees did not assume that they would transmit their sexual identities to their children. In fact, only one of the interviewees believed it likely that his child would develop the same sexual identity that he had (in his case, bisexuality), while thirteen thought it likely that their children would grow up to be straight.

The interviewees themselves pointed out that their attitudes contrasted with those of their families of origin in several areas. Most centrally, and clearly unlike their parents, the bisexual, lesbian and gay parents interviewed unanimously asserted that they would love and accept their children regardless of the sexual identities that the children would eventually adopt. Instead of valuing conformity with parental sexual identities, they valued authenticity, self-discovery, good communication, and the acceptance of diversity. The subjects were also distinguished from their straight parents by the role they expected to play in the socialization of their children. The subjects' straight parents, as predicted by the literature, assumed without much consideration that they would transmit a heterosexual identity to their children through a transparent process of role modelling. In contrast, the interviewees believed they must consciously examine their role model function, so that instead of attempting to transmit parental sexual identity to their children they would transmit their core values of self-knowledge, self-acceptance and acceptance of others' diversity. In fact, the majority of the interviewees stated that they would take active steps to ensure that their children did not feel any pressure to conform to their parents' sexual identities. These lesbian, gay and bisexual parents are clearly distinguished from their straight counterparts. This finding provides a counterpart

to the numerous studies which conclude that queer families are indistinguishable from straight families.

In addition, the findings demonstrate the inadequacy of the traditional understanding of socialization and identity formation. It is evident that socialization need not be a transparent, generally unconscious process by which parents transmit their identities to their children, ensuring a requisite hegemony of familial identities. Bisexual, gay and lesbian parents, like white parents who adopt African American children, can become more conscious of their role as agents of socialization, and may become determined to work support their children in a process of self-discovery through which it is likely that their children will adopt a sexual or racial identity that is different from their own. In fact, the subjects I interviewed were unanimously committed to such a process. This is due to the fact that almost all of them experienced significant trauma due to parental rejection of their nonconforming sexual identities, and were determined to spare their own children this trauma.

Conclusion

This study leads to two conclusions of general sociological import. Because of the fairly small sample size, the results must be considered preliminary: the parents interviewed may not be representative. Nevertheless, the striking similarity of the interviewees' attitudes regarding their children's sexual identities suggests that the the conclusions are significant. The first conclusion is that lesbian, gay and bisexual families can be distinguished from their straight counterparts. Unlike heterosexual parents, gay parents may intentionally seek to avoid exerting socialization pressure upon their children to conform to parental sexual identity. And as other studies have shown, children of homosexual parents usually adopt heterosexual identities when then mature.

The second conclusion of this study is more general, and relates to the theory of socialization. Traditional socialization theory holds that parents transmit their identities to their children in a transparent, generally unconscious process, and that this leads to a hegemony of identities that is necessary for familial solidarity.

This study shows that parents may become determined to rupture this process to allow children to adopt identities that differ fundamentally from their own.

This study has interesting implications for studies of "families of difference": families which are not characterized by the hegemony in racial background, religious affiliation, (hetero)sexual identity etc. which is assumed by traditional socialization theory. One might plausibly hypothesize that such familial diversity is a necessary but not sufficient condition for parental determination to rupture hegemonic socialization pressure in order to facilitate children's adoption of nonparental identities. There is evidence for this hypothesis in the fact that while the queer parents I studied were unanimously committed to such a rupture with respect to sexual identity, only about half of white parents who adopt black children have been reported to seek such a rupture with respect to racial identity.

If this difference is confirmed, a difference between the parents would provide a possible explanation. In short, queer parents are more educated about the significance of sexual identity than white parents are educated about the significance of racial identity. That is, because they have faced homophobia from both their parents and society at large, lesbian, gay and bisexual parents appear to be determined to give nonjudgmental support and autonomy to their children as they develop their sexual identities. White parents, however, are less likely to have faced a similar sensitizing personal experience with racism. Future studies should explore this possible link between sensitizing parental experiences and parental determination to rupture hegemonic identity socialization processes in families of difference.

The general implication of this study for social work is that adoptive or birth parents may successfully instill identities in their children which differ from their own. More specifically, the implication of this study for social work practice is that policies which discourage the placement of children with lesbian or gay adoptive or foster parents should be reexamined, because they are based upon the faulty premise that children raised by queer parents are "at risk" of themselves becoming bisexual, gay or lesbian. Numerous studies have shown that children raised by homosexual parents are no more likely to grow up to be gay than

are children raised by heterosexual parents. This study shows that due to their own experiences in coming out to their families of origin, queer parents may be determined to give nonjudgmental support to their children as they develop their sexual identities, and to accept that it is likely that their children will adopt a sexual identity that is different from their own.

Notes

1. I have chosen to employ a variety of terms in this paper to describe sexual identity. People of various political bents have very strong preferences for different terms; some object strenuously to the term "homosexual" while others object vehemently to the term "queer." I vary my terminology so that I may offend and mollify all equally. I most frequently refer inclusively to "lesbian, gay and bisexual people." Another note on terminology: I use the term "sexual identity" to refer to the identity that centers around an individual's desire to form same-gender or other-gender unions. I sometimes use the term "sexual orientation," but I prefer the term "sexual identity" because it is parallel to similar concepts such as gender identity or racial identity.
2. I believe that this sex ratio is roughly representative. While approximately equal numbers of queer men and women conceive children in previous (heterosexual) marriages, children conceived by queer parents outside of ostensibly heterosexual unions are conceived largely by women. This is due to both social reasons (women are socialized to value childbearing more intensely than men) and biological reasons (a lesbian seeking to become pregnant needs only minor assistance from a man, while a gay man seeking to conceive a child needs a massive investment of time, energy and emotion from a woman.)
3. Seven children had at least one parent with a racial identity that differed from their own. This may be coincidence, or it may reflect the fact that parents who are willing to cross one social boundary find it easier to cross another.
4. I believe that the subjects have had this topic raised before, but typically in a homophobic context. When schoolteachers, social workers, clergymembers or other institutional representatives raise the issue, it may be out of a homophobic fear that the children are being exposed to sexual activity, or out of a heterosexist fear that queer parents will (inappropriately) prefer their children to be queer as well. It was therefore necessary for me to introduce discussion of children's sexual identities sensitively and to reassure the interviewees so that I received candid responses to my questions.

Appendix I

INTERVIEWEE			COPARENT/PARTNER			CHILD(REN)				
Name	Age	Ethnicity	Name	Age	Ethnicity	S.O.	Name	Age	Ethnicity	How Conceived
Lillian	38	Jewish white	Amy	36	Jewish	lesbian	Amy	8	Jewish	Amy's nonbiological child from a previous lesbian relationship
Sarah	28	white	(none)			lesbian	Seth	5 mo.	Jewish	known donor/Lillian
Dexter	34	African American	Pearl	31	African American	straight	Jesse	3.5	African American	previous relationship with a man, terminated before her birth
Abby	38	white	Silvia	32	Mexican American	lesbian	Mark	5	white	known donor/Abby
Al	24	Chinese and white	Bonnie	30	white	bisexual	Nadia	4 mo.	Chinese and white	in marriage
Christy	34	white	Elise	47	white	lesbian	Eva	3 mo.	white	known donor/Christy
Elise	47	white	Christy	34	white	lesbian	Eva	(see above)		
Talia	31	Jewish	Laurel	33	Jewish	lesbian	Noah	2.5	Jewish	anonymous donor/Talia
Clark	36	Japanese and white	Julie	37	white	bisexual	Kimo	4	Japanese and white	in marriage
Julie	37	white	Clark	36	Japanese and white	bisexual	Kimo	(see above)		

INTERVIEWEE			COPARENT/PARTNER			CHILD(REN)			
Name	Age	Ethnicity	Name	Age	Ethnicity	Name	Age	Ethnicity	How Conceived
Willa	34	white	Gina	34	white	Gillian Wesley	2	white	donor insemination/ Gina
Jenny	36	white	Cora	36	Japanese and white	Erica	2	Philipino and white	donor insemination/ Gina
Cora	36	Japanese and white	Jenny	36	white	Erica		(see above)	donor insemination/ Jenny
Shiela	44	white	Scott	?	Jewish	Saul	16 mo.	white	coparent insemination, Shiela and Scott
Irena	35	white	Jean	38	white	Nigel	9	white	donor insemination/ Jean
Rick	48	Anglo and gay Latino	(none)			Cesar	3.5	Puerto Rican and African American	adopted
Darcy	39	white	June	36	white	Linden	19 mo.	white	donor insemination/ June
Sammi	34	African American	Jolene	36	African American	Martin	2.5	African American and white	adopted

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