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## The advantages and obstacles of having been raised by a gay or lesbian parent

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THE ADVANTAGES AND OBSTACLES OF HAVING BEEN  
RAISED BY A GAY OR LESBIAN PARENT

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A Project  
Presented to the  
Faculty of  
California State University,  
San Bernardino

---

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Social Work

---

by  
Jennifer Falconi Hilt

June 2006

THE ADVANTAGES AND OBSTACLES OF HAVING BEEN  
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by  
Jennifer Falconi Hilt  
June 2006

Approved by:



Dr. Rosemary McCaslin, Faculty Supervisor  
Social Work

5/16/06  
Date



Dan Bass, L.C.S.W., Jewish Family  
Service of the Desert



Dr. Rosemary McCaslin,  
M.S.W. Research Coordinator

## ABSTRACT

Families with gay and lesbian parents are becoming more common throughout the country, and they often face discrimination due to their unique family structure. In an exploratory study using a series of open-ended questions, 10 adult children with at least one identifiable gay or lesbian parent, were interviewed and asked to discuss their childhood experiences growing up in diverse families. Data were analyzed by the common themes that emerged. Understanding the retrospective views of adult children with gay or lesbian parents will allow social workers the ability to tailor services to ensure the needs of these new family constellations are met.

## DEDICATION

I would like to take this opportunity to thank my husband and best friend, Albert Hilt, for his unwavering support and patience over the last two years. I could not have completed this arduous journey without him.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

This chapter will discuss the recent emergence, within the last 30 years, of openly gay and lesbian families as a new breed of the American family. It will discuss the obstacles these unique family constellations face, and specifically the challenges the children of these families encounter. This chapter will address the broader issue of homophobia within American society, and how social policies undermine the validity of these family structures. The purpose of this study is addressed, as are the research methods that guided the study. Last, the author discusses implications for social work practice, policy and future research.

#### Problem Statement

##### Background

It has only been within the last thirty years that families involving gay or lesbian couples have really emerged into public view. Families that include gay or lesbian couples that have brought one or more children from previous marriages into their home, have led the way for more complex family structures. Today, it is not uncommon for lesbian couples to undergo insemination

either by anonymous donors or by friends. Similarly, there is an increasing number of couples that are adopting or fostering children unrelated to them (Baumrind, 1995).

It is important to understand any issues facing the children of gays and lesbians, because they are a new breed of the American family. Additionally, homophobia is rampant within our society, and it is important to educate social workers and the public regarding its detrimental effects. It has only been 32 years since the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its official list of mental disorders (Adam, 1987). A large percentage of the American public still believe that homosexuality is deviant and wrong. Ultimately, homophobia needs to be understood under the same guises as racism and sexism. The retrospective views of adult children of gay and lesbian parents will be beneficial in facilitating healthier atmospheres for children in similar families, today.

#### Importance of Studying This Problem Now

Gay and lesbian headed families are increasing in numbers and often encounter discrimination living in a heterosexist world. Citing the 2000 U.S. Census, the Human Rights Campaign estimates that 96 percent of all counties within the United States have at least one same sex couple

with children under the age of 18 (Gates, 2003). The exact number of children with one or more homosexual parents is unknown. Although the 2000 U.S. Census revealed that there were 601,209 gay and lesbian families within the United States, the Human Rights Campaign estimates that figure to be grossly undercounted, by as much as 62 percent (Smith and Gates, 2001). Society must stop ignoring and neglecting these new family structures. Prejudicial behavior and policies must be acknowledged and stopped.

Families with gay and lesbian parents are often discriminated against in their local communities. Children of homosexual parents are commonly bullied and teased about their parents' sexual orientation within the school setting. Additionally, children report that they receive little support from their teachers. In some instances children report receiving derogatory comments from their teachers, as well as the students (Ray, 2001). In addition to overt homophobic messages from teachers and classmates, there is an underlying sense of heterosexism that permeates the classroom. Families are almost always presented as heterosexual, and there is a lack of curriculum that acknowledges or validates families with homosexual parents.

Families with same gender parents also encounter discrimination at the state and federal levels of government. This is best evidenced by the current controversy over legalizing same sex marriage. The Defense of Marriage Act, passed in 1996, defines marriage as a legal union between a man and a woman (Lind, 2004). Since the passage of DOMA, various states have enacted laws that restrict marriage to heterosexual couples. Additionally, states with their own version of DOMA, do not acknowledge marriages of same sex couples performed in other states, therefore, denying gay and lesbian couples the same benefits as their heterosexual counterparts. The Defense of Marriage Act is an example of institutionalized heterosexuality. Discriminatory in nature, it permeates the country, and it denies gay and lesbian families legitimacy by refusing to acknowledge their family structures.

#### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to understand the advantages and obstacles of having been raised by a gay or lesbian parent. Specifically, the author hoped to dispel current myths surrounding a gay individual's ability to parent and discuss any specific advantages to growing up

with a homosexual parent. Extensive research has been done from the parent's perspective and has documented the issues and struggles they have faced in combating biases and discrimination. However, to date, there has not been substantial research looking at the child's perspective.

Through this project, the author sought to educate fellow social workers and the public, about commonly held misconceptions about growing up with gay and lesbian parents. Common myths include: children need a male and female parent to develop optimally, boys with gay dads will be effeminate, and girls with lesbian mothers will be masculine (Bozett, 1989). Additionally, the study illustrated special issues facing children of gay and lesbian parents, (homophobic societal messages, teasing from classmates) and in the process revealed areas in need of change at both micro and macro levels.

The study also identified the advantages of having grown up with a gay or lesbian parent. Are gay parents more apt to encourage open communication? Do gay parents emphasize the need for multicultural tolerance and acceptance? Perhaps there are certain areas in parenting where homosexual parents are more proficient than their heterosexual counterparts.

Interviewing adult children, who were raised by a gay or lesbian parent, was the best way to identify the needs of current, sexual minority families. The information revealed will allow social workers, and other human services providers, the ability to tailor programs specifically for this population.

#### Research Methods Used

This project was an exploratory, qualitative study using snowball sampling. Multiple starting points were used to avoid biases. As this is an understudied group, it did not lend itself well to traditional types of quantitative research. The majority of questions were open-ended in nature to illicit as much information as possible regarding the strengths and weaknesses of having grown up with a gay or lesbian parent.

The sample consisted of 10 adult children of at least one gay or lesbian parent. A list of formal questions were developed, and administered by the interviewer, either in person or over the phone. Office space to conduct interviews was provided at Jewish Family Service in Palm Springs. Questions were analyzed through the identification of themes and univariate analysis.

## Significance of the Project for Social Work

The NASW Code of Ethics Preamble (1981) explicitly states the importance for the social work profession of empowering people who are vulnerable and oppressed, while paying attention to the "environmental forces that create, contribute to, and address problems in living" (p. 1). This study was highly relevant to direct social work practice and policy making and research, because it provided insight into a group of people who have been historically discriminated against within American society. The information provided in this study will help direct service practitioners tailor their services to best meet the needs of this special population. This study will help researchers better understand these unique families, and it will help social workers recognize the importance of advocating and lobbying for policy changes at both the state and national levels.

### Significance for Direct Social Work Practice

On a micro level, the results of this study will educate social workers, working within Child Protective Services, about the positive and negative implications of placing a foster child with a gay or lesbian headed family. It will help dispel commonly held beliefs

regarding a homosexual individual's ability to be a loving parent. Ultimately, the information provided in this study may help open the door for more adoptions by same sex couples, helping foster children within the Inland Empire find permanent homes.

This study also has significance for mental health social workers, because it will provide insight into the unique dynamics effecting families with homosexual parents. Social workers will be able to better assess and implement treatment for gay and lesbian families, because they will understand the myriad of challenges these families face in a heterosexist world.

#### Significance for Policy Making

This study has relevance for social workers who are interested in lobbying and policy making, because there are laws and initiatives that actively discriminate against homosexual families at the federal, state and local levels. Gay and lesbian couples with children are denied the opportunity to wed in most of the country. Currently 36 states have laws banning same sex marriage (Lind, 2004). These laws undermine the legitimacy of the gay and lesbian family structure. Additionally, many school districts have developed laws forbidding teachers from discussing homosexuality in any form (Lind, 2004).



This study shows the need to include diverse families in school material. It also emphasizes the need for equal rights, under all laws, whether at the local, state, or federal level.

#### Significance for Research

Gay and Lesbian headed families have only emerged publicly within the last thirty years. Consequently, there has not been extensive research on the effects of being raised by a homosexual parent. This study was unique in that it looked at the retrospective views of adult children of gay and lesbian parents. The majority of the research surrounding gay and lesbian individuals and their families is based on the parent's perspective. As a result, this study addressed the assessment phase in the generalist intervention model and was exploratory in design. This study provides a stepping-stone for other social workers to conduct much needed longitudinal research on these diverse families. However, for the purposes of this study, the research question asked, what are the advantages and obstacles of having grown up with a gay or lesbian parent?

CHAPTER TWO  
LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter will highlight the issues unique to children of gay and lesbian parents. It will look at the heterosexist bias of curricula in the classroom, and the homophobic messages sent by teachers and classmates. This chapter will address the connection between a parent's sexual identity and their children's gender development. Additionally, factors affecting children's attitudes and acceptance of their parent's homosexuality will be addressed. Last, the chapter will discuss the importance of attachment theory and self-psychology in guiding this study, and any related future research.

Discrimination From Classmates and Teachers

Between six and nine million children in the United States have one or two gay or lesbian parents (Stein, 2004). Many of these children have reported being bullied, teased and harassed by fellow classmates (Clarke, Kitzinger, & Potter, 2004; Dew, 2000; Ray, 2001). It is probable that statistics are underreported, due to the sense of shame that often occurs when a child is teased. Additionally, children may not feel compelled to report

bullying out of a fear of retaliation from the perpetrator, or fear that nothing will be done to rectify the situation. According to Ray (2001), even more alarming than the children being harassed by fellow students, was the lack of support from the teachers. Many stood on the sidelines and did not intervene when children were being harassed (Ray, 2001). Some teachers admitted possessing actively homophobic views, themselves (Dew, 2000). When teachers or administrators fail to step in, it further undermines the child's confidence. The apathy displayed by teachers implies collusion on their part.

While some research has emphasized the impact of homophobic bullying on the children of gay and lesbian parents, other research has minimized it (Clarke et al., 2004). Gay and lesbian parents may fail to acknowledge or, at the very least, underreport incidents where their children are harassed or teased at school. Although this population is not as hidden as it once was, social desirability and factual self-reporting appears to be an issue among gay and lesbian parents. As a result of their family structure, these families are placed under intense scrutiny and suffer criticism from mainstream society. Those who feel homosexual individuals are unfit to parent, may cite bullying to support their argument. Given this

information, it is understandable that gay and lesbian parents may downplay homophobic bullying. However, it clearly exists, and the impact can erode a child's sense of well-being.

#### Heterosexual Curricula Within Schools

Other problems faced by children of gays and lesbians was the lack of curricula that acknowledged their family structure (Stein, 2004). Simple school assignments such as Mother's Day and Father's Day projects now have different dimensions. The same is true of family trees. Children reported feeling embarrassed by the amount of questions these assignments garnered from students and teachers alike (Stein, 2004). There is a lack of diversity when it comes to describing family structure in schools.

Oftentimes, even the earliest readers depict a heterosexual family (Stein, 2004). Materials that show alternate family arrangements need to be added to the school curriculum.

Despite this fact, countless school districts throughout the country have developed laws forbidding teachers from talking about homosexuality in any form (Lind, 2004). Additionally, things as simple as school permission forms, should be overhauled. Instead of

Mother's Signature/Father's Signature, it would be better if it were changed to Parent/Guardian signature (Stein, 2004).

#### Sexual Development of Children

Other articles on children of gays and lesbians focus on the sexual development of the child. Some of the most pervasive, damaging myths surrounding gay parenting, revolve around the debate over how a parent's sexual preference influences their child's development. Consistently, research has shown that children raised in gay and lesbian families are no more likely to become gay than children raised in heterosexual families (Demo, 2000; Golombok, Perry, Burston, Murray, Mooney- Summers, Stevens, & Golding, 2003; Patterson, 1992; Steckel, 1987). Girls with lesbian mothers were not found to be more masculine than their peers with heterosexual mothers. Similarly, boys were not found to be any more feminine if their dads were gay (Dew, 2000). The extent to which parents have the ability to influence their child's sexual identity appears to be limited to genetics. The way in which parent's raise their children is likely to make little difference (Golombok et al., 2003) regardless of their sexual identity.

There was also no evidence to suggest that children raised in gay or lesbian families were more gender sensitive than children raised in heterosexual families. There were no major differences in selection of toys, or favorite television programs (Patterson, 1992). It is likely that peers play a larger role in formation of gender role identity than parents. Research in this area has consistently shown that children self segregate by gender (Golombok et al., 2003), because of behavioral compatibility with children of the same sex as themselves.

#### Acceptance of Parent's Sexual Identity

The last major area of research with children of gays and lesbians involves children's overall ability to understand and accept their parent's sexual identity. There was a direct correlation between parent's ability to accept their sexuality and children's ability to accept it. In a study done on 21 children of lesbian mothers, conceived in the context of a heterosexual relationship, it was discovered that the majority of mothers had a difficult time self-disclosing their homosexuality. As a result, their children reported feeling discomfort and shame surrounding the issue (Lewis, 1980).

A child's response to learning of their parent's homosexuality is clearly age dependent. Younger children adjusted the easiest, whereas adolescents had the most difficult time accepting the news. Acceptance levels appear to increase again with adult children over the age of 18 (Gottman, 1990; Lewis, 1980). Such findings suggest that adolescence is a difficult time for any child to learn of their parent's homosexuality. This could likely be attributed to the fact that children are struggling with their own identity formation and emerging sexuality during this time. Additionally, it is important to note that children have a difficult time reconciling the fact that their parents are sexual beings, regardless of whether they are homosexual or heterosexual.

There were some notable problems with the research in this area. All of the children in these studies were conceived within the context of a heterosexual union. As such, it was difficult to distinguish if children were upset about the breakup of their parents' marriage, or about learning that one parent was gay or lesbian. Additionally, children may have been influenced by the heterosexual parent's reaction to their spouse's self-disclosure. For the purposes of this research, the

impact of the spouse's reaction, or ability to accept the news, cannot be overlooked.

There has not been substantive research with children who were raised by same gender couples from birth. It seems less likely that children conceived by lesbian women through donor insemination, or by gay men through surrogates or adoption at birth, would struggle with acceptance of their parent's sexual identity, because many of these families have extensive support systems within the gay and lesbian community. Children are likely to know other children with family structures similar to their own.

#### Theories Guiding Conceptualization

This study was guided by attachment theory and self-psychology theory. Past research has shown that children raised by homosexual parents are no different in terms of gender roles, sexual identity, and emotional development than children raised by heterosexual parents. These findings discredit many of the traditional psychoanalytic theories that have guided research on child development in the past (Golombok et al., 2003).

The tenets of attachment theory emphasize the function of the family not its structure. Children need to



attach to a safe, stable, parental figure. Gender is irrelevant. Attachment theory stresses the functional significance of sensitive parenting in creating secure relationships and not the typical mother/father structure (Patterson, 1992).

Similarly, self-psychology emphasizes utilizing the techniques of mirroring and idealizing to obtain optimal child development (Cooper & Lesser, 2005). In self-psychology it is important that the parental figure act as a self-object to the child. Again, gender is irrelevant. This is in direct contrast to the traditionally touted, psychoanalytic based, social learning theory, which states the importance of fathers providing male-modeled behavior and mothers providing female modeled behavior (Golombok et al., 2003).

This study considered Erikson's stages of development when interpreting the data, because past research has shown (Lewis, 1980) that adolescence is a particularly difficult time to learn about a parent's sexual identity. This can be attributed to the fact that children are struggling to define their own personal and sexual identities during adolescence (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2004). As such, the age at which a child learns of their parent's sexual identity is a relevant factor in

understanding the child's perception of having a gay or lesbian parent.

#### Summary

In summary, gay and lesbian headed families have only emerged as new family constellations within the last thirty years. Although they are increasing in numbers, there are a lack of services and policies that address their unique family structures. Institutionalized heterosexism is rampant within the school system, as evidenced by the lack of curricula that addresses alternative family structures. Additionally, children oftentimes face homophobic bullying from classmates and teachers, alike. This study assumed that the majority of issues faced by these unique families are related to homophobic prejudice and heterosexist bias within American culture, and not related to the same sex structure of the family, itself.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODS

#### Introduction

This chapter will discuss the overall design of this study. The sampling procedures and methods used in data collection and analysis will be discussed. Explanations for the research methods chosen will be provided. The instrument used to collect data will be presented, and the potential limitations and strengths of the instrument will be addressed. Last, this chapter will discuss the measures taken to protect the confidentiality of the human subjects involved in this study.

#### Study Design

The purpose of this study was to explore the advantages and obstacles of having been raised by a gay or lesbian parent. This study was specifically designed to be exploratory and primarily qualitative in nature. Information was collected in a semi-structured, one-on-one interview, either in person, or over the phone. Participants were asked to provide quantitative, demographic information (i.e., gender, age, education level, which parent is gay or lesbian), followed by a series of qualitative, open-ended, questions regarding

their retrospective views of their upbringing and family structure.

The choice of methods for this study was based on the idea that the information gained from a semi-structured interview would yield greater detail than the information acquired in a survey or questionnaire. It was believed that respondents would be less likely to elaborate with their answers if they were required to respond in written, narrative form. Additionally, this population has been relatively "hidden" in the past and has not been extensively studied. Due to the minimal amount of information available surrounding the experiences of children raised by a homosexual parent, the research question was exploratory in nature and asked: What are the advantages and obstacles of having been raised by a gay or lesbian parent?

#### Limitations

There were several limitations in this study. Participants in this study were located through snowball sampling. One problem with this technique is that the initial contact may have shaped the entire sample, and the data collected may not have been an accurate representation of the total population (Grinnell & Unrau, 2005). Although multiple starting points were used, there

was still a chance that respondents may have shared similar viewpoints based on fact that they were acquainted with one another.

Social desirability was another possible limitation in this study. Participants, fearing judgment by a heterosexist society, may have only given answers that depicted their family structures in a positive light.

Another potential limitation to this study was that it did not use a standardized instrument to collect data. There was little information about children's experiences in gay and lesbian families. This was an understudied topic, and there was not a tested instrument available to gather data on the retrospective views of adult children raised by a gay or lesbian parent. This study was designed as a result.

#### Sampling

For the purposes of this study, snowball sampling was utilized to obtain a sample of 10 participants. There was multiple starting points. Fliers were placed on the bulletin boards of local, community, human service agencies within the Coachella Valley. Social contacts within the community were utilized for word-of-mouth referrals for possible participants. Snowball sampling was

necessary due to lack of overtly identifying features and inaccessibility of this population. Respondents were at least 18 years of age and had at least one identified gay or lesbian parent.

#### Data Collection and Instruments

The data collected in this study included the independent variables provided in the demographic information (i.e., age, gender, level of education, which parent was gay or lesbian), and the dependent variables (i.e., the adult child's perceptions of their upbringing due to their diverse family structure, including perceived strengths and weaknesses). Both the nominal, dependent variables and the quantitative, independent variables were assessed by looking at frequencies and themes that emerge from the study.

The twelve-item questionnaire was designed to be administered orally, and contained demographic information in the beginning, followed by a series of open-ended questions (See Appendix A). The format of the questionnaire was arranged in a funneled fashion, with innocuous information asked first, to help assuage any initial uneasiness of the participant (Berg, 2004). Questions in the survey included: "How has being raised by

a gay or lesbian parent affected your views on diversity?" and "How was it to be raised by a gay or lesbian parent in a predominantly heterosexual society?" The questionnaire was pre-tested by a fellow student colleague, a faculty supervisor, and a member of the gay and lesbian community to ensure cultural sensitivity and optimal effectiveness in question wording.

This instrument was created to elicit as much information as possible regarding the strengths and weaknesses of having grown up with a gay or lesbian parent. The open-ended questions and exploratory nature of this instrument was one of its clear advantages. Conversely, one of the limitations of this instrument was its lack of concrete measurement. There was a greater chance of human error involved in the interpretation of data because a qualitative instrument was used.

#### Procedures

The twelve-item questionnaire was administered through a direct interview, either in person or over the phone. Private office space was utilized at Jewish Family Service in Palm Springs. One researcher conducted the semi-structured interviews within a 90-day period, beginning on December 20, 2005 and ending on March 15,

2006. Qualified and willing participants, identified through snowball sampling, were initially contacted by phone. Other participants chose to respond by calling the phone number posted on fliers (760) 831-5799. Once contact had been made, the purpose of the interview was explained and participation was solicited. An appointment was made to conduct the interview. At the time of the interview, informed consent was read out loud, and participant agreement was noted by the researcher on the interview form. Following the interview, a debriefing statement was read, and mailed if desired, and the participant was thanked for their time and effort.

#### Protection of Human Subjects

Numerous precautions were taken to protect the confidentiality of the participants in this study. All questionnaires were coded with an identification number rather than the participants' name. All of the researcher's notes were placed on the coded questionnaire, and placed in a locked file cabinet, accessible only by the researcher and research supervisor. The researcher read the informed consent to each individual. They were advised of the confidentiality parameters and their right to reveal as much, or as little, information as they



wished. Participants were advised that they could stop the interview at any point. At the end of the interview, if conducted over the phone, the researcher read the debriefing statement and asked each participant if they wanted a copy sent by mail. If the interview was conducted in person, the researcher provided a written copy of the debriefing statement to the participant, after reading it out loud. The debriefing statement provided information about the study and how to obtain results. A telephone number with information about gay and lesbian families was provided, in case the participant wanted to discuss the subject further. The informed consent and debriefing statements are attached as Appendices B and C.

#### Data Analysis

In determining the advantages and obstacles of having been raised by a gay or lesbian parent, this study analyzed the responses given to a series of qualitative, open-ended questions. Using content analysis, the items were analyzed in terms of explicit themes, amount of time devoted to certain topics, and the relative emphasis given to different concepts (Berg, 2004). Separate categories were created and the responses were described according to their common themes and emerging trends. This process was

repeated until all constructs were sufficiently explored. The demographic information was measured by looking for skews and potential biases based on potential disproportionate female to male respondents, and any disparities in education level among the participants.

#### Summary

This chapter discussed the design of this qualitative study. It explored the methodological implications and limitations of the design. The instrument to be used was presented, and the pre-test measures were discussed. Specific procedures for conducting the study were explored and protocol for sampling was revealed. Measures to be taken to protect the human subjects involved in this study were explained. Last, methods to be used in disseminating and interpreting the data in this study were discussed.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### RESULTS

#### Introduction

Chapter Four reviews both the quantitative, demographic information yielded by the study, as well as the overall qualitative study results. Qualitative data analysis was used to extract codes that represented each participant's response. These codes were grouped into categories. Separate categories were created and the responses were described according to their common themes and emerging trends. This process was repeated until all constructs were sufficiently explored. This chapter concludes with a summary.

#### Demographics

There were 10 total respondents in this study. Eight were female and two were male. Their ages ranged from 19-47 years, with the mean age of 31.4 years (standard deviation = 9.77). All respondents were high school graduates. One respondent possessed a doctorate degree, one possessed a master's degree, and three had earned bachelor's degrees. The remaining five respondents reported having "some college" experience. Out of the 10 participants, four had gay fathers, and five had lesbian

mothers. One participant was raised with both a gay father and a lesbian mother.

### Qualitative Results

The age at which the respondents first learned of their parent's sexual identity ranged from 5-30 years of age. The average age was 12.3 years (standard deviation = 6.51). Six respondents stated, "I figured it out on my own." Three individuals were told about their parent's sexual identity by the parent, themselves. One participant found out her father was gay after getting into an argument with her mother's former boyfriend. She explained, "I was being a smart ass and said, you're not my dad, you can't tell me what to do, and he blurted it out that my dad was gay. That's basically how I found out."

The respondent's reactions to learning of their parent's sexual identity, and thoughts on growing up with a gay or lesbian parent, exposed similarities. These similarities were linked together and are discussed as the following themes: divorce, diversity, perceived strengths, and ostracism.

## Divorce

(When the question was posed, "What differences did you see between your family and your friends' families?" eight out of 10 respondents cited their parents' divorce as the primary difference between their families and other families. A 19-year-old female respondent with a lesbian mother explained, "Divorce was the big factor. I never thought about my mom being gay, as much as a single parent. Her struggling to put food on the table was a bigger factor." Similarly, another female participant stated, "It was a challenge growing up in a broken home, not having two parents. My mom being gay was only a small part of the problems I saw with my family."

This theme was mentioned by both the youngest and oldest participant in the study, regardless of their level of education, and it was common across gender lines. A 25-year-old male respondent discussed what made him feel different than his classmates. He stated,

I felt different because all of my close friends' parents were married and mine were divorced. It was the divorce that made me feel different, not necessarily my dad being gay. I always wanted married parents, not a dad I only saw on the weekends.

In another question, the researcher inquired about any unique obstacles faced by respondents, as a result of their parent's sexual identity. The responses again focused on the ramifications of coming from a broken home. A 21 year old, female participant explained, "It was an obstacle having divorced parents, I could always leave out the part that he was gay." This sentiment was echoed by a 47-year-old female participant with a gay father who stated,

Being raised by a single parent was a much bigger factor than my dad's sexuality. We didn't have any money. Basically, our family obstacles were related to my parents being divorced and my mom raising five kids on her own with out any help.

Another respondent described the obstacle of having to deal with the betrayal she felt over her parents getting divorced. Her mother did not disclose her sexual identity until the respondent was 30 years old. Even as a grown woman, she felt her parents' divorce was harder to deal with than her mother's disclosure.

Divorce, as a theme, reappeared when participants were asked about their school experiences. One respondent described feeling badly that she didn't have a dad to

accompany her to any "father-daughter" functions at school.

Another respondent, who attended a strict Catholic school, was more concerned about the school officials finding out her parents were divorced than her dad being gay. She explained, "I didn't really know what gay meant, but I knew divorce was a mortal sin for Catholics."

### Diversity

When asked about their views on diversity, respondents described themselves as "politically active," "diverse," "open to all lifestyles," "respectful of others," "liberal in thinking," "accepting of different cultures," "having a soft spot for the underdog," and "concerned about human rights." All ten respondents reported that they valued diversity, and seven out of 10 directly attributed their beliefs to having a gay or lesbian parent. One respondent reflected, "I think growing up in an alternative family has taught me, that we're all god's children." Although all participants stated they valued diversity, three of the ten did not feel their beliefs should be attributed to their parent's sexual identity. These respondents felt strongly that their beliefs were a result of their own life experiences and

political viewpoints, and not a result of having a gay or lesbian parent.

### Perceived Strengths

When participants were asked to reflect on any unique strengths growing up with a gay or lesbian parent, 50 percent explicitly cited tolerance and diversity as primary strengths. A 34 year old, male respondent, raised with both a gay father and lesbian mother explained, "I'm definitely more open minded about people who fall outside the normal family boundaries." Similarly, a 19 year old, female participant raised with a lesbian mother stated,

I've lived the life of a minority, we weren't a cookie cutter traditional family. It was a saving grace, and I'm thankful for it. It became a good thing for me to step outside the box. I've become more understanding of different cultures.

Other areas identified as strengths included, community action and involvement. One respondent stated she became her high school expert on LGBT issues after classmates found out her mother was a lesbian. She explained,

By high school it opened up a lot of doors for me, friends who thought they might be gay or lesbian, came to me for advice. I really grew into my own and



became a source for others to talk with.

Six participants explained that they were active in promoting lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender rights. Several mentioned their commitment to speaking out against discriminatory behaviors and practices at local levels and involvement in organizations such as PFLAG. Others cited commitment to AIDS charities and AIDS related research. Two participants could not identify any strengths as a result their family structure.

#### Ostracism

The final prominent theme that emerged from this study was ostracism. This theme was most evident in two forms, ostracism from friends and classmates of the respondents, and alienation of the participant's parents from their co-workers and family members once their sexual identity was revealed. Ostracism, or fear of ostracism, was a common theme among eight out of ten participants in the study.

Four out of ten respondents stated they were harassed or teased, when classmates found out their parent was gay or lesbian. A 40 year old, female respondent raised with a lesbian mother explained one of her experiences. She stated, "I was ostracized for it. One of my friend's

mothers found out and called all the other moms and told them not to allow their daughters to play with me."

Three other study participants described similar outcomes of being harassed and bullied. One respondent said, "When I told my best friend, I was in junior high. She just freaked out and told all the other kids. They made fun of me."

Although only four respondents reported being overtly ostracized, four additional respondent's described fear of ostracism. Consequently, they chose not to tell their friends about their parent's sexual identity when they were in elementary or middle school. One of the participants explained,

It was difficult in the sense that I didn't feel as though I could talk about it to any of my friends. I didn't tell any of my friends about it until high school, when I felt I could trust others.

Others decided not to tell their friends, because they feared their friends would think they were gay. A 21-year-old female participant described her experiences growing up with a gay father. She stated,

I never told my classmates when I was young. I never wanted to tell anyone, because I was worried that they would think I was gay. It was hard when I was

around my friends and they would say things about gay people. It helped when I started meeting my dad's friends and they had kids. I knew I wasn't alone.

Seven out of ten respondents reported that their parent was discriminated against and alienated by either friends, family, coworkers, or their employers as a direct result of being gay or lesbian. For many of the respondents, this was more difficult to handle than being ostracized themselves. A female participant stated, "My grandfather stopped talking to us when he found out my mom was gay. I don't have a grandfather, he treated my mom really badly because she was gay."

Other participants discussed their parents being denied promotions due to their sexual preferences, and being sexually harassed by coworkers. One respondent talked about his mother's death, and how her partner was dismissed by the hospital staff. The respondent explained, They wouldn't release my mom's body to her partner. They had been together over 20 years at that time. I lived out of state, and they actually waited several hours for me to arrive before allowing any decisions to be made.

In certain incidents, respondents described their parent's struggle to be recognized as domestic partners, and having to fight for health benefits from their employers.

#### Summary

Chapter Four reviewed both the quantitative, demographic data, and the qualitative, narrative data revealed in this study. The qualitative data were analyzed and reduced into various codes. The codes were then placed into different categories based on their similarities. From the various categories, themes were detected and named. The four most prominent themes identified among the respondents were: divorce, diversity, perceived strengths and ostracism. These themes were discussed in a narrative form for the purpose of understanding the advantages and obstacles of having been raised with a gay or lesbian parent.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### DISCUSSION

#### Introduction

Chapter Five includes a presentation of the conclusions derived from this thesis project. The limitations of this study are presented. Additionally, suggestions for future social work practice, policy, and research are discussed. Last, this chapter concludes with a summary.

#### Discussion

Previous literature on gay and lesbian headed families did not fully explore the impact of divorce on children of gay and lesbian parents, conceived in a heterosexual union. Although it was mentioned as a potential factor impacting a child's ability to successfully cope with their new family structure, it was always spoken of as a side note or afterthought.

As a result, it was surprising when it was mentioned by nearly every respondent as the primary factor that made them feel different from their peers. The two participants that did not mention divorce as a factor, cited their parent's alcoholism or mental illness as the primary noticeable difference between their family and their

friends' families, not their parent's sexual identity. Similarly, it was interesting that only a few of the participants discussed their parent's sexual identity as an obstacle growing up. Instead, they returned to the topic of divorce and the ramifications of growing up in a broken home. Their parent's sexual orientation appeared to be a secondary concern behind divorce, mental illness and alcoholism.

The question, "What differences did you see between your family and your friends' family?" yielded interesting data based on the way the question was perceived by the participants. All respondents interpreted the word "different," as a negative. Nobody talked about their pride in diversity or their heightened cultural awareness (common themes elicited from other questions) in response to this question. This suggests that for school aged children, the need for sameness is strong.

Much of the literature reviewed discussed discrimination experienced at school. Although none of the participants felt discriminated against by teachers, or expressed frustration over heterosexist curriculum in the classroom, many did feel ostracized by friends and classmates. Several respondents decided not to tell friends about their parent's sexual identity out of fear

of being teased or bullied. This was consistent with the vast majority of the literature previously published.

All respondents reported having characteristics consistent with diversity. Although not surprising, this should not necessarily be viewed as an automatic byproduct of having been raised with a gay or lesbian parent. It is difficult to determine to what extent cultural awareness and diversity could be attributed to educational backgrounds or the geographic location of the sample. There is no specific causality for diversity.

This study is also important, because of the information that was not found. None of the adult children in this sample reported parental pathologies based on their mother or father's sexual orientation. If anything, this study discredits the commonly held belief that gay and lesbian parents are deficient based on their sexual identity and unsuitable to raise children. Instead, it shows that gay and lesbian parents are no less capable of providing a safe, loving home for their children than their heterosexual counterparts.

None of the adult children interviewed in this study overtly cited, or alluded to, parental practices (positive or negative) that could necessarily be considered unique, because of their parent's sexual orientation. Conversely,

children growing up with gay and lesbian parents experience many of the same issues as children raised in traditional nuclear families. The only notable difference was in the discrimination and ostracism they faced from an uneducated society, that refuses to acknowledge the legitimacy and value of their family structure.

#### Limitations

There are several possible limitations of this study. First, the sample size could potentially be a problem. Although qualitative in nature, with only ten participants, it is hard to accurately gauge the representative quality of this study. Attempting to apply generalities to this population, based on the findings of a sample size of ten, seems impractical.

Another possible limitation involves the lack of equitable gender representation within the sample. This study reflects the views of eight females and only two males. Sons and daughters raised with two heterosexual parents report vastly different childhoods and interpret their experiences differently. The same is true with the children of gay and lesbian parents. As such, this study would be more generalizable with more male participants to



better reflect a son's perspective on growing up with a gay or lesbian parent.

Another possible limitation to this study could be the way in which the respondents were obtained. Snowball sampling was utilized to gather this sample of participants. Although multiple starting points were used to solicit a diverse sample, most respondents were connected to the Palm Springs area, a socially progressive gay and lesbian community. It is possible that the responses may have been different if the snowball sample originated in a different geographical location.

Last, as a whole, the 10 respondents in this study were well educated. All were high school graduates, and all reported at least some college experience. Three respondents had received bachelor degrees, one had earned a masters degree, and another held a doctorate degree. The respondent's overall level of education may have potentially skewed the results of this study, and should be kept in mind if trying to generalize the findings to this entire population.

#### Recommendations for Social Work Practice, Policy and Research

This study has implications for social workers, working at both micro and macro practice levels. The

results of this study revealed the need for more school based social work programs focusing on cultural sensitivity training and diversity education, within the public school systems. Although none of the participants cited issues of discrimination from teachers, many suffered from ridicule and harassment initiated by their peers. It is this researcher's belief that this problem could largely be mitigated by school based social workers, providing educational workshops for staff and students on tolerance and diversity.

For direct service practitioners working in adoption and foster home placement, the focus is on what this study did not reveal. This study did not show any correlation between a parent's sexual orientation and their ability to be a good parent. Parental fitness cannot be predetermined based solely on sexual orientation. Millions of children are in need of a safe, nurturing environment. Gay and lesbian couples should be afforded the same opportunity to raise these children as heterosexual couples. Gender is irrelevant. This researcher discovered no evidence to contradict this premise.

At the macro level, social workers are needed to advocate for social policy reform. Policies such as the Defense of Marriage Act, which defines marriage as a legal

institution between a man and a woman only, openly discriminates against gay and lesbian couples, and by its very nature renders gay and lesbian headed families illegitimate. The refusal to acknowledge the legitimacy of gay unions, implies that gay and lesbian families are unwelcome in American society.

The second ethical principle listed in the NASW Code of Ethics (1981), states that social workers should challenge social injustice on behalf of oppressed populations. It is this researcher's opinion that gay and lesbian individuals and their families are oppressed by policies such as the Defense of Marriage Act. On a macro level, social workers could enact great social change by lobbying to abolish this law.

Last, there is little research on gay and lesbian families. There is even less research capturing the children's point of view. In order to best serve this new breed of the American family, social workers should continue to research the dynamics surrounding gay and lesbian parents and their children. Ideally, longitudinal research is needed to fully understand the impact of growing up in an alternative family.

## Conclusions

This study illustrated that there are more similarities than differences between children with gay and lesbian parents and children with heterosexual parents. Divorce continues to be a major factor with children, whether their parents are gay or straight. With an increasing number of children being raised by gay or lesbian couples, it seems the emphasis is placed on providing a stable home life and an intact family unit.

The adult children interviewed in this study placed little importance on their parent's sexual orientation, and did not cite any parental practices or behaviors related to their parent's sexual preferences, that negatively impacted their childhood. Any difficulties faced as a result of having been raised with a gay or lesbian parent, were in the negative responses from society in general.

APPENDIX A  
QUESTIONNAIRE

Respondent Number: \_\_\_\_\_

## INTERVIEWER'S QUESTIONNAIRE

### Section I

#### Demographic Information:

- Respondent's gender
- Respondent's age
- Respondent's level of education
- Number of Siblings
- Which parent is gay or lesbian

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### Section II

#### Open-ended Questions:

1. When did you find out your parent was gay/lesbian?  
-How did you find out?

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**2. How was it to be raised by a gay/lesbian parent in a predominantly heterosexual society?**

**How was it in school?**

**How was it with extended family?**

**How did it impact your social activities?**

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**3. How did your heterosexual parent react, if you had one?**

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**4. How has being raised by a gay or lesbian parent affected your views on diversity?**

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**5. What differences did you see between your family and your friends' families?**

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**6. Were there any unique obstacles your family encountered as a result of your parent's sexual identity?**

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**7. Were there any unique strengths you can identify as a result of your family structure? What were they?**

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APPENDIX B  
INFORMED CONSENT

## INFORMED CONSENT

The study in which you are being invited to participate is designed to look at the advantages and obstacles of having been raised with a gay or lesbian parent. This study is being conducted by Jennifer Hilt, a graduate student in the Masters of Social Work Program at California State University, San Bernardino. The project will be supervised by Dr. Rosemary McCaslin. Dr. McCaslin can be reached at (909) 537-5507 to address any concerns regarding this study

Your participation in this project is completely voluntary. You may answer as many, or few questions, as you desire. If, at any time, you wish to discontinue the interview, you are free to do so. You may remove any data at any time during this study. The interview is expected to take 30 minutes to complete. Please be assured that any information you provide will be strictly confidential. At no time will your name be reported along with your responses. Specifics will be merged to create composite descriptions so individuals are not identifiable. All interview forms will be identified with a number only, and the information will be kept in a locked cabinet, accessible only to the researcher and research supervisor

The Department of Social Work Sub-Committee of the CSUSB Institutional Review Board has approved this project. The results of this study will be presented as a final research project for the Masters of Social Work Program at CSUSB. The results will be available in the Pfau University Library, and at Jewish Family Service in Palm Springs, after September 2006

I acknowledge that I have been informed of, and understand, the nature and purpose of this study, and I freely consent to participate. I acknowledge that I am at least 18 years of age

Mark: \_\_\_\_\_

Verbal Consent: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX C  
DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

## **DEBRIEFING STATEMENT**

Thank you for your participation in an exploratory study regarding the advantages and obstacles of having been raised by a gay or lesbian parent. This study hopes to understand any special issues these family constellations may face and dispel commonly held, heterosexist myths regarding alternative family structures. If you have any questions, or want to further discuss gay and lesbian families please contact the desert chapter of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) at (760) 202-4430

This study was conducted by Jennifer Hilt under the supervision of Dr. Rosemary McCaslin. If you have any questions about this study you may contact Dr. McCaslin at (909) 537-5507. Results of this study will be available in the Pfau Library at California State University San Bernardino, and Jewish Family Service in Palm Springs, after September 2006

APPENDIX D

LETTER



## Jewish Family Service of the Desert

801 E. TAHQUITZ CANYON WAY, SUITE 202, PALM SPRINGS, CA 92262  
(760) 325-4088 • FAX (760) 778-3781 • www.jfsdesert.org

November 28, 2005

**To Whom it May Concern:**

Jennifer Hilt, a student in the Masters of Social Work program at California State University, San Bernardino has expressed interest in completing her thesis/graduate project on "The advantages and obstacles of having been raised by a gay or lesbian parent."

The gay and lesbian community is a growing segment within the Coachella Valley. As such, the results of Ms. Hilt's study are of great interest to this agency. Jewish Family Service is willing to provide Ms. Hilt the office space needed to conduct the interviews for her project. Additionally, Ms. Hilt is welcome to place a flier in our waiting room to solicit potential participants for her study. We look forward to reviewing the results in the spring of 2006.

Feel free to call with any questions.

Dan Bass, LCSW  
Executive Director, Jewish Family Service



Jewish Family Service is a beneficiary of the Jewish Federation of Palm Springs and Desert Area, the United Way of the Desert and a member agency of the Association of Jewish Family and Children's Agencies



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