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Same-Sex Parenting: Bringing Awareness to the Challenges and
Strengths of Gay and Lesbian Parents Today

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This paper's objective was to bring awareness as well as understanding to same-sex parents. The challenges as well as strengths and resilience factors of same-sex parents were examined through a review of the existing literature on the topic. The main points of the paper included the diversity of gay and lesbian families, common misconceptions about them, the legal challenges they face, as well as other obstacles they may encounter. The way these families cope with their problems as well as considerations for therapists working with them were also discussed. The main conclusion of the paper is that there are no significant differences in the well-being of children raised by same-sex parents as compared to those raised by heterosexual parents. It seems like parenting skills, rather than sexual orientation, are most important when deciding who is a fit parent.

Running head: SAME-SEX PARENTING

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Lesbian Parents Today

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Abstract

This paper's objective was to bring awareness as well as understanding to same-sex parents. The challenges as well as strengths and resilience factors of same-sex parents were examined through a review of the existing literature on the topic. The main points of the paper included the diversity of gay and lesbian families, common misconceptions about them, the legal challenges they face, as well as other obstacles they may encounter. The way these families cope with their problems as well as considerations for therapists working with them were also discussed. The main conclusion of the paper is that there are no significant differences in the well-being of children raised by same-sex parents as compared to those raised by heterosexual parents. It seems like parenting skills, rather than sexual orientation, are most important when deciding who is a fit parent.

Introduction

Throughout history, gays and lesbians have found ways to fit into mainstream society, sometimes by hiding their sexual orientation and forming families with heterosexual partners. As our society has evolved and gays and lesbians have been able to publicly “come out,” many of them have decided to start their own families without feeling the need to hide. New reproductive technologies have also been a factor that has made it easier for lesbian and gay couples to become parents (Renaud, 2007). This “public acknowledgement” of gay and lesbian families did not start until the late 20th century (Lindsay, Perlesz, Brown, McNair, deVaus & Pitts, 2006). Today, there are anywhere from 2 to 10 million gay and lesbian parents in the United States raising from 6 to 14 million children (Adams, Jaques, & May, 2004). Many gay and lesbian individuals have moved beyond pushing for tolerance and asking for acceptance of their families (Berkowitz, 2007). Even though it is not always easy, gays and lesbians have managed to form happy, functioning families with success (Patterson, 2000).

Gay and lesbian families, in addition to dealing with problems that arise in any other family, are also faced with some obstacles that are unique to them. Even though it is easier now than it has been in the past to be an openly gay or lesbian individual, many people still hold prejudice regarding their sexuality. Gays and lesbians are still at times victims of discrimination. A 1999 survey by Crawford showed that the majority of Americans are still against gay and lesbian individuals becoming parents. The survey also showed that even some psychologists with experience working with gay and lesbian individuals might show a slight prejudice in adoption recommendations for them (as cited in Tye, 2003).

A big part of society's bias and prejudice towards gay and lesbian families might be largely due to misinformation about them, therefore an increase in understanding and awareness of these families is essential. There have not been any significant differences found in the psychological outcome of children raised by same-sex parents (Patterson, 2000; Tye, 2003; Perlesz, Brown, Lindsay, McNair, deVaus, & Pitts, 2006). This paper will attempt to increase knowledge of gay and lesbian parents and their families, including how diverse they are, misconceptions about them, their legal rights, the particular obstacles they face, and how they manage to stay resilient despite these obstacles. The implications for therapists working with this minority group will also be discussed.

Although this paper will mainly focus on research specifically done on gay and lesbian parents; it is important to keep in mind that many of the same issues and challenges mentioned here are also faced by bisexual and transgender parents. Also, in order to have the opportunity to integrate research with real life experiences, summaries of two phone interviews with women in same-sex relationships are included at the end of the paper. One of these women adopted a child within the context of her same-sex relationship (see Appendix A) while the other one is a biological parent of two children she conceived in a previous heterosexual relationship (see Appendix B).

Great Diversity within a Minority Group

People's motivation to become parents is the same whether they are gay, lesbian, or heterosexual (McCann & Delmonte, 2005; Patterson, 2000). For example, most people want become parents because they have a desire to nurture children and enjoy being around them (McCann & Delmonte, 2005). The only exception is that gay men are

more likely to cite the higher status given to parents as opposed to non-parents in society as one of the factors of their motivation to become parents (Patterson, 2000). This might reflect the desire of a minority group to be more accepted by society.

Even though there are no significant differences between heterosexuals and non-heterosexuals in their motivation to becoming a parent, Tye points out in his article about gay and lesbian adoption that a child is never “accidental” for a gay or lesbian individual. Therefore, gay and lesbian couples have actively prepared themselves to become parents (Tye, 2003). Lesbian couples, for example, have to make many decisions when deciding to become mothers. They have to think about donor insemination, gender and role expectations, concern about the well-being of their children, legal challenges they might face, and the possibility they might encounter some discrimination in a somewhat homophobic society (Renaud, 2007).

There are many different ways in which gays and lesbians can become parents. First, a child could have been conceived (or adopted) at a time in which a gay or lesbian individual was involved in a heterosexual relationship (Patterson, 2000). Families that are the result of a previous separation or divorce of a heterosexual couple many times deal with problems that arise from the separation (like a parent’s new partner) in addition to dealing with problems related to their family member coming out to them for the first time. (Patterson, 2000). In addition, gay and lesbian parents from these previous relationships might face the fear of losing their children’s custody and anxiety about forming a new family (Johnson & O’Connor, 2002).

Secondly, now more than ever, children are being born to or adopted by gay fathers or lesbian mothers (while they are in a same-sex relationship). These types of

families have been called families of the gay/lesbian baby boom, planned lesbian mother or planned gay father families, and *de novo* families (Tasker & Patterson, 2007).

Other ways a same-sex couple might decide to start a family include the use of a surrogate mother, or (in the case of a lesbian couple) one of the mothers might decide to get pregnant through artificial insemination. Another documented method is called co-parenting (an agreement between usually three to four gay and lesbian adults who want to biologically conceive a child and raise him/her together), although this is less common (McCann & Delmonte, 2005).

Common Misconceptions about Same-Sex parents and their Children

There are certain misunderstandings that might lead to a societal bias toward same-sex parenting. Many people question the rights of gays and lesbians to be parents because they think that having a gay or lesbian parent (s) might be damaging to children. In fact, research seems to show over and over that children who are raised by gay or lesbian parents are not anymore at risk of psychological or emotional problems than those raised by heterosexual parents (Patterson, 2000; Tye, 2003; Perlesz et.al, 2006).

Chapter one of Johnson and O'Connor's book is titled "Ask the Experts: What Makes a Good Parent?" (2007). In this chapter, the authors emphasize that parents being "consistently sensitive, available, accepting, and cooperative throughout their child's first year of life" leads to that child having a secure attachment. It is well-known in psychology and child development research that a secure attachment between a child and his or her caregiver is correlated to that child being confident in him or herself and feeling worthy of the love of others (p. 12). The authors also go on to say that other factors related to good parenting are having an authoritative style (being "warm and

responsive” but also “strict and demanding when needed”), and the quality of the parents’ relationship (i.e. low conflict tends to result in better outcomes when it comes to the psychological well being of the child). Outside stress and lack of support might also have an effect on parenting. None of these factors are related to the parents’ sexual orientation. There is no evidence to suggest that same-sex parents cannot be as responsive, loving and accepting of a child as heterosexual parents (Johnson & O’Connor, 2007).

Gay and lesbian parents could be at risk of experiencing less support from their families or others. Also, the fact that their families are not legally recognized could lead to stressful situations. However, these things are because of our society’s lack of acceptance of gay and lesbian families and not because of the parent’s sexual orientation itself (Johnson & O’Connor, 2007).

Researchers have also looked at the belief that children of gay and lesbian parents would become gays and lesbians themselves. Critics of this idea argue that if parents’ sexual orientation was a determining factor in a child’s sexuality, why then, would there be homosexual children born to heterosexual parents? In fact previous studies have come to the conclusion that most children raised by gay or lesbian parents grow up to be heterosexual (McCann & Delmonte, 2005).

Some people have also raised concerns about the absence of a role model of the opposite sex in the lives of children of gay parents. However, as it will be discussed later in the paper, most gay and lesbian couples include friends and other relatives in their “family of choice,” and children have the opportunity to have contact with adults of the opposite sex of their parents (McCann & Delmonte, 2005). Research has revealed that

children raised by same-sex parents have positive relationships with their peers as well as with adults (Tasker & Patterson, 2007).

Considerations and Potential Challenges Faced by Same-Sex Parents

Gay and lesbian parents face many of the same issues all families have to deal with. According to a 1995 study by Kurdek, the top five areas of conflict in gay and lesbian couples are finances, driving style, affection/sex, being overly critical, and division of household tasks (as cited in Patterson, 2000). These sound like problems that any couple (gay or straight) might face. However, there are many other obstacles that gay parents face for the mere fact of being gay or lesbian in our society. For example, they might have to deal with homophobic attitudes that are still held by many people today. Also, heterosexism (the belief that opposite-sex couples are superior to same-sex couples) might be as damaging as homophobia (Adams, Jaques, & May, 2004).

The first challenges faced by gay and lesbian individuals start from the moment they decide to become parents, since there are many decisions they have to make. In a study that included interviews and observations of lesbian mothers, it was found that lesbian mothers discussed everything from parental philosophies to daycare, insurance, and work arrangements. They also might face the decision of which partner would become a biological mother and give birth to their child. If they were using a donor they faced the decision of having a known versus an unknown one. In the study, some participants decided to choose known sperm bank donors to give their child the choice to find out who the donor was (in the future). Others reported feeling threatened by the fact that known donor might claim parental rights and therefore chose to use an unknown donor (Renaud, 2007).

Furthermore, gay and lesbian parents have to deal with their own experiences as gay and lesbian men and women. Some individuals might have distorted ideas about themselves and their ability to be a good parent because of the negative and self-loathing messages they have received by society throughout their lives (McCann & Delmonte, 2005). Gay fathers particularly have to deal with societal views that gay men should not be trusted around children and that women are seen as better caregivers of children than men (McCann & Delmonte, 2005). Unfortunately, gay men might have an easier time if they present themselves as single fathers even if they are in a loving, committed relationship. An additional challenge when only one partner of the same-sex couple is the biological parent is deciding what to call the “co-parent.” (Oswald, 2002)

Finally, it is not possible to talk about the issues and obstacles faced by gay and lesbian families without mentioning the “coming out” process. Members of the family might have different opinions about when and how to be open about the nature of their family (Patterson, 2000).

Gays and lesbians might come out before or after deciding to become parents. When coming out to their children, they face concerns of their sexual orientation affecting custody disputes, family-of-origin-reactions, and the fear that their children will be discriminated by their friends, school, and others (Adams, Jaques, & May, 2004). At times, gay and lesbian families might not feel the freedom to openly discuss their family structure because of fear of violence or discrimination (O’Dell, 2000).

As mentioned, sometimes gay and lesbian parents have to deal with their own parents or families not being accepting of their lifestyles. As a lesbian mother puts it in article by Perlesz and her colleagues, “I actually think my family deals with my sexuality

better when I'm not in a relationship than when I'm in it. I think they can ignore it until I am in a relationship." In an interview, a grandfather's initial reaction about his lesbian daughter having a baby was that it would be hard for the child since he/she would be teased and he thought that she shouldn't have a baby for that reason. Despite his initial hesitation, this grandfather became very involved in the baby's life once his daughter had the child, but for many gay and lesbian parents this is not always the case (Perlesz et. al, 2006).

Families weigh the benefits against the risks when deciding whether or not to "come out." For example, a parent might struggle with the need and want to acknowledge same-sex couples and families against the risk of being discriminated against by others. Also, disclosure involves all the family members (not just the gay and/or lesbian parents themselves), which makes the process even more complex. Parents sometimes report making compromises with their children as to the extent in which they are open about the nature of their sexual orientation in order to protect them (Tasker & Patterson, 2007). Other factors that can affect how comfortable gay and lesbian parents and children are with "coming out" have to do with their surroundings. For example, families that live in more conservative places might have a harder time than those who live in more accepting communities (Perlesz et. al , 2006).

Legal Implications of Same-Sex Parenting

The legal rights of same-sex couples in this country vary by state. Same-sex marriage is illegal in most states but some states allow civil unions. However, a civil union does not carry the same benefits that a marriage does. With a civil union, rights are not carried across states, parent adoptions can be overturned, and work benefits for

someone's partner are usually not equal to those given to heterosexual marriages. Some employers have benefits for "domestic partners" but this is not guaranteed (Oswald, 2002). In addition, same-sex couples can be denied visiting each other at the hospital when one of them is sick or hurt. They are also not entitled to family leave, and most pension plans (i.e. in case of the death of a worker) only take into account a legal spouse (Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2009). The 2006 report, *Marriage Inequality in the State of Maryland*, lists more than 425 state provisions that exclude same-sex couples because they depend on either being married or being part of someone's immediate family (as cited in Polikoff, 2008). Marriage does not only mean legal recognition, it also brings many legal benefits along with it (Polikoff, 2008).

Other gay and lesbian family relationships (in addition to marriage) are also not recognized in every state. Some gay and lesbian parents cannot have a legal tie to their children since not every state allows same-sex parents to adopt a child together (Johnson & O'Connor, 2002). Some states allow children to have two parents of the same sex while others do not (Oswald, 2002). A second parent adoption is when the non-biological parent (for example, the biological parent's partner) wants to adopt a child, usually to share custody. Under the law, heterosexual couples have fewer obstacles than same-sex partners when trying adopt through second parent adoption. Second parent adoption by the non-biological gay or lesbian parent is only assured in eight U.S. states. In the other states, individual cases would be up to the decision of a specific judge (Tye, 2003).

In most states, at least one gay or lesbian parent may adopt a child as a "single parent". However, in Florida, a "first parent" adoption is limited to heterosexuals only.

A gay or lesbian identified individual would have to lie about their sexuality in order to adopt a child in that state. In Mississippi and Utah, a cohabiting non-married couple (gay, lesbian, or heterosexual) is not allowed to adopt a child. Furthermore, in many states (even if adoption is allowed), some adoption agencies refuse to work with gay and lesbian individuals or couples (Tye, 2003).

It is very important to bring awareness to the legal issues faced by gay and lesbian individuals and couples trying to adopt a child because there is currently a shortage of adoptive and foster parents in this country. There are around 500,000 children in the United States who are in foster care (Brooks & Goldberg, 2001). Also, the number of children in need of an adoptive home keeps growing while there are not nearly as many families to adopt them (Brooks & Goldberg, 2001; Ryan, Pearlmuter, & Groza, 2004). Despite the fact that research shows no significant differences in the outcomes of children raised by a same-sex couple, gay and lesbian parents still at times face obstacles and scrutiny by society when trying to adopt children (Brooks & Goldberg, 2001; Tye, 2003; Tasker & Patterson, 2007). They often experience institutionalized discrimination, meaning they are treated differently by social service providers (Brooks & Goldberg, 2001).

Other legal problems may arise when there is a heterosexual couple's divorce because of a parent coming out. This may lead to a custody dispute and at times the heterosexual parent might use their anger, confusion, and the prejudices that might exist in the law in order to deny custody or visitation rights to the gay or lesbian parent. Many times this happens for no reason other than their ex-partner's sexual orientation (Tye, 2003; Johnson & O'Connor, 2002). Because of this, it is important to work to set laws

that prevent these situations from giving an unfair advantage to a parent solely based on his or her sexual orientation. Tye stresses that a forensic evaluation (for an adoption) should be based on factors unrelated to a parent's sexual orientation including parental strengths and weaknesses and most importantly the best interest of the child in question (2003).

The fact that non-biological parents are often not properly recognized by the law and society as a whole is often difficult for gay and lesbian parents (McCann & Delmonte, 2005; Oswald, 2002). In a study by Renaud, some mothers reported that forms given to them at the hospital did not include "partner" as an option and they felt like health providers were not particularly understanding of their lifestyles. Also, mothers reported there would be no recognition of their partner in case of an emergency, death, or illness. Next-of-kin rules at times prevented a co-mother to visit the hospital intensive care unit to see her baby (2007).

In Renaud's study, some health insurance plans covered the entire costs, while others excluded coverage for lesbians. Certain plans covered fertility costs for single—but not for lesbian-- mothers. Although most mothers in the study mentioned it was important for them to choose "lesbian-friendly" health institutions, a few reported homophobia and many felt a tense environment and talked about overhearing negative comments during doctor appointments (Renaud, 2007)

In most of the U.S., lesbian families do not have legal rights to file joint income taxes, be included in a healthcare policy, sign documents for their partner, inherit property without a will, or buy a home without special documents (Renaud, 2007). In chapter three of his book, Mohr argues that with the increase of children being adopted

by or born into gay and lesbian families, there is not a justifiable purpose that serves these children by not giving their parents the same legal rights as everyone else (Mohr, 2005).

Resiliency in Lesbian and Gay Families

Given all of the obstacles previously mentioned that gay and lesbian parents and their children encounter, how do they manage to stay strong? There are many different things that gay and lesbian families do to intensify their family bonds and overcome any problems they might face.

Often times, children of gay and lesbian families have to deal with the fact that their definition of family might be different from what most of society tells them family is or should be (Perlesz et. al, 2006). A consistent finding in gay and lesbian literature is the idea of “family of choice.” (Perlesz et. al, 2006; Oswald, 2002). This refers to gays and lesbians choosing their own families to include not only members of their family of origin but also friends (gay and straight). These friends are considered to be nothing less than family. They take care of each other when someone is sick, spend holidays together, raise children together, and even share expenses at times. A biological grandmother of a child in a lesbian family described it the following way; “I just think we’re flexible, we are not stuck in this is what patriarchy says family looks like” (Perlesz et. al, 2006).

Some researchers have argued that the exclusion of gays and lesbians in mainstream definitions of family and the rejection from their biological families are important factors that led to gays and lesbians “choosing” their own families. A “family of choice” helps strengthen a gay or lesbian family because while unsupportive family members are excluded, those who accept their sexual orientation and family structure are

brought closer together (Oswald, 2002). Lesbian mothers giving birth have reported it was very important for them to bring their lesbian friends and supportive families with them to the hospital (Renaud, 2007).

Another important factor of resilience is the way and timing in which the family “comes out.” It is important to remember that “coming out” is not a one-time-event but an “ongoing process.” (Oswald, 2002; Adams, Jaques, & May, 2004). Gay and lesbian families will encounter different people and situations over time and will constantly need to “assess their environment and make careful choices” (Oswald, 2002). Younger children appear to have an easier time with their parents coming out than adolescents do. A 2001 study by Ray and Gregory that interviewed 5-8 year olds who were born into a lesbian relationship found that these children simply said they had two moms even when their friends kept questioning them about how that was possible, or telling them they were wrong. This study is also among others that have found that the most awkward and difficult time for children to deal with their parent’s homosexuality are the early teenage years (i.e. from 13 to 16) (as cited in Perlesz et. al, 2006). As kids get older they might stop seeing their parents relationship with a member of the same sex as “normal,” and this might affect how they talk about their family to others. Some might choose not to reveal this to others in order to protect themselves from social disapproval (Perlesz et. al, 2006; Adams, Jaques, & May, 2004; McCann & Delmonte, 2005).

It is important for parents to understand their children’s situation and needs. They should know that if their children are reacting negatively, this is due to a homophobic/patriarchal culture and not because of the parents themselves (Adams,

Jaques, & May, 2004). Sometimes a gay or lesbian family might seek therapy to better deal with these situations, as will be discussed later in the paper.

For the most part, however, even though they may at some point have a hard time with being open about their parents' sexual orientation; teenagers with gay or lesbian parents report having just as warm and caring of a relationship with their parents as teenagers with heterosexual parents (Tasker & Patterson, 2007).

Participating in the community has also been shown to be important for gay and lesbian families. Being part of organizations promoting gay and lesbian rights also helps a family be resilient by providing support. However, using community resources in general (not just those specifically aimed at gay and lesbian populations) seems to be an important resilience factor. Examples of this include going to church, being part of an ethnic group, and other social or political activities. (Oswald, 2002).

As an additional way to overcome the legal and societal obstacles mentioned earlier, same-sex couples and families might take part in their own commitment ceremonies if they are not allowed to "legally" marry. They might choose to buy joint property and have second parent adoptions (Oswald, 2002). In addition, sometimes all parents and children chose to have the same last name. Other times, the non-biological parent's last name might be given to the child to strengthen their relationship (Oswald, 2002).

Just like there are unique obstacles that same-sex parents face, there are also unique strengths they can benefit from. For example, it has been found that the division of labor as well as child care are more equally divided in gay and lesbian parents than among heterosexual parents (McCann & Delmonte, 2005; Patterson, 2000). Also, gay

fathers place more importance on nurturing their children over providing for them economically (as opposed to heterosexual fathers). In the broader gay community, gay fathers have a higher self-esteem than gay men who are not fathers (McCann & Delmonte, 2005). Also, lesbian couples with children report higher levels of relationship satisfaction and quality of their sexual relationship than those without children (Patterson, 2000). It has been found that school-aged children born to lesbian families had a closer relationship to their birthmothers than those born to a heterosexual couple (McCann & Delmonte, 2005). These positive qualities of same-sex parents and their families might also help them when dealing with the different situations they might encounter.

Important Considerations for Therapists Working with Gay and Lesbian Families

Gay and Lesbian families or couples might choose to see a therapist to deal with their problems. Many times, they will need to work on issues faced by any family (gay or straight). However, because of the factors we have discussed, therapists need to be informed about how to deal with the specific issues faced by same-sex couples and their families in order to effectively assist them. Working to improve parental skills and confidence is also important (McCann & Delmonte, 2005).

As always, it is also necessary that a therapist is open-minded, appreciating of the family's strengths, and aware of his or her own beliefs and values (McCann & Delmonte, 2005). Therapists should not be prejudiced and they should be able to empathize with clients. However, if it is the case that a therapist's own values might interfere with dealing with a client, they should refer them to someone else that might be better suited to help them (McCann & Delmonte, 2005; Adams, Jaques, & May, 2004).

Having a welcoming environment, using inclusive language, books, and posters showing diversity in families (including same-sex parents) might make same-sex couples and their families feel more comfortable. Therapists should be wary of using models based on heterosexual relationships. Although these models might still be helpful to all families (Adams, Jaques, & May, 2004), sometimes a model might not work with a gay or lesbian family and could make them feel uncomfortable (McCann & Delmonte, 2005). In addition, a therapist should not assume all the problems are within the family unit itself, but take into account the family's social context (i.e. socioeconomic status, area, culture etc.). (Adams, Jaques, & May, 2004).

Gay and Lesbian families may need a therapist's help or support with issues raised by coming out. For example, like mentioned before, when coming out to their teenage sons or daughters, they might need reassurance that if there is a negative reaction, their children are reacting to a homophobic culture rather than to their effectiveness/abilities as parents. They should also remember that coming out is an ongoing process (Adams, Jaques, & May, 2004) and that it does not always result in acceptance by society (O'Dell, 2000). All of these things should be understood and taken into account by the therapist, but perhaps the most important factor for therapists to remember is that they are in a position to bring awareness to the gay and lesbian population (Adams, Jaques, & May, 2004).

Author's Summary and Conclusion

People at times have a hard time accepting what is different from them. This might be one of the reasons why some individuals have a hard time accepting same-sex parents. Personal beliefs and religion might be another reason. Some people might think

that a same-sex relationship is wrong in the eyes of God. However it is important to remember that there is a separation of church and state and these personal beliefs should not mean that the equal rights of a particular group should be denied. Still, the most effective way to change negative attitudes and perceptions about gay and lesbian families is probably bringing awareness to their existence. This was the main purpose of this paper.

I believe that as people see more and more same-sex parents doing an effective job raising their children, they might see that gay and lesbian families are not that different from their own. As mentioned multiple times in this paper, research has shown that this is the case. Based on the finding that children raised by same-sex parents are not that different from those raised by a traditional heterosexual couple, traditional views of family (i.e. emphasizing heterosexuality) should be reconsidered (Patterson, 2000). The quality of a family's relationship is much more important than that family's particular structure (Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2009; Patterson, 2000). This means that good parenting skills, providing a child with love and a stable home, and parents' efforts to raise confident and self-reliant children are the factors that should matter when deciding who is fit to be a parent. Sexual orientation is not relevant to the child's well being (Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2009; Ryan, 2007; Johnson & O'Connor, 2002). This is particularly important when talking about adoption. It is unjust to deny a child the right to have a family because of an unfounded bias. It is crucial to educate the public about same-sex parenting. Given the many children that need homes, gay and lesbian individuals should not be discarded as an option based solely because of their sexual orientation

Some progress has been made when it comes to gay and lesbian parents adopting children in the U.S. According to a survey of adoption agencies, 60% of those that responded reported accepting applications from gay and lesbian individuals, and 40% had actually placed a child with a lesbian mother or gay father. However, more needs to be done. Agencies are still more open to placing a child in foster care with a gay or lesbian parent rather than for actual adoption (Tasker & Patterson, 2007).

Major child welfare organizations have issued policies against restrictions on parenting by lesbian and gay men. For example, the Child Welfare League of America's position statement on this topic is the following:

Based on more than three decades of social science research and our 85 years of service to millions of families, CWLA believes that families with LGBTQ members deserve the same levels of support afforded other families. Any attempt to preclude or prevent gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals or couples from parenting, based solely on their sexual orientation, is not in the best interest of children. (American Liberties Union, 2008)

The American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Medical Association, and many other children organizations have publicly stated similar thoughts on the matter (American Liberties Union, 2008).

Other legal issues faced by same-sex parents and their families were also discussed in this paper, particularly the lack of recognition and acceptance they often encounter. Some of these injustices are in part due to marriage inequality. Polikoff suggests that laws that "make marriage—only marriage and always marriage—different from all other relationships must be reevaluated." He argues that all families should be

valued in the law and with a changing society and new family forms, same-sex couples should not have less rights than other couples for the simple fact that they are not able to marry (2008).

I believe education is also very important in order to assure that health professionals, psychologists, social workers, adoption agents, and other professionals will be better informed about gay and lesbian family dynamics and issues relevant to this population. This will lead to same-sex parents and their families having more positive experiences and facing less discrimination.

Finally, the two phone interviews I conducted with mothers in same-sex relationships gave me the opportunity to apply this research to real-life situations. These interviews gave me a first-hand perspective on the life of same-sex parents. Talking to these two women, it was clear how important their children were to them. Also, although they talked about particular situations they faced, they did not seem very different from any other loving family. Appendix A and Appendix B are summaries of these interviews.

Some limitations of this research that might be worth noting is the fact that there is a greater body of research on lesbian mothers than gay fathers. Reasons for this include the fact that gay fathers are less likely to win the custody of their children after a divorce and therefore only a small percentage of gay fathers live with their children after a divorce. The psychological health of lesbian mothers as compared to that of heterosexual mothers is a factor that has come up in custody battles (Patterson, 2000) and this is why research on lesbian mothers is more readily available.

Research on gay and lesbian parents has also been criticized for having self-selected samples (also known as convenience samples) in studies. In addition, most

research has been done with White, college-educated parents who are usually open about their sexual orientation (Tasker & Patterson, 2007). These two things have been seen as limitations because they might not always be representative of the population we are trying to study. Future research needs to address these issues by including more minority groups and trying to use more inclusive samples.

Tasker and Patterson mention that an important advance that has been made in this research is the availability of more longitudinal data that has allowed researchers to have follow-ups with the participants. These longitudinal studies have found that children raised by same-sex parents generally continue to do well over time (2007).

To summarize, our culture has evolved over time and many people are much more accepting of same-sex parents than in the past. However, some people still resist the idea of accepting this family structure. Informing and educating the public are important factors to change this. Even if some people will still reject the idea of a child having two parents of the same sex, the overwhelming body of research strongly suggests that sexual orientation is irrelevant to parenting skills. The well-being of children should be the most important factor when making any decisions. Given the fact that research has constantly shown that there is little difference between children raised by same-sex parents as opposed to those raised by heterosexual parents, it is time to re-evaluate the way our society views same-sex couples and their families.

Appendix A

Demographic Summary: This is a woman in a committed lesbian relationship. She adopted a child with her partner. The following is a summary of the responses she gave in a phone interview.

1. **Tell me a little bit about your parenting situation, I understand you are in a committed relationship with your partner and you adopted a child—was that once you were already in that relationship?**
 - She has been together with her partner for 16 years.
 - Their adoptive son is three years old.
 - The whole adoption process took about 5 years. “Our first choice was to conceive but we are older parents, so we decided on adoption... We went through several heartbreaking moments” (until they were finally able to adopt their son).
 - Two days after he was born they went to Texas for an open adoption. They later adopted him in Minnesota (where she and her partner live). Until then it was not legal yet.
 - “The biological mother chose us specifically, she wanted a gay couple.”
 - Her partner adopted him first. “It took another 6 months to a year and I was able to adopt him too.”

2. **What has been your experience as a lesbian mother in today’s society?**
 - It has been positive for the most part. “It has been a great experience, no conflict, no altercations in public or anything like that.”
 - “I don’t really identify as a lesbian, I am bisexual and in a relationship with a woman.”

3. **What do you think is the greatest challenge for gay and lesbian parents today?**
 - In her experience it has not been any different from any other kind of relationship.
 - The biggest challenge she sees: “potentially, if you are not proactive in certain school situations”; for example in her son’s school they made necklaces for mother’s day and he said he had to make two necklaces. He told his teachers he had “mommy and momma.”
 - As he gets older, she thinks they might encounter some conflict around how to accommodate the situation.
 - Another thing that is hard is “sometimes when we are in a store and he’ll yell out something like ‘I want my momma’, and people will give you funny looks like ‘You are not his mother? Who are you?’” It makes her uncomfortable as if they might think she is kidnapping him.

4. **Research has consistently shown that children who grow up with gay or lesbian parents are not much different from those with heterosexual parents. Why do you think prejudice toward gay parents still exists today?**
 - “I just think it is an archaic system, it hasn’t been updated in a while and in it sometimes preys in people’s desperation.” She gave the example of third world

countries which have children up for adoption and charge a lot of money for their services.

- “The amount of background checks we had to go through (to adopt their son) was absurd... There is the concern that you are pedophiles.” She couldn’t help but thinking “people whose only intentions are to molest a child wouldn’t spend that kind of money just to adopt one.”

5. Do you think that ‘pedophile’ stereotype you mentioned is even worse for gay men?

- “Oh, absolutely. It is worse for a male couple...it is such an assumption.”

6. Laws in certain states, for example Florida, forbid gay and lesbian couples from adopting children. What is your take on this?

- “That was our experience at first with an agency that was going international... There are laws against it (gay and lesbian parents adopting) internationally.”
- It can be a heartbreaking process.
- With the example in of Florida “you want to morally not lie,” but otherwise gay and lesbian couples are not allowed to adopt children.
- “In Minnesota we had no obstacles, we got a really cool judge and a lawyer that specialized in same-sex adoption. However, we did hear some concern about certain judges being less lenient.”

7. Do you think the law does enough to protect the rights of gay and lesbian parents? What more still needs to be done?

- “No. I feel protected because I’m a legal parent, so if one of us was to die, other family members couldn’t just take our son away. But that is not always the case (for other same-sex couples).”

8. A consistent finding in gay and lesbian literature is the idea of a “family of choice.” Can you talk a little bit more about this? Why do you think this is common?

- “Good parents realize you need an extensive network to support child development.”
- “The biggest issue is non-acceptance.”
- These families of choice are formed “to normalize family situations. For example Thanksgiving Day.”
- “It normalizes the kids’ experience and frame of reference.”

9. What are some ways to bring awareness to gay and lesbian families? Do you think this is important to bring about change in how society sees them?

- “My partner is part of RAINBOW counseling.” It is important to “be up in politics, get exposure.” (Rainbow is a group against violence).
- “Being involved in a community support effort like the RAINBOW family is good. For example, they had a Halloween party. People can see that our families are not that different from theirs.”

- “Being proactive is important; (for example) when there are festivals, parades, we are there. We are out and about.”
- The other day when her son answered the phone and was asked “Is mommy or daddy there?” “He simply said, “Oh, I don’t have a daddy, I have two mommies, there is mommy and momma’ ...He doesn’t see it as an issue, maybe later we will have to deal with some teen angst, but we will deal with that later.”

Appendix B

Demographic Summary: This was a phone interview with an adult woman in her 50's. She is in a committed lesbian relationship with her partner and has two adult children from a previous marriage. This is a summary of her responses.

1. **Tell me a little bit about your parenting situation, you're the biological mother of two children and you are in a committed relationship. Were your children born in the context of your current relationship or in a previous one?**
 - Married to a man for about 17 years
 - Separated when her children were 8 and 10
 - Single for a while, had 1st relationship with a woman but it didn't work out
 - Her children were teenagers when she got into her current relationship (with a woman)

2. **What was your children's reaction to you coming out?**
 - Had some trouble when she first came out, they didn't like her first girlfriend, they were more resigned by the time she started dating her 2nd girlfriend
 - Interesting fact—later one of her daughters moved to Florida, fell in love with a woman, came out, married her in Boston... "It was an interesting turn of events, it was definitely an adjustment when she came out. I was the lesbian in the family."
 - Ex-husband is a biologist/geneticist..he really just wanted our daughter to have biological kids
 - Daughter took partner's last name, they might ask partner's brother to be a sperm donor.
 - "My parents always raised me to be accepting."

3. **What has been your experience as a lesbian mother in today's society?**
 - "Pretty typical experience as a parent in general" (especially since she had kids in the context of a heterosexual relationship.)
 - Different experience because she is "not one of those people who knew they were gay from an early age like my partner, she always knew she felt that way."
 - "If someone in my 20s had told me I was going to end up here I would have laughed, I had no clue where my life was going to be going."
 - Had a lot of gay friends, "my ex-husband used to joke that if the relationship ended it would be because he would run off with a woman, or I would run off with a woman, turns out he ran off with another woman first, then me."
 - "I think he knew I was bisexual all along."
 - Her partner 12 years younger than her; she had tried being a foster mom before they met..

4. **How do your children and partner get along?**
 - Some issues, disagreements, for example over her oldest daughter; "my partner and I don't always agree on things..." They have some disagreements about her

daughter still being financially dependent on her since she goes to a pretty expensive college.

- That is what their issues are about, “it all comes down to sex and money.”
 - But “I feel like my partner really loves my kids”
 - There are still times when she expresses some concerns as “If I died there wouldn’t be anybody to take care of her,” so she might feel sometimes like they are not “truly her family.”
- 5. What do you think is the greatest challenge for gay and lesbian parents today?**
- Society’s acceptance of them
 - “I was at Fox Valley mall once, there were two women who were clearly lesbian with small children..I had that ‘Oh My God, how hard it must be’ moment..” She looked at it from both perspectives (inside and out)
 - She and her partner were at a small town in MO the other day, a predominantly white, middle-American town—they went to a concert, they felt a little uncomfortable when people started talking about family, when they got married, etc. “I felt like we didn’t belong” (as a lesbian couple)
 - Years ago, a child in a public elementary school “the token child of gay parents,” “I’m sure he couldn’t have been the only one...” She is pleased that now gay couples are more “visible, more mainstream, even though there are still those who think it is horrible.”
- 6. Research has consistently shown that children who grow up with gay or lesbian parents are not much different from those with heterosexual parents. Why do you think prejudice toward gay parents still exists today?**
- “I don’t know, because even gay people have internalized homophobia, the thought that the ‘true family’ is a man and a woman”
 - People haven’t been exposed enough
 - Experienced it when her daughter came out, and when her friend’s oldest son came out; her friend told her how she worried about his safety.
 - She thinks that what it comes down to is fear. “There is a lot of fear on both sides.”
 - “Even I have internalized homophobia sometimes when I see two (male) gay parents; I think ‘can they really do it?’” But then she hears things like about these two gay men that had foster kids and wanted to adopt them and they couldn’t, they weren’t allowed to (in the state of Florida). “That makes me really angry.”
- 7. That was actually going to be my next question. Laws in certain states, for example Florida, forbid gay and lesbian couples from adopting children. What is your take on this?**
- “It makes me really angry, especially since that is possibly where we want to move when we retire”
 - In the case of the gay parents (mentioned in the previous question), it was very unfair because they had been raising those children for a very long time and they were not allowed to “legally” adopt them.

8. Do you think the law does enough to protect the rights of gay and lesbian parents? What more still needs to be done?

- “Not enough being done at all.”
- We need “more lobbying by gay rights groups..I would like to see gay marriage be legal in all states, I think it’s a global thing, (as in) gay rights in general.”

9. A consistent finding in gay and lesbian literature is the idea of a “family of choice.” Can you talk a little bit more about this? Why do you think this is common?

- Unfortunately because of the rejection they face by their own families
- “ I was very fortunate in which both me and my partner’s family were very supporting..my parents are deceased but all my parents’ brothers and sisters...”
- “Blessed” in that aspect, “but I realize the rejection faced by others, so (this idea of family of choice) makes a lot of sense” “very sad that people have to do that, I wish that parents would extend themselves more.” She feels like you never know, it could happen to your own kids. She also feels like schools need to do more to prepare young people (on parenting, etc.).
- She is personally part of a liberal religious organization and “they are my family of choice, they feel like family to me.”

10. Why do you think people at times are so judgmental of what’s different from them?

- Sometimes just need a “scapegoat,” (made the comparison to Nazi Germany: If it had not been the Jewish people, the Nazis would have found somebody else to pick on); “If they didn’t have gay people to yell at it would be someone else”
- Similar to the African American rights movement; “now it is not socially acceptable to be discriminating against people of color, but I remember how different it was even 30 years ago...I wonder ‘what’s it going to be like 30 years from now?’”
- There should be a “message of love,” “morally, if you really want to love your neighbor, love who your neighbor loves.”
- Also there is so much stereotyping about gay people in general, “there is a lot of variation but people make assumptions.”

11. What are some ways to bring awareness to gay and lesbian families? Do you think this is important to bring about change in how society sees them?

- Very important, these are real issues.
- Our school system “seems to be very homophobic, it is better now that it was..teachers could not be openly gay” but still more needs to be done
- “it comes down to education, literally in schools, there is still a lot of denial and oppression”
- “I understand that it is very delicate, kids are dealing with their own sexuality and issues...”
- When there is a child of gay parents, people “shouldn’t make a big deal.”

- There is a lot of bullying and violence in schools, “I think we have let our children down.”
- Parents sometimes might not have the time, or they might have their own stereotypes, “I think the school should take a major role” (in educating children about the diversity of families, etc.).

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