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It's not a matter of fashion: How psychological research can revamp common beliefs on lesbian and gay parenting

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ABSTRACT

Lesbian and gay parenting is still controversial and same- sex parents are often subjected to prejudices founded on the belief that parental sexual orientation exposes children to various negative outcomes. On the basis of this concern, a number of studies have compared the developmental outcomes of children with lesbian and gay parents with those of children with heterosexual parents. Both personal and social outcomes have been examined: sexual identity, psychological adjustment and quality of the relationships with peers. This paper presents a summary of the studies on the developmental outcomes of children raised by same- sex parents so as to compare the common beliefs on lesbian and gay parenting with the empirical findings of psychological research. The review shows that the common stereotypical negative beliefs about children raised by lesbian and gay parents have no empirical foundation.

Introduction

In 2015, the famous stylists Dolce and Gabbana opened the fashion spring season with a controversial interview to the Italian weekly magazine Panorama. “Children need a father and a mother” and “family is not a fad” were surprising statements from the openly gay designers, who expressed their disapproval at “synthetic children” and “wombs for rent”. The reactions were instantaneous, with Elton John urging a boycott of the fashion house and several celebrities from all over the world tweeting their support for gay and lesbian families.

Lesbian and gay parenting is still controversial; public opinion frequently takes opposing points of view based on common sense. However, more than 30 years of psychological research can change the diffused negative beliefs about children with same- sex parents.

The vast majority of existing research on lesbian and gay parenting aims at comparing the developmental outcomes of children with same- sex parents to those of children with opposite- sex parents, in order to understand whether or not parental sexual orientation influences children’s development. Scholars investigate both personal and social outcomes of children raised by same- sex parents: sexual identity, psychological adjustment and quality of the relationships that children have with their peers. As the present review will show, research does not support the hypothesis that children raised by lesbian and gay parents are more likely to exhibit problems in these outcomes, but that is by no means the whole story.

Sexual identity: Children embrace tradition

Studies focused on sexual identity answer one of the main concerns about children growing up with same- sex parents: Will they be straight? In order to answer this question, research has investigated the three dimensions of sexual identity (Money & Erhardt, 1972): gender identity, gender role and sexual orientation.

Gender identity is the individual’s self-identification as male or female (Stoller, 1968). It is a definition that excludes many other options for individuals to identify themselves as (e.g. queer, agender, intersex, trans, etc.) and will likely soon be replaced by more inclusive options. We have only to think that around 1.5 billion monthly active Facebook users worldwide are now allowed to customise their gender in the profile options to understand the variety of existing possibilities.

Many studies into lesbian and gay parenting address the question of gender identity. While research of this type has been vital in challenging concerns about supposed damaging effects upon children, it may also be criticized for employing a notion of gender as a fixed,

measurable entity, thus failing to question the notion of expected gender or sexual identity development (Hicks, 2013).

Findings do not show any significant differences in gender identity of children of lesbian and gay parents compared with children of heterosexual parents (Anderssen, Amlie & Ytterøy, 2002; Bos & Sandfort, 2010; Fedewa, Black & Ahn, 2015; Cowl, Ahn & Baker, 2008; Green, 1978; Green, Mandel, Hotvedt, Gray & Smith, 1986; Kirkpatrick, Smith & Roy, 1981). Thus, children seem to have access to the same signals to define themselves as male or female, such as genital, dress and word labels (Green et al., 1986), whether or not they are from heterosexual families.

Gender role refers to behaviours, attitudes and personality characteristics that are culturally defined as more appropriate for one sex than the other (Boldizar, 1991). Research comparing gender roles in children from same- sex and opposite- sex families offers different conclusions: while some studies indicate that children of lesbian and gay parents are in some respects less traditional in their gender attitudes (Fulcher, Sutfin & Patterson, 2008; Green et al., 1986; MacCallum & Golombok, 2004), other studies have found they are as conformist in their gender behaviours and preferences as children of heterosexual parents (Anderssen et al., 2002; Brewaeys, Ponjaert, Van Hall & Golombok, 1997; Cowl et al., 2008; Fulcher, Sutfin & Patterson, 2008; Golombok, Spencer & Rutter, 1983; Green, 1978; Green et al., 1986). So while lesbian mothers and gay fathers may challenge the stereotypical gender roles, they may avoid imposing nonstandard ideas about gender onto their children, since they know that their children live in a gender-conforming world (Hicks, 2013). Moreover, children's gender roles do not depend only on their parents; we are all heavily influenced by what is culturally appropriate and what is not (Tasker & Golombok, 1997).

Finally, the third dimension of sexual identity is sexual orientation, which indicates whether the individual feels attracted to individuals of his/her own sex (homosexual), the opposite sex (heterosexual), or both sexes (bisexual). Although the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from the list of mental illnesses in 1973, the opponents of lesbian and gay parenting refer to the risk of children becoming homosexual themselves as one of the main reasons to prevent gays and lesbians from having children. At the basis of this opposition is the heteronormative view that involves the alignment of gender identity, gender role and sexual orientation with the biological sex (Warner, 1991). Heteronormativity implies the idea that heterosexual attraction and relationships are the normal form of sexuality, thus the possibility "to inherit" parents' sexual orientation should be avoided. However, to test the hypothesis of the transmission of sexual orientation is far from easy: it is argued that children

raised by gay and lesbian parents might be influenced by so many factors (imitation of parents, socialisation processes that do not discourage homosexuality, relationships with acquaintances who do not stigmatise homosexuality, etc.) that controlling for all these variables is very arduous. Existing research investigating possible correlations between parents and children's sexual orientation has not provided any clear conclusion and there is no empirical evidence to support the existence of such a correlation (Bailey, Bobrow, Wolfe & Mikach, 1995; Golombok, et al., 1983; Green, 1978; Huggins, 1989; Miller, 1979; Tasker & Golombok, 1997). Furthermore, the mere observation that most gays and lesbians have heterosexual parents suggests that the hypothesis of the transmission of sexual orientation from parents to child will never receive empirical support.

Equally well-adjusted

Besides sexual identity, scholars have also analysed the psychological adjustment of children raised by lesbian and gay parents, thus evaluating aspects such as mental health, behavioural problems and cognitive functioning.

The assumptions at the base of these concerns are different (Goldberg, 2010): some scholars presume that children from lesbian-mother and gay-father families are more likely to experience victimisation, which may cause emotional and behavioural problems. Other studies assume that being raised by lesbian or gay parents is, in itself, a stressful experience. Finally, a third kind of claim is that lesbian and gay parenting exposes children to the risk of psychological maladjustment because of the lack of a male or female parent.

However, similar to the findings of studies on sexual identity, research on psychological adjustment has found no differences between children of same- sex parents and children of opposite- sex parents, either during preschool, school age (Chan, Raboy & Patterson, 1998; Erich, Leung & Kindle, 2005; Flaks, Ficher, Masterpasqua & Joseph, 1995; Golombok, Tasker & Murray, 1997; Golombok et al., 2003; Green et al., 1986) or when they are adolescents/teenagers (Gershon, Tschann & Jemerin, 1999; Huggins, 1989; Rivers, Noret & Poteat, 2008).

Some studies have found that children's psychological adjustment is associated with the quality of the relationship between their parents, rather than their sexual orientation (Chan et al., 1998). Thus, parents' satisfaction both with the division of household labour and their relationship are associated with children's adjustment in lesbian-mother families, gay-father families and heterosexual families (Chan et al., 1998). These findings are interesting because of their variety regarding the supposedly homogenous categories of "lesbian and gay parents"

and “heterosexual parents”: the psychological adjustment of children is the result of a complex system of influences where the relationship between parents, among other factors, has a fundamental role, while their sexual orientation does not.

No victimisation by peers

As mentioned above, in addition to the focus on individual developmental outcomes, research on lesbian and gay parenting has also given attention to the social functioning of children, namely the quality of the relationships they have with their peers. This is an important area to investigate because concerns for societal reaction to same- sex parenting are widespread. “I do think that gays and lesbians may be as good parents as heterosexuals, but society is not ready for that” is a common argument we come across when discussing lesbian and gay parenting. Although reluctance to accept lesbian and gay parenting is clearly motivated by the intention to protect children from experiencing victimisation, this is a concern with no empirical foundation. Research has not found evidence that children from lesbian-mother and gay-father families are more likely to have problems with their peers compared to children of heterosexual parents (Clarke, Kitzinger & Potter, 2004; Golombok et al., 2003; Golombok et al., 1997; Green et al, 1986; Miller, 1979). Also teachers’ evaluations of the social functioning of students from lesbian and gay parents confirmed findings that no difference exists (Golombok et al., 2003; MacCallum & Golombok, 2004). All this does not mean, of course, that lesbian and gay parents are not troubled by the idea that their children might experience harassment or teasing because of their family structure (Goldberg, 2010), which is why they make great effort to prepare their children for the possibility of stigma (Gartrell et al., 2000). Moreover, the existence of lesbian and gay parents’ networks, more common in metropolitan areas (Oswald & Holman, 2013), can help to deal with discrimination. For example, having frequent contact with other children with lesbian or gay parents offers protection against the negative impact of stigma on self-esteem (Bos & van Balen, 2008). The level of acceptance of lesbian and gay people in the context of where the family lives is another factor that may influence children’s experience of peer stigma and the openness about private aspects of their lives (Bos et al., 2008).

Although children of lesbian and gay parents sometimes report being worried about reactions from peers to their parents’ sexual orientation (Gartrell, Deck, Rodas, Peyser & Banks, 2005; Lewis, 1980; Miller, 1979), they do not seem to be victimised significantly more often than are their peers that are being raised by heterosexual parents (Wainright & Patterson, 2006). Even when children report being teased due to their family structure, this does not mean that they

are more often subjected to teasing than children from heterosexual families (Vanfraussen, Ponjaert-Kristoffersen & Brewaeys, 2002). Parents' sexual orientation is just one of the many characteristics (other examples are clothing or physical appearance) that can be the pretext for teasing (Goldberg, 2010).

It's time for research to go further!

Research on lesbian and gay parenting has found no relationship between children's developmental outcomes and parents' sexual orientation, and there is no evidence that the development of children raised by lesbian and gay parents is further disturbed in any respect relative to that of children raised by heterosexual parents.

Although some opponents to lesbian and gay parenting highlight the weaknesses of the research in this field due to the small number of participants in the studies, currently a number of reviews (e.g. Anderssen et al., 2002; Fitzgerald, 1999; Goldberg, 2010; Patterson, 1992; Patterson, 2005; Tasker, Patterson, 2007) and meta-analyses (e.g. Allen, Burrell, 1996; Crowl, Ahn, Baker, 2008; Fedewa et al., 2015) are available to balance out the limitations of the single studies. For example, a recent quantitative synthesis of 33 previous unpublished and published studies (N of children = 5,272) on the effects of parent sexual orientation on child developmental outcomes highlighted that child sexual orientation, cognitive abilities, psychological adjustment, and gender identity were not moderated by parents' gender or sexual orientation (Fedewa et al., 2015).

In spite of the encouraging findings, lesbian and gay parenting remains controversial and beliefs about same- sex parents and their children seem to be independent of empirical data. If this is due to a deep-rooted conventional vision of gender and sexuality, it should be useful to reflect on the contribution that psychological research gives to support a different culture of family and parenting.

If we look at the basis of the studies summarised above, it is evident that most psychological research, in true good faith and probably unconsciously, has adopted some assumptions that could reinforce the idea of lesbian and gay parenting as something abnormal. First of all, the comparison between lesbian and gay parenting and heterosexual parenting is, in itself, something to reconsider since it creates two categories on the basis of sexual orientation, assuming that they are internally homogenous. If the readers think of four or five couples they know that are parents, they can easily remember differences and similarities between them (in their conjugal functioning, their parenting styles, etc.), whether they are lesbian, gay or heterosexual. Living in a lesbian or gay family is clearly 'different', but it is not because of

some essential characteristics, rather in the sense that lesbian or gay families have been considered as abnormal through a range of legal, moral and social measures (Hicks, 2005). Moreover, when psychological research looks at dimensions such as sexual identity, inevitably it supports the idea that there is only one way of being “normal”: the straight self-identification, the straight gender role and the straight sexual orientation. Instead of reinforcing standard notions of gender and sexuality, a more critical research enquiry would help us to understand how all of us are required to perform the appropriate masculine or feminine roles differently dependent upon the context, and what the consequences are for those who challenge the social expectations about gender and sexuality (Hicks, 2013). Finally, scholars should also reflect on the possibility for their research to reach the public opinion, giving solid references for interpreting relevant social phenomena: why is the idea that children need a mum and a dad so hard to overcome and why does the resistance to accept lesbian and gay parents persist? Why, in spite of almost 40 years of research, do opinions on lesbian and gay parenting without any scientific basis get to be on the cover of a magazine? Why has psychological research not yet been able to succeed in contending that lesbian and gay parenting is not a fad? How can psychological research improve its social relevance so as to confront, with its empirical findings, those stereotypes that persist even among openly gay cosmopolitan people?

Thus, the contemporary challenge for research on lesbian and gay parenting is not to do more studies on the topics mentioned above, but instead to do studies that do not imply an artificial antithesis between same- sex and opposite- sex parents, and to find new ways to communicate their results.

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