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## **Is Gay Parenting Bad for Kids? Responding to the 'Very Idea of Difference' in Research on Lesbian and Gay Parents**

Stephen Hicks

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**Abstract** This article examines the claim that children of lesbians and gay men are different to those of heterosexuals, particularly in their gender and sexual identity. The author considers two examples, a UK Christian discourse opposed to all forms of lesbian and gay parenting and a US liberal equality approach, represented by the work of Stacey and Biblarz (2001). Both, the author argues, treat difference as a thing acquired by children. This article examines and disputes the ways in which this idea of difference is achieved, and proposes that treating gender and sexuality as measurable outcomes is highly problematic. The author argues for research that asks how contemporary discourses of sexuality actually maintain the very idea that lesbian and gay families are different.

**Keywords** child development, Christian right, difference, gay parenting, lesbian parenting

Stephen Hicks

*University of Salford, UK*

## Is Gay Parenting Bad for Kids? Responding to the ‘Very Idea of Difference’ in Research on Lesbian and Gay Parents

Gay and lesbian parenting continue to provoke strong anxieties within a heteronormative society, and one of the most prominent of contemporary responses is to focus on the supposed ‘differences’ that such families and their children exhibit. I am going to question this model in this article because, in my view, it reinforces the idea that such families are essentially different from heterosexuals, whether those differences are interpreted positively or negatively. Indeed I will be comparing two examples to make the point that, whilst having opposing intents, each relies upon the idea that the children of lesbians and gay men do exhibit differences especially in the areas of gender and sexual development. These examples are, firstly, Patricia Morgan’s book *Children as Trophies? Examining the Evidence on*

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*Same-Sex Parenting* (2002), which was published by the United Kingdom Christian Institute and argues that 'same-sex parenting is bad for kids' (Christian Institute, 2002d). The second is Judith Stacey and Timothy J. Biblarz's article, '(How) Does the Sexual Orientation of Parents Matter?' published in the *American Sociological Review*, which argues that children of gay and lesbian parents 'appear less traditionally gender-typed and more likely to be open to homoerotic relationships' than children of heterosexuals (Stacey and Biblarz, 2001: 176), differences which they suggest are positive.

My point is that we need to ask why this particular question, 'Do the children of lesbians and gay men exhibit differences?' has become so central. In my view, it rests upon a theory of sexuality that sees lesbians and gay men as essentially different from heterosexuals. Succinctly, the categories 'lesbian' and 'gay' are seen as referring to a distinct type of person with a set of characteristics that can be transmitted to children. There are, therefore, a number of difference arguments here which are often conflated: the idea that lesbians and gay men are different, that these differences are passed on to children, and that those children exhibit different gender and sexual identity outcomes to those who live with heterosexual parents. My purpose in this article is to analyse the ways in which contemporary sexual discourses actually produce and maintain the very idea of difference, whereas the focus in the examples I intend to discuss is rather upon the ways in which lesbian and gay families *are* different.

My argument is that this difference model encourages a perspective on lesbian and gay parenting which is likely to adopt one of two options. The first is an outlawing stance which argues that the differences exhibited by lesbian and gay families are wrong, damaging to children, and morally inferior, the position taken by Morgan, the Christian Institute and other similar examples (P. Cameron, 1999; Cameron and Cameron, 1996; Cameron et al., 1996; Christian Institute, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c, 2002d; Holloway, 2002; Morgan, 2002; Wardle, 1997). The second standpoint is a liberal equality or 'ethnic model' of sexuality (Epstein, 1987) that argues the differences exhibited by lesbians and gay men are not deficient but 'just different' (Stacey and Biblarz, 2001: 164), and therefore should not warrant discrimination.

I will be arguing that both perspectives' reliance upon a difference paradigm uses simplistic models of gender and sexuality as measurable outcomes, as things acquired by children as a result of parental, environmental and genetic influences. In my view, this is achieved through dependence, in both examples, upon positivist views of what counts as research knowledge and, in the case of Morgan and the Christian Institute, a spurious 'objective' stance. I begin by discussing the emergence of UK

Christian opposition to lesbian and gay parenting, and I go on to question the idea of an objective position in relation to research in this area. After outlining some of Stacey and Biblarz's arguments, I then move on to discuss what I see as problematic views of what counts as research knowledge in the examples, before finally considering the ways in which difference is presented in both.

## Christian opposition to lesbian and gay parenting in the UK

A range of work on both US and UK Christian right-wing discourses, including those on lesbian and gay parenting, has suggested that 'the homosexual' is represented as a threat to 'normal' family relations and to children (Durham, 2000; Herman, 1997; Smith, 1994). Anna Marie Smith's work, for example, shows how the arguments for Section 28 of the UK Local Government Act, 1987–88,<sup>1</sup> distinguished 'real' (heterosexual) families from 'pretend' (lesbian and gay) ones (Smith, 1994). I adopt a similar approach here, which means that, instead of replacing Christian right-wing assertions about lesbian and gay parenting with a set of corrective 'truths', rather I ask how those assertions are achieved and maintained within and through discourse (Potter, 1996).

In the UK, large and substantially funded organizations, such as the Christian Institute, have begun to commission research and mount well-organized campaigns. For example, at the same time that the UK Houses of Parliament debated an amendment to the Adoption and Children Act 2002 to allow joint adoptions by couples who were not married, including lesbians and gay men, the Christian Institute published Morgan's book. This was supported by a national press release which argued that lesbian and gay parenting was damaging to children, and went on to say that it is

difficult to find such poor quality research as that which purports to show that same-sex parenting is at least as good if not superior to parenting by married couples. In many cases the word research is a misnomer since often the only evidence consists of collections of anecdotes. This is often advocacy parading as research. (Christian Institute, 2002b)

The Christian Institute sent copies of Morgan's book to every Member of Parliament for England and Wales, and also funded a survey<sup>2</sup> that claimed 71 per cent of respondents were against adoption rights for gay men (Christian Institute, 2002c). These results were also sent to MPs, supported by a poster and briefing paper (Christian Institute, 2002a). Joy Holloway, who is married to the Reverend David Holloway, a trustee of the Christian Institute, also penned a self-published piece which reviewed

research on lesbian and gay parenting with a particular focus on foster care and adoption (Holloway, 2002). This paper made very similar arguments to those in Morgan's book and was sent to all foster care and adoption panels and their medical advisers across the United Kingdom.<sup>3</sup>

The work of these Christian authors opposes lesbian and gay parenting in a number of ways. The first is to claim that existing research is of poor quality, or that its findings have been misinterpreted. From this, a corrective position is taken which argues that lesbian or gay parents in fact damage children. Crucially, this argument is made from a specific standpoint, and it is one in which the authors claim to adopt an entirely neutral, objective, even scientific, stance on the research. Morgan's book, for example, tells us, '[a]ctually it is irrelevant what a reviewer or critic's views are on a particular subject – in this instance, same-sex parenting or homosexuality' (Morgan, 2002: 34). In my view, this claim is used in an attempt to conceal what is actually an anti-gay moral position although this attempt at concealment is not particularly vigorous. Further, such claims to objectivity made by Morgan (2002) or Holloway (2002) are discursive devices used to suggest that they are without motive or bias, while all other work on lesbian and gay parenting is flawed. They are an attempt to deny partial knowledge on the part of the Christian authors, to impute it to others, and demonstrate what Jonathan Potter terms 'stake inoculation', that is the denial of interest in order to head off any accusation of bias (Potter, 1996: 125).

Morgan's book displays what I have elsewhere termed a 'Christian homophobic discourse' (Hicks, 2003), made up of three major strands: the notion of a powerful 'gay research mafia' against which most are afraid to speak; the suggestion that homosexuality is against nature; and the view that lesbians and gay men are both pathological and sexually violent. Morgan begins her argument by pointing out that lesbian and gay parenting is 'an explosive subject' and that most are afraid to challenge the research because this is 'apt to invoke furious reflex accusations about homophobia':

There is fear for professional and academic reputations, where the promotion, tenures and research funds of those who speak out are at risk. Academics and researchers tend to cowardice anyway, something reinforced by an ivory tower snobbery against involvement in vulgar public debate. (Morgan, 2002: 34)

This invocation of a 'gay research mafia' is used to suggest that research on lesbian and gay parenting is tainted with bias and, therefore, not to be trusted. But I also think that it is used to suggest that lesbians and gay men dominate or control the existing research and arguments. This is what Smith has termed the representation within right-wing discourse of 'the homosexual' as 'invader' (Smith, 1994: 200).

The second strand of Morgan's moral agenda is her claim that homosexuality is against nature. She tells us that gay relationships are 'essentially non-generative' (Morgan, 2002: 25), and further that 'it still happens to be a "fact of nature" that only two people, not three or fifty, and only a man and a woman, not two men or four women, nor a woman and a gerbil, can make a child' (Morgan, 2002: 30). Morgan's perspective here is that the 'right' to have a child is derived solely from 'normal reproductive processes' (2002: 30), and that claims to gay parenting therefore involve only an adult rights agenda at the expense of children. She also argues that lesbians and gay men only wish to acquire children in order to have the benefits of a life that imitates heterosexuality (2002: 23). This echoes Smith's analysis of 'the homosexual' as 'pseudo-norm' within homophobic discourse (Smith, 1994: 204). Much as Section 28 distinguished 'real' from 'pretend' families, Morgan's work also claims that lesbian and gay parents are pseudo-heterosexuals, using children to derive the benefits of 'normality'.

The third and final strand of Morgan's moral agenda concerning lesbians and gay men is that they are pathological and sexually violent, and this is similar to the examples Smith gives of the representation of 'the homosexual' as predatory seducer or monster (Smith, 1994: 201–3). For example, Morgan and other Christian writers (K. Cameron, 1999; Holloway, 2002; F. Smith, 1993) claim that there are very small numbers of lesbians and gay men within the population as a whole. Morgan then uses this point to suggest that homosexual men commit a disproportionately high number of rapes (2002: 46), and both she and Joy Holloway also propose that homosexual men are responsible for a higher incidence of child sexual abuse (Holloway, 2002: 4). However, these claims are evidenced in a number of highly suspect ways.

Firstly, Morgan and Holloway rely upon figures from the National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles in Britain (Wellings et al., 1994) to categorically state that only 1 per cent of the male population is gay. This is extremely problematic, however, since large-scale surveys usually fail to count people who identify as lesbian or gay due to a number of methodological and ethical limitations (Stanley, 1995). Secondly, Morgan and Holloway both count as perpetrated by gay men all rapes and child abuse that have been officially labelled 'homosexual' (Holloway, 2002: 4; Morgan, 2002: 45–6). What this does not take into account is the very use of the word 'homosexual' in these cases, which actually refers to sexually violent crimes committed by men against other men and boys, that is 'same-sex' rather than 'homosexual' acts.

Finally, returning to the arguments about parenting, Morgan also claims that there is a culture of 'paedophobia' amongst both lesbians and gay men, by which she means a hatred or fear of children (Morgan, 2002:

109–11). I would like to dwell on this point briefly because Morgan quotes from my own research into lesbian and gay foster care and adoption to support this view. In 1999 I co-edited a book that presented a collection of personal accounts by lesbians and gay men who had fostered or adopted children (Hicks and McDermott, 1999). Both Morgan and a discussion paper from the Christian Institute use the same quotation from our book:

The lesbian and gay club scene does not cater to the needs of lesbian and gay parents and rarely, if ever, acknowledges their existence, and some are still shocked to discover that lesbians and gay men do have children. (Hicks and McDermott, 1999: 156)<sup>4</sup>

This quotation is drawn from a section of our book in which we were commenting upon the difficulties that single gay or lesbian carers face when trying to form new adult relationships. Our contributors told us that some lesbians and gay men are not interested in children and, therefore, might not be keen to start a relationship with someone who has them (see, for example, ‘Simon’s story’, Hicks and McDermott, 1999: 29–36). We were also deliberately highlighting the fact that, as with all sections of the community, many adult-focused social spaces do not take those with children into account. In addition, we were determined not to write a book in which everything about foster care and adoption was positive, and in which all lesbians and gay men were beyond criticism. There are, of course, lesbian and gay people who are not interested in children (a standpoint which I would support and accept) and there are, indeed, some who might be termed ‘paedophobic’, but the idea that this is peculiar to lesbians and gay men is a nonsense. However, this example also demonstrates the use to which homophobic discourses will put any criticism of the lesbian and gay ‘community’.

## **Not deficient, just different?**

Turning now to Stacey and Biblarz’s article, we find the important argument that existing research on lesbian and gay parenting adopts the defensive position of suggesting that the children of such families exhibit no differences to those in heterosexual ones (Stacey and Biblarz, 2001: 160). I agree with Stacey and Biblarz on this point – much existing research does argue that the children of lesbians and gay men are just like others, and they rightly suggest that this is due to a ‘hetero-normative presumption governing the terms of the discourse – that healthy child development depends upon parenting by a married heterosexual couple’ (Stacey and Biblarz, 2001: 160). That is, lesbian and gay families will always be compared with the ‘gold standard’ of heterosexual parenting

(Stacey and Biblarz, 2001: 162), and so much of the research is constrained to argue that there are no differences in child development outcomes.

Instead, Stacey and Biblarz review a range of lesbian and gay parenting studies, and argue that ‘on some dimensions – particularly those related to gender and sexuality – the sexual orientation of these parents matter somewhat more for their children than the researchers claimed’ (Stacey and Biblarz, 2001: 167). That is, Stacey and Biblarz argue that the children of lesbians and gay men do turn out differently to those of heterosexuals, but these differences should be viewed positively rather than negatively. However, although Stacey and Biblarz have a very different intent to the Christian writers, in the areas of methodological critique and a ‘difference’ stance they exhibit some similarities, and it is to these that I now turn.

## Methodological flaws?

The UK Christian authors raise a number of methodological criticisms of the research on lesbian and gay parenting. Morgan (2002) and Holloway (2002) both argue that the status of research evidence on lesbian and gay parenting is highly suspect, and this is because it exhibits poor study design, an inability to measure and control for the correct variables, and the misguided use of statistical tests.

Morgan, for example, makes criticisms about research sample sizes and characteristics, arguing that the samples are so biased or faulty as to make statistical and other claims totally invalid (Morgan, 2002: 54–6). Interestingly, much of Morgan’s argument here is derived from references to the work of Paul Cameron in the United States (P. Cameron, 1999; Cameron and Cameron, 1996; Cameron et al., 1996), and she references him 11 times in ways that suggest his work is credible and methodologically sound. However, it is fairly well known that Cameron was expelled from the American Psychological Association for deliberate distortion of research findings, and from the American Sociological Association for misinterpreting and misrepresenting sociological research on sexuality, homosexuality and lesbianism (Durham, 2000: 53; Herek, 1997–2002).

Morgan argues that ‘proper’ research is only that which uses random control trials, and goes on to point out that all other research into gay and lesbian parenting is therefore epistemologically flawed – in her terms, it does not really count as knowledge at all. Morgan labels all qualitative or interpretivist work in this area as anecdotal, ‘gushing personal testimonies’ which prove nothing (2002: 48).

Stacey and Biblarz’s (2001) piece also strongly argues that existing research on lesbian and gay parenting exhibits a number of methodological



flaws. They too are mainly concerned with the problems involved in deriving representative and generalizable samples from the population of gay and lesbian parents. This concern is important and fully justified, but only, in my view, where researchers are using experimental or survey-based approaches that do make claims to representativity and generalize to the entire population of lesbian and gay parents. Indeed some of the existing research is very clear in reflecting upon the limitations of the samples used (Barrett and Tasker, 2001; Tasker, 1999; Tasker and Golombok, 1995, 1997). However, I argue that, in the case of both the Christian writers and Stacey and Biblarz, ending the methodological debate after having pointed out the limitations of those studies that do claim 'representative' sampling is very limited.

This is because both sets of critiques rely upon a positivist account of knowledge as that which must be objective, directly observable and generative of scientific laws. In these terms, 'sexuality' and 'gender' have to be seen as obvious entities that can be isolated and tested, rather than the very complex and socially constructed sets of ideas that I believe them to be. Indeed, one of the consequences of this view of sexuality or gender as variables is the suggestion that both are outcomes that can be detected and measured, and it is to this 'differences' stance that I now return.

## **Difference? . . . The very idea!**

The examples I have chosen to discuss in this article point to the prevalence of concerns about the supposed 'differences' exhibited by the children of lesbians and gay men. I think it is important to ask why this difference paradigm is so dominant. In my view, it has been an abiding concern in the field of lesbian and gay parenting and surfaces in many examples. The first of these would be the ubiquity of suggestions that the children of lesbians and gay men will suffer sexual abuse, gender disorder, psychological problems or teasing, that is a stigmatization through difference (Hicks, 1997). For this reason, many examples of research into the children of lesbians and gay men are at pains to address such concerns and to reassure readers that these differences do not exist (Green and Bozett, 1991). However, as I have already pointed out, Stacey and Biblarz suggest that this 'no differences' argument is rather defensive in tone, and they go on to ask whether such differences do exist, suggest that they are present in some areas, and question why this has not been admitted in research to date (Stacey and Biblarz, 2001).

A very different conception of differences is suggested by the subtitle of the book that I co-edited on fostering and adoption by lesbians and gay men (Hicks and McDermott, 1999). The phrase 'extraordinary yet ordinary' was our attempt to sum up the perspective of our contributors,

which was that there are differences in belonging to a lesbian or gay family but that there are also many similarities with other families too. In short, we meant that lesbian and gay families were largely *treated differently* to heterosexual ones, but that they were not essentially different. This is a concern with how difference is socially constructed and imputed rather than characteristic.

Both the Stacey and Biblarz piece and works by the Christian writers, however, propose that the children of lesbians and gay men do exhibit differences to those of heterosexuals along the lines of gender identity and sexual orientation outcomes. Nevertheless, these differences are interpreted very differently. Morgan, like other Christian writers (P. Cameron, 1999; Holloway, 2002), suggests that the children of lesbians and gay men demonstrate terrible gender confusion, 'with daughters of lesbian mothers more likely to value and exhibit male sex-typed traits, and sons more female-valued traits' (Morgan, 2002: 78). However, this claim is in fact based upon Morgan's own interpretation of a study by Hoeffler (1981), which argued that some lesbian mothers were less likely to insist their children play with traditionally gender-typed toys.

In addition, Morgan claims that the children of lesbians and gay men are more likely to become gay (2002: 67), suggesting that the Golombok and Tasker study (1996) shows this, when it does not. Morgan also references Tasker and Golombok (1995) as evidence that the children of lesbians and gay men suffer greater and more serious teasing by peers (Morgan, 2002: 72). Actually this study said that the children of lesbian mothers were more likely to have been teased about their mothers' sexuality than other children, and were more likely to recall being teased about their own sexuality than others (Tasker and Golombok, 1995). The children of lesbian mothers were not more likely to have been teased than other children, however, and reported good peer relationships (Golombok, 2000: 55; Tasker and Golombok, 1997: 149).

After reviewing a range of research on lesbian and gay parenting, Stacey and Biblarz also conclude that some differences do exist. For example, Steckel's (1987) research reported that the daughters of lesbian mothers showed higher aspirations to non-traditional gender occupations than those of heterosexual mothers. Thus, Stacey and Biblarz see the children of lesbians and gay men as being freed from a range of restrictive and traditional gender expectations, a difference which they, unlike Morgan, see as positive (Stacey and Biblarz, 2001: 168).

Stacey and Biblarz's review of existing research leads them to conclude that there are no differences in the areas of psychological well-being, cognitive function, social adjustment and quality of relationships for the children of lesbians and gays and their parents, compared with heterosexuals. They also suggest no particular differences in parenting styles,

investment in children, or closeness according to sexual orientation (Stacey and Biblarz, 2001: 176). They do, however, conclude that there *are* some important differences to which we should pay attention, rather than defensively denying their existence. In particular, they say:

Children with lesbian parents appear less traditionally gender-typed and more likely to be open to homoerotic relationships. (Stacey and Biblarz, 2001: 176)

However, in explaining these differences, Stacey and Biblarz argue that the evidence

hints that parental sexual orientation is positively associated with the possibility that children will be more likely to attain a similar orientation – and theory and common sense also support such a view . . . This may be partly due to genetic and family socialization processes, but what sociologists refer to as ‘contextual effects’ not yet investigated by psychologists may also be important. (Stacey and Biblarz, 2001: 178)

I disagree with their position here for a number of reasons. Firstly, I do not think that the existing research *does* support the view that the children of lesbians and gay men are more likely to ‘attain a similar orientation’. I can find no evidence of this. The Tasker and Golombok study, for example, showed that the children of lesbians were more likely to think about the possibility of a same-sex relationship, were more likely to try this with peers at some point, but were not more likely eventually to identify as lesbian or gay (Golombok, 2000: 54; Tasker and Golombok, 1997: 150). While I fully support Stacey and Biblarz’s anti-heterosexist stance, part of which is to ask why indeed it would be a problem if the children of lesbians and gay men were to become gay, that is not the same as saying that there is an existing association of gay parents with gay children in the research.

Secondly, their notion that ‘theory and common sense’ support this view is a very sweeping one, but it is also one that reminds me very much of Paul Cameron’s similar assertions. He has, for example, argued that ‘common sense’ would expect children to become like their parents, that homosexuality is learned by the children of gay men or lesbians, and that this is a reliable theory since ‘common sense is reasonably considered an elaborate system of rules and assumptions validated by its “workability” in the real world over thousands of years’ (P. Cameron, 1999: 290). This ‘common sense’ view can also be seen, I think, in some of the press or media reporting of Stacey and Biblarz’s work, which did suggest that the children of gay parents ‘turn out gay’ (Bronski, 2001; Goode, 2001). In my view, however, Stacey and Biblarz’s suggestion that theory and common sense support the idea that parental sexual orientation is positively associated with a similar orientation in their children is unproven and

disputable. That is, their suggestion is just that – a suggestion – rather than a statement of fact.

More importantly, however, my problem with the difference paradigm as it is presented by either the Christian writers or by Stacey and Biblarz is an epistemological one. I certainly would not deny that living in a gay or lesbian family is ‘different’. Clearly it is, in the sense that lesbian or gay families have been defined as abnormal through a range of legal, moral and social measures. But this ‘difference’ is the effect of a range of discourses that locate, define and maintain the very idea of ‘the lesbian or gay family’ as different, subordinate and even subversive, not as a result of a set of essential characteristics.

Perhaps the most important question here should be, ‘Different from what?’ For behind such assertions of difference rests a standard against which these are determined, and here this has to be a ‘heterosexual assumption’ (Weeks et al., 2001: 41), most clearly exemplified in Morgan’s suggestion that a prime motivation for lesbians and gay men to have children is to imitate and acquire the benefits of a heterosexual life (Morgan, 2002: 23). In the examples I have chosen, this difference model results in one of two positions, outlawing or liberal acceptance. Morgan and the other Christian writers argue for a range of differences that they claim exist and are damaging to both society and to children. This model deliberately represents lesbians and gay men as sexually excessive, as unable to raise properly gendered children, and therefore as being outside the ‘natural’ law of the family. It is a model in which differences are seen as an essential part of lesbians and gay men.

Stacey and Biblarz’s version of difference does admit the possibility of social and environmental factors, but nevertheless sees such differences as discernible and transmittable to children. Their piece also exemplifies a liberal acceptance model because they say that, even though differences do exist, gay and lesbian families must still be fairly treated because sometimes ‘a difference *really is* just a difference!’ (Stacey and Biblarz, 2001: 164). This point they link to an argument for ‘a more genuinely pluralist approach to family diversity’ (2001: 164), to the need for ‘equal recognition and rights’ (2001: 159), or what Stacey has elsewhere termed a ‘straightforward, liberal, equality rights agenda for lesbians and gays’ (Stacey, 1996: 138). The problem with this position, however, is that it reinforces the view that lesbians and gay men are an essentially different group with a set of special needs or characteristics that must be accounted for by a liberal rights-based society.

This has the effect, in my view, of constructing the idea of lesbians and gay men as ‘other’ to an assumed heterosexual normality and homogeneity, which I think is likely to reinforce the defensive and heteronormative position which Stacey and Biblarz set out to criticize. Urvashi Vaid,

for example, has argued that a liberal rights agenda for lesbians and gay men is limited because, ultimately, it asks only for tolerance within existing structures, what she terms 'virtual equality' (Vaid, 1995). This assumes that such structures are benign places where those who are 'different' will one day find a home. However, lesbian and gay families do not just experience disadvantages because they are 'different', in fact there are a range of discursive practices at work which maintain the very idea of such differences and uphold a hierarchy of family forms. Rather than just disadvantage, then, lesbians and gay men are subject to processes that aim to displace them from civil society (Calhoun, 2000).

To return to my earlier point, I also think that the difference model relies upon notions of gender and sexuality as variables or measurable outcomes in children, as things acquired and affected by 'parental genes, practices, environment, or beliefs' (Stacey and Biblarz, 2001: 163). This is not a view of gender or sexuality that I can support, and I would also say that the research on the children of lesbians and gay men does not support it either. I argue that gender and sexuality are not things acquired, but rather sets of ideas, or practices that are socially achieved. For example, gender is not learned in childhood alone, it is not inherent within us, but it is attributed to us in everyday interactions and it takes hierarchical forms that aim to maintain rigid distinctions between women and men. This might be demonstrated, for example, in the gender anxieties raised amongst panel members who consider foster care or adoption applications by lesbian and gay couples, wherein heteronormative views about the discrete 'roles' and characteristics of men and women are thrown into confusion. 'Are gay men able to do the laundry?' a panel once asked (Hicks, 2000).

## Conclusion

I have criticized the liberal rights model proposed by Stacey and Biblarz (2001) because I do not support the view that we live in a society in which lesbians and gay men are 'just different'. Instead we live in one that organizes sexual discourse to produce hierarchies in which traditional and heteronormative family forms are dominant, and this is reinforced through a series of textual, legal, social and cultural practices. I accept that Stacey and Biblarz write from an anti-heterosexist standpoint, and I also accept their argument that some research into lesbian and gay parenting has had to argue 'no differences' because of that very heterosexism. However, if we start from the baseline that differences between gay and straight families simply exist, then such ideas can play into the hands of the Christian right because they do not question the very system of sexual knowledge that organizes contemporary ideas

about 'sexuality'. That is, the 'idea of difference' shapes our practices of knowing (Seidman, 1997), so that we start to ask whether and how the children of lesbians and gay men turn out different, instead of asking how contemporary discourses organize 'sexual identities' into discrete groupings.

It is for this reason that we cannot and should not assess lesbian and gay parenting on the basis of 'research evidence' alone, since evidence is always open to a series of interpretations which ultimately relate to a moral and political stance. I have used this article to dispute the views of UK Christian writers (Christian Institute, 2002b, 2002d; Holloway, 2002; Morgan, 2002) because they pretend or claim to assess the 'evidence' from a position of objectivity. However, such homophobic discourses (as I see them) cannot be simply opposed by rational arguments that suggest an alternative 'truth' because there are no such truths about sexuality that can be based upon readings of 'the evidence'.

Instead of asking whether gay parenting is bad for kids, I think we should ask how contemporary discourses of sexuality maintain the very idea that lesbian and gay families are essentially different and, indeed, deficient. But, in order to ask this, I think that we need a wider range of research into lesbian and gay parenting that employs interpretivist methodologies, which does not rely upon statements of fact, and which moves away from an obsession with outcome-based evidence. Qualitative, in-depth studies, and even personal accounts by lesbian and gay parents and their children, allow us some 'tolerance for complexity' (Gubrium and Holstein, 1997: 13) with which to examine the variety of lesbian and gay lives. They also allow us to begin to ask how ideas about who counts as a 'family' are achieved. This does not mean that qualitative accounts are any less partial, but it also does not mean that they are illegitimate. More work of this sort will help us to ask more complex questions about forms of parenting that continue to offer some novel and challenging approaches to family life.

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### *Notes*

1. Finally repealed in September 2003.
2. The survey was carried out in the UK Prime Minister's constituency of Sedgefield by ICM. We are told that percentages refer to those who expressed a view but not the total sample figure.
3. UK panels ultimately make the decision whether to approve an applicant to

become a foster carer or adopter and medical advisers amongst other members support them.

4. In Christian Institute, 2002a; Morgan, 2002: 109.

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### **Biographical Note**

Stephen Hicks works in the School of Community, Health Sciences and Social Care at the University of Salford UK. He is interested in contemporary forms of lesbian and gay parenting and their implications for our understanding of human relationships. Steve is co-editor of *Lesbian and Gay Fostering and Adoption: Extraordinary Yet Ordinary* (1999), and is a founder member of the Northern Support Group for gay and lesbian adoptive and foster families. Address: School of Community, Health Sciences and Social Care, Allerton Building, Frederick Road Campus, University of Salford, Greater Manchester M5 4WT, UK. [email: s.hicks@salford.ac.uk]