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# Gay and Lesbian Families: What We Know and Where to Go From Here

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*The author reviewed the research on gay and lesbian parents and their children. The current body of research has been clear and consistent in establishing that children of gay and lesbian parents are as psychologically healthy as their peers from heterosexual homes. However, this comparison approach to research design appears to have limited the scope of research on gay and lesbian families, leaving much of the experience of these families yet to be investigated.*

**Keywords:** gay men; lesbians; parenting; families

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The relationships and family lives of gay and lesbian people have been the focus of much controversy in the past decade. The legal and social implications of gay and lesbian parents appear to have clearly affected the direction that researchers in the fields of psychology and sociology have taken in regard to these diverse families. As clinicians, educators, and researchers, counselors need to be aware of and involved with issues related to lesbian and gay family life for several reasons. First, our professional code of ethics charges us with the ethical responsibility to demonstrate a commitment to gaining knowledge, personal awareness, sensitivity, and skills significant for working with diverse populations (American Counseling Association, 1995; International Association of Marriage and Family Counselors, n.d.). Counselors are also in a unique position to advocate for diverse clients and families in their communities as well as in their practices but must possess the knowledge to do so effectively (Eriksen, 1999). It is believed that work in this area not only

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has the potential to affect the lives of our gay and lesbian clients and their children but also influences developmental and family theory and informs public policies for the future (Patterson, 1995, 2000; Savin-Williams & Esterberg, 2000).

This article will review the recent research regarding families headed by gay men and lesbians. Studies reviewed include investigations of gay or lesbian versus homosexual parents, sources of diversity among gay and lesbian parents, and the personal and sociological development of the children of gay and lesbian parents. Implications for counselors as well as directions for future research will also be discussed.

## GAY AND LESBIAN PARENTS

### How Many Are Out There?

Unfortunately, accurate statistics regarding the numbers of families headed by gay men and lesbians in our culture are difficult to determine. Due to fear of discrimination in one or more aspects of their lives, many gay men and lesbians have carefully kept their sexual orientation concealed—even from their own children in some cases (Huggins, 1989). Patterson (2000) noted that it is especially difficult to locate gay and lesbian parents due to fears that they would lose custody and/or visitation rights by disclosing their sexual orientation.

Regardless of these difficulties, some broad estimates of the numbers of gay and lesbian parents in the United States have been offered. The number of lesbian mothers has been estimated to be from 1 to 5 million (Falk, 1989; Gottman, 1990) and those for gay fathers from 1 to 3 million (Gottman, 1990). The number of children of gay and lesbian parents has been estimated to range from 4 to 14 million (Patterson, 1995).

In addition to becoming parents through heterosexual marriages and relationships before coming out, growing

numbers of lesbians and gay men are becoming parents after coming out. In her review of the research, Patterson (2000) reported that an estimated 5,000 to 10,000 lesbians have given birth after coming out. She stated that these numbers are believed to be increasing with the increased availability of artificial insemination procedures. Many gay men and lesbians are also fostering and adopting children, indicating that, overall, gay parenting is on the rise in the United States.

### Relevant Issues

Patterson (1995) observed that the “phenomenon of large numbers of openly lesbian and gay parents raising children represents a sociocultural innovation that is unique to the current historical era” (p. 263). An important difference is between families in which children were born or adopted within the context of a heterosexual relationship before one or both parents identified as gay or lesbian, resulting in the dissolution of the relationship, and those in which the parents have well-established gay or lesbian identities prior to adopting or bearing children (Patterson, 1992). Families of the first type have undergone the stress and reorganization associated with parental separation and divorce, whereas families of the second type most likely did not experience these transitions (Patterson, 2000). The possible variations within each of these two types of families represent many additional forms of diversity apart from the ethnic, religious, and economic distinctions that characterize other families (Patterson, 2000). For example, a gay couple and a lesbian couple may decide to conceive children together and raise them jointly or a lesbian couple and a single gay man or a gay couple and a single lesbian mother.

### Divorced Lesbian Mothers and Gay Fathers

Historically, the driving force behind much of the research done on gay and lesbian parents and their children has come from judicial concerns about the psychological health and stability of divorced lesbian mothers and their children as compared with divorced heterosexual mothers and their children (Patterson, 1992, 1995). This research has often been designed to address negative assumptions expressed in legal proceedings and public policies relevant to gay and lesbian parents (Patterson & Redding, 1996). The courts have, at times, made the assumption that gay men and lesbians are not fit to be parents due to inherent mental illness, that lesbians cannot be good mothers due to being less maternal than heterosexual women, and that the relationships with sexual partners leave gay men and lesbians with little time for ongoing parent-child interactions (Editors of the *Harvard Law Review*, 1990). The conclusions of studies primarily done in the late 1970s and 1980s will be summarized here (relying heavily on previous research reviews by Patterson; for a more detailed review, see Patterson, 1992, 1995, 2000). More spe-

cific information on recent research will be included in later sections addressing diversity among gay and lesbian families, including the use of donor insemination (DI).

A number of studies have assessed the overall mental health of lesbian versus heterosexual mothers. Research in this area has consistently revealed that divorced lesbian mothers score “at least as high” as divorced heterosexual mothers on measures of psychological functioning (Patterson, 1992, 1995, 2000). Additional reviews of the research observed that these studies found no differences between lesbian and heterosexual mothers for self-concept, happiness, overall adjustment, or psychiatric health (Falk, 1994; Millbank, 2003).

The courts have also expressed concern regarding the gender role behavior of lesbian mothers, “suggesting that they may be unusually masculine and that they might interact inappropriately with their children” (Patterson, 1995, 2000). However, self-report studies comparing lesbian and heterosexual mothers found no differences on parental sex role behavior, interest in child rearing, responses to child behavior, or ratings of warmth toward children.

Some differences between lesbian and heterosexual mothers have been reported. Not surprisingly, two studies found that divorced lesbian mothers in their samples had more fears about loss of child custody than did divorced heterosexual mothers. Another study found that lesbian mothers were more likely to provide their children with a mixture of masculine and feminine sex-typed toys, whereas heterosexual mothers tended to choose only sex-typed toys for their children (Patterson, 1995). Studies investigating the relationships of lesbian mothers have consistently found that divorced lesbian mothers were more likely than divorced heterosexual mothers to be living with a romantic partner. However, it is unclear whether this finding represents a difference between female heterosexual and lesbian head of households or a sampling bias of the research (Patterson, 1995, 2000). Although the impact of these partnerships on the family is unclear, the limited research available indicates that “like heterosexual stepparents, co-resident lesbian partners can be sources of conflict as well as support in the family” (Patterson, 2000, p. 1056).

Although more recent research has primarily focused on other issues with gay and lesbian parenting, many important questions regarding divorced lesbian mothers remain unanswered. In her review of the research, Patterson (2000) discussed the need for further explorations of factors contributing to lesbian mothers’ experience of support, confidence in their ability to care for their children, and overall sense of well-being. Preliminary studies have shown that lesbian mothers’ increased openness about their sexual orientation with employers, the children’s father, children, and friends and an increased involvement in feminist activism were associated with psychological health (Patterson, 2000). Another study found that partnered lesbian mothers reported greater

emotional and economic resources than those single parenting their children (Kirkpatrick, 1987). However, a better understanding of these factors may be crucial in prevention efforts aimed at developing protective factors within these as yet marginalized families.

Other issues for divorced lesbian mothers that require further study include if, when, and how should a mother who is coming out to herself and others share this information with her child? Preliminary research and clinical practice reports indicate that early adolescence is a more difficult time for parents to come out to their children regarding homosexuality and that these disclosures may be less stressful for the child at earlier or later stages of development (Patterson, 1992, 1995, 2000). Matters revolving around stepfamily and blended family relationships that may emerge for both divorced lesbian mothers and gay fathers also warrant investigation.

There is considerably more research available on divorced lesbian mothers than on gay custodial fathers. There are currently no published comparisons of gay and heterosexual fathers focusing on psychological adjustment. Patterson (2000) suggested that because "gay fathers are unlikely to win custody battles over their children after divorce, fewer such cases seem to have reached the courts" (p. 1057).

Although there are no studies comparing psychological adjustment, parenting attitudes of gay and heterosexual fathers have been explored. One such study found that there were no significant differences in motivation for parenthood, with one exception. Gay fathers were found to be more likely to report the "higher status accorded to parents" as compared with nonparents as a motivation for deciding to parent (Bigner & Jacobsen, 1989a, as cited in Patterson, 2000). In the same study, fathers were asked to self-report on their behavior with their children. The responses indicated no differences in reports of involvement or intimacy, along with reports by gay fathers of greater warmth and responsiveness combined with control and limit setting in their parenting patterns.

Additional research on lesbian mothers and gay fathers has found that gay fathers reported higher incomes and more frequently reported encouraging their children to play with gender-specific toys than lesbian mothers. Lesbian mothers in the same study believed that their children "received positive benefits, such as increased tolerance for diversity, from having lesbian or gay parents" (Patterson, 2000, p. 1056).

Although the fact that some research on divorced gay fathers exists, it is clear that there is much more to be explored. Patterson (1995) pointed out that there is no research regarding the diversity that exists among divorced gay fathers and suggests investigations regarding the amount of contact divorced gay men have with their children and how this affects their relationship. She also recommended exploring the impact of contact with the gay community on gay fathers' self-concept and their relationship with their children.

## Lesbians and Gay Men Choosing Parenthood

Several researchers and reviewers (Millbank, 2003; Patterson, 1995, 2000; Savin-Williams & Esterberg, 2000) have noted that little to no research has been done on the transition to parenthood for lesbian and gay couples, a topic that has received considerable attention in the literature on heterosexual parenting. Savin-Williams & Esterberg (2000) noted that researchers have studied "how the timing of entrance into parenting affects parents' satisfaction with their relationships, divorce, and children's well-being, as well as gender relations within heterosexual studies" (p. 206). However, this body of research has not addressed gay and lesbian families.

Due to the obvious dearth of information in this area, Savin-Williams and Esterberg (2000) offered the following questions for continued research regarding the transition to parenthood for gay men and lesbians:

- What does it mean to be a lesbian or gay parent within the context of a legal and social system that declares that being lesbian or gay and a parent is incompatible? How do lesbian and gay parents simultaneously construct sexual identities and parenting identities, and how do these identity constructions vary depending on the circumstance?
- How do lesbian and gay parents negotiate the institutions that child rearing brings to them, such as child care settings and schools? How are lesbian and gay parents—and their institutions—affected by these interactions?
- In what ways is the transition to parenthood both similar to and different from that of heterosexual parents? How do lesbian and gay relationships change with the addition of children in terms of satisfaction with the relationship, the division of household labor, commitment to equality, and other factors?
- What sources of support are available to lesbian and gay parents from families of origin, chosen kin, and lesbian and gay communities? (Ainslie & Feltey, 1991; Weston, 1991, both as cited in Savin-Williams & Esterberg, 2000, p. 206)

## THE CHILDREN OF GAY AND LESBIAN PARENTS

A significant amount of research attention has been paid to the children of lesbian and gay parents (Savin-Williams & Esterberg, 2000). As with studies of gay fathers and lesbian mothers, much of this research was published as child custody cases involving gay and lesbian parents were entering the judicial system in the 1980s and 1990s. Therefore, much of the research emphasizes three main judicial concerns: children's sexual identity, other issues related to personal development, and social relationships (Patterson, 2000).

Theoretical issues have also been an important impetus for researchers. Traditional theories of psychological and social development have emphasized distinctive contributions of both mothers and fathers in the healthy development of their

children. Thus, many theories predict negative outcomes for children raised in nontraditional families. The combination of developmental theory and judicial concerns has contributed to the focus of this research on comparing development of children with custodial lesbian mothers to that of children with custodial heterosexual mothers (Patterson 1992, 1995, 2000).

### Gender and Sexual Orientation

Due to judicial concerns that children brought up by lesbian mothers of gay fathers would become gay or lesbian themselves (Falk, 1989), "an outcome that the courts view as undesirable" (Patterson, 1992, p. 1029), research on sexual identity has investigated gender identity, gender role behavior, and sexual orientation.

"Research on gender identity has failed to reveal any differences in the development of children as a function of their parents' sexual orientations" (Patterson, 2000, p. 1059). Early studies compared development of children of lesbian mothers with that of same-aged heterosexual mothers using projective testing techniques. Most children in both groups drew same-gender figures first, an expected finding based on normative sampling (Kirkpatrick, Smith, & Roy, 1981).

Studies on gender role behavior also failed to uncover any developmental difficulties in the children of lesbian mothers. Favorite toys and vocational choices of these children all fell within expected limits for conventional gender roles (Patterson, 1992, 1995, 2000).

Sexual orientation has been studied by several researchers using similar methods (Golombok & Tasker, 1996; Gottman, 1990; Huggins, 1989; Tasker & Golombok, 1995). These studies involved interviewing a group of teenagers, half of whom were the children of lesbian mothers, with the other half being children of heterosexual mothers. Golombok and Tasker (1996) conducted a longitudinal study (rare in the current body of research) of children at the average age of 9.5 years and interviewed the same children at 23.5 years. They found no significant differences for young adults from lesbian and heterosexual families with respect to sexual orientation, gender identification, or gender role behavior. Interestingly, they did find that young adults from lesbian families were more likely to consider the possibility of having lesbian or gay relationships and to actually do so during adolescence. Of the 6 young adults that reported having same-sex relationships, 4 identified as heterosexual in early adulthood. The researchers conclude that by creating a climate of acceptance or rejection of homosexuality within the family, parents may have some impact on their children's sexual experimentation as heterosexual, lesbian, or gay. However, there are some limitations to this study based on the small sample size, gender differences among the comparison groups, and the fact that many lesbians do not identify as homosexual until later in life.

Bailey, Bobrow, Wolfe, and Mikach (1995) studied the sexual orientations of adult sons of gay and bisexual men. The

researchers found that 7 of 75 (9%) of the sons in the sample identified as gay or bisexual. These results are difficult to interpret given the dependence on population base-rates of male sons of heterosexual fathers identifying as gay or bisexual, and these are not known (Bailey et al., 1995).

Although the research on the development of sexual identity among children of gay and lesbian parents appears to clearly indicate that a vast majority of children with lesbian or gay parents grow up to identify themselves as heterosexual, these studies have some significant limitations. As noted earlier, the fact that many lesbians do not self-identify as homosexual until adulthood may limit studies of sexual orientation identification in adolescence (Patterson, 2000). Another concern involves the comparison of children of divorced heterosexual mothers with divorced lesbian mothers; the lesbian mothers were more apt to be partnered than the heterosexual mothers, thus confounding maternal sexual orientation and relationship status (Patterson, 2000). Although the existing research indicates that the development of sexual identity among children of gay and lesbian parents does not differ significantly from the development of their peers from heterosexual parents, more research in this area is needed.

### Personal Development

Studies of personal development among children of gay and lesbian parents as compared to children of heterosexual parents have investigated a wide range of characteristics: psychiatric evaluations, behavioral assessments, personality, self-concept, locus of control, moral judgment, and intelligence (see Patterson, 1992 for more detailed information). "Concerns about possible difficulties in personal development among children of lesbian and gay parents have not been sustained by the results of research" (Patterson, 1992, 1995, 2000; Savin-Williams & Esterberg, 2000).

### Social Relationships

Due to judicial concerns that children of gay and lesbian parents may face difficulties in peer relationships, the attention of researchers has focused on peer relations. Patterson (1992, 1995, 2000) found that research involving both lesbian mother reports and adult observers has consistently indicated that children of lesbian and gay parents have normal peer relations. In addition, a recent European study (Ray & Gregory, 2001) explored peer relations between children of gay fathers and lesbian mothers with children they encounter in the general school population. Nearly half of the children between Grades 3 and 10 reported teasing and bullying in regard to their parent's sexuality, with the numbers dropping dramatically in Grades 11 and 12. The kinds of bullying experienced "ranged from verbal abuse, teasing, and joking to physical and sexual violence" (Ray & Gregory, 2001, p. 8). Many of the children reported hearing anti-gay sentiments, often on a daily basis.

Clearly, there is a need for more research in this country regarding the experience of the children of gay and lesbian parents with their peers in school and other social settings. This research can inform policy decisions and practices in many settings, allowing for the children of gay and lesbian parents to be better supported and not subjected to discrimination and harassment. The need for social/support networks for these children to combat their feelings of isolation and difference are clearly indicated (Ray & Gregory, 2001).

Research has also been directed toward describing the relationships between the children of lesbian and gay parents and adults. Studies from the early 1980s indicate that children of lesbian mothers were more likely to have contact with their fathers than children of heterosexual mothers. The majority of children of lesbian mothers had contact with their father in the year preceding one study, with one third of them visiting with their father weekly. Conversely, most children of heterosexual mothers had not had contact with their father in the year preceding the study and only 1 out of 20 children had weekly contact with their fathers. In addition, the social networks of lesbian mothers have been found to include both men and women, providing their children with opportunities to socialize with adults of both genders (Patterson, 1992).

### **Children Born to Lesbian Mothers**

The increase in lesbian parenting in recent years due to artificial or donor insemination procedures has been noted by many authors, even being referred to as the "lesbian baby boom" (Flaks, Ficher, Masterpasqua, & Joseph, 1995; Patterson, 1992, 1995; Patterson, Hurt, & Mason, 1998), yet research in this area remains relatively new. Although some gay men are also becoming parents after coming out, no research has yet been published on their children. Also scarce in the current body of literature are studies involving gay male and lesbian adoptions, quite possibly due to widespread public policy excluding gay men and lesbians from adopting children in the United States. Because this direction of study has been the predominant focus of recent research, a more detailed review of the research follows.

Early studies examined psychosocial development among preschool and school-aged children born to lesbian mothers. Patterson (1994, as cited in Patterson, 2000), studied this population (including some children adopted by lesbian mothers) on a wide range of measures, providing an overview of child development. Patterson found that children of lesbian mothers scored in the normal range for all of the measures. On two of the subscales of the self-concept measure, scores indicated that children of lesbian mothers reported more emotional reactions to stress (feeling angry, scared, or upset) but an increased sense of well-being (feeling joyful, content, and comfortable with themselves) than did same-aged children of heterosexual mothers (Patterson, 1994, as cited in Patterson, 2000). Researchers report that it is possible that these children did experience more stress in their daily lives or equally

possible that children of lesbian mothers more easily acknowledged both positive and negative aspects of their emotional experience.

Additional research has emphasized the inclusion of extended family members in families headed by lesbian couples, with the inclusion of grandparents and adult friends and relatives (Patterson et al., 1998). Researchers also found that lesbian parents were likely to maintain egalitarian divisions of labor, with biological mothers more likely to do more of the child care, whereas co-parents spent more time at work when differences did occur. Patterson (2000) also found that in lesbian families in which child care was more evenly divided, children exhibited the most favorable adjustment.

In a comparison of children conceived through DI to lesbian parents and children of heterosexual parents conceived through conventional methods, Flaks et al. (1995) studied the development of the children and the quality of the parenting relationship. The researchers found results that were "entirely consistent with prior research on planned lesbian-mother families" (Flaks et al., 1995, p. 112) on measures of child intellectual and behavioral functioning that included teacher reports. This study also investigated possible gender differences among the children and found no significant differences across or within family structures; in fact, boys and girls in the lesbian- and heterosexual-parent households were found to be "extremely similar" (Flaks et al., 1995, p. 112). In the area of relationship quality, no differences were found between heterosexual parenting couples and lesbian parenting couples, although lesbian couples scored higher "in every area of dyadic adjustment" (Flaks et al., 1995, p. 112). The study also indicated that lesbian couples were more aware of the parenting skills necessary for effective parenting than their heterosexual counterparts as measured by Briklin's Parent Awareness Skills Survey (PASS) (as cited in Flaks et al., 1995). However, this difference is believed to represent differences due to gender rather than sexual orientation. Both lesbian and heterosexual mothers were found to be more aware of effective parenting skills than heterosexual fathers (Flaks et al., 1995). The authors concluded that the data indicated that lesbian parents can possess the necessary parenting skills and maintain intimate relationships of ample quality to raise psychologically healthy children (Flaks et al., 1995).

More recently, Chan, Raboy, and Patterson (1998) studied 80 families formed by lesbian (single and partnered) and heterosexual (single and married) parents by means of DI. Similar to previous research comparing the children of lesbian mothers to children of heterosexual mothers, Chan and his colleagues found no differences in social competence or behavioral problems, and both groups of children were regarded as "well adjusted" by both parents and teachers (Chan et al., 1998, p. 453). By comparing single parents and two-parent families headed by lesbians and heterosexuals, the researchers were able to compare family process components in addition to looking at family structure. Chan et al. found that

similar to research on heterosexual families alone, children exhibited increased behavioral difficulties in relation to the amount of parenting stress reported by lesbian and heterosexual parents. Associations were also found between parents' relationship satisfaction and children's well-being. Regardless of family structure, children in less happy or conflict-ridden homes had less positive outcomes as reported by their parents and teachers. Chan and his colleagues concluded that "our results are consistent with the view that qualities of relationships within families are more important than parental sexual orientation as predictors of children's adjustment" (p. 455).

In a European study, Golombok, Tasker, and Murray (1997) similarly studied the adjustment of children conceived through DI to both heterosexual and lesbian parents and compared them to children who were conceived by heterosexual parents the conventional way. All of the children reported positive feelings about their parents, representing no differences in parent-child relationships across the different types of family structure. Measures of child behavior and emotional adjustment indicated that children conceived of DI methods in heterosexual families exhibited more behavioral problems than children in heterosexual families conceived through conventional means. These results were particularly salient among girls, with girls conceived via DI in heterosexual families displaying more behavioral difficulties than girls from any other parenting group. Researchers believed that this finding may have been attributable to the level of secrecy regarding the use of DI in heterosexual families. These findings were not particularly relevant for lesbian-mother families whose use of artificial insemination methods did not reflect on their own fertility and who typically disclosed use of DI openly (Golombok et al., 1997).

In another, similar study comparing the well-being of children raised from birth by lesbian mothers and heterosexual single mothers with children raised in heterosexual two-parent families, no differences were found as a function of family type (Golombok et al., 1997). The results did indicate that children of mother-only families had more secure attachment relationships with their parents than children with two heterosexual parents. On measures of perceived competence, children of mother-only families indicated lower perceptions of cognitive and physical competence than did children with fathers. The authors concluded that these findings indicate a dependence on parents' gender, rather than sexual orientation.

Citing limits to existing research based on reliance on voluntary samples of lesbian mothers, Golombok et al. (2003) studied lesbian-mother families from a general population sample obtained through an existing community clinic-based longitudinal study of parents. Lesbian-mother families were then matched with single heterosexual-mother families for comparison. The lesbian-mother families represented single-parent as well as co-parenting families and children con-

ceived in prior heterosexual relationships as well as those conceived to lesbian mothers via DI. Similar to previous results, no significant differences were found between lesbian and heterosexual mothers, "although lesbian mothers reported smacking their children less and engaged more frequently in imaginative and domestic play with their children" (Golombok et al., 2003, p. 29). No significant psychological differences were found among children of lesbian and heterosexual mothers, and no differences with respect to gender-typed behavior were found for either boys or girls. The researchers hypothesized that lesbian co-parents' lower levels of emotional involvement with children, less frequent arguments with children, and lower rates of physical punishment, indicated that lesbian co-parents were less involved with child discipline than their heterosexual counterparts. However, more research is needed to test this hypothesis. Comparisons of single-parent families to two-parent families revealed findings similar to those in previous studies (Chan et al., 1998), suggesting that "the presence of two parents irrespective of their gender, rather than the presence of a parent of each sex, is associated with more positive outcomes for children's psychological well-being than is rearing by a single mother" (Golombok et al., 2003, p. 31). Although the number of children with lesbian parents conceived via DI in this study was low (11) compared to those conceived conventionally (28), the results indicate no significant differences among the two groups of children with lesbian parents. This represents one of the few studies available that incorporates a study of diversity within a group of children of lesbian parents.

In addition, it is important to note that the suggestion made by Stacey and Biblarz (2001) regarding possible gender differences in the development of children raised by lesbian mothers may exist and are underemphasized by researchers appears to be unfounded. Golombok et al. (2003) and Flaks et al. (1995) both investigated differences related to gender among children raised by lesbian mothers and found no significant results.

## MULTICULTURAL ISSUES IN THE RESEARCH

The foremost criticism of the current body of research regarding multicultural issues is the homogeneity of the subjects studied. It is well documented that the studies reviewed here and by others (see Millbank, 2003; Patterson, 1992, 1995, 1997, 2000; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001) almost exclusively study populations that are White, well-educated, middle class, and American. Although this has been noted by researchers and reviewers over the past two decades, the demographics of sample populations have not changed (Chan et al., 1998; Flaks et al., 1995; Gartrell et al., 2000; Patterson et al., 1998). Although research has been conducted in England (Golombok & Tasker, 1996; Golombok et al., 1997, 2003; Tasker & Golombok, 1995), Australia (Ray & Gregory,

2001), and Brussels (Vanfraussen, Ponjaert-Kristoffersen, & Brewaeys, 2002), these studies reflect similar sampling limitations. Some of these sampling problems appear to be inherent in the focus of study; for example, when studying American women who have knowledge of and access to artificial insemination procedures, the available population appears to narrow to predominantly well-educated, middle-class White Americans. Another difficulty lies in the fear that gay fathers and lesbian mothers have regarding custody concerns should they disclose their sexual orientation (Patterson, 2000). It is clear that researchers may need to use alternative and creative sampling procedures to investigate the experience of gay and lesbian parents and their children within the contexts of ethnic, racial, religious, cultural, and socioeconomic diversity. It will be important to know how these parents and children manage the multiple identities that they experience in a variety of contexts.

Another important limit to the current research is the lack of attention to diversity within gay and lesbian families. The research has been primarily conducted with lesbian mothers and their children conceived through heterosexual relationships or via DI; custodial and noncustodial gay fathers have received relatively little attention. Few studies have explored lesbian and gay parents fostering and adopting children from this and other countries and the complex multicultural issues that may arise for these families in today's society. In addition, there appears to be no literature investigating the family dynamics associated with lesbian couples and gay male couples having children together via DI or gay male couples and a single lesbian mother or lesbian couples and a single gay father.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCHERS

As indicated in this review of the existing research, much of the research to date has primarily focused on comparisons between children of gay and lesbian parents and children of heterosexual parents for the purposes of evaluating predictions of negative consequences for the children growing up in gay and lesbian families. Although this body of research has yielded some important results, the existing studies are not without limitations. Small homogeneous samples and a heavy reliance on self-report measures are most noteworthy, although additional concerns have been raised (see Patterson, 1995; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). Additional studies using observational methods with diverse populations undergoing longitudinal designs are definitely desirable (Patterson, 2000). Promisingly, longitudinal designs are beginning to appear (e.g., Gartrell et al., 2000; Tasker & Golombok, 1995).

Regardless of these challenges, the research clearly indicates that the family environments provided by lesbian and gay parents are as likely as those provided by heterosexual parents to foster and promote children's psychological well-being. With these conclusions well established, researchers

are now beginning to study the conditions under which lesbian and gay families thrive. Patterson (1995) observed that "Having addressed negative assumptions represented in psychological theory, judicial opinion, and popular prejudice, researchers are now in a position to explore a broader range of issues" (p. 284).

It has been suggested that further comparisons of gay and lesbian families to heterosexual families does not serve a purpose in future research and, in fact, perpetuates heterocentrism and homophobia in our culture (Savin-Williams & Esterberg, 2000; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). Researchers need to instead consider the strengths that children of gay and lesbian households may develop, "including a greater appreciation of diversity; a willingness to challenge traditional sex-role stereotypes; and an ability to fashion creative, healthy, nurturing family relationships despite legal constraints" (Savin-Williams & Esterberg, 2000, p. 209).

The implications for future research focused on understanding the implications of differences in race, ethnicity, cultural environments, and socioeconomic status among gay and lesbian families is quite clear. Future studies addressing the issues that gay men and lesbians face as they transition into parenthood, stated earlier in this article, are also needed. In addition, the processes that established gay and lesbian parents and children go through as they encounter and cope with various institutional settings embedded within a heterocentric society need further investigation. These studies may vary in scope from studying interactions with schools, parent-teacher meetings and associations, and financial institutions to vacation planning and holiday gatherings with extended family. The possibilities for further investigation appear to be endless.

Additional studies focusing on the processes of family relationships within gay and lesbian families can significantly contribute to our understanding of family climates that are beneficial to the development of all children. It has been indicated that variables related to the quality of relationships may be better predictors of child adjustment than those related to family structure (Patterson, 1997). These findings indicate that some traditional theories of development that emphasize the contributions of a heterosexual male parent to socialization may need to be reevaluated.

Patterson (1995) suggested that the conceptualization of gay and lesbian parents' sexual identities is an issue requiring research attention. Little attention has been given to the fluidity of sexual orientation among gay, lesbian, and bisexual parents over time or to the implications of this fluidity on children (Patterson, 1995).

A focus on the interests of lesbian- and gay-parented families will give rise to many more important research questions (Patterson, 2000). Lesbian and gay parents are interested in differences between the experiences of biological and non-biological parents (Patterson, 1997). Many gay and lesbian parents express concern about their children's experiences at

school, and although some studies have broken ground in this area (Patterson, 2000), this research has just begun.

Finally, the current body of research attempts to study the experiences and processes that involve gay and lesbian parents and their children predominantly through quantitative methods. Some studies have used a mixed-method approach; however, the need to gather rich descriptions of these experiences and processes necessitates the inclusion of qualitative methods that can ground findings in the words and experiences of the participants under investigation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Thick, rich descriptions of the experiences of gay and lesbian families may contribute to the reader's ability to make self-other comparisons with this minority group, possibly resulting in increased understanding and acceptance (Allport, 1954). The current body of research represents the theory of "trying harder" to influence the judicial system, public policy, and public opinion with the use of statistical comparisons; it is time for researchers to "try different."

### IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELORS

The most obvious implication for counselors is evident in the complete absence of studies on gay and lesbian parents and their children found in journals specific to the counseling profession. Counselors need to be knowledgeable of the research and its implications for human development to better serve individual clients, gay and lesbian families, extended family members, school populations, and their communities. Knowledge of these diverse families and their ability to competently raise psychologically healthy children becomes a tool for intervention, prevention, and advocacy efforts on multiple levels.

The need for counselors to conduct research on their work with gay and lesbian families and contribute to the growing body of research cannot be understated. Counselors need to inform one another of the work that they are doing and contribute to their own and the profession's professional identity development as well as advocating for their clients within the profession (Myers, Sweeney, & White, 2002). Knowledge of the issues facing marginalized client populations is fundamental to the ability of counselors to advocate for their clients within their communities and the larger social context (Eriksen, 1999). Now appears to be a most opportune time for the implications of the research on gay and lesbian families to become more accessible to a larger portion of the population.

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