Family Relationships of Lesbians and Gay Men

The family lives of lesbian and gay people have been a source of controversy during the past decade. Despite prejudice and discrimination, lesbians and gay men have often succeeded in creating and sustaining family relationships. Research on same-gender couple relationships, parent-child relationships, and other family relationships is reviewed here. In general, the picture of lesbian and gay relationships emerging from this body of work is one of positive adjustment, even in the face of stressful conditions. Research is also beginning to address questions about individual differences among the family relationships of lesbians and gay men. Future work in this area has the potential to affect lesbian and gay lives, influence developmental and family theory, and inform public policies in the decade ahead.

The family lives of lesbian and gay people have been a subject of controversy during the past decade. Because of the stigma attached to nonheterosexual identities, those who declare lesbian or gay identities often do so at the risk of relationships in families of origin. In the United States, as in most other nations, the law does not recognize marriages between same-gender partners, nor—in many jurisdictions—does it protect relationships between lesbian or gay parents and their children. Despite such obstacles, however, lesbian and gay people have often succeeded in creating and sustaining meaningful family relationships.

How this has been accomplished, at what cost, and with what results, is the subject of this essay.

A preliminary issue concerns the assessment of sexual orientation itself, a notoriously challenging topic (McWhirter, Sanders, & Reinisch, 1990; Michaels, 1996). Common understandings of terms such as "lesbian," "gay," and "bisexual" generally rest on the belief that sexual attractions, sexual behaviors, and sexual identities coincide. For instance, a man who is sexually attracted to other men is generally expected to have sexual relations mainly or exclusively with men and to identify as gay. Such expectations are not always correct, however (Diamond, 1998; Golden, 1987; Savin-Williams, 1998b). Felt attractions, actual sexual behavior, and sexual identities may match one another for some individuals, but for others the situation may be quite different. Furthermore, although it is generally assumed that sexual orientation is a stable part of a person's identity over the entire life course, and although this may often be the case, mounting evidence suggests that, particularly for women, sexual identities may shift over time (e.g., Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995). When such considerations are combined with controversies over the extent to which categorical or dimensional systems are best in the assessment of sexual orientation (McWhirter et al., 1990), it becomes clear that simple two- or three-category schemes often may fail to capture the complexity of many lives.

This article presents an overview of recent research on the family lives of lesbians and gay men (see also Laird & Green, 1996; Patterson & D'Augelli, 1998). Research on lesbian and gay couples is described first, followed by studies of lesbian and gay parents and their children, and...
then by research on other family relationships. The review of research is followed by a discussion of some limitations of existing work and suggestions about directions for future research.

**Couple Relationships**

Research on lesbian and gay couples has addressed a variety of interrelated issues. In this section, I give an overview of findings on love and commitment, power and the division of labor, sexual behavior, problems and conflict in relationships, and the ending of couple relationships. For recent reviews of research and theory on lesbian and gay couples, see James and Murphy (1998), Klinger (1996), Kurdek (1995), McWhirter and Mattison (1996), Murphy (1994), Peplau (1991), and Peplau, Veniegas, and Campbell (1996).

**Love and Commitment**

Many if not most lesbians and gay men express the desire for an enduring love relationship with a partner of the same gender. Indeed, research findings suggest that many are successful in creating such relationships. Survey data suggest that 40 to 60% of gay men and 45 to 80% of lesbians are currently involved in steady romantic relationships (see Peplau & Cochran, 1990; Peplau et al., 1996). Because most surveys involve many young adults who may not yet have found romantic partners, these figures may underestimate the actual numbers.

When asked about their current relationship, lesbians and gay men report as much satisfaction with their relationships as do heterosexual couples; the great majority describe themselves as happy (Cardell, Finn, & Maracek, 1981; Kurdek & Schmidt, 1986a, 1986b; Peplau, Padesky, & Hamilton, 1982). For example, Peplau and Cochran (1990) described a study of 50 lesbians, 50 gay men, 50 heterosexual women, and 50 heterosexual men who were currently involved in romantic relationships. Both lesbians and gay men reported very positive feelings about their partners and rated their relationships as very satisfying. There were no differences as a function of sexual orientation on any of the measures of relationship quality (Peplau & Cochran, 1990).

Research also has focused on factors related to differences in relationship satisfaction between couples. The correlates of relationship quality for lesbian and gay couples include feelings of having equal power, perceiving many attractions and few alternatives to the relationship, endorsing few dysfunctional beliefs about the relationship, placing a high value on the relationship, and engaging in shared decision making (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Kurdek, 1994, 1995).

**Power and Division of Labor**

The great majority of lesbian and gay couples believe that an equal balance of power is desirable (Peplau & Cochran, 1990), but not all report that they achieve equality. In Peplau and Cochran’s study, only 59% of lesbians, 38% of gay men, 48% of heterosexual women, and 40% of heterosexual men reported that the balance of power in their current relationship was exactly equal. Others have found that majorities of gay as well as lesbian couples report equal power (see Peplau et al., 1996).

When power is unequal in a relationship, which partner has more power in an intimate relationship and why? Social exchange theory predicts that the partner with greater personal resources (e.g., income, education) should have greater power (Peplau, 1991), and results of a number of studies have supported this view. For example, Harry found that older, wealthier men tended to have more power in their intimate relationships (Harry, 1984; Harry & DeVall, 1978). Caldwell and Peplau, in a study of young lesbians (1984), reported that wealthier, better educated women tended to have more power than their partners. In an early study, Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) reported that the partner with greater financial resources had more power in money management issues in gay, married heterosexual, and unmarried (but cohabiting) heterosexual couples, but not in lesbian couples. The extent to which financial resources affect balance of power in lesbian couples remains an open question (see Peplau et al., 1996).

Other predictions from exchange theory have also received empirical support (Kurdek, 1995; Peplau, 1991; Peplau et al., 1996). In social exchange theory, the “principle of least interest” states that when one person is more dependent or involved than the other, the more dependent partner is expected to have less power (Peplau, 1991). Consistent with this view, Caldwell and Peplau (1984) found associations between unequal involvement and unequal power among lesbian couples. As predicted by social exchange theory, the
woman who was less involved in the relationship had more power.

Although some expect that, in same-gender couples, one partner plays a traditionally "male" and one a traditionally "female" role, research has consistently found that this is rarely the case (Kurdek, 1995; Peplau et al., 1996). For example, Bell and Weinberg reported in 1978 that most lesbians and gay men in their sample reported sharing domestic tasks equally. More recently, Kurdek (1993) reported egalitarian divisions of labor among lesbian and gay couples without children. Others have described similar findings among lesbian and gay couples who are raising children together (Chan, Brooks, Raboy, & Patterson, 1998; Dunne, 1998; Gertrull et al., 1999; McPherson, 1993; Patterson, 1995c; Sullivan, 1996; Tasker & Golombek, 1998).

Sexual Behavior

Sexual behavior among lesbian and gay couples has been found to vary considerably as a function of gender. First, the frequency of genital sexual behavior has been reported to decline with the duration of a relationship, and this is true of reports given by lesbian, gay, heterosexual married, and unmarried (but cohabiting) heterosexual couples (Kurdek, 1995). These declines are less pronounced among gay and more pronounced among lesbian couples than among heterosexual couples, whether married or not. The frequency of genital sexual relations, as reported in surveys, thus appears to increase with the number of men in a couple. It is also possible that lesbian couples have different conceptions of sexuality and of sexual behavior than do gay men or heterosexual couples (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983).

Another area in which strong gender differences emerge is in that of the degree of a couple's desire for and accomplishment of sexual exclusivity. Lesbians and heterosexual couples have generally been found to be more supportive than gay men of monogamy in their relationships, and their reported behavior corresponds to these views. In their classic study, Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) reported that among couples who had been together between 2 and 10 years, most lesbian and heterosexual couples preferred and experienced monogamous sexual relationships, whereas most gay couples did not. These data were collected before the HIV/AIDS epidemic had attracted public attention. Nonetheless, data collected during 1988–1989, after HIV infection had become widespread in the United States, revealed the same pattern of results (Bryant & Demian, 1994).

Despite differences in preferences and in sexual behavior, however, lesbian, gay, heterosexual married, and unmarried (but cohabiting) heterosexual couples all report similar satisfaction with their sexual relationships (Bryant & Demian, 1994). Thus, although gender differences in sexual attitudes and sexual behavior would appear to be substantial, reported sexual satisfaction within couple relationships has not varied as a function of sexual orientation or gender of partners (Kurdek, 1995; Peplau, 1991).

Problems and Conflict in Couples

When lesbian and gay couples experience problems in their relationships, some of these stem from the same roots from which difficulties in heterosexual relationships also arise. As in heterosexual relationships, problems can arise because of different religious, racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic backgrounds and because of the different values that these backgrounds may have inculcated. Relationship difficulties can also arise as a result of problems at either partner's job, financial pressures on the couple, friction with members of extended family networks, and so forth, just as they do in heterosexual relationships. Kurdek (1994, 1995) reported that the top five areas of conflict for lesbian and gay couples were finances, driving style, affection/sex, being overly critical, and division of household tasks.

There are some conflicts that are probably unique to lesbian and gay couples and prominent among these are issues created by negative social attitudes toward homosexuality (Kurdek & Schmidt, 1987). When a couple disagrees about the extent to which they should disclose the lesbian or gay nature of their relationship, problems in their relationship can ensue (James & Murphy, 1998). Resolution of such conflicts may be central to the success of the couple relationship over time (Peplau et al., 1996).

The longevity of lesbian and gay relationships has also been a topic of some research. Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) found that for couples who had been together 10 years, breakup rates over the 18 months of their study were low; only 6% of lesbian couples, 4% of gay couples, and 4% of married couples separated during this period. For couples who had been together less than 2 years, 22% of lesbian couples, 16% of gay couples, 17% of cohabiting (but unmarried) heterosexual cou-
Within each of these two types of families, there are of course many additional forms of diversity (Lewin, 1993). Apart from the ethnic, religious, economic, and other forms of diversity that characterize other families, there are also a number of forms of diversity that are more specific to lesbian and gay family formation (Martin, 1993; Patterson, 1994b; Weston, 1991). For instance, a lesbian couple and a gay couple may agree to conceive children together and raise them jointly. Variants on this kind of arrangement might involve a gay couple and a single lesbian, or a lesbian couple and a single gay man.

One important impetus for research in the area of lesbian and gay parents has come from extrinsic sources, such as judicial concerns about the psychological health and well-being of divorced lesbian mothers and their children compared with that of divorced heterosexual mothers and their children. Other work has emerged from concerns that are more intrinsic to the families themselves, such as the role of biological linkages in the formation of family relationships. In some areas, existing research addresses only those concerns arising from extrinsic sources, but wherever possible, I address both types of issues. Other recent reviews of this literature can be found in Brewaey and Van Hall (1997), Falk (1994), Flaks (1994), Kirkpatrick (1996), Parks (1998), Patterson (1992, 1995a, 1997), Patterson and Chan (1997), Tasker and Golombok (1991, 1997), and Victor and Fish (1995).

**Divorced Lesbian Mothers**

Research comparing lesbian and gay parents and their children with heterosexual parents and their children often has been designed to address negative assumptions that have been expressed in judicial opinions, legislative initiatives or public policies relevant to lesbian and gay parents and their children (Patterson & Redding, 1996). Thus, many studies have been conducted to evaluate the accuracy of negative expectations about lesbian and gay parents or about their children.

Because it often has been raised as an issue by judges presiding over custody disputes (Falk, 1989), a number of studies have assessed the overall mental health of lesbian compared with heterosexual mothers. Consistent with data on the mental health of lesbians in general (Gonsiorek, 1991), research in this area has revealed that divorced lesbian mothers score at least as high as divorced heterosexual mothers on assessments of

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**Lesbian and Gay Parents and Their Children**

When considering lesbian and gay parents and their children, it is helpful to recognize the diversity of family constellations (Arnup, 1995; Benkov, 1994). One important distinction (Patterson, 1992) is between families in which children were born or adopted in the context of heterosexual marriages that later dissolved when one or both parents came out as gay or lesbian on the one hand, and those in which children were born or adopted after parents had affirmed lesbian or gay identities on the other. Families of the first type have undergone the tensions and reorganizations characteristic of parental divorce and separation, whereas families of the second type have not necessarily experienced these transitions. Children’s histories are likely to be different in these two types of families.
psychological health. For instance, studies have found no differences between lesbian and heterosexual mothers on self-concept, happiness, overall adjustment, or psychiatric status (Falk, 1989, 1994; Patterson, 1992, 1997).

Another area of judicial concern has focused on maternal gender role behavior and its potential impact on children (Patterson, 1995a, 1995b). Stereotypes cited by the courts suggest that lesbians might be unusually masculine and that they might interact inappropriately with their children. In contrast to expectations based on the stereotypes, however, neither lesbian mothers' reports about their gender role behavior nor their self-described interest in childrearing have been found to differ from those of heterosexual mothers. Reports about responses to child behavior and ratings of warmth toward children have been found not to differ significantly between lesbian and heterosexual mothers.

Differences between lesbian and heterosexual mothers also have been reported. Among the most straightforward of these are the early reports by Lyons (1983) and Pagelow (1980) that divorced lesbian mothers in their samples had more fears about loss of child custody than did divorced heterosexual mothers. Similarly, Green, Mandel, Hetvedt, Gray, and Smith (1986) reported that lesbian mothers were more likely than heterosexual mothers to be active in feminist organizations.

A few other scattered differences seem more difficult to interpret. For instance, Miller, Jacobsen, and Bigner (1981) reported that lesbian mothers they studied were more child-centered than were heterosexual mothers in their discipline techniques. In a sample of African American lesbian and heterosexual mothers, Hill (1987) found that lesbian mothers reported being more flexible about rules, more relaxed about sex play and modesty, and more likely to have nontraditional expectations for their daughters.

Several studies have also examined the social circumstances and relationships of lesbian mothers. Divorced lesbian mothers have consistently been reported to be more likely than divorced heterosexual mothers to be living with a romantic partner (Harris & Turner, 1985/1986; Kirkpatrick, Smith, & Roy, 1981; Pagelow, 1980). Whether this represents a difference between lesbian and heterosexual mother-headed families or it reflects a sampling bias of the research cannot be determined on the basis of information in the published reports. Information is sparse about the impact of such relationships in lesbian-mother families, but that which has been published suggests that, like heterosexual stepparents, coresident lesbian partners of divorced lesbian mothers can be important sources of conflict as well as support in the family.

Relationships with the fathers of children in lesbian-mother homes have also been a topic of study. Few differences in the likelihood of paternal financial support have been reported for lesbian and heterosexual families with children; Kirkpatrick and her colleagues (1981) reported, for example, that only about one half of heterosexual and about one half of lesbian mothers in their sample received financial support from the fathers of their children. Findings about frequency of contact with the fathers are mixed, with some (e.g., Kirkpatrick et al., 1981) reporting no differences as a function of maternal sexual orientation and others (e.g., Golombok, Spencer, & Rutter, 1983) reporting more contact among lesbian than among heterosexual mothers.

Although most research to date has involved assessment of possible differences between lesbian and heterosexual mothers, a few studies have reported other types of comparisons. For instance, in a study of divorced lesbian mothers and divorced gay fathers, Harris and Turner (1985/1986) found that gay fathers were likely to report higher incomes and that they encouraged more gender-typed toy play among their children whereas lesbian mothers were more likely to see benefits for their children (e.g., increased empathy and tolerance for differences) as a result of having lesbian or gay parents. In comparisons of relationship satisfaction among lesbian couples who did or did not have children, Koepeke, Hare, and Moran (1992) reported that couples with children scored higher on overall measures of relationship satisfaction and of the quality of their sexual relationship.

Another important set of questions, as yet little studied, concerns the conditions under which lesbian mothers experience enhanced feelings of well-being, support, and ability to care for their children. Rand, Graham, and Rawlings (1982) reported that psychological health of lesbian mothers was associated with the mothers' openness about her sexual orientation with her employer, ex-husband, children, and friends, and with her degree of feminist activism. Kirkpatrick (1987) found that lesbian mothers living with partners and children had greater economic and emotional resources than those living alone with their children.

Many other issues that have arisen in the con-
text of divorced, lesbian-mother families are also in need of study. For instance, when a mother is in the process of coming out as a lesbian to herself and to others, at what point in that process should she address the topic with her child, and in what ways should she do so—if at all? And what influence ought the child's age and circumstances have in such a decision? Reports from research and clinical practice suggest that early adolescence may be a particularly difficult time for parents to initiate discussions of this topic and that disclosure may be less stressful at earlier or later points in a child's development (Patterson, 1992; 1995a). Similarly, many issues remain to be addressed regarding step-family and blended family relationships that may emerge as a lesbian mother's household seeks new equilibrium following her separation or divorce from the child's father.

Divorced Gay Fathers

Although considerable research has focused on the overall psychological adjustment of lesbian mothers compared with that of heterosexual mothers, no published studies of gay fathers make such comparisons with heterosexual fathers. This may be attributable to the greater role of judicial decision making as an impetus for research on lesbian mothers (Patterson & Redding, 1996). In jurisdictions where the law provides for bias in custody proceedings, these are likely to favor female and heterosexual parents. Perhaps because, other things being equal, gay fathers are unlikely to win custody battles over their children after divorce, fewer such cases seem to have reached the courts. Consistent with this view, only a minority of divorced gay fathers have been described as living in the same households as their children (Bigner & Bozett, 1990; Bozett, 1980, 1989).

Research on the parenting attitudes of gay versus heterosexual divorced fathers has been reported, however. Bigner and Jacobsen (1989a, 1989b) compared gay and heterosexual fathers, each of whom had at least two children. Their results revealed that, with one exception, there were no significant differences between gay and heterosexual fathers in their motives for parenthood. The single exception concerned the greater likelihood of gay than heterosexual fathers to cite the higher status accorded to parents as compared with non-parents as a motivation for parenthood (Bigner & Jacobsen, 1989a).

Bigner and Jacobsen (1989b) also asked gay and heterosexual fathers in their sample to report on their behavior when interacting with their children. Although no differences emerged in the fathers' reports of involvement or intimacy, gay fathers reported that their behavior was characterized by greater responsiveness, more reasoning, and more limit setting than was that of heterosexual fathers. These reports by gay fathers of greater warmth and responsiveness on the one hand and of greater control and limit setting on the other are strongly reminiscent of findings from research with heterosexual families and would seem to raise the possibility that gay fathers are more likely than their heterosexual counterparts to exhibit authoritative patterns of parenting behavior such as those described by Baumrind (Baumrind & Black, 1967).

In addition to research comparing gay and heterosexual fathers, a handful of studies have made other comparisons. For instance, Robinson and Skeen (1982) compared gender-role orientations of gay fathers with those of gay men who were not fathers and found no differences. Similarly, Skeen and Robinson (1985) found no evidence to suggest that gay men's retrospective reports about relationships with their own parents varied as a function of whether they were parents themselves. As noted above, Harris and Turner (1985/1986) compared gay fathers and lesbian mothers and reported that although gay fathers had higher incomes and were more likely to report encouraging their children to play with gender-typed toys, lesbian mothers were more likely to believe that their children received positive benefits such as increased tolerance for diversity from having lesbian or gay parents. Findings such as these suggest a number of issues for research on gender, sexual orientation, and parenting behavior.

Much research in this area has also arisen from concerns about the gay father identity and its transformations over time. Thus, work by Miller (1978, 1979) and Bozett (1980, 1981a, 1981b, 1987) sought to provide a conceptualization of the processes by which a man who considers himself to be a heterosexual father may come to identify himself, both in public and in private, as a gay father. Based on extensive interviews with gay fathers in the United States and Canada, these authors emphasized the pivotal nature of identity disclosure itself and of the reactions to disclosure by significant people in a man's life. Miller (1978) suggested that although a number of factors such as the extent of occupational autonomy and amount of access to gay communities may affect how rapidly a gay man discloses his identity to
others, the most important of these is likely to be the experience of falling in love with another man. It is this experience, more than any other, Miller argued, that leads a man to integrate the otherwise compartmentalized parts of his identity as a gay father.

Lesbians and Gay Men Choosing to Become Parents

Although for many years lesbian mothers and gay fathers were generally assumed to have become parents in the context of previous heterosexual relationships, both men and women are believed increasingly to be undertaking parenthood in the context of preexisting lesbian and gay identities (Beers, 1996; Crawford, 1987; Gartrell et al., 1996, 1999; Patterson, 1994a, 1994b). Although a substantial body of research addresses the transition to parenthood among heterosexuals (e.g., Cowan & Cowan, 1992), little research has explored this transition among gay men or lesbians.

The first question concerns whether to pursue parenthood at all (Beers, 1996; Sbordone, 1993). In one study of gay men who were not parents, Beers found that about half of the participants reported that they would like to become parents. Interestingly, those who expressed the desire to become parents were also assessed at higher levels of psychosocial development (assessed within an Eriksonian framework) and at higher levels of identity formation with regard to their gay identities, but there were no differences in retrospective reports of experiences with their own parents. Sbordone studied gay men who had become parents through adoption or surrogacy arrangements after coming out and compared them with gay men who were not fathers. There were no differences between fathers and nonfathers on reports about relationships with the men's own parents. Gay fathers did, however, report higher self-esteem and fewer negative attitudes about homosexuality than did gay men who were not fathers.

An interesting result of the Sbordone (1993) study was that more than half of the gay men who were not fathers indicated that they would like to rear a child. Those who said that they wanted children were younger than those who said they did not, but the two groups did not differ otherwise (e.g., on income, race, education, or attitudes about homosexuality). Given that fathers had higher self-esteem and fewer negative attitudes about homosexuality than either group of nonfathers, Sbordone suggested that gay fathers' higher self-esteem might be a result rather than a cause of parenthood. No comparable results have been reported as yet in the literature on transition to parenthood among lesbian women.

Having made the decision to pursue parenthood, a number of interrelated issues are often faced by lesbians and gay men (Crawford, 1987; Patterson, 1994b; Pies, 1985). One of the first needs is for accurate, up-to-date information on how lesbians and gay men can become parents, how their children are likely to develop, and what supports are available. Lesbians and gay men who are seeking biological parenthood are also likely to encounter various health concerns, ranging from medical screening of prospective birthparents to assistance with donor insemination techniques, prenatal care, and preparation for birth. As matters progress, legal concerns about the rights and responsibilities of all parties may also emerge. Associated with all of these will generally be financial issues; in addition to the support of a child, auxiliary costs of medical and legal assistance may be considerable. Finally, social and emotional concerns of many different kinds are also likely to surface (Martin, 1998; Pies, 1985, 1990; Patterson; Rohrbough, 1988).

As this brief overview of issues suggests, numerous questions are posed by the emergence of prospective lesbian and gay parents. What are the factors that influence lesbians' and gay men's inclinations to make parenthood a part of their lives, and through what processes do they exert an influence? What effects does parenting have on lesbians or gay men who undertake it, and how do these effects compare with those experienced by heterosexuals? How effectively do special services such as support groups serve the needs of lesbian and gay parents and prospective parents for whom they were designed? What are the elements of a social climate that is supportive for gay and lesbian parents and their children? As yet, little research has addressed such questions.

Research on Children of Lesbian and Gay Parents

In this section, research on children born in the context of heterosexual relationships is presented first, followed by a description of work with children born to or adopted by lesbian and gay parents. Most samples studied to date have been composed mainly of White, middle-class, largely professional families. Whenever samples differ
from this description, that fact is specifically noted in the discussion.

Research on Children Born in the Context of Heterosexual Relationships

As with research on lesbian mothers, much of the impetus for research in this area has come from judicial concerns about the welfare of children residing with gay or lesbian parents (Patterson & Redding, 1996). Research in each of three main areas of judicial concern—namely, children’s sexual identity, other aspects of children’s personal development, and children’s social relationships—is summarized here. For other recent reviews of this material, see Gibbs (1988), Green and Bozett (1991), Patterson (1992, 1995c, 1997, 1998), Perrin (1998), and Tasker and Golombok (1991, 1997).

Reflecting issues relevant in the largest number of custody disputes, most of the research compares development of children with custodial lesbian mothers to that of children with custodial heterosexual mothers. Because many children living in lesbian mother-headed households have undergone parental divorce and separation, it has been widely believed that children living in families headed by divorced but heterosexual mothers provide the best comparison group.

Sexual identity. Research on the development of sexual identity has explored the development of gender identity, gender-role behavior, and sexual orientation. Gender identity concerns a person’s self-identification as male or female. Gender-role behavior involves the extent to which a person’s activities and occupations are regarded by the culture as masculine, feminine, or both. Sexual orientation refers to a person’s choice of sexual partners (e.g., heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual).

To examine the possibility that children in the custody of lesbian mothers experience disruptions of sexual identity, research has addressed each of these three major facets of sexual identity.

Research on gender identity has failed to reveal any differences in the development of children as a function of their parents’ sexual orientation. In an early study, Kirkpatrick et al. (1981) compared development among children of lesbian mothers with that among same-aged children of heterosexual mothers. In projective testing, most children in both groups drew a same-gender figure first, a finding that fell within expected norms. Of those who drew an opposite-gender figure first, only three (one with a lesbian mother, and two with heterosexual mothers) showed concern about gender issues in clinical interviews. Similar findings have been reported in projective testing by other investigators (e.g., Green et al., 1986), and studies using more direct methods of assessment (e.g., Golombok et al., 1983) have yielded similar results.

Research on gender-role behavior has also failed to reveal difficulties in the development of children with lesbian mothers. For instance, Green (1978) reported that a large majority of children of lesbian mothers in his sample named a favorite toy consistent with conventional gender-typed toy preferences and that all reported vocational choices fell within typical limits for conventional gender roles. In interviews with 56 children of lesbians and 48 children of heterosexual mothers, Green and his colleagues (1986) found no differences with respect to favorite television programs, television characters, games, or toys. These investigators reported that daughters of lesbian mothers were more likely to be described as taking part in rough and tumble play or as playing with “masculine” toys such as trucks or guns, but found no comparable differences for sons.

A number of investigators have also studied sexual orientation, the third component of sexual identity. For instance, Huggins (1989) interviewed a group of teenagers, half of whom were the offspring of lesbian mothers and half of heterosexual mothers. No child of a lesbian mother identified as lesbian or gay, but one child of a heterosexual mother did. Similar results have been reported by other investigators (e.g., Golombok & Tasker, 1996; Gottman, 1990). Studies of the offspring of gay fathers have yielded similar results (Bozett, 1987).

Two studies conducted from a behavior genetic perspective have recently added to this literature. Pattutucci and Hamer (1995) studied a large sample of women, some of whom identified as lesbian or bisexual. Of the 19 such women in their sample with daughters old enough to report sexual orientation, six daughters were identified as lesbian or bisexual using relatively loose criteria for this assessment. When more restrictive criteria were used, however, only one of seven adult daughters were identified as lesbian or bisexual. No significant results emerged for sons of nonheterosexual mothers in this sample. Bailey, Bobrow, Wolfe, and Mikach (1995) interviewed gay fathers and inquired as to the sexual orientation of their adult sons. They reported that 7 of 75 (9%) of the sons
in their sample were identified as gay or bisexual. No information about the daughters of gay fathers was collected in this study. Definitive interpretation of these numbers depends on the population base rates for nonheterosexual identities, and as noted earlier, these are not known. Thus, the clearest conclusion from these and the earlier studies is that the great majority of children with lesbian or gay parents grow up to identify themselves as heterosexual (Bailey & Dawood, 1998).

As clear as these results are, it should be recognized that research on the development of sexual identity among the offspring of lesbian and gay parents has been criticized from a number of perspectives. For instance, many lesbian women do not self-identify as lesbians until adulthood (see Brown, 1995); for this reason, studies of sexual orientation among adolescents may count as heterosexual some individuals who will identify as lesbian later in life. Concern has also been voiced that in many studies that compare children of divorced heterosexual mothers with children of divorced lesbian mothers, the lesbian mothers were more likely to be living with a romantic partner; in these cases, maternal sexual orientation and relationship status have been conflated. Although these and other methodological issues await resolution, it remains true that no significant problems in the development of sexual identity among children of lesbian mothers have yet been identified.

Other aspects of personal development. Studies of other aspects of personal development among children of gay and lesbian parents have assessed a broad array of characteristics (Patterson, 1995a; Tasker & Golombok, 1995). Among these have been psychiatric evaluations and assessments of behavior problems, personality, self-concept, locus of control, moral judgment, and intelligence. 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, 1995a, 1997). As was true for sexual identity, studies of other aspects of personal development have revealed no significant differences between children of lesbian or gay parents and children of heterosexual parents. Thus, fears that children of gay and lesbian parents suffer deficits in personal development are without empirical foundation.

Social relationships. Studies assessing potential differences between children of gay and lesbian versus heterosexual parents have sometimes included assessments of children's social relationships. Because of concerns voiced in legal settings that children of lesbian and gay parents might encounter difficulties among their peers, the most common focus of attention has been on peer relations. Research has consistently found that children of lesbian mothers report normal peer relations and that adults observers agree with this judgment (Patterson, 1992). Anecdotal accounts sometimes describe children's worries about being stigmatized as a result of their parents' sexual orientation (e.g., Pollack & Vaughn, 1987), but research findings to date provide no evidence to suggest that children of lesbian mothers have difficulties in peer relations (Tasker & Golombok, 1995).

Research has also been directed toward description of children's relationships with adults, especially fathers. For instance, Golombok and her colleagues in the United Kingdom (1983) found that children of lesbian mothers were more likely than children of heterosexual mothers to have contact with their fathers. Most children of lesbian mothers had some contact with their fathers during the year preceding the study, but most children of heterosexual mothers had not; indeed, almost one third of the children of lesbian mothers reported at least weekly contact with their fathers, whereas only 1 in 20 of the children of heterosexual mothers reported this. Kirkpatrick and her colleagues (1981) also reported that lesbian mothers in their sample were more concerned than heterosexual mothers that their children have opportunities for good relationships with adult men, including fathers. Lesbian mothers' social networks have been found to include both men and women, and their offspring as a result have contact with adults of both genders. Overall, results of research to date suggest that children of lesbian parents have satisfactory relationships with adults of both genders.

Concerns that children of lesbian or gay parents are more likely than children of heterosexual parents to be sexually abused have also been voiced by judges in the context of child custody disputes (Patterson, 1992). Results of research in this area show that the great majority of adults who perpetrate sexual abuse are men; sexual abuse of children by adult women is extremely rare. Lesbian mothers are thus extremely unlikely to abuse their children. Existing research findings suggest that gay men are no more likely than heterosexual men to perpetrate child sexual abuse.
Diversity Among Children With Divorced Lesbian or Gay Parents

Despite the great diversity evident within gay and lesbian communities, research on differences among children of lesbian and gay parents is as yet relatively sparse.

One important dimension of difference among gay and lesbian families concerns whether the custodial parent is involved in a romantic relationship, and if so what implications this may have for children. Pagelow (1980), Kirkpatrick et al. (1981), and Golombok et al. (1983) reported that in their samples, divorced lesbian mothers were more likely than divorced heterosexual mothers to be living with a romantic partner. Huggins (1989) reported that self-esteem among daughters of lesbian mothers whose lesbian partners lived with them was higher than that among daughters of lesbian mothers who did not live with a partner. This finding might be interpreted to mean that mothers who are high in self-esteem are more likely to be involved in romantic relationships and to have daughters who are also high in self-esteem, but many other interpretations are also possible. In view of the small sample size and absence of conventional statistical tests, Huggins' finding should be interpreted with great caution. Particularly in view of the judicial attention that lesbian mothers' romantic relationships have received during custody proceedings (Falk, 1989), it is surprising that more research has not examined the impact of this variable on children.

Rand et al. (1982) found that lesbian mothers' sense of psychological well-being was related to the extent to which they were open about their lesbian identity with employers, ex-husbands, and children. In their sample, a mother who felt more able to disclose her lesbian identity was also more likely to express a positive sense of well-being. In light of the consistent finding that in heterosexual families, children's adjustment is often related to indexes of maternal mental health (Sameroff & Chandler, 1975), one might expect factors that enhance mental health among lesbian mothers also to benefit the children of these women, but this possibility has not yet been studied.

Another area of great diversity among families with a gay or lesbian parent concerns the degree to which a parent's sexual identity is accepted by other significant people in children's lives. Huggins (1989) found a tendency for children whose fathers were rejecting of maternal lesbianism to report lower self-esteem than those whose fathers were neutral or positive. Because of small sample size and absence of conventional statistical tests, this finding should be seen as suggestive rather than definitive.

Effects of the age at which children learn of parents' gay or lesbian identities have also been a topic of study. Paul (1986) reported that those who were told either in childhood or in late adolescence found it easier to cope with the news than did those who first learned of it during adolescence. Huggins (1989) reported that those who learned of maternal lesbianism in childhood had higher self-esteem than did those who were not informed of it until they were adolescents. Early adolescence may be a particularly difficult time for children to learn of their parents' lesbian or gay identities (Patterson, 1992).

As this discussion reveals, research on diversity among families with gay and lesbian parents is only beginning. Existing data favor early disclosure of identity to children, good maternal mental health, and a supportive milieu, but the available data are still limited. Little information is yet available on differences attributable to race or ethnicity, family economic circumstances, cultural environments, or related variables. Because none of the published work has employed observational measures or longitudinal designs, little is known about the details of actual behavior in these families or about any changes over time.

Research on Children Born to or Adopted by Lesbian Mothers

Many writers have noted recent increases in childbearing among lesbians, but research with these families is as yet relatively new (Kirkpatrick, 1996; Martin, 1993; Patterson, 1992, 1994b). Here, I summarize the research to date on children born to or adopted by lesbian mothers. Although some gay men are also becoming parents after coming out, no research has yet been reported on their children.

In one of the first systematic studies of children born to lesbians, Steckel (1987) compared the progress of separation-individuation among preschool children born via donor insemination to lesbian couples with that among same-aged chil-
children of heterosexual couples. She compared independence, ego functions, and object relations among children in the two types of families and reported impressive similarity in development among children in the two groups. Similar findings, based on extensive interviews with a smaller group of lesbian mother families were also reported by McCandlish (1987).

Another early study examining psychosocial development among preschool and school-aged children born to or adopted by lesbian mothers was conducted by Patterson (1994a), who studied 37 four- to nine-year-old children. Using a variety of standardized measures, the study sought to provide an overview of the children's development. Results showed that children scored in the normal range for all measures. For instance, children of lesbian mothers' scores for social competence, internalizing behavior problems, and externalizing behavior problems differed significantly from the scores for a clinical sample but did not differ from the scores for a large normative sample of American children. Likewise, children of lesbian mothers reported gender-role preferences within the expected normal range for children of this age. On most subscales of the self-concept measure, answers given by children of lesbian mothers did not differ from those given by same-aged children of heterosexual mothers studied in a standardization sample.

On two subscales of the self-concept measure, however, Patterson (1994a) found that children of lesbian mothers reported feeling more reactions to stress (e.g., feeling angry, scared, or upset), but a greater sense of well-being (e.g., feeling joyful, content, and comfortable with themselves) than did the same-aged children of heterosexual mothers in the standardization sample. One possible interpretation of this result is that children of lesbian mothers reported greater reactivity to stress because, in fact, they experienced greater stress in their daily lives than did other children. Another possibility is that, regardless of actual stress levels, children of lesbian mothers were better able to acknowledge both positive and negative aspects of their emotional experience.

Contrary to stereotypes of these families as isolated from families of origin, most reported that children had regular (i.e., at least monthly) contact with one or more grandparents, as well as with other adult friends and relatives of both genders (Patterson, Hunt, & Mason, 1998). In families headed by lesbian couples, the parents were likely to maintain egalitarian divisions of labor, but when differences occurred, biological lesbian mothers were likely to do somewhat more child care and nonbiological lesbian mothers were likely to spend somewhat more time engaged in paid employment (Patterson, 1995c). Even within the relatively small range represented in this sample, families in which child care was divided more evenly were also those in which children exhibited the most favorable adjustment (Patterson, 1995c). These results suggest the importance of family process variables as predictors of child adjustment in lesbian as well as in heterosexual families.

Chan and his colleagues (Chan, Brooks, et al., 1998; Chan, Raboy, & Patterson, 1998) studied a group of 80 families formed by lesbian and heterosexual parents via donor insemination (DI) and reported similar findings. Children's overall adjustment was unrelated to parents' sexual orientation. Regardless of parents' sexual orientation or relationship status, parents who were experiencing higher levels of parenting stress, higher levels of interparental conflict, and lower levels of love for each other had children who exhibited more behavior problems. Among lesbian couples, nonbiological mothers' satisfaction with the division of labor, especially in family decision making, was related to better couple adjustment, which was in turn related to children's positive psychological adjustment (Chan, Raboy, et al., 1998), a result that is consistent with research on heterosexual families (Cowan, Cowan, & Kerig, 1993). Flaks, Fischer, Masterpasqua, & Joseph (1995) also compared children from lesbian mother families with those from heterosexual families and found no differences in the children's level of psychological adjustment as a function of mother's sexual orientation.

In Europe, Brewaeys, Ponjaert, Van Hall, & Golombek (1997) studied adjustment among a group of 4- to 8-year-old children who were conceived via DI by lesbian and heterosexual parents and compared them to a group of children who were conceived by heterosexual parents in the conventional way. When children were asked about their perceptions of parent-child relationships, all children reported positive feelings about their parents, and there were no differences in children's reports as a function family type. Children's behavior and emotional adjustment were also assessed, and results indicated that overall, children who were conceived via DI in heterosexual families exhibited more behavior problems than children who were conceived in the conventional way. Furthermore, girls who were con-
ceived via DI in heterosexual families exhibited more behavioral problems than girls from other family types. Brevaeys concluded that the differences observed in the heterosexual DI families may have been attributable to issues related to secrecy regarding DI; in particular, some fathers wished to conceal information about their own infertility, and this contributed to their wish to maintain secrecy about the use of DI. Such concerns were not relevant to lesbian mother families, whose use of DI did not reflect on their own fertility and who generally disclosed information about their use of DI.

In another European study, Golombok, Tasker, and Murray (1997) reported on the psychological well-being of children raised since birth by lesbian mothers and by heterosexual single mothers. These children were compared with children raised in two-parent heterosexual families. Results indicated that these children did not show unusual emotional or behavior problems (as reported by parents or by teachers), and there were no differences as a function of family type. In terms of children’s attachment relationships to their parents, children from mother-only families (lesbian mothers and heterosexual single mothers) scored higher on an attachment-related assessment than did children reared by heterosexual couples, suggesting the possibility that children from mother-only families had more secure attachment relationships with their mothers. With respect to children’s perceived competence, children from mother-only families reported lower perceived cognitive and physical competence than those children from father-present families. Thus, key findings in this study seemed to depend on parents’ gender rather than parental sexual orientation.

**Research on Other Family Relationships**

In addition to parent-child and couple relationships in which they may participate, lesbians and gay men are likely also to maintain contacts with parents, siblings, and other members of their families of origin (Cohen & Savin-Williams, 1996; D’Augelli, Hershberger, & Pilkington, 1998; Herdt & Beeler, 1998; Laird, 1998; Patterson & D’Augelli, 1998; Patterson et al., 1998; Savin-Williams, 1998a). Although, as Herdt and Beeler, Laird, and others have emphasized, many other issues are undoubtedly significant, the largest amount of research to date has focused on the concerns of young lesbians and gay men about disclosing their sexual identities to members of their families of origin, especially to parents.

Most lesbians and gay men apparently come out first to close friends and only later—if at all—to family members (Herdt & Boxer, 1993; Savin-Williams, 1990). Young people are more likely to come out first to mothers rather than to fathers, perhaps because they expect more positive responses from mothers (Bryant & Demian, 1994; Cohen & Savin-Williams, 1996).

Although it is difficult to predict parental reactions to disclosure of a nonheterosexual orientation by their offspring, the most common initial reactions are negative (Cohen & Savin-Williams, 1996; D’Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; D’Augelli et al., 1998; Strommen, 1989a, 1989b). Negative reactions are likely to be more pronounced among older parents, those with less education, and those whose parent-child relationships were troubled before the disclosure. Although interactions between lesbian and gay young people and their parents often suffer difficulties immediately after disclosure, they most often improve again over time as families assimilate this new information into existing images of the lesbian or gay child. The best predictor of postdisclosure relationships between lesbian and gay young adults and their parents is the quality of their relationships before the disclosure (Cohen & Savin-Williams; Savin-Williams, 1990).

What are the associations between disclosure of lesbian or gay identity to parents and young adults’ self-esteem? Because of the significance of parent-adolescent relationships, one might expect parental acceptance to be associated with favorable self-images among lesbian and gay youth. Consistent with this view, Savin-Williams (1990) found that teenaged and young-adult lesbians who reported that their parents were accepting of their sexual identities (or would be accepting if they knew) also reported feeling more comfortable with their sexual orientation. This was true for young men only if they also described their parents as important to their self-image, however (Savin-Williams, 1990). Because the research to date has been correlational in nature, it cannot be determined whether parental acceptance makes lesbian and gay children feel better about themselves, whether youth who already have high self-esteem are more likely to disclose to parents, or whether a cyclical process may be involved.

While some research has focused on young adults’ disclosure of lesbian and gay identities to parents, other studies have shown that among
samples of older lesbian and gay adults, sizable proportions have not come out to parents or other family members. When a lesbian or gay identity has not been disclosed, any one of several coping strategies may be employed by the individual and the family (Brown, 1989).

When a family member's nonheterosexual orientation becomes known, Strommen (1989a, 1989b) has described the family's reaction as involving a two-stage process. First, the family members struggle to understand and assimilate this new information about one of its members. The family may then simply reject the lesbian or gay person, or it may reorganize itself over time to accommodate this shift in identity while still including the lesbian or gay person in family activities. Parents in particular often find that the process of reorganization can be difficult, often extending over substantial periods of time. In the end, many discover that the process has brought them unexpected gifts (Bernstein, 1995).

Disclosure of nonheterosexual identity is only one issue of many that are relevant to lesbian and gay family lives. Research has not yet explored at any length the ways in which sexual identities affect other aspects of parent-child or sibling relationships in adulthood (Allen & Demo, 1995). How are experiences of change in romantic relationships, parenting, and occupational lives affected by an individual's assuming either a lesbian or gay identity? How do the sexual identities of family members affect responses to illness, death, and bereavement? How indeed does sexual orientation affect understandings of family membership itself? There is much territory here for research to explore, and there have been some intriguing recent efforts (Badgett, 1998; Herdt & Beeler, 1998; Laird, 1998; Weinstock, 1998); such explorations should lead to a more inclusive understanding of family lives.

**DISCUSSION AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

Research on lesbian and gay couples and on families with children, although relatively new, has nevertheless yielded some important results.

Without denying the consistency of major research findings to date, it is important first to acknowledge that much of the research is subject to various criticisms. For instance, much of the research has involved small samples that are predominantly White, well-educated, middle class, and American; the degree to which results would hold with other populations is thus difficult to evaluate. It would also be desirable to have data based on observational methods, collected within longitudinal designs. Longitudinal studies are beginning to appear (e.g., Garrell et al., 1999; Tasker & Golembek, 1997), but observational work is still lacking. Other issues could also be raised (see Patterson, 1995a).

Despite limitations, however, central results of existing research on lesbian and gay couples and families with children are exceptionally clear. Beyond their witness to the sheer existence of lesbian and gay family lives, the results of existing studies, taken together, also yield a picture of families thriving, even in the midst of discrimination and oppression. Certainly, they provide no evidence that psychological adjustment among lesbians, gay men, their children, or other family members is impaired in any significant way. Indeed, the evidence suggests that relationships of lesbian and gay couples are just as supportive and that home environments provided by lesbian and gay parents are just as likely as those provided by heterosexual parents to enable psychosocial growth among family members.

As discussed above, much research on lesbian and gay parenting has focused primarily on comparisons between lesbian and gay families and heterosexual families. This approach presumably reflects the concern of researchers to address prejudices and negative stereotypes that have been influential in judicial decision making and in public policies relevant to lesbian and gay couples, parents, and their children in the United States. Now that results of research have begun to converge so clearly on answers to questions posed in this way, the time has come also to address a broader range of issues in this area.

Many important research questions arise from a focus on the interests of lesbian- and gay-parented families themselves. For instance, many lesbian and gay couples with children are interested in distinctions between the experiences of biological and nonbiological parents (Patterson, 1998). How important, they ask, are the biological linkages in influencing experiences of parenthood? Similarly, both lesbian and gay parented families are concerned about the qualities of children's experiences at school, and some groundbreaking work in this area has been reported by Casper and her colleagues (Casper & Schultz, 1999; Casper, Schultz, & Wickens, 1992). In the future, scholarship likely will increasingly concern itself with the study of sources of strength and resilience in
Lesbian and gay couples, as well as among lesbian and gay parents and their children.

In the meantime, however, the central results of research to date have important implications. If psychosocial development among children born to lesbian mothers and gay fathers is, as research suggests (Patterson, 1994a), essentially normal, then traditional theoretical emphases on the importance of parental heterosexuality need to be reconsidered. Although many possible approaches to such a task are possible (Patterson, 1992), one promising approach is to focus on the significance of family process rather than structure. Thus, structural variables such as parental sexual orientation may ultimately be seen as less important in mediating children’s developmental outcomes than qualities of family interactions, relationships, and processes. By including variables of both types, future research will facilitate comparisons between them.

Results of research with lesbian and gay parents and their children also have implications for what might be termed the “politics of family life.” If, as appears to be the case, neither parents nor children in lesbian and gay families run any special risk of maladjustment or other psychosocial problems, then a good rationale for prejudice and discrimination becomes more and more difficult to provide. Without such a rationale, many legal precedents and public policies relevant to lesbian and gay families would require reconsideration. Ultimately, lesbian and gay couples and parents might come to be viewed as couples and parents like others, and policies might be designed to protect their legitimate interests, as well as those of their family members. Although some recent steps in this direction have been taken, much remains to be done.

Considering substantive directions of future research, it is important to note that a number of issues have gone all but unexplored to date in the research literature on lesbian and gay family lives. For instance, little attention has been devoted to assessment of sexual orientation over time (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995). Similarly, the phenomena associated with bisexuality (Paul, 1996) have received relatively little study. Ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic diversity of lesbian and gay family lives have yet to be systematically explored. Little research has been conducted outside the United States. These gaps all provide important opportunities for future research.

From a methodological perspective, it would be valuable to have more studies that follow couples or parents and their children over time. Longitudinal studies of the relationships between lesbians, gay men, and members of their families of origin over relatively long periods of time could also be helpful in describing predictable sequences of reactions to significant life events (e.g., coming out, having a child) among family members. To avoid the pitfalls associated with retrospective reporting, these studies should utilize prospective designs that follow participants over time.

Another methodological issue in the literature to date is the dearth of observational data. Observational studies of couples, parents, and children, as well as of lesbian and gay adults with members of their families of origin, could provide valuable evidence about similarities and differences between family processes in the family lives of lesbian, gay, and heterosexual adults. Such observational data could be collected from dyads or triads or larger family groups, at home or in the laboratory, in a single visit or in repeated sessions over time; these kinds of data could add tremendously to knowledge about the families of lesbians and gay men.

Overall, the study of lesbian and gay family lives provides a context in which to explore the limits of existing theoretical perspectives and an opportunity to develop new ones. Future research that addresses these challenges has the potential to improve understanding of lesbian and gay family life, increase inclusiveness of theoretical notions about family structure and process, and inform public policies and judicial rulings relevant to lesbian and gay family lives. Rapid change in attitudes, social climates, and even legal rulings relevant to lesbian and gay family lives during the last 25 years in the United States has, in many ways, transformed the daily lives of lesbians and gay men and those of their family members as well. The experiences associated with lesbian and gay family lives will no doubt also be transformed by future events. Another role for research in the years ahead, then, is to document the ways in which secular changes in attitudes, behaviors, and public policies both influence and are influenced by lesbians, by gay men, and by their families.

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Family Relationships of Lesbians and Gay Men


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