

9.16

Family Lives of Lesbians and Gay Men

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9.16.1 INTRODUCTION	253
9.16.2 FAMILIES OF LESBIANS AND GAY MEN TODAY	254
9.16.2.1 <i>Estimates of the Lesbian and Gay Population</i>	254
9.16.2.2 <i>Diversity Among Lesbians, Gay Men, and Their Families</i>	255
9.16.2.3 <i>Legal and Public Policy Issues</i>	256
9.16.3 RESEARCH ON LESBIAN AND GAY COUPLE RELATIONSHIPS	256
9.16.3.1 <i>Descriptions of Lesbian and Gay Couples</i>	257
9.16.3.2 <i>Love and Commitment</i>	257
9.16.3.3 <i>Power and Division of Labor</i>	258
9.16.3.4 <i>Sexual Behavior</i>	258
9.16.3.5 <i>Problems and Conflict in Couples</i>	259
9.16.4 RESEARCH ON LESBIAN MOTHERS AND GAY FATHERS	260
9.16.4.1 <i>Lesbians and Gay Men Who Became Parents in the Context of Heterosexual Relationships</i>	260
9.16.4.1.1 <i>Divorced lesbian mothers</i>	260
9.16.4.1.2 <i>Divorced gay fathers</i>	261
9.16.4.2 <i>Lesbians and Gay Men Choosing to Become Parents</i>	262
9.16.5 RESEARCH ON CHILDREN OF LESBIAN AND GAY PARENTS	264
9.16.5.1 <i>Research on Children Born in the Context of Heterosexual Relationships</i>	264
9.16.5.1.1 <i>Sexual identity</i>	264
9.16.5.1.2 <i>Other aspects of personal development</i>	265
9.16.5.1.3 <i>Social relationships</i>	265
9.16.5.2 <i>Diversity Among Children With Divorced Lesbian or Gay Parents</i>	266
9.16.5.3 <i>Research on Children Born to or Adopted by Lesbian Mothers</i>	267
9.16.6 RESEARCH ON OTHER FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS	267
9.16.7 IMPLICATIONS OF RESEARCH FINDINGS	268
9.16.8 DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH	269
9.16.9 REFERENCES	270

9.16.1 INTRODUCTION

In 1990, Ninia Baehr went on a blind date with another young woman, Genora Dancel. It was love at first sight. Later that year, they applied for a marriage license in Honolulu, where they were living. They were denied. Joining with a gay couple and another lesbian couple who had been similarly

denied, they filed a lawsuit asking the State of Hawaii to grant them a marriage license. (Adapted from Bull & Gallagher, 1996, pp. 197–200)

Thus began the case that has become known as *Baehr v. Miike*, which is often called the Hawaii same-sex marriage case. In 1993, the Hawaii Supreme Court declared that the denial

of marriage licenses to the three couples appeared to violate the state's prohibition on gender-based discrimination, and remanded the case to a lower court. In order to maintain the ban, the state would be required to prove that it served a compelling state interest. When the case was heard in 1996, the state's attorney argued that if same-sex couples could form legal marriages, then they would be likely to have more children, and this would harm children. Same-sex marriages would thus have an adverse impact on the welfare of children, the state's attorney argued, and this justified the ban. The trial judge's decision rejected the state's argument, holding that sexual orientation and parental fitness are not related, and struck down the prohibition on same-sex marriage. At the time of this writing, in 1997, the case is on appeal to the Hawaii Supreme Court.

The Baehr case has generated enormous controversy, not only in Hawaii, but also across the USA and around the world. Conservatives argued that legal marriages between same-sex couples would undermine the institution of marriage, and introduced into the US Congress a "Defense of Marriage Act" (DOMA) which said that states were not required to recognize as legal same-sex marriages contracted in another state. The bill passed, and was quickly signed into law. Meanwhile, a 1994 survey of a large group of gay men found that 85% said they would marry a same-sex partner if they were legally able to do so (Bull & Gallagher, 1996, p. 214). Religious groups also entered the debate. On one side, the Vatican declared that same-sex marriages would "undermine the foundation of the family model upon which human civilization was built" and would legitimize "moral disorder." At the same time, other religious groups, such as the Central Conference of American Rabbis, voted to support legalization of same-sex marriages (Dunlap, 1996).

What is it that makes a lawsuit like *Baehr v. Miike* so controversial? This chapter addresses three inter-related reasons. First, the Baehr case involves controversies about the legitimacy of families formed by lesbians and gay men. Second, although widespread prejudices suggest that lesbians and gay men live outside the reach of family pleasures and responsibilities, the actual reality as illuminated by research is quite different. Third, if the family lives of lesbians and gay men are deemed acceptable under the law, the challenge to deeply held ideas about families and about child development is undoubtedly significant. Thus, when considering whether marriages like the one sought by Ninia Baehr and Genora Dancel are legitimate, much is at stake.

What are the findings of social science research about lesbian and gay family life? In this chapter, information about the prevalence and diversity of lesbian and gay family life, as well as about the legal context in which lesbian and gay families currently live, are first reviewed. The results of research on lesbian and gay couples, parents and their children, and other family members are then described and the implications of research findings for psychological theory as well as public policy are discussed. A discussion of directions for further research concludes the chapter.

9.16.2 FAMILIES OF LESBIANS AND GAY MEN TODAY

How many lesbian and gay people are there in the USA, and how many people are included in their families? What are important sources of diversity among these families? What is the nature of the legal context in which lesbians, gay men, and their families are living today?

9.16.2.1 Estimates of the Lesbian and Gay Population

For many reasons, no accurate count of lesbian and gay adults, much less of their families, is available. The numbers of lesbian and gay adults in the USA cannot be estimated with confidence. Because of fear of discrimination, many take pains to conceal their sexual orientation (Blumenfeld & Raymond, 1988). It is especially difficult to locate gay and lesbian parents. Fearing that they would lose child custody and/or visitation rights if their sexual orientation were to be known, many lesbian and gay parents attempt to conceal their gay or lesbian identities (Pagelow, 1980). It can also be difficult to locate other relatives of lesbians and gay men (e.g., siblings), because some may not be aware of having a lesbian or gay relative, and because others may not wish to acknowledge this aspect of their family life.

One approach to making estimates of this kind is to extrapolate from what is known or believed about base rates in the population. For example, there are approximately 260 million people in the USA (US Bureau of the Census, 1995). Based on data collected by the National Health and Social Life Survey (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994), 1.4% of women and 2.8% of men identified themselves to an interviewer as lesbian or gay. Using these numbers, one can estimate that there are approximately 5.5 million people who identify as lesbian or gay in the USA. If, on average, each one has five relatives (e.g., two parents, one

sibling, and two grandparents), then there are at least 27 million heterosexual people with a lesbian or gay relative. That would mean that more than 32 million Americans either identify as lesbian or gay, or have a close relative who identifies in this way.

The accuracy of such estimates is, of course, no better than the accuracy of the numbers on which they are based. Laumann et al. (1994) also reported that 4.1% of women and 4.9% of men reported at least one same-sex sexual partner since 18 years of age. If estimates are based not on self-identification as lesbian or gay, but on numbers of adults who reported at least one same-sex sexual partner, then population estimates for lesbians, gay men, and their families will of course become larger. Whatever the precise numbers, it is clear that, when one considers the families of lesbians and gay men, very substantial numbers of people are under discussion.

9.16.2.2 Diversity Among Lesbians, Gay Men, and Their Families

Although lesbians, gay men, and their family members are often stereotyped in very specific ways, there is tremendous diversity among individuals and families. Just as other families embrace many variations, so the families of lesbians and gay men vary in many different ways from one another. Some of the variation is similar to that among heterosexual families, and some is more specific to the families of lesbians and gay men.

As is true for heterosexual families, the families of lesbians and gay men vary considerably on demographic characteristics. Lesbians, gay men, and their families may be of any racial or ethnic group, any cultural background, and they may or may not have had the benefit of extensive educational opportunities. Lesbians and gay men can be found in all economic strata (Badgett, in press), and in many different occupations. Although evidence suggests that men who identify as gay are more likely to live in urban than in suburban or rural environments, the geographic dispersal of lesbian women seems to be less pronounced (Laumann et al., 1994). Family members may live near their lesbian or gay relatives, or may live at some distance. Much of this type of variation is held in common with the families of heterosexual individuals.

Among lesbian and gay families with children, one important distinction concerns the sexual identity of parents at the time of a child's birth or adoption. Probably the largest group of children with lesbian and gay parents today are those who were born in the context of

heterosexual relationships between the biological parents, and whose parent or parents subsequently identified as gay or lesbian. These include families in which the parents divorce when the husband comes out as gay, the wife comes out as lesbian, both parents come out, and one or both of the parents comes out and the parents decide not to divorce. Gay or lesbian parents may be single, or they may have same-sex partners. A gay or lesbian parent's same-sex partner may or may not assume step-parenting relationships with the children. If the partner also has children, the youngsters may assume step-sibling relationships with one another. In short, gay and lesbian families with children born in the context of heterosexual relationships are themselves a relatively diverse group.

In addition to children born in the context of heterosexual relationships between parents, lesbians and gay men are believed increasingly to be choosing parenthood (Martin, 1993; Patterson, 1994a, 1994b; Pies, 1985, 1990). The majority of such children are conceived by means of donor insemination (DI). Lesbians who wish to bear children may choose a friend, relative, or acquaintance to be the sperm donor, or they may choose to use sperm from an unknown donor. When sperm donors are known, they may take parental or avuncular roles relative to children conceived via DI, or they may not (Martin, 1993; Patterson, 1994a, 1994b; Pies, 1985, 1990). Gay men may also become biological parents of children whom they intend to parent, whether with a single woman (who may be lesbian or heterosexual), with a lesbian couple, or with a gay male partner. Options pursued by gay men and lesbians also include both adoption and foster care (Ricketts, 1991). Thus, children are today being brought up in a diverse array of lesbian and gay families.

In addition to differences in parents' sexual identities at the time of a child's birth, another distinction among the families of lesbians and gay men is the extent to which family members are related biologically to one another (Pollack & Vaughn, 1987; Riley, 1988; Weston, 1991). Although biological relatedness of family members to one another in heterosexual families is probably less often taken for granted than it once was, it is often even more prominent as an issue in lesbian and gay families with children. When children are born via DI into lesbian families, they are generally related biologically only to the birthmother, not to her partner. Similarly, when children are born via surrogacy to a gay couple, only the father who served as a sperm donor is biologically related to the child. In adoption and foster care, of course, the child will probably have no

biological relation to any adoptive or foster parent.

Another distinction of particular importance for lesbian and gay families concerns custodial arrangements for minor children following the break-up of heterosexual marriages. As in heterosexual families, children generally live with one of their biological parents, or they spend part of their time in one biological parent's household, and part of their time in the other's home. Many lesbian mothers and gay fathers have, however, lost custody of their children to heterosexual spouses following divorce, and the threat of custody litigation almost certainly looms larger in the lives of most divorced lesbian mothers than it does in the lives of divorced heterosexual ones (Lyons, 1983; Pagelow, 1980). Although no authoritative figures are available, it seems likely that a greater proportion of gay and lesbian than heterosexual parents lost custody of children against their will. Probably for this reason, more lesbians and gay men are noncustodial parents (i.e., do not have legal custody of their children) and nonresidential parents (i.e., do not live in the same household with their children) than might otherwise be expected.

9.16.2.3 Legal and Public Policy Issues

The legal system in the USA has long been hostile to lesbians and gay men, and especially to those who are or who wish to become parents (Editors of the Harvard Law Review, 1990; Falk, 1989; Patterson & Redding, 1996; Polikoff, 1990; Rivera, 1991; Rubenstein, 1991, 1996). Same-sex marriages are currently not legal in any jurisdiction in the USA. Lesbian mothers and gay fathers have often been denied custody and/or visitation with their children following divorce from heterosexual marriages. Although some states now have laws stipulating that parental sexual orientation as such cannot be a factor in determining child custody following heterosexual divorce, in other states gay or lesbian parents may be regarded as unfit. Regulations governing foster care and adoption in many states have also made it difficult for lesbians or gay men to adopt or to serve as foster parents (Ricketts, 1991; Ricketts & Achtenberg, 1990).

One of the central issues underlying judicial decision-making in custody litigation and in public policies governing foster care and adoption has been questions about the fitness of lesbians and gay men to be parents (Patterson, 1995c; Patterson & Redding, 1996). Specifically, policies have sometimes been constructed and judicial decisions have

often been made on the assumptions that gay men and lesbians are mentally ill and hence not fit to be parents, that lesbians are less maternal than heterosexual women and hence do not make good mothers, and that lesbians' and gay men's relationships with sexual partners leave little time for ongoing parent-child interactions (Editors of the Harvard Law Review, 1990; Falk, 1989). Because these assumptions have been important ones in limiting gay and lesbian parental rights, and because they are open to empirical evaluation, they have guided much of the research on lesbian and gay parents that is discussed below.

In addition to judicial concerns about parents themselves, three principal kinds of fears regarding the effects of gay and lesbian parents on children have also been reflected in judicial decision-making about child custody and in public policies such as regulations governing foster care and adoption (Patterson, 1992, 1995c; Patterson & Redding, 1996). One of these concerns is that development of sexual identity among children of lesbian and gay parents will be impaired. For example, judges may fear that children will themselves grow up to be gay or lesbian, an outcome which they generally view as negative. Another is that gay and lesbian parents will have adverse effects on other aspects of their children's personal development. For example, judges may fear that children in the custody of gay or lesbian parents will be more vulnerable to behavior problems or to mental breakdown. A third concern is that these children will have difficulties in social relationships. One version of such concern is the fear that children will be teased or stigmatized by peers because of the sexual orientation of their parents. Because such concerns have often been explicit in judicial determinations when lesbian or gay parents' custody or visitation rights have been denied or curtailed, and because these assumptions are open to empirical test, they have provided an important impetus to research.

9.16.3 RESEARCH ON LESBIAN AND GAY COUPLE RELATIONSHIPS

Research on lesbian and gay couples is a phenomenon of the last 25 years, and has addressed a number of interrelated issues. In this section, descriptive information from a large-scale survey of lesbian and gay couples is first summarized, then research findings on love and commitment, power and the division of labor, sexual behavior, problems and conflict in relationships, and the ending of couple relationships are described.

9.16.3.1 Descriptions of Lesbian and Gay Couples

The earliest large-scale study of lesbian and gay couples was conducted by Blumstein and Schwartz (1983). In their study, 1576 lesbian, 1938 gay, 3656 heterosexual married, and 653 heterosexual cohabiting (but unmarried) couples completed extensive questionnaires about topics ranging from money and jobs to love and sexual behavior. Despite the large sample, carefully drawn from diverse geographic areas in the USA, the lesbian and gay respondents were almost all white, between 21 and 40 years of age, mostly well educated, and mostly employed in professional or managerial occupations. Similar demographics have characterized other large-scale studies of lesbian and gay couples as well (Bryant & Demian, 1994; McWhirter & Mattison, 1984).

Bryant and Demian's (1994) study of lesbian and gay couples involved questionnaires completed by 709 lesbian and 557 gay couples who were drawn from 48 of the 50 states, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia. This group of respondents averaged about 35 years of age, had on average more than 16 years of education, and was heavily Caucasian. The average couple had been together more than five years, and lived together full-time. Most respondents reported having had one or two major lesbian/gay relationships before the one in which they were currently involved.

Bryant and Demian (1994) reported a number of interesting differences between lesbian and gay couples. For example, lesbian couples were more likely than gay couples to have incorporated ritual and symbolism into their relationships by having a commitment ceremony or by wearing rings to symbolize their commitment to one another. Gay couples reported having sexual relations more frequently than did lesbian couples. Most couples of both genders reported that their relationships were sexually exclusive or monogamous, and very few couples reported sex with partners outside their primary relationships. However, men were over-represented among those who were not monogamous or who reported sex outside the relationship. Further, men were more likely than women to call the person with whom they were involved their "lover," and women were more likely than men to call this person their "partner"; not one person of either gender mentioned using the term "longtime companion" to describe their lover or partner.

When asked to whom they looked for support, couples reported that friends and co-workers were more supportive than relatives (Bryant & Demian, 1994; Kurdek & Schmidt,

1987). Among relatives, siblings were considered most supportive, followed by mothers, and other relatives. Fathers were considered the least supportive among the couples' relatives. Overall, relatives were rated as the third most important challenge to couple relationships, after "communication" and "career."

A minority of couples reported acting in parental or other caregiving roles for children. Altogether, 21% of lesbian and 9% of gay couples reported caring for children. Most (75% of lesbians and 79% of gay men) had children from a previous marriage, and only 13% of lesbian mothers had children who had been conceived via DI. Interestingly, however, children were planned or under consideration by fully a third of all respondents under 35 years of age.

In summary, couples who participated in large-scale surveys have been largely well educated, relatively young, mainly Caucasian, and usually living together full-time. They were likely to regard friends and co-workers (rather than relatives) as their principal sources of support, and unlikely to have children living with them in the home. In addition, some differences between lesbian and gay couples have been described, notably in the couples' use of ritual and symbolism, sexual behavior, and in their names for one another. The extent to which these findings would be true of a more general cross-section of the population of lesbian and gay couples is unknown.

9.16.3.2 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 40–60% of gay men and 45–80% of lesbians are currently involved in steady romantic relationships (see Peplau & Cochran, 1990; Peplau, Veniegas, & Campbell, 1996). Because most surveys involve many young adults, who may not have yet committed to stable romantic relationships, these numbers may underestimate the true figures.

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) surveyed 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).

Of course, not every lesbian or gay couple is happy together, and research has also focused on factors related to differences in relationship satisfaction. 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).

9.16.3.3 Power and Division of Labor

How should power be allocated in a couple? The great majority of lesbian and gay couples feel that an equal balance of power would be desirable (Peplau & Cochran, 1990), but not all report that they achieve this ideal state. 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 (1984) found that older, wealthier men tended to have more power in their intimate relationships, and Caldwell and Peplau (1984), in a study of young lesbians, reported that wealthier and better educated women tended to have more power than their partners. Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) found 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. Whether or not relative financial resources affect the balance of power in lesbian couples remains an open question (see Peplau et al., 1996).

Other predictions from exchange theory have also received support from empirical research (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). In other words, the person who is less interested in continuing the relationship has more power. Consistent with this view, Caldwell and Peplau (1984) found correlations between unequal involvement and unequal power among lesbian couples. Overall, as predicted by social exchange theory, the woman who was less involved in the relationship had more power.

Although many people who are unfamiliar with lesbian and gay couples assume that, in same-sex couples, one partner plays a male and one a female role, research has consistently found that this is only rarely the case (Kurdek, 1995; Peplau et al., 1996). For example, Bell and Weinberg (1978) reported that the majority of lesbians and gay men they studied reported that they shared domestic tasks equally. When they were asked whether one partner does the feminine tasks while the other does the masculine tasks, about 90% of lesbians and gay men said that this was not the case in their households. Kurdek (1993) reported egalitarian divisions of labor among lesbian and gay couples, and Patterson (1995d) reported that in a sample of lesbian couples with children, most family and household tasks were shared equally.

9.16.3.4 Sexual Behavior

Sexual behavior among lesbian and gay couples has been found to be strongly shaped by 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. Critics of these findings have suggested that lesbian couples may have different definitions of sexual behavior than do gay men or heterosexual couples. As Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) reported, lesbians may place greater value on non-genital expressions of love, such as hugging and other affectionate behaviors.

Another area in which strong gender differences emerge is in 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. For example, 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 attention. However, data collected during 1988–89, after HIV infection and AIDS had become widespread in the USA, revealed the same pattern of results (Bryant & Demian, 1994).

Despite differences in preferences and in actual behavior, however, lesbian, gay, heterosexual married, and unmarried (but cohabiting) heterosexual couples all reported similar satisfaction with their sexual relationships (see also Bryant & Demian, 1994). Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) reported that, in each of the four couple types they studied, satisfaction with sex was associated with a perception of equality in initiating and refusing sexual overtures. 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).

9.16.3.5 Problems and Conflict in Couples

When lesbian and gay couples experience problems in their relationships, some of these stem from the same roots as those from which difficulties in heterosexual relationships also arise. As in heterosexual relationships, problems can arise due to different religious, racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic backgrounds of partners, and due to 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 (1992) found 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 problems generated by negative social attitudes toward homosexuality. Because of prejudice and discrimination directed toward lesbians and gay men, many are unwilling to disclose their sexual identities to family members, neighbors, co-workers, and even to friends. When a couple disagrees about

the extent to which they should disclose the lesbian or gay nature of their relationship, real difficulties in the couple relationship can ensue. 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 already been together 10 years, break-up 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 couples, and only 4% of heterosexual married couples had separated. Thus, being married was associated with low break-up rates, but otherwise there were no significant differences. A later study (Kurdek, 1992, cited in Kurdek, 1995) also found no differences in break-up rates between lesbian and gay couples. In this study, break-up rates over a four-year period were 22% for lesbians and 12% for gay men, and this difference was not significant.

Kurdek and Schmidt (1986a) compared the attractions that a relationship held for the partners and also the barriers to exiting a relationship for lesbian, gay, unmarried (but cohabiting) heterosexual, and married heterosexual couples. They found no differences among these four types of couples in the strength of attractions toward their relationships, but did find significant differences in barriers to leaving the relationships. Specifically, married heterosexual spouses reported more obstacles to exiting the relationship than did members of the other three types of couples.

In addition to all the usual ways in which relationships can end, gay relationships in particular have, since the early 1980s, been subject to unusual stresses due to the HIV/AIDS epidemic (Mattison & McWhirter, 1994; Paul, Hays, & Coates, 1995). In particular, the severe illnesses and premature deaths suffered by many gay men have precipitated relationship losses for surviving partners, who may themselves be relatively young. A study of a large group of gay men in New York City found that nearly one-third had suffered the loss of a close friend or lover to AIDS (Martin & Dean, 1993). Such men may not only have cared for a dying partner through a long illness, but also suffer bereavement without the institutionalized supports that would be available to surviving members of heterosexual couples. Despite such stresses, gay communities have responded with tremendous energy by creating volunteer service

agencies and memorials such as the AIDS Quilt, which have supported those suffering with illness and helped survivors to keep memories of loved ones alive (D'Augelli & Garnets, 1995; Paul et al., 1995).

In summary, research has begun to describe various characteristics of lesbian and gay relationships. Most lesbians and gay men want to have intimate romantic relationships, and most do in fact create such relationships. The majority of couples surveyed have reported a desire for egalitarian relationships, although many acknowledge that their current relationship may not attain that ideal. What inequalities in power do exist in lesbian and gay couple relationships can often be traced to differences in the personal resources and/or commitment of each partner to maintaining the relationship. Rarely do lesbian or gay couples rely on gendered divisions of labor in their relationships; they are more likely to divide family and household labor in more flexible and egalitarian ways. Although sexual practices diverge to some degree as a function of gender, both lesbian and gay couples are likely to express satisfaction with their sexual relationships. Many lesbian and gay relationships endure for a period of years, and there are no significant differences in break-up rates between lesbian, gay, and unmarried (but cohabiting) heterosexual couples. When problems arise, these are likely to be in areas common to heterosexual couples as well, although a few areas of special concern to lesbian and gay couples also exist due to the effects of societal prejudice and discrimination. Many gay relationships have been terminated prematurely because of the illness and death of a partner from HIV/AIDS, but other gay and lesbian relationships endure. Despite notable advances, research on lesbian and gay couples is still quite new, and much remains to be learned.

9.16.4 RESEARCH ON LESBIAN MOTHERS AND GAY FATHERS

Systematic research on lesbian mothers, gay fathers, and their children is a phenomenon of the last 25 years. Despite the diversity of lesbian and gay parenting communities, however, research has with few exceptions been conducted with relatively homogeneous groups of participants. Like research on couples, research on parents has generally employed samples composed of white, middle or upper middle class, well-educated individuals, generally living in the USA. In this chapter, any studies that provide exceptions to this rule are specifically

noted. In this section, research on those who became parents in the context of heterosexual relationships, before coming out as lesbian or gay, is presented first, followed by a description of studies of lesbians who became parents after coming out.

9.16.4.1 Lesbians and Gay Men Who Became Parents in the Context of Heterosexual Relationships

One important impetus for research in this area has come from extrinsic sources, such as judicial concerns about the psychological health and well-being of lesbians compared with heterosexual mothers. Other work has arisen from concerns that are more intrinsic to the families themselves, such as what and when children should be told about their parents' sexual orientation.

9.16.4.1.1 Divorced lesbian mothers

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

Another area of judicial concern has focused on maternal sex-role behavior and its potential impact on children (Patterson, 1995a, 1995b). Stereotypes cited by the courts suggest that lesbians might be overly masculine and/or that they might interact inappropriately with their children. However, neither lesbian mothers' reports about their sex-role behavior nor their self-described interest in child-rearing 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 have also been reported. Among the most straightforward of these are the 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, Hotvedt, Gray, and Smith (1986) reported that lesbian mothers were more likely than

heterosexual mothers to be active in feminist organizations. Given the environments in which these lesbian mothers were living, findings like these are not surprising.

A few other scattered differences seem more difficult to interpret. For example, Miller, Jacobsen, and Bigner (1981) found lesbian mothers to be more child-centered than 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. Pending confirmation and replication with different samples, these findings are best viewed as suggestive.

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, 1985/86; Kirkpatrick, Smith, & Roy, 1981; Pagelow, 1980). Whether this represents a difference between lesbian and heterosexual mother-headed families, or reflects nothing more than sampling biases of the research, cannot be determined from current research studies. Information is sparse about the impact of such relationships in lesbian mother families, but that which has been published suggests that, like heterosexual step-parents, 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 et al. (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 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 (1985/86) found that gay fathers were likely to

report higher incomes and that they encouraged more sex-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, Koepke, 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. These findings are intriguing, but much more research will be needed before their interpretation will be clear.

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. Much remains to be learned about determinants of individual differences in psychological well-being among lesbian mothers.

Many other issues that have arisen in the context 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 to 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 such conversations, and that disclosure may be less stressful at earlier or later points in a child's development (Patterson, 1992, 1995a), but systematic research on these issues is just beginning. 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.

9.16.4.1.2 Divorced gay fathers

Although considerable research has focused on the overall psychological adjustment of lesbian mothers as 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. In jurisdictions where the law provides for biases 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 have reached the courts. Consistent with this view, only a minority of gay fathers have been reported to live in the same households with their children (Bigner & Bozett, 1990; Bozett, 1980, 1989).

Research on the parenting attitudes of gay versus heterosexual divorced fathers has, however, been reported. 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 nonparents in the dominant culture 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 heterosexual fathers. These reports by gay fathers of greater warmth and responsiveness, as well as greater control and limit-setting, 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 (Baumrind, 1967; Baumrind & Black, 1967). Caution must be exercised, however, in the interpretation of results which stem entirely from paternal reports about their own behavior.

In addition to research comparing gay and heterosexual fathers, a handful of studies have made other comparisons. For instance, Robinson and Skeen (1982) compared sex-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 or not they were parents themselves. As noted above, Harris and Turner (1985/86) compared gay fathers and lesbian mothers, reporting that while gay fathers had higher incomes and were more likely to report encouraging their children to play with sex-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.

Much research in this area has also arisen from concerns about the gay father identity and its transformations over time. For example, Miller (1978, 1979) and Bozett (1980, 1981a, 1981b, 1987) sought to provide a conceptualization of the processes through 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 USA 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 while 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.

9.16.4.2 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 pre-existing lesbian and gay identities (Crawford, 1987; Patterson, 1994a, 1994b). Although a substantial body of research addresses the transition to parenthood among heterosexuals, little research has explored the transition to parenthood for gay men or lesbians. While many issues that arise for heterosexuals also face lesbians and gay men (e.g., concerns about how children will affect couple relationships, economic concerns about supporting children), lesbians and gay men must also cope with many additional issues because of their situation as members of stigmatized minorities. These issues are best understood by viewing them against the backdrop of pervasive heterosexism and antigay prejudice.

Antigay prejudice is evident in institutions involved with health care, education, and employment that often fail to support and, in many cases, are openly hostile to lesbian and gay families (Casper, Schultz, & Wickens, 1992; Pollack & Vaughn, 1987). Lesbian and gay parents may encounter antigay prejudice and bigotry even from their families of origin. Many, if not most of, the special concerns of lesbian and gay parents and prospective parents stem from problems created by such hostility.

A number of inter-related issues are often faced in particular by lesbians and gay men who wish to become parents (Crawford, 1987; Patterson, 1994b). One of the first needs among this group 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 to assist them. In addition to these educational needs, 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 DI techniques, prenatal care, and preparation for birth. As matters progress, a number of legal concerns about the rights and responsibilities of all parties are likely to 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 emerge (Patterson, 1994b; Pies, 1985, 1990; Pollack & Vaughn, 1987; Rohrbach, 1988).

The earliest studies of childbearing among lesbian couples were reported by McCandlish (1987) and Steckel (1987). Both investigators reported research based on small samples of lesbian couples who had given birth to children by means of DI. Their focus was primarily on the children in such families, and neither investigator provided much in the way of systematic assessment of mothers. McCandlish did, however, highlight events and issues that were significant among families in her sample. For instance, she noted that, regardless of their interest in parenting prior to birth of the first child, nonbiological mothers in each couple unanimously reported an "unexpected and immediate attachment" to the child (McCandlish, 1987, p. 28). Although both mothers took part in parenting, they reported shifting patterns of caretaking responsibilities over time, with the biological mother taking primary responsibility during the earliest months, and the nonbiological mother's role increasing in importance after the first year. Couples also

reported changes in their relationships following the birth of the child, notably a reduction or cessation in sexual intimacy. Though the best interpretation of results from these pioneering studies is by no means clear, the work raises important issues and questions.

A study by Hand (1991) examined the ways in which 17 lesbian and 17 heterosexual couples with children under two years of age shared childcare, household duties, and occupational roles. Her principal finding was that lesbian couples shared parenting more equally than heterosexual couples. Lesbian nonbiological mothers were significantly more involved in childcare and regarded their parental role as significantly more salient than heterosexual fathers. Lesbian biological mothers viewed their maternal role as more salient than did any of the other mothers, whether lesbian or heterosexual. Fathers viewed their occupational roles as more salient than any of the mothers, whether lesbian or heterosexual. Hand's major result was, however, that lesbian couples were more likely than heterosexual couples to share childcare relatively evenly.

Another study (Osterweil, 1991) involved 30 lesbian couples with at least one child between 18 and 36 months of age. Consistent with Hand's (1991) results for parents of younger children, Osterweil reported that biological mothers viewed their maternal role as more salient than nonbiological mothers. In addition, although household maintenance activities were shared about equally, biological mothers reported somewhat more influence in family decisions and somewhat more involvement in childcare. Osterweil also reported that the couples in her study scored at about the mean for normative samples of heterosexual couples in overall relationship satisfaction. These studies suggest that lesbian couples who have chosen to bear children are likely to share household and childcare duties to a somewhat greater degree than heterosexual couples, and that lesbians are relatively satisfied with their couple relationships. Similar findings have also been reported by Patterson (1995d).

Two studies of men who have become fathers after identifying themselves as gay have been reported. Sbordone (1993) studied 78 gay men who had become parents through adoption or through surrogacy, and compared them with 83 gay men who were not fathers. Consistent with Skeen and Robinson's (1985) findings for divorced gay fathers, Sbordone found 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 gay men who were not fathers.

An interesting observation of Sbordone's (1993) study was that most gay men who were not fathers indicated that they would like to rear a child. The men who said that they wanted children were younger than those who said they did not, but the two groups did not differ on income, education, race, self-esteem, or attitudes about homosexuality. Given that fathers had higher self-esteem than either group of nonfathers, Sbordone suggested the possibility that the higher self-esteem of gay fathers might have been a result, not a cause or simple correlate, of parenthood.

McPherson (1993) reported a study of gay couples who had chosen to become parents. He studied division of labor, satisfaction with division of labor, and satisfaction with couple relationships among 28 gay and 27 heterosexual parenting couples. Consistent with evidence from lesbian couples with children (Hand 1991; Osterweil, 1991; Patterson, 1995d), McPherson found that gay couples reported a more even division of responsibilities for household maintenance and childcare than did heterosexual couples. Gay couples also reported greater satisfaction with their division of childcare tasks than did heterosexual couples. Finally, gay couples also reported greater satisfaction with their couple relationships, especially in the areas of cohesion and expression of affection.

In summary, studies of lesbians and gay men who have chosen to become parents are still sparse. Most research has been conducted on a relatively small scale and many important issues have yet to be addressed. Much remains to be learned about the determinants of lesbian and gay parenting and about its impact on lesbian and gay parents themselves.

9.16.5 RESEARCH ON CHILDREN OF LESBIAN AND GAY PARENTS

Research on children in lesbian and gay families has, with few exceptions, been conducted with relatively homogeneous groups of white, well-educated, middle class, largely professional families living in or around urban centers in the USA or in other Western countries. Unless otherwise specifically noted, these characteristics apply to the research described 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.

9.16.5.1 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. 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.

9.16.5.1.1 Sexual identity

Following Money and Ehrhardt (1972), research on three aspects of sexual identity is considered. Gender identity concerns a person's self-identification as male or female. Gender-role behavior concerns 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).

Research on gender identity has failed to reveal any differences in the development of children as a function of their parents' sexual orientation. For example, Kirkpatrick et al. (1981) compared development among 20 children of lesbian mothers with that among 20 same-aged children of heterosexual mothers. In projective testing, most children in both groups drew a same-sex figure first, a finding that fell within expected norms. Of those who drew an opposite-sex 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 have yielded similar results (e.g., Golombok et al., 1983).

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 20 of 21 children of lesbian mothers in his sample named a favorite toy consistent with conventional sex-typed toy preferences, and that all reported vocational choices that fell within typical limits for conventional sex roles. In interviews with 56 children of lesbians and 48 children of heterosexual mothers, Green et al. (1986) found no differences with respect to favorite television programs, television characters, games, or toys. They 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. In all studies, the behavior of lesbian mothers' children was seen as falling within normal limits.

Rees (1979) administered the Bem Sex Role Inventory to 12 young adolescent offspring of lesbian mothers and 12 same-aged youngsters of heterosexual mothers. Although children of lesbian and heterosexual mothers did not differ on masculinity or androgyny, adolescent offspring of lesbian mothers reported greater psychological femininity than their same-aged peers with heterosexual mothers. This result runs counter to expectations based on stereotypes of lesbians as lacking in femininity and, although provocative, it should be interpreted cautiously pending replication. Overall, research has failed to reveal any notable difficulties in the development of sex-role behavior among children of lesbian mothers.

A number of investigators have also studied sexual orientation, the third component of sexual identity. For example, Huggins (1989) interviewed 36 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. Generally 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). Based on the results of these studies, there is no reason to believe that the offspring of lesbian or gay parents are any more likely than those of heterosexual parents to become lesbian or gay themselves.

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 themselves 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 confounded. While 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.

9.16.5.1.2 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. On the basis of existing evidence, fears that children of gay and lesbian parents suffer deficits in personal development appear to be without empirical foundation.

9.16.5.1.3 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 by the courts that children of lesbian and gay parents might encounter difficulties among their peers, the most common focus of attention has been on peer relations. Studies have consistently found that children of lesbian mothers report normal peer relations, and that adult observers agree with this judgment (Patterson, 1992). Anecdotal and first-person accounts describe children's worries about being stigmatized as a result of their parents' sexual orientation (e.g., Pollack & Vaughn, 1987), but research findings provide no evidence for the proposition that children of lesbian mothers have difficulties in peer relations (Tasker & Golombok, 1995).

Research has also described children's relationships with adults, especially fathers. For instance, Golombok et al. (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 a 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 et al. (1981) also reported that lesbian mothers 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, as a result, their children have contact with adults of both genders. Overall, research suggests that children of lesbian parents have satisfactory relationships with adults of both sexes.

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). Research in this area shows that the great majority of adults who perpetrate sexual abuse are males and 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. Fears that children in custody of gay or lesbian parents might be at heightened risk for sexual abuse are thus without empirical foundation (Patterson, 1992, 1995a, 1995b).

9.16.5.2 Diversity Among Children With Divorced Lesbian or Gay Parents

Despite the great diversity evident with gay and lesbian communities (Blumenfeld & Raymond, 1988), research on differences among children of lesbian and gay parents is, as yet, very limited. 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 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.

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 which 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. Due to small sample size and absence of conventional statistical tests, this finding should be seen as suggestive rather than definitive. Huggins' results raise questions, however, about the extent to which reactions of important adults in a child's environment influence responses to discovery of a parent's gay or lesbian identity.

Effects of the age at which children learn of parents' gay or lesbian identities have also been investigated. Paul (1986) reported that those who were told either in childhood or in late adolescence found the news easier to cope with 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 those who were not informed until they were adolescents. From a clinical standpoint, early adolescence is a particularly difficult time for children to learn of their parents' lesbian or gay identities (Patterson, 1992).

In summary, existing data favor early disclosure of identity to children, good maternal mental health, and a supportive milieu, but the available data are very limited. No 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. It is clear that much remains to be learned about differences among gay and lesbian families and about the impact of such differences on children growing up in these homes.

9.16.5.3 Research on Children Born to or Adopted by Lesbian Mothers

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 DI to lesbian couples with that among same-aged children of heterosexual couples. Using parent interviews, parent and teacher Q sorts, and structured doll play techniques, Steckel compared independence, ego functions, and object relations among children in the two types of families. Her main results documented impressive similarity in development among children in the two groups. Similar findings, based on extensive interviews with five lesbian mother families were also reported by McCandlish (1987).

Steckel (1987) did, however, report suggestive differences between the two groups. Children of heterosexual parents saw themselves as somewhat more aggressive than did children of lesbians, and they were seen by both parents and teachers as more bossy, domineering, and negativistic. Children of lesbian parents saw themselves as more lovable and were seen by parents and teachers as more affectionate, responsive, and protective toward younger children. In view of the small sample size, and the large number of statistical tests performed, these results must be interpreted with caution. Steckel's work was, however, the first to make systematic comparisons of development among children born to lesbian and to heterosexual couples.

The first study to examine psychosocial development among preschool and school-aged children born to or adopted by lesbian mothers was conducted by Patterson (1994a). Thirty-seven four- to nine-year-old children were studied, using a variety of standardized measures. The Child Behavior Checklist was used to assess children's social competence and behavior problems; five scales from the Eder Children's Self-View Questionnaire were used to assess children's self-concepts, and open-ended interview techniques were used to assess preferences associated with sex-role behavior.

Results showed that children scored in the normal range for all measures. On the Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach and Edelbrock, 1983), for example, 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 sex-role preferences within the ex-

pected 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 report 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.

Some additional findings from this study can be mentioned briefly. Contrary to stereotypes of these families as isolated from families of origin, most reported that children had regular contact with one or more grandparents, as well as with other adult friends and relatives of both sexes (Patterson, Hurt, & Mason, in press). 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 childcare and nonbiological lesbian mothers were likely to spend somewhat more time engaged in paid employment (Patterson, 1995d). Even within the relatively small range represented in this sample, families in which childcare was divided more evenly were also those in which children exhibited the most favorable adjustment (Patterson, 1995d).

9.16.6 RESEARCH ON OTHER FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

In addition to parent-child and couple relationships, lesbians and gay men are likely to maintain contacts with parents, siblings, and other members of their families of origin (Cohen & Savin-Williams, 1996; Laird, 1996; Patterson et al., in press). Although, as Laird (1996) has emphasized, many other issues are undoubtedly significant, the largest amount of research 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.

After acknowledging lesbian or gay identities, many people begin to wonder whether and how to share such identities with (i.e., “come out to”) those who are important to them. Most lesbians and gay men appear to come out first to close friends, and only later—if at all—to family members (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). For example, Remafedi (1987) studied a sample of gay and bisexual teenagers, and found that most were out to their mothers but not their fathers, and almost all were out to at least one friend.

Although it is difficult to predict parental reactions to disclosure of a nonheterosexual orientation by their offspring, the most common initial reactions are usually negative (Cohen & Savin-Williams, 1996). 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, 1996; 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 said 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, however, only if they also described their parents as important to their self-image (Savin-Williams, 1990). Because the research 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. Identification of causal pathways in this area thus represents an important challenge for future research.

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, sizeable 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). A common one is distancing, whether emotionally or geographically (or both) from the family of origin. Another is the unspoken agreement that nobody in the family will discuss the lesbian or gay individual’s personal life; this has been termed the “I know you know” strategy. A third approach is to disclose to one family member, who is thought to be supportive, on the condition that no others be told. This approach appears to rely on and perhaps strengthen coalitions among subgroups within a family. Although these strategies may or may not be viewed as problematic by those who employ them, they all block the achievement of true intimacy and add to the stress experienced by lesbian and gay adults (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).

9.16.7 IMPLICATIONS OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

Research on lesbian and gay couples and families with children, though relatively new, has nevertheless yielded results that are worthy of attention. Without denying the consistency of major research findings, it is important also to acknowledge that the research is subject to various criticisms. For instance, much of the research has involved small samples that are predominantly white, well educated, relatively affluent, and American; the degree to which results would hold with other populations is thus difficult or impossible to evaluate at this time. It would also be desirable to have data

based on observational methods, collected within longitudinal designs, but studies of this kind have not yet been reported.

Despite shortcomings, however, central results of existing research on lesbian and gay couples and families with children are exceptionally clear. First, research has succeeded in bringing to light the fact that lesbian and gay parents as well as couples exist in large numbers. Given the relative invisibility of lesbian and gay couples, as well as that of parents and their children, this achievement is significant in itself, and should not be overlooked.

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 respect. Indeed, the available 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 support and enable psychosocial growth among family members.

Much research on lesbian and gay parenting has focused primarily on comparisons between lesbian and gay families, on the one hand, and heterosexual families, on the other. 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 USA. Now that results of research have begun to converge so clearly on answers to questions posed in this way, it would appear that 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 families themselves. For example, many lesbian and gay couples with children are interested in distinctions between the experiences of biological and nonbiological parents. How important, they ask, is the biological link in influencing experiences of parenthood? Similarly, both lesbian and gay families can benefit from more information about diversity among lesbian and gay couples and families with children. It would seem likely that future scholarship will increasingly concern itself with the study of sources of strength and resilience in lesbian and gay couples as well as among parents and their children.

In the meantime, however, the central results of research have important implications. If

psychosocial development among children born to lesbian mothers and gay fathers is 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 the quality of family interactions, relationships, and processes.

Results of research with lesbian and gay parents and their children also have implications for the politics of family life. If, as would appear 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 is 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 normal, and policies might be designed to protect their legitimate interests, as well as those of their family members.

9.16.8 DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH

Because research on the family lives of lesbians and gay men is relatively new, there are many promising avenues for further research (Allen & Demo, 1995). From a substantive point of view, a number of issues have gone all but unexplored in the research literature on lesbian and gay family lives. For example, little attention has been devoted to assessment of sexual orientation over time, and the phenomena associated with bisexuality (Paul, 1996) have received 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 of 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 involve prospective designs that follow participants over time.

Another methodological issue in the literature is the almost complete absence 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; and it could add tremendously to knowledge in this area.

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 life.

When lesbian and gay family lives are viewed in these terms, it serves to underline the tremendous significance of historical factors in shaping both individual and familial experiences. Rapid change in attitudes, social climates, and even legal rulings relevant to lesbian and gay family lives in the USA has, in many ways, transformed the daily lives of lesbians and gay men, and those of their family members as well. Future events, such as decisions in cases like *Baehr v. Miike*, hold the potential to further transform the experiences associated with lesbian and gay family lives.

9.16.9 REFERENCES

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