

BRIEF REPORTS

Parenting Intentions and Desires Among Childless Lesbian, Gay, and Heterosexual Individuals

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Parenthood is one of the most universal and highly valued experiences of American adults. However, lesbian and gay adults in the United States are much less likely than heterosexual adults to be parents. Our goal was to explore the reasons why this is the case. Using nationally representative data from the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), we studied parenting intentions, desires, and attitudes of childless lesbian, gay, and heterosexual individuals 15 to 44 years of age. We found that gay men and lesbian women were less likely than matched heterosexual peers to express desire for parenthood. Moreover, gay men who expressed *desire* to become parents were less likely than heterosexual men to express the *intention* to become parents; this was not true for women. Despite being less likely to express parenting desires, gay and lesbian participants endorsed the value of parenthood just as strongly as did heterosexual participants. By exploring the psychology of family formation as a function of sexual orientation, these results inform ongoing debates about sexual orientation and parenthood.

Keywords: lesbian, gay, parenting intentions, parenting desires, parenting attitudes

Parenthood is one of the most universal and highly valued experiences of Americans. There are many lesbian and gay parents in the United States today; however, lesbian and gay adults are less likely than their heterosexual counterparts to be parents (Gates, Badgett, Macomber, & Chambers, 2007). Why is this the case? Among other reasons, two possible causes are (a) lack of *desire* to become a parent, and (b) lack of *intention* to become a parent. Desires consist of what one wants or would like to do, whereas intentions consist of what one intends or plans to do. A desire to become a parent might or might not be accompanied by an intention to do so. For example, a person might say, "I would like to have children, but I do not plan to." Lower incidence of parenting desires or intentions could result in lower parenthood rates among lesbian and gay adults, when compared with their heterosexual peers.

Previous research has demonstrated that many lesbian women and gay men want to be parents. In Gates and colleagues' (2007) study of data from the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), 41% of childless lesbian women and 52% of childless gay men ages 15 to 44 expressed a desire to have children. In the same dataset, 53% of heterosexual women and 67% of heterosexual men expressed a desire for children (Gates et al., 2007). Thus, parenting desires may be partly responsible for lower parenthood rates among lesbian and gay adults. Recent research has also found strong *expectations* of parenthood among lesbian and gay youth. In a study of urban lesbian and gay youth (D'Augelli, Rendina, Grossman, & Sinclair, 2006/2007), 86% of young men and 91% of young women reported that they expected to rear children someday.

Although parenting *desires* and *expectations* of lesbian and gay individuals have been studied (D'Augelli et al., 2006/2007; Gates et al., 2007), the present research is the first to our knowledge to examine parenting *intentions* and *attitudes* in this population. For people with low commitment to their intentions or who perceive relatively little personal control, expectations and intentions can differ (Rhodes & Matheson, 2005). Parenting intentions are strong predictors of parenthood, at least for different-sex couples (Schoen, Astone, Kim, Nathanson, & Fields, 1999). Furthermore, little previous research has assessed broad attitudes toward parenthood, such as the general value of parenthood, among childless or nonheterosexual adults. To explore some reasons why lesbian women and gay men might be less likely than their heterosexual peers to become

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parents, we conducted a secondary analysis of data from the 2002 NSFG. Participants were interviewed about several topics, including parenting intentions, desires, and attitudes.

We expected that parenting intentions, desires, and attitudes would vary as a function of participant sexual orientation. Specifically, we expected to find lower rates of parenting desires and intentions as well as less positive attitudes toward parenthood among childless gay and lesbian individuals relative to their heterosexual peers. However, as the attitude measures assessed feelings towards parenthood on a less personal level, we expected that attitudes might exhibit different patterns of endorsement than intentions or desires.

Method

Participants and Procedure

We utilized data from the 2002 NSFG, administered by the U.S. National Center for Health Statistics. The 2002 NSFG included 12,571 individuals (female = 7,643), aged 15 to 44 years. Data were based on a nationally representative multistage area probability sample drawn from 121 areas across the United States. For further details about the NSFG sample, see Groves and colleagues (2005).

Our analyses focused on a subsample of childless lesbian and gay participants and a matched comparison group of childless heterosexual participants. First, we identified all childless participants (2,913 women; 3,030 men), excluding any biological, adoptive, or foster parents and anyone who reported that a child was living "under his/her care and responsibility." Next, we identified as gay or lesbian those who self-identified in this way and also described same- or both-sex attractions (45 women; 103 men). We excluded one man who was equally attracted to people of both sexes and had a history of sexual behavior with other-sex but not same-sex partners, for a total of 45 lesbian women and 102 gay men. Finally, we matched a heterosexual participant (45 women; 102 men) with each lesbian or gay participant on gender, age, race/ethnicity, and education level. When multiple individuals matched on all of these criteria, a computer randomly selected the heterosexual participant to be included in the study.

Our final subsample included 294 childless lesbian, gay, and heterosexual participants (female = 90; male = 204). They ranged from 15 to 44 years of age (female $M = 31.1$, $SD = 8.8$; male $M = 32.0$, $SD = 7.8$). Participants averaged 14 years of education, which corresponds to "Some College" (female $M = 14.1$, $SD = 2.7$; male $M = 14.1$, $SD = 2.9$). The male subsample was 23% Latino, 63% Euro-American, 12% African-American, and 3% "Other." The female subsample was 11% Latina, 78% Euro-American, and 11% African-American. There were no statistically significant differences between the heterosexual and non-heterosexual groups on age, years of education, or percent Euro-American (all t s and χ^2 s < 1 , $ps > 0.20$).

Responses were collected primarily through computer-assisted interviewing in participants' homes. Many sensitive questions, including measures of sexual orientation, were ad-

ministered using Audio Computer-Assisted Self-Interviewing (ACASI). This mode of interviewing allowed the participant to privately enter a response into a computer. This survey was reviewed and approved by the National Center of Health Statistics Research Ethics Review.

Measures

Survey items of interest focused on parenting desires, intentions, and attitudes. All participants were asked about desires for parenthood. Female participants were asked: "Looking to the future, if it were possible, would you, yourself, *want* to have a baby at some time?" (Yes/No). Those who expressed parenting desires were also asked about parenting intentions. Female participants were asked: "Sometimes what people want and what they intend are different because they are not able to do what they want . . . Looking to the future, do you, yourself, *intend* to have a baby at some time?"

Male participants were asked the same intentions and desires questions as female participants, but the word "child" was substituted for the word "baby." Response options for this question were binary ($yes = 1/no = 0$) for females, but formed a 4-point Likert scale for males ("Definitely Yes"/"Probably Yes"/"Probably No"/"Definitely No"). We recoded male participants' responses to the intentions item, creating a binary ($yes = 1/no = 0$) variable.

A question about attitudes toward childlessness was asked of all participants: "If it turns out that you do not have any children, would that bother you a great deal, some, a little, or not at all?" Responses formed a 4-point Likert scale, as follows: 1 = *Not at all*, 2 = *A little*, 3 = *Some*, 4 = *A great deal*. All participants were also asked about the value of parenthood: "The rewards of being a parent are worth it, despite the cost and the work it takes." Responses formed a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *Strongly disagree* to 5 = *Strongly agree*.

Analysis. As stated above, wording and response options varied by participant sex on certain items of interest. Therefore, we analyzed data separately for male and female participants and did not estimate gender effects or interactions. We included interactions between sexual orientation, age, and race/ethnicity in versions of every model tested. Interaction terms were not statistically significant, so results are presented without reference to them. "*Heterosexual*" was coded as "1," while "*homosexual*" was coded as "0." To maintain statistical power, we recoded race/ethnicity as a binary variable, coding "*White*" as "1" and "*non-White*" as "0."

Results

Our central question was whether childless gay and lesbian individuals are less likely than their heterosexual peers to intend and desire to have children. For male participants, we found this to be the case. Over half of all gay male participants (54%) and three quarters of all heterosexual male participants (75%) expressed parenting desires. In a logistic regression predicting parenting desires from age,

race/ethnicity, and sexual orientation, all three were statistically significant predictors (see Table 1; $\chi^2 = 42.77(3)$, $p < .001$). Younger, non-White, heterosexual male participants were most likely to express parenting desires.

Of those who expressed parenting desires, 67% of gay and 90% of heterosexual male participants also expressed parenting intentions. Overall, 30% of gay male participants expressed both desires and intentions. Sexual orientation, age, and race/ethnicity were all statistically significant predictors of parenting intentions (see Table 1; $\chi^2 = 28.74(3)$, $p < .001$). Younger, non-White, heterosexual male participants were most likely to express parenting intentions.

We also studied two indices of attitudes towards parenthood. The first item measured how distressed the participant would feel if he remained childless throughout his lifetime. The mean response for heterosexual male participants corresponded with the range "a little" to "some" ($M = 2.61$, $SD = 1.10$). The mean response for gay male participants corresponded with the phrase "a little" ($M = 1.98$, $SD = 1.00$). In a linear regression, age and sexual orientation were statistically significant predictors of distress, $F = 18.35(2)$, $p < .001$, but race/ethnicity was not. Effect sizes were small, both Δ Adjusted R^2 s = 0.08. Younger, heterosexual male participants expressed the most distress at the prospect of lifelong childlessness.

The second item measured participants' endorsement of a statement about the value of parenthood. Mean responses for both heterosexual ($M = 4.37$, $SD = 0.82$) and gay ($M = 4.19$, $SD = 0.83$) male participants corresponded with the "Agree" to "Strongly agree" range, indicating strong endorsement of parenthood for both groups. In linear regression analyses, no statistically significant predictors emerged.

Childless gay men were less likely than their heterosexual peers to express parenting desires and intentions. For female participants, however, the picture was somewhat different. While childless lesbian women were less likely than their heterosexual peers to express parenting desires, they were just as likely as their heterosexual peers to express parenting

intentions. Over a third of all lesbian (37%) and two-thirds of all heterosexual (68%) female participants expressed parenting desires. Age and sexual orientation were statistically significant predictors of parenting desires (see Table 1; $\chi^2 = 34.59(2)$, $p < .001$), but race/ethnicity was not. Younger heterosexual female participants were most likely to express parenting desires.

Most lesbian (83%) and heterosexual (72%) female participants who expressed desire to become parents also expressed the intention to do so. Lesbian participants were at least as likely as heterosexual female participants to express parenting intentions. Overall, 33% of lesbian participants expressed both parenting desires and intentions. Age was a statistically significant predictor of parenting intentions (see Table 1; $\chi^2 = 15.82(2)$, $p < .001$), but sexual orientation and race/ethnicity were not. Younger women were most likely to express parenting intentions.

The first attitudes item measured how distressed the participant would feel if she remained permanently childless. The mean response for heterosexual female participants corresponded with the range "a little" to "some" ($M = 2.58$, $SD = 1.03$). The mean response for lesbian participants corresponded with the response "a little" ($M = 1.98$, $SD = 1.10$). Age and sexual orientation were statistically significant predictors of this distress (model $F = 6.59(2)$, $p = .002$), while race/ethnicity was not. Age and sexual orientation explained some variance in female participants' distress at the prospect of lifelong childlessness (both Δ Adjusted R^2 s = 0.10). Younger, heterosexual participants were most distressed at the prospect of lifelong childlessness.

The second item measured participants' endorsement of a statement about the value of parenthood. Mean responses for both lesbian ($M = 4.09$, $SD = 1.00$) and heterosexual ($M = 4.20$, $SD = 0.89$) female participants corresponded with the "Agree" to "Strongly Agree" range, indicating endorsement of parenthood from both groups. In linear regression analyses, no statistically significant predictors emerged.

Table 1
Parenting Intentions and Desires: Final Models

Gender	Dependent variable	<i>n</i>	Independent variables	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	Exp(<i>B</i>) ^a	Nagelkerke's <i>R</i> ²
Male	Parenting desires	199 ^b	Age	-0.10	0.02	0.91***	0.13
			Race/ethnicity	-0.94	0.36	0.39**	0.04
			Sexual orientation	1.45	0.34	4.28***	0.11
	Total: 0.28						
	Parenting intentions	112	Age	-0.14	0.05	0.87**	0.13
			Race/ethnicity	-1.74	0.67	0.18**	0.08
Sexual orientation			2.02	0.60	7.55**	0.15	
Total: 0.36							
Female	Parenting desires	84 ^b	Age	-0.16	0.04	0.85***	0.33
			Sexual orientation	1.78	0.59	5.92**	0.12
	Total: 0.45						
	Parenting intentions	50	Age	-0.21	0.07	0.81**	0.41

Note. Nagelkerke's R^2 indicates the degree to which the model parameters improve upon the prediction of the null model. Greater improvement corresponds to a higher Nagelkerke's R^2 . Like other R^2 values, these range from 0 to 1.

^a Odds ratio. ^b Because of missing data, differs from total n of 204 men and 90 women.

** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Discussion

This study was the first to examine parenting intentions, desires, and attitudes of childless lesbian and gay individuals in a nationally representative sample. Overall, childless lesbian and gay individuals reported lower parenting desires than did their heterosexual counterparts, but it is noteworthy that, contrary to stereotypes, many do want to become parents (Badgett, 2001). What is more, many intend to realize this ambition. Thus, neither policymakers nor clinicians should assume that lesbian and gay individuals are uninterested in parenthood (Patterson, 2004, 2007).

Like Gates and his colleagues (2007), we found that childless lesbian and gay individuals were less likely than matched heterosexual peers to report desire for parenthood. Gates and his colleagues (2007) did not consider the possible contributions of participants' age, race, or education to these results. Even after controlling for these demographic characteristics, however, we found that the effect of sexual orientation remained statistically significant. Understanding the reasons for this finding presents an important challenge for future research.

In addition to lower desire for parenthood, we also found a significant gap between desires and intentions for gay men. Of men who expressed the desire for parenthood, gay men were less likely than heterosexual men to say that they intended to become parents. This was true even after controlling for age, race, and educational background. The causes of this gap between desire and intention have yet to be understood. It should be noted, however, that heterosexual men and women who are "childless by circumstances" (i.e., harbor parenting desires but do not expect to realize them) often show elevated levels of depressive symptoms, compared to those who are "childfree by choice" (Connidis & McMullin, 2002). Thus, unfulfilled parenting desires may also be a risk factor for depression among gay men.

Despite being less likely to express parenting desires, we found that lesbian and gay individuals endorsed the value of parenthood just as strongly as did their heterosexual peers. This finding contradicts the stereotype that lesbian and gay individuals consider parenthood to be unrewarding or overly costly (Badgett, 2001). It was intriguing that, even though they might not plan to undertake it personally, many lesbian and gay participants nevertheless endorsed the value of parenthood.

The NSFG dataset presented a rare opportunity to study a nationally representative sample of childless lesbian and gay individuals. Participants represented many communities that have been under-represented in research on sexual orientation and parenthood: gay men, people of color, and people who live in non-urban areas. Furthermore, NSFG researchers were not specifically focused on sexual orientation, so it is unlikely that NSFG data were subject to any

particular biases in this regard. In all these ways, the NSFG dataset presented a special set of opportunities.

While the NSFG had many strengths, it also had limitations. As noted earlier, question wording sometimes varied by participant sex. Sample sizes for some comparisons were small, and measures of parenting attitudes consisted of single items. As a result, future research will be needed to explore the mechanisms underlying the present findings. Furthermore, this study was cross-sectional, and longitudinal research will be necessary to explore issues related to age and cohort.

Overall, our findings suggest that, while some lesbian and gay people want to become parents, their relatively lower desires for parenthood, coupled with gay men's lower intentions to parent, may contribute to lower rates of parenthood among gay and lesbian populations. By exploring the role of sexual orientation in family formation, our findings contribute to the understanding of human development and family life among sexual minority individuals.

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