

# LGBT Sexuality and Families at the Start of the Twenty-First Century

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### Abstract

Since the start of the twenty-first century, the literature on same-sex couple relationships and families headed by single parents who identify as lesbian or gay has grown exponentially, and research published in the past 10 to 15 years tackles many new questions about sexual minority families. This review concentrates on four topics that have dominated the sociological arena: who counts as family and how/whether changing definitions of family incorporate households formed by lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people; the biological, social, and legal obstacles that influence family formation for this population; the outcomes for youth raised with lesbian or gay parents; and family dynamics, relationship quality, and relationship dissolution in same-sex couple and transgender partner households. We conclude with future directions for the sociological study of LGBT sexuality and families.

## INTRODUCTION

Whether it is the study of the relationship between sexual satisfaction and marital quality or dating and relationship patterns of young adults, sexuality has often been a component of research on families. This interest in sexuality often took heterosexuality for granted when studying family formation and family processes. However, the literature on same-sex couple relationships and families headed by single parents who identify as lesbian or gay has grown exponentially. Social science research published since the start of the twenty-first century tackles many new questions about sexual minority families. Psychologists are writing about family processes, relationship quality between partners, and children's socioemotional outcomes and development. Sociologists have been considering these issues while also grappling with questions regarding how these families relate to social institutions such as school and legal systems and how these systems shape and are affected by lesbian and gay families. Sociological studies have also revealed the strategies adults in these households adopt to construct meaning so that they are perceived by outsiders as family. Because our space is limited, at times we incorporate the psychological research on

lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) families, but we focus our review on four topics that have dominated the sociological research:<sup>1</sup>

1. Who counts as family and how/whether changing definitions of family incorporate LGBT people;
2. How lesbians and gay men come to have children—the biological, social, and legal obstacles that influence family formation for this population;
3. Outcomes for youth raised with openly gay parents; and
4. Family dynamics, relationship quality, and relationship dissolution in same-sex couple and transgender partner households.

We conclude with future directions for the sociological study of LGBT sexuality and families.

Some caveats are necessary. First, most of the sociological research in this area focuses on same-sex couple households and not on single-parent households. Second, most of the research focuses on households in which the partners identify as lesbian or gay and not bisexual or transgender (see sidebar). Third, much of the work reviewed is US-based. An international and cross-cultural framework for the study of LGBT-parent families would be ideal, given that changes are happening around the world, in part independently and in part informed by one another, in how same-sex parent families are defined and understood. However, space limitations compel us to emphasize work done in the United States, though we make an effort to include research in other national contexts whenever possible. We recognize that by not including material from social systems

## A NOTE ON DEFINITIONS

In this review, we use terminology that represents the varying scope of populations in the research we review from tight to broad according to the sample and description in the cited study. Lesbian and gay refers to women and men who identify themselves as attracted, usually exclusively, to members of the same sex/gender. As an adjective, gay may sometimes refer to both gay men and lesbians. LGB (lesbian, gay, and bisexual) includes individuals who identify themselves as attracted to both sexes/genders. LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) includes individuals who have changed or are in the process of changing sexes or gender identities. Finally, sexual minority refers broadly to individuals whose sexual identity/behavior is marginalized by heterosexually prescribed norms.

<sup>1</sup>Sociological issues relating to LGBT sexuality and families that are not well covered in this article but that have contributed important developments to this literature since the start of the twenty-first century include the relationships LGBT people have with their families of origin (Bennett & Battle 2001, Oswald 2002, Acosta 2008), the continuously shifting state and federal legislation of same-sex marriage (Oswald & Kuvalanka 2008), poly-parent families (Sheff 2010, Vaccaro 2010, Stacey 2011), and the gender socialization of children raised in same-sex parent families.

in which same-sex marriage is more firmly institutionalized than in the United States (e.g., in Scandinavia and the Netherlands), as well as non-Western cultural contexts where sexual minority parenthood often takes place in the context of heterosexual unions while individuals also maintain a lesbian or gay identity, we may lose some purchase on the trends we identify.<sup>2</sup> Finally, much of this work has been interdisciplinary rather than purely sociological, so we draw from the work that most closely speaks to sociological understandings.

## WHAT MAKES A FAMILY?

The ideological debates on sexuality and family situate gay men and lesbians at the heart of broader discussions of family politics. Bernstein & Reimann (2001) argue that by making themselves visible as families, same-sex couple households reveal a subversive power that challenges dominant conceptions of gender. In her analysis of pro- and anti-gay marriage movements, Lehr (1999, p. 140) says that “gays and lesbians stand in a unique location from which to view family and from which to define a politics of family and private life” and should seek to undo marriage altogether in favor of new and creative ways of organizing their families beyond the liberal democratic discourse of the rights of couples. For Lehr, the recognition of same-sex marriage inadvertently supports politics that reinforce the

disciplinary power of marriage in general. This perspective suggests that marriage should not bestow special legal privileges upon couples, regardless of sexual orientation. It advocates for a broader approach to thinking about what constitutes familial commitment and how it should be legally protected (see Polikoff 2008 for a similar perspective in the field of law, and Folgerø 2008 and Oswald et al. 2009 for other research on the interaction between queer theory and LGBT family scholarship).

Other sociologists have found that even when same-sex couples want to marry and have society view their households as families, they are met with resistance. Stein’s (2005) work shows the continuing ambivalence about the normalization of homosexuality and says that as a nation we remain divided over whether lesbians and gay men are the moral equivalent of heterosexuals. In *Counted Out: Same-Sex Relations and Americans’ Definitions of Family*, Powell et al. (2010) analyze two waves of survey data, collected in 2003 and 2006, from a nationally representative sample of Americans about a variety of family-related topics, including their opinions about same-sex couple households. They find that a large segment of the US population is ambivalent or resistant to the inclusion of same-sex couples in their definition of family because they believe these relationships threaten the heterosexual family form and undermine traditional gender and sexuality norms (Powell et al. 2010, p. 103).<sup>3</sup> These ideologies not only represent disapproval or discomfort around gay sexuality but also speak to broader understandings of gender and sexuality.

## DEFINING LESBIAN- AND GAY-PARENT FAMILIES

Gates (2012b) provides one of the earliest analyses of the 2010 data for same-sex couple households in the US Census. From 2000 to 2010, the

<sup>2</sup>For example, Badgett’s (2010) work offers a perspective on gay marriage that draws on precedents in the Netherlands and Denmark as a template to help us think about sexual orientation equality in the United States. See also Andersson et al. (2006) on relationship dissolution in Norway and Sweden and Golombok’s (2000) ongoing work on parenting in the United Kingdom and other locales. Herrera (2009) examines legislative frameworks and their impact on lesbian partnerships in Chile. Polášková’s (2007) study is the first to examine lesbian and gay families in the Czech Republic. Potgieter’s (2003) research on Black lesbians in South Africa offers insights on children’s experiences and parenting experiences in the particular cultural contexts of the region. For a review of non-Western research on LGBT parents and their children, see Lubbe (2013).

<sup>3</sup>Powell et al. (2010) also note that even in the short three-year period between waves of data, resistance to the idea of same-sex couples as family has weakened.

number of these households increased by about 80%, from 358,390 to 646,464.<sup>4</sup> Different-sex unmarried couples increased by about 40% during this same period, whereas different-sex married couples increased by a much smaller rate of 3.7%. Gates also found that in the American Community Survey data from 2011, 19% of same-sex couples were raising children under age 18. These data suggest that currently there are approximately 125,000 same-sex couples raising nearly 220,000 children. The most recent report on LGBT parenting issued by the Williams Institute analyzes data from the Gallup Daily Tracking Survey collected from June to September 2012, the 2008–2010 General Social Survey, and the National Transgender Discrimination Survey. It estimates that as many as 6 million American children and adults have an LGBT parent (Gates 2013). It also finds that same-sex couples are more likely than different-sex couples to be raising an adopted or foster child. And these numbers reflect only those individuals who were in same-sex partnerships at the time of data collection.

Work with Census 2010 and other recent data has begun to shed new light on the geographic, racial, ethnic, and class composition of same-sex couple families. Same-sex couple households with children are not evenly spread across geographic regions or socioeconomic class. Same-sex parenting is more common in the South, where more than a quarter of same-sex couples are raising children (Gates 2011b). One finding across demographic studies is the greater level of interraciality among same-sex couples compared with different-sex married couples (Jepsen & Jepsen 2002, Rosenfeld & Kim 2005). Relative to Whites, childrearing among same-sex couples is higher among

African Americans, Latinos, and American Indian/Alaskan Natives and lower among Asian and Pacific Islanders. Forty percent of African American same-sex couples, 28% of Latino/a, 24% of American Indian/Alaskan Native, 12% of Asian and Pacific Islander, and 16% of White same-sex couples have children under age 18 living with them in the home (Gates 2011b, p. F3).

Rosenfeld's (2010) analyses of Census 2000 show that although same-sex couples have relatively high educational attainment and earnings, same-sex couples with children tend to come from the working class and are more likely to be from racial minority groups. Albelda et al. (2009) analyze data from Census 2000, the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth, and the 2003 and 2005 California Health Interview Surveys to compare poverty rates across sexual minority status. After controlling for other factors, they find that same-sex couple families are significantly more likely to be poor than are heterosexual married couple families. For example, African American same-sex couples have poverty rates that are significantly higher than both African American different-sex married couples and White same-sex couples. Children in lesbian and gay couple households have poverty rates twice those of children in heterosexual married couple households, and their families are more likely to receive government cash supports intended for low-income families. Analyses of recent Gallup data show that single LGBT adults raising children are three times more likely than comparable non-LGBT people to be living at or near poverty level (Gates 2013). Lesbian and gay couples who live in rural areas are much more likely to be low-income than are urban same-sex couples. These differences reveal race, ethnicity, and social class as mutually constitutive in the lives of sexual minority parents and their children (Moore & Brainer 2013).

Of the nearly 650,000 same-sex couples counted in Census 2010, 79,200 or about 12% have at least one partner who either is not a US citizen or is a naturalized citizen, and these couples are raising more than 25,000 children

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<sup>4</sup>Because the Census contains self-reported data, the increase may be primarily due to an actual increase in the number of same-sex couple households. It likely is also due in part to changes in households' willingness to self-report as same-sex couples. Nevertheless, the 2010 figures might underestimate the number of these households if some people are reluctant to openly report a same-sex relationship in the Census inventory.

(Konnoth & Gates 2011).<sup>5</sup> Existing immigration law has made it difficult for these families to legalize through marriage and bars couples who do not share the same home country from pursuing permanent residency as a couple in either partner's country of origin. However, in September 2012 the federal government officially changed deportation guidelines to define same-sex couples as families. Department of Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano ordered Immigration and Customs Enforcement to issue written guidelines making clear that long-term same-sex partners are included in the definition of the phrase "family relationships" and should be considered as such when determining whether an individual should be deported (Sacchetti 2012). This change in policy is a potential sign of greater complexity with respect to societal attitudes toward sexual minority families.

## PATHWAYS TO PARENTING

There are four dominant ways individuals in same-sex partner households come to parent children: through a prior relationship with a different-sex partner that resulted in the birth of a child/children, through adoption, through the use of assisted reproductive technologies, or by becoming a partner to someone who has done one or more of these things. The framework that guides much of the quantitative research on these families is comparative and seeks to measure relationship quality, parenting behaviors, and children's educational and socioemotional outcomes to two-biological-parent households and other heterosexual family arrangements. The qualitative research on lesbian and gay family formation focuses on three areas: the construction and negotiation of family bonds, questions of identity as they relate to heterosexually prescribed gender norms, and the relationships these families have with their extended kin and with social institutions such as schools and the law.

<sup>5</sup>The countries most represented among these couples are Mexico (25%), Canada (8%), and the United Kingdom (6%).

The most common route to parenthood for lesbians and gay men is one in which a person has children through heterosexual contact before taking on a gay identity (Telingator & Patterson 2008). However, the increasing social and political acceptance of lesbian and gay relationships over the past 20 years has created new opportunities for people to create families within the context of their unions or as single parents through donor insemination, surrogacy, and/or adoption. These intentional families, also referred to by Biblarz & Savci (2010) as "planned families," represent a generational shift in lesbian and gay parenting. They have generated sociological interest for several reasons. First, they reflect the desire of sexual minorities to have children outside of heteronormative circumstances and, to some scholars (Dunne 2000, Stacey 2006), represent a radical shift in the meaning of parenthood and family. Second, sexual minorities, and particularly gay men, must navigate complicated and sometimes hostile institutions to have children and then raise them (Berkowitz & Marsiglio 2007). Third, differences in gender, race, class, and region constrain and enable how such families overcome these barriers and accentuate the inequalities among them. Finally, as these intentional families pursue greater legal recognition, judicial and legislative scrutiny has pushed scholars to interrogate the details of these families and, in particular, the outcomes for children raised in lesbian- and gay-parent households.

## Parenting as an Identity

In the past decade, psychologists and scholars from other disciplines have advanced a significant portion of the research on lesbian and gay families with children, much of which is reviewed by Biblarz & Savci (2010). Of particular interest to sociologists is how this group identifies, understands, and negotiates their identities as mother or father. Researchers have approached this question by looking at how couples divide housework, paid work, and child care, how they think about gender when parenting, and how they negotiate social

institutions that are particularly relevant to families with children, such as schools, child care settings, and playgrounds. Nancy Mezey's (2008) book examines differences between lesbian mothers and lesbians who do not want to become mothers in how they desire and/or experience motherhood, sometimes finding cleavages within and other times finding intersections across race and class. Sociologists are also concerned with providing new insights into the changing identity and emerging forms of kinship and family relationships for LGB people that accompany their new role as parents (Agigian 2004, Mamo 2007).

Across disciplines, the bulk of research has emphasized the experiences in lesbian households with children because, compared with gay men, it is easier for women to have children through nonheterosexual reproduction, such as various forms of donor insemination (Biblarz & Savci 2010). For example, Agigian's (2004) work looks at the legal and medical advances in lesbian insemination practices and their impact and potential for lesbian family formation. Mamo (2007) introduces the notion of affinity ties, which describe how the couple chooses a donor that has similar traits as the birth mother's partner and her family in physical appearance, national origin, religious ancestry, cultural interests, hobbies, and other social qualities. These characteristics serve as kinship devices for constructing imagined relatedness, social connection, and social legitimacy.

Sociological research on gay male intentional families is relatively small compared with that on lesbian households, although the past decade has seen several intensive studies of gay fatherhood, including four books that include a social science approach to their analyses of these men (Mallon 2004, Lewin 2009, Stacey 2011, Goldberg 2012). Similar to Mamo's work on lesbian mothers, Berkowitz (2007) is concerned with the meanings and understandings gay men have about fatherhood as an identity. Stacey (2006) argues that gay men must confront the idea that men in general are not naturally predisposed to raising children and that gay men in particular are

unfit for parenthood. Despite these symbolic challenges, as men learn about the logistics of becoming fathers they develop a "procreative consciousness" or sense of self that conjugates their identity both as fathers and as gay men (Berkowitz 2007, Berkowitz & Marsiglio 2007).

Institutional contexts and structural opportunities are rapidly shifting how gay men become fathers, but differences in resources (e.g., institutional knowledge, access to attorneys) and uneven laws across jurisdictions create inequalities in the abilities of gay men to reproduce (Bergman et al. 2010). In the above studies, surrogacy was the least common pathway to gay male parenthood because it was often prohibitively expensive and available only in certain jurisdictions. Of those that did choose surrogacy, gay couples had to confront the issue of how, if at all, to incorporate the surrogate mother into the future life of the child and negotiate feelings around only one father's biological relatedness to the child (Berkowitz & Marsiglio 2007).

## Adoption

The adoption of children by lesbians and gay men has been a controversial issue in the United States and in many other countries, primarily centering around the capabilities of lesbian and gay adults to effectively parent and the question of whether a heterosexual mother and father are the most appropriate models for children's development and gender socialization. In the early 1980s, the number of children in foster care increased dramatically, and the practice of screening adoption applicants changed as child welfare professionals began to rethink their notions of what constituted acceptable mothers and fathers for waiting children. The concept of a so-called suitable family expanded to include single parents, grandparents, parents of different ethnicities, lower-income families, and, since the 1990s in many states, lesbians and gay men (Esposito & Biafora 2007). Drawing from three national data sources, Gates (2013) estimates that same-sex couples are currently raising more than 25,000 adopted and foster

children in the United States. Same-sex couples raising children are four times more likely than their different-sex counterparts to be raising an adopted child and six times more likely to be raising foster children. These figures significantly underestimate LGBT parent adoption because they do not account for single-parent sexual minorities who have adopted or are fostering a child. National survey data suggest that lesbian and gay adoptive parents share several demographic characteristics with heterosexual adoptive parents. Gates's (2011b) analysis of Census 2010 showed that although racial and ethnic minority same-sex couples were significantly more likely to be raising children, White same-sex couples were significantly more likely to have used adoption to have children. Same-sex couples with adopted children have the highest average annual household income of all adoptive family types, including heterosexual married adoptive couples (Gates et al. 2007).

Shapiro (2013) writes about the ways state laws govern LGBT-parent families. She argues that the key distinction in the law for parental rights in same-sex couple households is whether one or both adults are the legal parent of the child. Once recognition as a legal parent is attained, the rights of parents do not vary based on sexual orientation, but legal differences across states and varying judge's adjudications, especially in the case of custody determinations, can create uncertainty for families. Given that in some jurisdictions only the biological parent in a gay or lesbian intentional family is automatically recognized as a legal guardian of the child, many parents seek out a second-parent adoption in which the nonbiological partner is fully recognized as an equal parent (Polikoff 2008). In a study of 40 lesbian mothers, Hequembourg (2004) found that second-parent adoption was a powerful tool for intentional lesbian families to overcome the "incomplete institutionalization" of gay parenting and other material and symbolic barriers by establishing a legal tie between the nonbiological parent and her children.

Although second-parent adoption offers a more secure legal environment for families to raise children, it also affects custody when cou-

ples end their relationships and is not generally used in lesbian stepfamilies. Work by Gartrell and colleagues (2011) shows that second-parent adoption makes custody decisions more complicated for judges but results in a more equitable sharing of time between parents than in instances when only one parent was recognized as the legal guardian. Furthermore, the likelihood that a child reported feeling close to both mothers was significantly higher in families that had second-parent adoptions. Evidence from the law and society literature suggests that the granting of second-parent adoption is subject to the individual appreciation of judges and is highly variable across jurisdictions, which can exaggerate inequalities among sexual minority families (S.G. Mezey 2008).

Among couples seeking to adopt children through the foster care system or through private adoption, Shapiro says the variance in state law regarding the right of same-sex couples to legally marry affects the ability of these partners to attain legal parent status. There are no states that prohibit adoption because of sexual orientation, so an openly gay man or woman can pursue this path to family formation. However, some states require couples who jointly adopt to be legally married but do not permit same-sex marriage, effectively establishing a hierarchy in the parental relationship in which only the adopting adult has the legal tie to the child. Some states have said that second-parent adoptions are not permissible under the adoption statutes in those states for either same-sex or different-sex couples who are not married, which prevents same-sex couples from adopting children.

## **CHILDREN'S OUTCOMES IN SAME-SEX PARENT FAMILIES**

The outcomes for children raised by same-sex parents versus those of children raised by different-sex parents have garnered significant political and media attention. Some debate exists about the degree to which this research either over- or understates the differences or similarities between these groups, the impact

the political setting has on study results, and whether finding different outcomes for children of gays and lesbians matters. The highly politicized nature of these questions and of same-sex parent families more generally has sparked a rich and complex discussion about the relationship between research and policy, methodological challenges, and the claims stakeholders make based on the literature. For instance, Marks (2012) and Regnerus (2012a) criticized the American Psychological Association's (2005) report and subsequent briefs on lesbian and gay parenting, widely used by advocates of same-sex marriage, for inaccurately representing the literature and for failing to point out data limitations. In turn, opponents of same-sex marriage used these pieces in amicus curiae briefs arguing in favor of upholding the 1996 Defense of Marriage Act currently before federal courts.

Scholarship on the outcomes for children raised in same-sex parent households primarily considers lesbian-headed families. Most analyses (Wainright et al. 2004; Wainright & Patterson 2006, 2008; Rosenfeld 2010) show that years spent being raised by same-sex couple parents creates no significant disadvantage for children. Although the absence of a significant effect in some studies may be due to small sample sizes, even studies using nationally representative data (Fedewa & Clark 2009, Rosenfeld 2010) typically do not find a disadvantage.

However, contrary findings—that children of gay parents seem to fare worse (Regnerus 2012a, Allen et al. 2013)—have used a broader set of family definitions and ill-defined causal mechanisms that treat outcomes that were already present when the children lived with two different-sex parents as if they were outcomes that appeared later on after the children had spent time in a same-sex couple family (Allen et al. 2013; see Rosenfeld 2013 for an explanation). Rather than defining “children raised by gays and lesbians” as those children who grew up in intentional same-sex families, these studies include (a) respondents who ever lived, even briefly, with a same-sex couple; (b) respon-

dents who claim at least one of their parents engaged in same-sex behavior even if that parent was never in a same-sex couple; and (c) respondents whose parent took on a gay identity after a divorce or after the respondent reached adulthood (Gates 2012a; Regnerus 2012b; M.J. Rosenfeld, unpublished data). Thus, these studies do not specifically examine children raised by two same-sex parents and cannot speak to the impact of same-sex parenting on children's outcomes. A recent amicus curiae brief filed by the American Sociological Association (2013) argues that because of these and other methodological issues, including a failure to account for family transitions, such findings do not undermine the “scholarly consensus” that children raised by gay and lesbian couples face no disadvantages. It states, “The clear and consistent consensus in the social science profession is that across a wide range of indicators, children fare just as well when they are raised by same-sex parents when compared to children raised by opposite-sex parents” (p. 3).

The absence of a disadvantage for children in most of the research on same-sex parent families does not necessarily mean the absence of any differences. Some scholars have warned that, in an effort to demonstrate the fitness of lesbian and gay households to raise children, family scholars may have inadvertently overlooked the ways that children raised by gays and lesbians differ from their peers in different-sex parent households. In their reviews on parental gender and parental sexual orientation, Biblarz & Stacey (2010) and Stacey & Biblarz (2001), though not always able to identify the relative strength of individual studies, highlight some interesting dimensions on which same-sex parents behave differently than heterosexual parents. For instance, same-sex parents are less worried about gender nonconformity, spend more time on shared interests and activities, and use less corporal punishment. The division of labor in lesbian relationships is simultaneously less taken for granted and more equal when compared with heterosexual relationships (Sutfin et al. 2008). Consequently, children raised in this context may grow up with a more



flexible understanding of the expectations they should have for their own gender and sexuality (Gartrell et al. 2011). Although we must use caution when attempting to generalize from research with small sample sizes, Gartrell et al.'s (2011) findings suggest that, among other differences in sexual orientation, behavior, and risk exposure, girls raised with lesbian parents have an older age at first heterosexual contact and hold less rigid ideas about their own sexuality than do girls raised by heterosexual parents.

Some of the newest research in this field has begun to hypothesize about the role of family transitions in the outcomes for children in same-sex parent families. Moore (2008) noted the conflict that can occur between the biological mother and her partner over authority in lesbian stepfamilies when children have experienced a transition from one family type to another. The biological mother's greater say over childrearing decisions, combined with her interest in being recognized as the primary parent and other structural components of their relationship, can lead to disharmony in the home that might affect relationship quality and duration as well as children's well-being. In contrast, couples who had children together through assisted reproductive technologies want society to accept them as equal parents and tend to make parenting decisions together. Moreover, their children do not have the experience of marital or relationship disruption, as do children in lesbian stepfamilies.

Rosenfeld (2010) and Potter (2012) tell us that just as family transitions and instability matter for the well-being of children in households with different-sex parents and single parents, they may also matter for children in same-sex parent families. For example, Potter (2012) used data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-K to examine whether and how changes in family structure between kindergarten and eighth grade related to math achievement. Same-sex parent families were included as a type of family structure. He found that children who continuously lived with two same-sex parents had math assessment scores that were about one point higher than

and not significantly different from children who continuously lived with two biological parents. However, the number of cumulative family transitions a child experienced significantly reduced her or his test scores, and this was true across family status. Accounting for family instability through family transitions or in other ways is crucial to the question of how family structure matters for children's well-being.

### **FAMILY DYNAMICS IN HOUSEHOLDS HEADED BY LESBIANS, GAY MEN, AND TRANSGENDER PEOPLE**

The psychological research on family processes in LGBT-parent families mostly compares the intimate relationships of same-sex and different-sex couples in relationship satisfaction, rates of dissolution, the effects of parenthood and legal recognition on these dynamics, and the potential effects of these things on their children. Sociologists are looking at these relationships through slightly different lenses. Oswald and colleagues (Oswald 2002, Oswald et al. 2008) examine how lesbian and gay couples negotiate their relationships with their families of origin and how the rituals around commitment ceremonies and marriage facilitate or complicate those interactions. Same-sex couples use intentionality—or strategies to legitimize and support their relationships—and redefinition—or language, culture, and symbols—to make meaning and affirm their social networks. Related to this theme is the work of Reczek et al. (2009), who show the ways couples use or do not use rituals such as commitment ceremonies to legitimate their unions and transition to a more serious state in their relationships. These findings point us to alternative forms and expressions of union making.

Sullivan (2004), Steinbugler (2012), and Moore (2011) are among those sociologists who have produced books in the past 10 years using interview and ethnographic data to study family processes in lesbian couple families. Sullivan (2004, p. 8) examines the egalitarian nature of housework in lesbian couple

households and their particular efforts to “disrupt the power eminent in gender relations.” Steinbugler (2012) considers how race debates about a postracial US society play out in the lives of interracial same-sex and different-sex couples and analyzes the links between micro-level interactions and macro-level race relations by examining strategies through which individuals maintain close relationships across lines of racial stratification. Moore (2011) weaves together an intracategorical, intersectional analysis of Black lesbian identity and family formation. All three studies were based primarily on qualitative data, which limits their generalizability, but they do suggest avenues and processes that future research should explore.

### Relationship Dissolution

Despite the nonrepresentative nature of data on same-sex couple relationship quality, the literature across studies suggests that heterosexual and same-sex relationships function similarly but are differently exposed to risk factors associated with relationship stability. Comparing longitudinal data from married and cohabiting different-sex and cohabiting same-sex couples, Kurdek (2006) found similar couple dynamics. Predictors of relationship stability and quality for different-sex couples such as personality traits, conflict resolution, and social support also operate for same-sex couples. Using longitudinal relationship dynamics and satisfaction data starting with 226 heterosexual married (80 parent and 146 nonparent) couples and 133 lesbian and gay nonparent couples, Kurdek (2004) compared relationship dissolution rates across couple types. The rates were 3.1% for heterosexual parents, 18.7% for heterosexual nonparents, 19% for gay men, and 23.8% for lesbians. When controlling for age, education, income, and years lived together, the difference between lesbians and gay men was not significant. Across this research (Peplau & Fingerhut 2007), evidence suggests that social barriers—perceived and material—such as legal institutions, children, and interdependent finances decrease the likelihood of relationship

dissolution, whereas social stressors, financial difficulties, and discrimination increase it. Consequently, cohabiting same-sex couples have higher relationship dissolution rates than married heterosexual couples, but more data are necessary to understand differences between lesbian and gay couples.

Full access to marriage for same-sex couples may affect dissolution rates. Using demographic data from Norway and Sweden for different-sex couples marrying and same-sex couples entering a legal union—same-sex marriage was not yet legal—between 1993 and 2002, Andersson et al. (2006) found that divorce risk patterns were similar across groups but that risk levels, such as having a non-native partner, were higher for same-sex couples. Using longitudinal, nationally representative data from the United States, Rosenfeld (2012) showed that marriage (in its various legal manifestations) has the same beneficial effect in extending couple longevity for same-sex couples as marriage has always had for heterosexual couples. Furthermore, controlling for marriage and couple longevity, Rosenfeld showed that gay male couples had the same stability as heterosexual couples, whereas lesbian couples were slightly more likely to break up.

### Transgender Couple Households

After a paucity of research on transgender families, recent scholarship has begun to fill this gap (Hines 2006; Schilt & Westbrook 2009; Pfeffer 2010, 2012; Sanger 2010; Ward 2010). These sociologists investigate intimate relationships in which at least one of the partners has changed or is in the process of changing sexes and how that transition impacts aspects of families such as the division of household labor, relationship formation and dissolution, communication to family and outsiders, the management of self-understandings, and the negotiation of institutions. To date, the sociological literature has focused on transpeople in relationships with someone of a different sex, rather than with people of the same sex (i.e., transwomen partnered with lesbians).

Analyzing relationships in which one person is transgender reveals a complex and nuanced dynamic of sexual and gender identity that distinguishes them from lesbian, gay, or heterosexual couples (Sanger 2010). Interviews with partners of transgender individuals show that they perform a great deal of “gendered labor” (Ward 2010) to help their partners achieve their desired gender both during and after transition. Women in relationships with transmen report doing more of the housework and emotional work such as nurturing their partner or managing his medical care and health advocacy (Pfeffer 2010). They justify the inequalities in the division of labor in terms of individual preference and choice that allow them to create a “family myth” of gender equality and maintain a feminist identity (Pfeffer 2010).

Transgender families are uniquely situated socially and institutionally because they can subvert or maintain legal and social norms. If they are perceived by others as ordinary heterosexual couples despite their own desire to transgress, they can use “normative resistance” to work against this “queer invisibility” by rejecting expectations of marriage and monogamy (Pfeffer 2012, p. 580). At the same time, they can also use “inventive pragmatism” to take advantage of the social and material resources of existing heteronormative structures such as legal marriage and parenthood (p. 587). Scholars in this area point to the limits of existing categories of analysis, such as same-sex or different-sex couples, and highlight a need for new conceptual tools for studying families. They draw on a variety of theoretical approaches from the concept of “governmentality” (Foucault 1991) to “emotional work” (Hochschild 1979) and “doing gender” (West & Zimmerman 1987), and suggest new ways of understanding transgender families, a group at the intersection of the medical, legal, and social institutions of sex, gender, and sexuality (Schilt & Westbrook 2009).

### **Confronting Stigma**

Despite the social changes for lesbian and gay couple households in recent decades, they still

face obstacles in the legal system that pose barriers to their full recognition as families. In interviews with young adults raised by lesbian and gay parents, Robitaille & Saint-Jacques (2009) found that youths experienced both direct and indirect forms of stigmatization. They were more likely to have been teased or belittled because they had same-sex parents. They also reported feeling stigmatized when teachers and other adults discussed same-sex marriage or homosexuality in negative ways. Most of the adult children queried by Leddy et al. (2012) felt that lesbian families face both structural and interpersonal barriers to successful integration in society. Notwithstanding these impediments, they also reported receiving mostly positive responses from their peers about their families (though some reported negative or indifferent reactions). Of those who had experienced bullying because of their mothers’ sexual orientation, they reported feeling hurt and angry, as well as embarrassed.

Faced with such experiences, lesbian and gay families create strategies to confront stigma. In addition to communicating closely with their children and teaching them how to talk about their family structures to others, they also create dense and diverse social support networks with families, friends, and especially other lesbian and gay parents (Peplau & Fingerhut 2007, Bos & van Balen 2008). These relationships allow them to have both material and psychological support to counteract the negative effects of homophobia. Children of lesbian and gay parents, especially adolescents and adults, develop their own techniques of dealing with the stigma associated with their parents’ sexual orientation. For example, Leddy et al. (2012) found that young adults pursued several strategies including keeping quiet about their lesbian parents, speaking up and educating their peers when faced with negative comments, and, to a lesser degree, directly confronting instances of homophobia or seeking out support groups. Lick et al. (2012) linked county-level indices of social climate to psychological adjustment in individuals raised by sexual minority parents. Better outcomes were reported for children

living in areas that were more supportive of LGBT populations and had antidiscrimination laws to protect sexual minority populations. These findings suggest a role that public policies and laws can play in reducing the effects of stigma for youth raised in LGBT-parent families.

### WHAT LIES AHEAD: FUTURE RESEARCH ON LGBT-PARENT FAMILIES

Since the start of the twenty-first century, the status of lesbian and gay families has evolved considerably. Perhaps the most noticeable shift has been in the kinds of legal battles sexual minorities face as well in the centrality of family issues, such as marriage and parenting, within the international gay rights movement. In the 1980s and 1990s, a common legal struggle for lesbians and gay men was to gain custody of their children in instances of divorce from previous heterosexual relationships. Shapiro (2013, p. 295) says that these cases still exist, but modern LGBT family law is distinguished by a different series of cases: those in which two people—most often lesbians but increasingly gay men as well—separate and disagree over the continuing care and custody of the children. In the past 10–15 years, the field has evolved, with new and advanced data sets such as Census 2010, journals like the *Journal of GLBT Family Studies* and *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, as well as growing support for sexuality-based research in traditional sociology departments. The political and scientific are not unrelated; recent legal advances have only heightened the importance of sociological research on sexuality and families. The integral role of expert witnesses in the ongoing federal trial of California’s Proposition 8 stands as an example of how empirical work in the field can directly bear on the legal status of lesbian and gay families. These elevated stakes thus make high standards in data quality and ethical research approaches even more essential.

In this context, we see the field evolving in several directions. First, there is an obvious

need to produce high-quality data that accurately describe the lives of LGBT parents and their children (Institute of Medicine 2011). To do this we must incorporate better measures of sexual orientation into survey designs. Some of the harshest critiques of the research on LGBT sexuality and families lead us to the classic inquiry, “How do we know what we know?” Durso & Gates (2013) document the work of a group of leading social scientists to create a road map for how to construct questions on sexual orientation that provide conceptual clarity regarding the three discrete dimensions of sexuality identified by Laumann et al. (1994): sexual attraction, sexual behavior, and sexual identity. Measurement, not just of sexual orientation but of family experiences such as relationship transitions, will go a long way in improving what is known in the field, and here is where high-quality ethnographic and interview data can make a difference. More than better measurement, responsible analyses of sexual orientation data must carefully consider differences among LGBT people, as well as those who do not wish to label their sexuality (Gates 2011a).

Second, given the momentum of legal recognition of same-sex marriage in a growing number of US states and internationally, we can investigate empirically the warnings by some scholars that marriage for lesbians and gay men will ultimately result in exclusions for those who fall outside of the new “gay norm” (Warner 1999, Seidman 2002, Gilreath 2011). More generally, the demographic trends suggest a need to learn more about the effect of marriage, adoption, and ever-changing state and federal laws affecting sexual minority populations (Oswald & Kuvallanka 2008, Shulman et al. 2012). One way to do this is by better understanding how ongoing legal changes reduce, create, or exacerbate inequalities among families across the lines of race, class, gender, and sexual identity. Increasing state recognition of the marriages of same-sex couples also means we must more carefully understand distinctions between marriage and other types of same-sex unions on individual and child well-being.

Third, to further the integrity and strength of research within the field, ongoing analyses of the link between research and policy on LGBT-parent families are necessary. This conversation has already been initiated and examined in several forums, particularly on the issue of children's outcomes, and continues to be relevant. Sociology can make a unique contribution to this question by examining how research on lesbian and gay families is funded, institutionalized, conducted, and used in the policy sphere.

Finally, we stress that more attention needs to be paid to families on the margins: families of color, working-class families, transgender families, and households whose structures are outside the couple norm (i.e., poly-parent

families). Yet beyond increasing the volume and centrality of empirical studies dedicated to these families, we suggest that the theoretical insights of scholars already studying them be expanded and developed. The understandings we gain from learning about Black lesbian families or families with transgender members, for instance, require us to rethink how we address the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality and have ramifications for the field of family studies more broadly. By interrogating the very categories of analysis that tend to dominate research on lesbian and gay families, this groundbreaking work gives scholars the opportunity to push forward a rich research agenda that avoids taking the meanings of family for granted.

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# Contents

Frontispiece <i>Charles Tilly</i> .....	xiv
<b>Prefatory Chapter</b>	
Formations and Formalisms: Charles Tilly and the Paradox of the Actor <i>John Krinsky and Ann Mische</i> .....	1
<b>Theory and Methods</b>	
The Principles of Experimental Design and Their Application in Sociology <i>Michelle Jackson and D.R. Cox</i> .....	27
The New Sociology of Morality <i>Steven Hitlin and Stephen Vaisey</i> .....	51
<b>Social Processes</b>	
Social Scientific Inquiry Into Genocide and Mass Killing: From Unitary Outcome to Complex Processes <i>Peter B. Owens, Yang Su, and David A. Snow</i> .....	69
Interest-Oriented Action <i>Lyn Spillman and Michael Strand</i> .....	85
Drugs, Violence, and the State <i>Bryan R. Roberts and Yu Chen</i> .....	105
Healthcare Systems in Comparative Perspective: Classification, Convergence, Institutions, Inequalities, and Five Missed Turns <i>Jason Beckfield, Sigrun Olafsdottir, and Benjamin Sosnaud</i> .....	127
<b>Institutions and Culture</b>	
Multiculturalism and Immigration: A Contested Field in Cross-National Comparison <i>Ruud Koopmans</i> .....	147
Sociology of Fashion: Order and Change <i>Patrik Aspers and Frédéric Godart</i> .....	171

Religion, Nationalism, and Violence: An Integrated Approach <i>Philip S. Gorski and Gülay Türkmen-Derivoğlu</i> .....	193
<b>Formal Organizations</b>	
Race, Religious Organizations, and Integration <i>Korie L. Edwards, Brad Christerson, and Michael O. Emerson</i> .....	211
<b>Political and Economic Sociology</b>	
An Environmental Sociology for the Twenty-First Century <i>David N. Pellow and Hollie Nyseth Brehm</i> .....	229
Economic Institutions and the State: Insights from Economic History <i>Henning Hillmann</i> .....	251
<b>Differentiation and Stratification</b>	
Demographic Change and Parent-Child Relationships in Adulthood <i>Judith A. Seltzer and Suzanne M. Bianchi</i> .....	275
<b>Individual and Society</b>	
Gender and Crime <i>Candace Kruttschnitt</i> .....	291
White-Collar Crime: A Review of Recent Developments and Promising Directions for Future Research <i>Sally S. Simpson</i> .....	309
From Social Structure to Gene Regulation, and Back: A Critical Introduction to Environmental Epigenetics for Sociology <i>Hannah Landecker and Aaron Panofsky</i> .....	333
Racial Formation in Perspective: Connecting Individuals, Institutions, and Power Relations <i>Aliya Saperstein, Andrew M. Penner, and Ryan Light</i> .....	359
The Critical Sociology of Race and Sport: The First Fifty Years <i>Ben Carrington</i> .....	379
<b>Demography</b>	
The Causal Effects of Father Absence <i>Sara McLanahan, Laura Tach, and Daniel Schneider</i> .....	399
International Migration and Familial Change in Communities of Origin: Transformation and Resistance <i>Patricia Arias</i> .....	429
Trends and Variation in Assortative Mating: Causes and Consequences <i>Christine R. Schwartz</i> .....	451

Gender and International Migration: Contributions and Cross-Fertilizations <i>Gioconda Herrera</i> .....	471
--	-----

LGBT Sexuality and Families at the Start of the Twenty-First Century <i>Mignon R. Moore and Michael Stambolis-Rubstorfer</i> .....	491
---	-----

**Urban and Rural Community Sociology**

Housing: Commodity versus Right <i>Mary Pattillo</i> .....	509
---	-----

**Indexes**

Cumulative Index of Contributing Authors, Volumes 30–39 .....	533
Cumulative Index of Article Titles, Volumes 30–39 .....	537

**Errata**

An online log of corrections to *Annual Review of Sociology* articles may be found at  
<http://soc.annualreviews.org/errata.shtml>