

Lesbians as parents

A preliminary comparison of heterosexual and homosexual mothers and their children*

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This is a preliminary report on the psychosocial development of prepubescent children who live with their single mothers. The major independent variable is the sexual orientation of the mothers. Data from a group of 50 women self-designated as homosexual and their children ages 3-11 are compared with responses from a matched group of 20 heterosexual single mothers and their children.****

Introduction

The data are relevant to several areas of scientific investigation and social concern: pattern of the single-parent life-style; effects of a homosexual mother on children's social and sexual development; and effects of father absence on children's development. This paper is primarily concerned with the children's adjustment and development.

By focusing on mothers' sexual orientation and degree of father absence as major variables, and by studying the sexual histories of the mothers and the psychological tests of the children, it is hoped that a contribution will be made to understanding sexual identity development. The single mother study is one of several research projects of the Department of Psychiatry, SUNY – Stony Brook, which compare information from „atypical” families with matched „typical” households in order to illuminate the processes of creating and accepting a sexual lifestyle.

Each study is built around a central model of sexual identity and attempts to test critical points in the model. Stated briefly, sexual identity is viewed as having three major components: core morphologic identity, gender role

behavior, and sexual partner preference (Green 1975). Core identity is the sense that one is male or female. Most commonly, this perception is in agreement with an individual's genotype and phenotype, as well as the perceptions of those around him/her.

Related to core morphologic identity is gender-role behavior, the individual's conduct that is culturally ascribed to females or males. Lately, there has been considerable research on the concept of psychological androgyny. The latter, defined as freedom from rigid sex roles (Berzins; Wakefield *et al*) is measured by new attitude scales tested on adolescent and adult samples, perhaps most notably the Bem Sex Role Inventory (Bem). This inventory creates the category of androgyny for individuals who score relatively high on independent scales of femininity and masculinity.

The third component, perhaps developing after core morphologic identity and gender role, is sexual orientation, or sexual partner preference. Two factors need be considered in sexual orientation: sexual experience (including fantasy life), and self-labeling as heterosexual, homosexual or ambisexual. The potential formative relationships among these three components are issues for research in both the mothers' and children's data.

Subject description and methodology

The sample consists of two matched groups of unmarried women with at least one child between ages 3-11 years. The first group consists of 50 women

self-designated as homosexual and the second is composed of heterosexual single women. Data are reported on 20 match families. All adult subjects are white women between ages 25-46 who have been living as single parents for at least 2 years, with a mean of 4.4 years. While the majority (88 percent) are separated or divorced, some are widowed or were never married. Income and occupation range from unemployed on welfare to professional earning \$2000 per month. The majority work full-time for substantially less (median=\$500-850/month). Education ranges from grade school to graduate degrees, with most subjects having completed at least 1 year of college. There are 32 daughters and 26 sons in the homosexual family sample, and 13 daughters and 12 sons in the heterosexual group. The median age for the children is 8-9 years.

The homosexual sample was recruited beginning in October 1976 through mailings and personal contacts with 190 women's organizations, church groups, and single parents' associations. A press release about the study was also mailed by the National Gay Task Force, at our expense, to gay and lesbian publications. This approach brought volunteers from every region of the country. Efforts were concentrated on ten states which were in reasonable travelling distance, with efforts to reach women in both rural and urban areas.

The heterosexual match was begun in March 1977 through similar mailings and personal contacts with women's groups, church groups, and single parents groups. Ads were placed in local newspapers as well. To date, the matches have been made out of 500 respondents to the requests for subjects. The heterosexual group is matched to the homosexual families on age and racial group of mother, age and sex of children, length of time separated from father, marital status of mother (never married, divorced, separated, widowed), income level of family, educational level of mother, and, when possible, mother's religion of upbringing.

Each accepted adult volunteer completed questionnaires and attitude scales pertaining to her parenting experiences, upbringing, marital and relationship patterns, and her attitudes toward divorce, sex roles, sex education for children, and discipline. Personality scales were also included. An audiotaped interview with each mother was done which reviewed the material from the questionnaires, added depth to se-

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**** While a match of all 50 families is planned, it was felt that the study to date yielded useful information.

veral areas, and included a sexual history of the mother. Children were interviewed about play preferences, friendships, television habits and thoughts about growing up and tested using the WPPSI or WISC-R; several tests for sex-role behavior and gender identity; and the Bene-Anthony Family Relations Test.

The single parent experience: mothers' responses

The single-parent family is a growing phenomenon. There were 4 million single-parent families in the United States in 1975, with 90 percent headed by women; one out of every six children under eighteen years of age was living with a single parent. This pattern is relatively recent – since 1950 the number of single-parent families has increased ten times as fast as the number of two-parent families (*Molinoff*). Researchers, courts and social service agencies are concerned about the effects of parents' divorce and separation on children, and about the most effective child custody decisions. The phenomenon also has impact on the U.S. welfare system, job market, and educational system.

In many respects the two groups of mothers in this study are similar in their experiences as single parents and typify the phenomenon. Those married did so when 21 years old on the average, and their marriages lasted 7 years. While homosexual feelings were an issue leading to divorce for 15 of 50 lesbian women, other reasons for divorce were very similar: tension over the division of labor and sex roles in the marriage, sexual dissatisfaction, extramarital relationships, husband's alcoholism, and wife abuse. Reactions of close family members to the break were similar: shock, disapproval, and sadness. Forty percent of the homosexual women and 50 percent of the heterosexual women sought therapy for themselves in the first year as a single parent. Income levels dropped after divorce, and 50 percent felt that child support money is an angry issue between them and their ex-husbands. Changes in smoking, drinking, sleeping and work habits after becoming a single parent were also similar. Homosexual women were significantly less likely to report a decrease in sex drive as a single parent.

The current relationships with the absent father and relatives are similar for the two groups. Social life and living situations are different. Some heterosexual mothers have fairly regular rela-

tionships with men which may lead to sharing a household. Homosexual women sometimes have partners or good friends living with them, and the children experience a two-female parent arrangement. Twenty-four of the 50 homosexual mothers have partners who live in or very near their homes. In designing the research, the possible confounds of lifestyle differences were considered. One possibility was including only women who lived alone with their children with no impending partnership. This, however, would not have fit an accurate description of the lifestyle or hopes of either group of mothers. However, the original criterion of no adult male (18+ years) living in the household provided a controlled examination of the dimension of father-figure absence.

Both groups of mothers expressed concern about coping with children's reaction to relationships they have had since becoming single parents and described a similar range of reactions in their children (acceptance to rejection and jealousy).

Plans for the future differ in the two groups. Seventy-five percent of the homosexual women said they did not plan to remarry. Among the homosexual women who would consider another marriage, reasons most often cited were concern for the children, financial security, and the concealment of homosexuality. Heterosexuals most commonly listed emotional and sexual needs and companionships as reasons for desiring remarriage. Friendships differed. Homosexuals reported a preponderance of male and female homosexual friends; only one heterosexual acknowledges social contact with homosexuals. No significant differences between the two groups were found on the desirability of parenting, duration of breast feeding, or amount of physical contact with infants and young children.

The children in single-mother households

As the figures cited above suggest, child custody in the large majority of cases is awarded to mothers. However, if a mother is accused of being a homosexual by a spouse, relative, or social service agency, judges have often refused custody and restricted visitation. The most common concerns raised in custody cases are that the mother's sexual orientation will influence the child's sexual choices, that the child will have an unclear or improper gender identity,

that the child will suffer from a social stigma in peer group relationships, and that the child's general welfare will be neglected because the mother will be too involved in her own lifestyle.

Children's Welfare. Field notes were used to make some observations on attention given to children in their homes. No evidence of neglect or child abuse was seen. To the contrary, despite obvious income restrictions in many families which affect the size and furnishing of homes, the children always had pleasant rooms. In several homes this meant the mother slept in the living room, giving up some of her own privacy for her child's sake. Children were eager to show their rooms and favorite toys. Appointments were scheduled around numerous extracurricular activities such as dance and music lessons, sports events, and tutoring.

Peer Group Relationships. Both male and female children were similar in reporting same-sex best friends in the children's interview. A difference between children in the two groups appeared in their assessment of their own popularity. The female children of homosexual mothers tended to report themselves to be more popular than did heterosexual's daughters among other girls at home and at school and among boys in the neighbourhood. No other differences in popularity were found.

Sexual Identity. Traditionally femininity in childhood is expressed by interest in doll play, identification with female figures in fantasy games, women's dress, and avoidance of rough-and-tumble play (*Brown*). Masculinity encompasses sex-role traits that are instrumental, dominant, goal oriented, and cognitive (*Kelly and Worrell*). Masculinity in children is associated with rough-and-tumble play, preference for toys such as trucks, cars, and guns, identification with male figures in fantasy games and men's dress. The individual with sexual identity conflict perceives itself to be the opposite gender, and supports that self-labeling by fulfilling the opposite traditional sex role. In some adult cases, the person seeks surgery and hormonal treatments to effect a transsexual change (*Green and Money*). *Green* (1975) defines a sexual identity conflict in children as a child who wants to be of the other sex, consistently role plays as persons of the other sex; dresses or asks to be dressed as the other sex; prefers other-sex playmates; and avoids toys and games typical of its own sex.

Using Green's criteria, only one of 82 studied children, a boy of a heterosexual mother, could be considered as having a sexual identity conflict. On the Draw-a-Person test all children most commonly drew a same-sex person first, a measure of appropriate sexual identity development.

Girls with homosexual mothers were somewhat more likely to show interest in choosing a traditionally masculine occupation (16 of 32 as against 3 of 13 controls) but this was not statistically significant. They were similar to girls with heterosexual mothers in the proportion of males and females among persons they most want to be like. Boys in both groups were very similar and strongly masculine.

In children's interviews, there were no statistically significant differences in television viewing preferences of the two groups, either for type of program watched or sex of favorite character.

The favorite games and favorite toys reported by the two groups were similar for both groups of boys and both groups of girls. The daughters of heterosexuals tended to prefer traditionally feminine activities in school and in the neighbourhood more than did the daughters of homosexuals, but the difference was not statistically significant. The boys show a stronger preference than girls for activities of their own sex, both in school and near home, with boys very similar in both groups.

The It-scale scores for girls and boys showed no significant differences.

Father Absence. Previous studies have indicated significant effects on children's identity in father-absent or mother-dominant homes. By far the majority of studies on the effect of father-absence have focused on the effects upon male children. In a review of 60 studies which met minimal research criteria, *Herzog and Sudia* summarized the effects of father-absence on masculine identity as the failure of the male children to develop an adequate sense of their own masculinity, resulting in feminization, sex role „confusion”, or overcompensation leading to extreme aggressiveness and delinquent behavior (*Barclay and Cusamano*). *Green* (1975) noted that 40 percent of his sample of boys exhibiting extremely feminine behavior were separated from their biological fathers before their fifth birthdays.

Studies exploring the effects of father-absence on girls are few. *Lynn and Sawrey* found that girls with absent fathers tended to be more dependent on their mothers than girls from intact families. Significant research in this area has been contributed by *Hetherington*. Girls from families whose fathers were absent as a result of death or divorce were unable to relate in a trusting and comfortable manner to men and male peers. Age at onset of heterosexual activities was also affected. No differences were found between father-absent and father-present girls on sex-role preference or femininity.

Summarizing the literature, the effects

of father-absence on boys include diminished masculinity, increased aggression, competitiveness and physical activity. The boys' peer relations may also be affected. The female child may be unable to engage in trusting relationships with males, and may be more dependent upon her mother, however, her femininity does not seem to be affected. The earlier in the life of the child and the more prolonged the absence of the father, the more likely that the child, especially the male, will experience adjustment problems.

In this study, the degree of contact with father ranges from the child not knowing his/her father to spending only slightly less than half their time with him. The majority spend 25 percent or less of the time with their father. Both homosexual and heterosexual mothers encourage visitation and help to provide additional male role models – friends, relatives, teachers – for their children, particularly sons.

Field evaluations show generally good feelings expressed about subjects' fathers. During the test children frequently wish to discuss their reactions to divorce or the custody arrangement. Older children have commented that they are aware of their fathers being more generous to them since the separation. Some children express jealousy toward stepmothers and other children living with their fathers, and similar comments are made about some mothers' partners, both female and male. Children who do not know a father report it and seem comfortable with their mothers' explanations. For three sons of homosexuals, a maternal grandfather or uncle is described as a male parent-substitute. The children who report mostly negative feelings about fathers feel that their fathers are disinterested in them because there is no consistency in the visitation pattern. A father who lives in another region and can be with his children only a month every year is more positively viewed than is a father who sees a child more frequently but erratically, breaking promises about expected times together.

Conclusion

The study to date has shown far more similarities than differences in the families headed by homosexual and heterosexual mothers. Patterns of nurturance, sexual and marital histories, difficulties encountered as female heads-of-households, and relationships



with children and relatives are similar. Differences reflect the variable of another woman more often present in the homosexual mothers' homes, the homosexuals' low interest in another marriage, and the incidence of homosexuality as a contributing factor to separation and divorce.

Thus far the analysis of the children's data has not revealed any sexual identity conflict or sex role confusion. Relationships with fathers and other males did not differ significantly. No examples of child neglect or abuse were discerned. Instead, effective parenting seems to be provided by both groups of mothers. The concerns raised in child custody cases about homosexual mothers' fitness to parent are not supported by the data. Further analysis using a completed control group will determine the effects of fathers' absence, mothers' sex role orientation, and mother's sexual preference on sons' and daughters' development.

This information may aid family courts in making custody decisions based on fact and not on commonly held assumptions, decisions truly in the best interests of the child.

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Aan het lijntje houden of knopen doorhakken?

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Toen men omstreeks 1960 aarzelend in het openbaar begon te spreken over homoseksualiteit, zagen kerkelijke ambtsdragers en gemeentelieden zich geconfronteerd met een verschijnsel dat zij niet konden negeren. In een soort paniekstemming werden bijbelteksten naar voren gehaald, die er geen twijfel over lieten bestaan dat homoseksualiteit moest worden afgewezen. Maar er waren ook anderen die juist waarschuwden tegen klakkeloos citeren. Inmiddels is er wel wat veranderd. Een kort overzicht van de houding van de kerken tegenover homoseksualiteit.

Inleiding

Over alles valt te twisten, ook over smaak. Wel zal tijdens de meeste discussies blijken, dat niet wat er gezegd wordt, maar juist wat er niet gezegd wordt, de hoofdrol speelt. Iemand die wil aantonen, dat er veel ten gunste verandert in het kerkelijk denken en handelen, zal waarschijnlijk hoopvol gestemd zijn over de mogelijkheden binnen het christelijke gemeentelieven. Anderen, die de moed hebben opgegeven, zullen van links en rechts bewijsmateriaal aanslepen om de trieste ontwikkeling aan te tonen.

Bij homoseksualiteit is het niet zo moeilijk om schouderophalend aan te tonen dat het toch maar traag gaat met het verwerken van de problemen die de homoseksuele mensen bij bijbel- en kerkgetrouwe gelovigen hebben opgeroepen. Er zijn er die hun trouw aan de bijbel en kerk onomwonden blijven bewijzen. Zelden zal nog gezegd worden dat homoseksualiteit iets is dat niet bestaat of mag bestaan. Begrip is „in” en dus zal ook de meest fervente tegenstander zich royaal voorzien van begrip. De homoseksualiteit is er en mag er zijn, mits de homoseksuele mens zich maar niet als zodanig gedraagt. Duidelijke taal gebruikt Ds. W. Glashouwer in zijn boekje „Wat zegt God over homoseksuele handelingen?": „Homoseksuele omgang is één van de ergste tekenen van het feit dat wij in zonde zijn gevallen en dat we Zijn beeld zijn kwijtgeraakt. Dat

* Verbonden aan het Oekumenisch Radiopastoraat.

blijkt duidelijk uit de geschiedenis van Sodom en Gomorra”.

Bijbelcitaten

Toen men rond 1960 aarzelend in het openbaar begon te spreken over homoseksualiteit, werden er opeens bijbelteksten ontdekt, waarvan velen het bestaan nauwelijks wisten. In een soort paniekstemming werden teksten naar voren gehaald die duidelijk konden aantonen dat homoseksualiteit zonder meer moest worden afgewezen. Leviticus 20:13 werd geciteerd: „Een man die gemeenschap heeft met iemand van het mannelijk geslacht, zoals men gemeenschap heeft met een vrouw, – beiden hebben een gruwel gedaan, zij zullen zeker ter dood gebracht worden, hun bloedschuld is op hen”. Maar bijna niemand repte van Leviticus 20:18: „Een man die bij een vloeiende vrouw ligt en haar schaamte ontbloot – haar bron heeft hij ontbloot en zij heeft de bron van haar bloed ontbloot; beiden zullen zij uitgeroeid worden uit het midden van hun volk”. Het blijft een vreemde zaak wanneer mensen in de bijbel op zoek gaan naar die teksten die als bewijsmateriaal kunnen dienen voor opvattingen die bij voorbaat vaststaan. En ik verzeker U, ook in dit geval gaat de vlieger op: wie zoekt, zal vinden. Dr. S. J. Ridderbos (gereformeerd predikant) publiceerde in 1959 in het blad „Bezinning” de bijbelgedeelten waarin sprake is van homoseksueel gedrag. Hij waarschuwt tegen een klakkeloos citeren. Hij stelt ook de vraag hoe