

# Queers as Folk

## Does it really make no difference if your parents are straight or gay?

By Mark Regnerus



Not all studies about children raised by same-sex parents are created equal

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Also read William Saletan's take on the new gay-parents study [here](#).

Not far beneath all the debate about marriage equality remains a longstanding concern about children. Parents and advocates of all stripes wonder, and some worry, whether the children of gay and lesbian parents will turn out “different.” Different in significant ways, not just odd or unique ones. Family scholars, in particular, have paid closer attention to the specific family dynamics that might affect such children, like the number and gender of parents, their genetic relationship to the children, as well as any “household transitions” the kids have endured.

Most family scholars had, until recently, consistently (and publicly) affirmed the elevated stability and social benefits of the married, heterosexual, biological, two-parent household,

when contrasted to single mothers, cohabiting couples, adoptive parents, divorced parents, and—tacitly—gay and lesbian parents. For instance, in their 1994 book *Growing Up With A Single Parent*, sociologists Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur wrote, “If we were asked to design a system for making sure that children’s basic needs were met, we would probably come up with something quite similar to the two-parent ideal.” Other family structures were all widely perceived to fall short—even if not far short—in a variety of developmental domains such as educational achievement, behavior problems, and emotional well-being. While many of us have anecdotal evidence or personal experience to the contrary, the social science on the matter remained clear: When mom and dad stay together their children tend to be, in the weekly words of Garrison Keillor, “above average.” Stepparents and single moms got used to the chorus of voices telling them their job was a tall one. Ditto for gay and lesbian parents.

For this last group, however, things began to change in 2001 with the publication of a review article in the *American Sociological Review*, which noted that while there appeared to be some differences in outcomes between children in same-sex and heterosexual households, there weren’t as many as family scholars might have expected, and some differences—like a proclivity toward same-sex experimentation—need no longer be perceived as deficits in an enlightened age like ours. Since that time the conventional wisdom has been that there are “no differences” of note in the child outcomes of gay and lesbian parents. The phrase has appeared in dozens of studies, reports, depositions, and articles—and in countless email and Facebook debates—since then.

Ten years later, the discourse has actually shifted further still, suggesting that same-sex parents now appear to be more competent than heterosexual ones. A second review of research asserted that “non-heterosexual” parents, on average, enjoy significantly better relationships with their children than do heterosexual ones, and that the kids in same-sex families exhibited no differences in the domains of cognitive development, psychological adjustment, and gender identity. Elsewhere it was noted that in lesbian families there is zero evidence of sexual abuse, and the news was widely publicized. This line of argument led to yet another review article—this one on gender and parenting in 2010—with sociologists Judith Stacey and Tim Biblarz openly contending that:

based strictly on the published science, one could argue that two women parent better on average than a woman and a man, or at least than a woman and man with a traditional division of labor. Lesbian coparents seem to outperform comparable married heterosexual, biological parents on several measures, even while being denied the substantial privileges of marriage.

The matter was considered settled. In fact, it was old news to psychologists by then, since in 2005 the APA had issued a brief on lesbian and gay

parenting in which it was asserted, “Not a single study has found children of lesbian or gay parents to be disadvantaged in any significant respect relative to children of heterosexual parents.”

The rapid pace at which the overall academic discourse surrounding gay and lesbian parents’ comparative competence has swung—from the wide acknowledgement of challenges to “no differences” to more capable than mom and pop families—is notable, and frankly a bit suspect. Scientific truths are seldom reversed in a decade. By comparison, studies of adoption—a common method by which many same-sex couples (but even more heterosexual ones) become parents—have repeatedly and consistently revealed important and wide-ranging differences, on average, between adopted children and biological ones. The differences have been so pervasive and consistent that adoption experts now emphasize that “acknowledgement of difference” is critical for both parents and clinicians when working with adopted children and teens. This ought to give social scientists studying gay-parenting outcomes pause—rather than lockstep unanimity. After all, many children of gay and lesbian couples are adopted.

Far more of them, however, are the children of single parents, and were born the old-fashioned way. This is one conclusion of the New Family Structures Study (NFSS), an overview article about which appears in the July issue of the journal *Social Science Research*. Instead of relying on small samples, or the challenges of discerning sexual orientation of household residents using census data, my colleagues and I randomly screened over 15,000 Americans aged 18-39 and asked them if their biological mother or father ever had a romantic relationship with a member of the same sex. I realize that one same-sex relationship does not a lesbian make, necessarily. But our research team was less concerned with the complicated politics of sexual identity than with same-sex behavior.

The basic results call into question simplistic notions of “no differences,” at least with the generation that is out of the house. On 25 of 40 different outcomes evaluated, the children of women who’ve had same-sex relationships fare quite differently than those in stable, biologically-intact mom-and-pop families, displaying numbers more comparable to those from heterosexual stepfamilies and single parents. Even after including controls for age, race, gender, and things like being bullied as a youth, or the gay-friendliness of the state in which they live, such respondents were more apt to report being unemployed, less healthy, more depressed, more likely to have cheated on a spouse or partner, smoke more pot, had trouble with the law, report more male and female sex partners, more sexual victimization, and were more likely to reflect negatively on their childhood family life, among other things. Why such dramatic differences? I can only speculate, since the data are not poised to pinpoint causes. One notable theme among the adult children of same-sex parents, however, is household instability, and plenty of it. The children of fathers who have had same-sex relationships fare a bit better, but they seldom reported living with their father for very long, and never with his partner for more than three years.

So why did this study come up with such different results than previous work in the field? And why should one study alter so much previous sentiment? Basically, better methods. When it comes to assessing how children of gay parents are faring, the careful methods and random sampling approach found in demography has not often been employed by scholars studying this issue, due in part—to be sure—to the challenges in locating and surveying small minorities randomly. In its place, the scholarly community has often been treated to small, nonrandom “convenience” studies of mostly white, well-educated lesbian parents, including plenty of data-collection efforts in which participants knew that they were contributing to important studies with potentially substantial political consequences, elevating the probability of something akin to the “Hawthorne Effect.” This is hardly an optimal environment for collecting unbiased data (and to their credit, many of the researchers admitted these challenges). I’m not claiming that all the previous research on this subject is bunk. But small or nonrandom studies shouldn’t be the gold standard for research, all the more so when we’re dealing with a topic so weighted with public interest and significance.

To improve upon the science and to test the theory of “no differences,” the NFSS collected data from a large, random cross-section of American young adults—apart from the census, the largest population-based dataset prepared to answer research questions about households in which mothers or fathers have had same-sex relationships—and asked them questions about their life both now and while they were growing up. When simply and briefly asked if their mother and/or father had been in a same-sex romantic relationship, 175 said it was true of their mothers and 73 said the same about their fathers—numbers far larger than has typified studies in this area. We interviewed all of these respondents (and a random sample of others) about their own lives and relationships, as well as asked them to reflect upon their family life while growing up. The differences, it turns out, were numerous. For instance, 28 percent of the adult children of women who’ve had same-sex relationships are currently unemployed, compared to 8 percent of those from married mom-and-dad families. Forty percent of the former admit to having had an affair while married or cohabiting, compared to 13 percent of the latter. Nineteen percent of the former said they were currently or recently in psychotherapy for problems connected with anxiety, depression, or relationships, compared with 8 percent of the latter. And those are just three of the 25 differences I noted.

While we know that good things tend to happen—both in the short-term and over the long run—when people provide households that last, parents in the NFSS who had same-sex relationships were the least likely to exhibit such stability. The young-adult children of women in lesbian relationships

reported the highest incidence of time spent in foster care (at 14 percent of total, compared to 2 percent among the rest of the sample). Forty percent spent time living with their grandparents (compared to 10 percent of the rest); 19 percent spent time living on their own before age 18 (compared to 4 percent among everyone else). In fact, less than 2 percent of all respondents who said their mother had a same-sex relationship reported living with their mother and her partner for all 18 years of their childhood.

Kudos to those gay parents, like those of Zach Wahls, who have done a remarkable job in raising their now young-adult children. I'm sure the challenges were significant and the social support often modest. There are cases in the data of people like Zach, but not very many. Stability is pivotal, but uncommon.

There are limitations to this study, of course. We didn't have as many intact lesbian and gay families as we hoped to evaluate, even though they are the face of much public deliberation about marriage equality. But it wasn't for lack of effort.

Let me be clear: I'm not claiming that sexual orientation is at fault here, or that I know about kids who are presently being raised by gay or lesbian parents. Their parents may be forging more stable relationships in an era that is more accepting and supportive of gay and lesbian couples. But that is not the case among the previous generation, and thus social scientists, parents, and advocates would do well from here forward to avoid simply assuming the kids are all right.

This study arrives in the middle of a season that's already exhibited plenty of high drama over same-sex marriage, whether it's DOMA, the president's evolving perspective, Prop 8 pinball, or finished and future state ballot initiatives. The political take-home message of the NFSS study is unclear, however. On the one hand, the instability detected in the NFSS could translate into a call for extending the relative security afforded by marriage to gay and lesbian couples. On the other hand, it may suggest that the household instability that the NFSS reveals is just too common among same-sex couples to take the social gamble of spending significant political and economic capital to esteem and support this new (but tiny) family form while Americans continue to flee the stable, two-parent biological married model, the far more common and accomplished workhorse of the American household, and still—according to the data, at least—the safest place for a kid.