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Homosexual Parenting: does it make a difference?

A re-evaluation of the research with adoption and fostering in mind

Joy Holloway

What is the research evidence about lesbian and male homosexual parenting and how should it affect our practice in adoption and fostering? In 1985 when I first became a medical adviser to a local authority adoption and fostering panel, homosexual placements for children were not considered an option. In 1990 the Department of Health consultation paper for the Children Act¹ said that 'gay rights policies have no place in fostering services'. but already in 1990 some adoption agencies were quietly placing children with homosexual couples, and since then the pressure to use homosexual placements has grown. Agencies are now accused of unfair discrimination if they are *not* prepared to accept homosexual applicants.

It is often stated that research evidence shows there is no difference in the outcomes for children whether they are reared by homosexuals or heterosexuals. This is not the conclusion that I draw from looking at the research. But many reviews of the subject do give very favourable reports of homosexual parenting. The recent widely circulated British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) training paper² is typical. It says, 'taken together, the data do not suggest elevated rates of homosexuality among children of gay or lesbian parents', and 'a literature review found no indication that children of gay and lesbian parents were picked on more than others'. Also, in February 2002, the American Academy of Pediatrics supported adoption by homosexuals, stating that '...professional literature provides evidence that children with parents who are homosexual can have the same advantages and the same expectations for health, adjustment and development as can children whose parents are heterosexual'.³ But often the studies quoted are anecdotal and descriptive. Those with a more statistical quantitative approach understandably have had great difficulty obtaining random samples of lesbian or gay parents. The parents studied often are volunteers answering advertisements, or friends of people already contacted. Thus the samples cannot be shown to be representative.

Also many studies have had difficulty obtaining a comparison group of heterosexual parents, which is similar to the sample of homosexual parents in terms of education, socio-economic status or other factors which are very relevant to child rearing. Many of these studies have small numbers which do not have sufficient statistical power to show significant differences, even if differences do exist. Few of the studies are longitudinal, and often the children studied are too young to show the long-term effects of parenting. Thus much of the research does not satisfy the basic scientific standards necessary for it to be used to dictate evidence-based practice. Also in this highly politicised area there is a possibility of bias from the political motivation of the researchers or of the participants. Now even some of the academics who support homosexual parenting, like Judith Stacey and Timothy Biblarz in California, are criticising the way 'researchers frequently downplay findings indicating differences regarding children's gender and sexual preferences and behaviour'.⁴ Even the American Academy of Pediatrics says 'the small and non-representative samples studied and the relatively young age of most of the children, suggests some reserve'.⁵ So what evidence is there and what are the trends? The following is a brief review.

Incident and partnerships

The incidence of homosexual practice in the U.K. is low. The British National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (NATSAL 1990)⁶ found that only 3.6% of men and only 1.7% of women had 'ever' had sex with someone of the same gender and many of those who try it as teenagers never repeat it. A repeat study ten years later, (NATSAL 2000)⁷ omitting those aged forty-five or older, showed a rising incidence but still only 5.4 % of men and 4.9% of women had 'ever' had sex with someone of the same gender and only 2.6% of men and 2.6% of women had had a homosexual partner in the past five years.

But what about the stability of relationships? Weatherburn *et al* looked at the sexual lifestyles of gay and bisexual men in England and Wales for Project SIGMA.⁸ They found about 60% of gay men had a regular partner in any given year it but less than half of these relationships are closed. 'Closed' was defined as not having had sex with a third party in the preceding month.⁹ The median length of sexual relationships in the SIGMA survey was twenty-one months.

Outcomes in children

What about children reared by lesbians or gay men? One of the few longitudinal studies was conducted by Golombok *et al* in the U.K.¹⁰ In 1976-1977 they recruited twenty-seven lesbian and twenty-seven single heterosexual mothers for controls by advertising in gay and single parent magazines. So the samples were not necessarily representative of the general population of lesbian or single heterosexual mothers. They reported no significant differences in the assessments of their children. But numbers in the single sex groups were quite small for demonstrating any significant differences in sexual development. Also the control group with single heterosexual mothers seem to have had higher levels of disturbance than the general population as measured by Rutter's behavioural questionnaires.¹¹ The children from the lesbian homes had more educated and professional mothers, more contact with their fathers, more favourable social circumstances, and they included more girls than the children of the single mothers who were used as controls. So the two groups were not matched for several variables which were likely to advantage the lesbian families.

Golombok's children were on average only nine years old when first studied. How did they turn out as adults? Golombok and Tasker¹² followed them up in 1992-1993 when the children were twenty-four years old on average. Sixty- two per cent of the original children were interviewed, twenty five with lesbian mothers, and twenty one with heterosexual single mothers. Numbers thus were very small when broken down into subgroups. So it is not surprising that most differences were not statistically significant. However they did find that the children from lesbian homes were *significantly* more likely to have *considered* the possibility of having a lesbian or gay relationship (14/25 from lesbian homes compared with 3/21 from heterosexual mothers, $F p = .003$). Those from lesbian homes were significantly more likely to have *actually* had involvement in same gender relationships. In fact none of the twenty-one young adults from heterosexual homes had experienced gay or lesbian relationships, but 24% (6/25) of the young adults from the lesbian homes had been involved in a sexual relationship with one or more people of the same gender ($F p = .022$). In the general population the incidence of ever having experienced same sex relationships was only 1.7% for women and 3.6% for men, so 24% is considerably higher than expected. What about sexual identity, identifying oneself as gay or lesbian? The difference here

was not significant, but two of the twenty-five with lesbian mothers identified themselves as homosexual, and both were lesbian. None of the twenty one with heterosexual mothers identified themselves as homosexual.

Another study by Flaks *et al*¹³ did try to eliminate some of the variables. They compared thirty children brought up by lesbian couples by donor insemination with thirty children living with married heterosexual couples. But again the recruitment of the samples was not random, and the mean age of the children was only five years old at the time of the study.

In an Australian study by Sarantakos,¹⁴ fifty-eight primary school age children living with homosexual couples were matched with fifty-eight children living with married couples and fifty-eight children with cohabiting heterosexual unmarried couples. In almost all the academic measures used there was a gradient with the children with married parents doing best and those with homosexual parents doing least well. The children from homosexual parents had considerably more problems with peer relationships, and in general they were more confused about gender. There may have been some bias in the teachers' reports, but they were reporting consistently large differences between the three groups of children.

Stigma

What about stigma at school? Sarantakos in Australia, Javaid in New York,¹⁵ and Wyers in Oregon¹⁶ all found that children of lesbian or male homosexual parents reported considerable problems from their peers with respect to their parent's homosexuality. Golombok and Tasker's study in the U.K. asked the grown up children to recall any easing in adolescence about sexuality or their mother's lifestyle.¹⁷ The children of lesbian mothers were more likely to be teased about their own sexuality (11/20 *cf.* 4/15 Fishers Exact $p = .091$) especially the boys. Green in the United States¹⁸ found that older boys from lesbian homes were significantly less confident about their popularity with other boys than the sons of single heterosexual mothers ($RR = .1, p > .5$).

Child Sexual Abuse

Is there any evidence of an increase incidence among homosexuals of sex with children? Most case studies of child sexual abuse are perpetrated by heterosexual males. but if the incidence of homosexuality in men is 3% or less,

then we must ask what is the relative risk as heterosexual males are thirty to forty times more common in the population. In an interesting but inconclusive paper Marshall¹⁹ has studied sexual preferences in male offenders. In his group of twenty-one sexual offenders against boys under sixteen years, he found seven of the offenders (33%) were sexually aroused by nude pictures of adult men, and the remaining fourteen (66%) were not aroused, neither were any of the twenty-one non-offending men used as controls. The NATSAL 1990 survey found only 1% of the general male population were attracted to adult males more than females. A Police Research Series paper in 1998²⁰ suggested that 20-30% of child sexual abuse was by men on boys and 10% was mixed. More research is indicated.

Discussion

In the same way that many of the 'accepted facts' from Freud and Kinsey have been found to be seriously flawed, so the current accepted wisdom about gay parenting appears to be flawed. It claims reassuring conclusions that are hard to justify from current research. In many cases it is true that studies do not show significant differences, but numbers are small and lesbian mothers are often from a more advantaged socio-economic group than the single heterosexual mothers used as controls. Nevertheless research indicates a trend that children reared in lesbian households have a greater likelihood of stigma at school. Children in the public care already feel different from their peers and they may even be stigmatised for this. Is it in their best interests to add yet another element of differentness to their lives that is likely to result in more peer difficulties? Also there is some evidence that children of lesbian mothers are more likely to have same sex relationships as they grow up. Most heterosexual parents (and most lesbian mothers) wish for their children to grow up to marry (heterosexually) and to have children. This is the normal aspiration.

In 1999 twenty-seven per cent of the U.K. population thought that sexual relations between adults of the same sex were 'not wrong at all'²¹ in spite of massive media persuasion to approve of homosexuality. If the majority, including myself, have moral concerns then presumably the majority do not want vulnerable youngsters to be drawn into this kind of lifestyle, with the higher incidence of sexually transmitted infections including HIV²² and more suicides among young male homosexuals. And so the traditional moral, and

Christian view appears to coincide with what is ultimately for the well-being and happiness of children.

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ENDNOTES

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