

See related research article by Henny Bos et al., “Same-Sex and Different-Sex Parent Households and Child Health Outcomes: Findings from the National Survey of Children’s Health” on page 179.

Moving Beyond Anti-LGBT Politics: Commentary on “Same-Sex and Different-Sex Parent Households and Child Health Outcomes: Findings from the National Survey of Children’s Health”

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For several decades now, researchers, policymakers, and opinion leaders have studied and debated what is known about how children with lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) parents fare in comparison to their peers. The field was pioneered by lesbian researchers beginning in the late 1970s and 1980s, and arose largely out of a need to defend the rights of lesbian mothers to maintain custody of their children after the dissolution of a different-sex relationship.¹⁻³ But the research was also applicable to, and inspired by, the growing phenomenon of lesbians who were considering “planned” families, in which same-sex partners gave birth using assisted reproduction. This family configuration grew in visibility in tandem with the birth of the religious right, and its increasing politicization, spurring very public criticism by social conservatives of the capacities, rights, and outcomes of LGBT parents—often framed in terms of the risks that such parenting allegedly posed to children. Hence, the scholarship on LGBT parenting has been heavily politicized from the start.⁴

More recently, this discourse has been frequently applied to the national debate over same-sex marriage. In this context, social conservatives have deployed both existing and new research in an effort to suggest that having an lesbian, gay, bisexual (LGB) parent raises the risks of poor outcomes for children, and that this, in turn, militates against legalizing marriage for same-sex couples.⁵⁻⁸ LGBT researchers and advocates, for their part, have continued to publish studies finding “no differences” in child outcomes based on family configuration, and have critiqued both the scholarship and its public framing by social

conservatives who, they maintain, have misled the public in their efforts to bolster opposition to LGBT parenting rights.

In “Same-Sex and Different-Sex Parent Households and Child Health Outcomes: Findings from the National Survey of Children’s Health,” Bos et al make a significant contribution to the literature on same-sex parenting and child outcomes. Focusing on female same-sex parents who have been continuously coupled, they find that, although such couples report more parenting stress, their children “demonstrate no differences in general health, emotional difficulties, coping behavior, and learning behavior from children reared in different-sex parent households.”⁹ The study therefore corroborates the “no differences” conclusions that have been reached by at least 73 other scholarly studies, according to the Columbia Law School’s What We Know Project, which continuously collects scholarship on this issue.¹⁰

This study is significant because it helps to fill a number of methodological gaps in the literature. For starters, it draws its data from the National Survey of Children’s Health (NSCH), which made it possible to identify and control for family configurations that were ignored or unavailable in previous research. Since the NSCH is a large, nationally representative survey, the sampling method is a significant improvement over the small, convenience-based samples on which many—although not all—previous studies relied. The initial panel consisted of 847,881 U.S. households, of which 95,677 with children under 18 completed interviews, yielding an *n* of 95 female same-sex parent households (after excluding families which had experienced disruptions and male-headed households because of their small number).

The authors were thus able to identify continuously coupled parents raising children who had not experienced divorce, separation, or adoption, and who did not suffer from the disruptions that have often been associated with research on children with gay parents. These same-sex parent-headed households were then matched to different-sex-headed households sharing key characteristics, thus minimizing the confounding effect of family disruption on child well-being outcomes.

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The use of a random sample with the ability to identify family disruptions and to compare stable same-sex-headed households with a matching sample provides crucial armor against the criticism of methodological limitations that some scholars have leveled against the “no differences” scholarship. That criticism has included small sample sizes, use of convenience sampling, lack of diversity in sampling pools, lack of a control group, and possible bias introduced by self-reporting on various measurements. In 2012, Marks concluded that because the available data on same-sex parenting were “derived primarily from small convenience samples, [they] are insufficient to support a strong generalized claim” about outcomes.^{11,12}

The Marks critique analyzed data from 2005. In the subsequent decade, a great deal of research has confirmed, and further elaborated on, the “no differences” consensus, increasingly using more sophisticated sampling methods. In 2010, Rosenfeld used U.S. census data to assess the school advancement of 3500 children with same-sex parents. When he controlled for parental background, he found no significant differences between same-sex-headed households and different-sex households. In 2012, Potter used nationally representative and longitudinal data to sample a data set of more than 20,000 children that yielded 158 living in same-sex-headed households. When he controlled for family transitions, the children showed no significant differences in school outcomes from their peers. In 2014, Bos et al used data from the Dutch Longitudinal Lesbian Family Study to compare adolescents from planned lesbian families with those in different-sex-headed households using a 1 to 1 matched sample. The authors again found “no differences” between outcomes in the 2 family types.^{13–15}

Indeed, the sheer volume of the 73 studies collected by Columbia’s What We Know Project that all conclude there are no differences between children in the 2 different kinds of families makes for an unusual degree of uniformity in findings on any issue of debate. Of course, if all 73 studies were committing the same methodological error, they would all simply be repeating the same mistaken conclusion. Yet, the range of different methodologies described above makes this extremely unlikely. This is one reason that a research analysis published in 2010 by Biblarz and Stacy concluded that scholars had “achieved a rare degree of consensus” that children raised by lesbian parents fared “at least as well as their counterparts with married heterosexual parents”—notwithstanding that the same-sex parent families generally lacked the benefit of legal marriage.¹⁶ As Amato put it in 2012, “If growing up with gay and lesbian parents were catastrophic for children, even studies based on small convenience samples would have shown this by now.” This is particularly true given the energy that social conservatives have put into disproving the “no differences” findings and upending the scholarly consensus that parenting by LGB adults causes no harm to children.¹⁷

The 4 studies included in the What We Know database that claim to find higher risks to children with gay

or lesbian parents are, however, all marked by the same fundamental flaw: they fail to control for disruptions in the family history of the children whose outcomes they study. This is no passing oversight, as it is well known that that vast majority of children with a gay or lesbian parent were born to different-sex parents, making prior family dissolution far more likely than average, thus giving such children a family history known to have far higher risks of poor outcomes. Although it is true that many of the “no differences” studies used small and nonrandom samples, the 73 “no differences” studies, with their various methodologies, makes for a fully “tapped out” universe of inquiry. By contrast, one of the studies most heavily touted by social conservatives for what they cast as a strong sampling method, the 2012 Regnerus study, turned out to have such a tiny sample of children actually raised by same-sex parents that the findings with respect to gay-headed households must be considered literally worthless. An initial panel of 15,000 individuals yielded 236 children with a gay or lesbian parent; yet of those, only 2 respondents had actually been raised by a same-sex couple without a family disruption.^{5–8}

This study comes at an opportune time to assess the current applicability and direction of research on same-sex parenting. In the wake of the U.S. Supreme Court’s resolution of the status of legal same-sex marriage, scholars on both sides of the ideological debate over LGBT equality likely will—or at least, should—hit the pause button as they assess the need to devote more resources to adding yet another study confirming the “no differences” hypothesis. The 73 existing studies are sufficient to inform anyone of good faith of the facts about whether same-sex parenting threatens children. Alarming, a few instances linger in which judges overseeing custody disputes or state lawmakers proposing laws that privilege heterosexuals in family settings continue to claim that different-sex couples are best suited to parent and ought to be treated preferentially to same-sex couples. Reviewing the extant literature ought to disabuse them of this notion—or nothing will. The scientific debate over the politics of gay parenting is over, and equal treatment has won.

Politics, however, is not the only arena in which knowledge about LGBT families matters. This is the reason that this moment is ideal for evaluating the direction of the research. A significant limitation to this study, as with much of the no differences research, is that subjects are disproportionately white and are more affluent than the actual population of same-sex-headed households.^{12,18} The result is not only to limit the generalizability of the results, but to miss an opportunity to shed crucial light on how a diverse range of LGBT people may experience family, and cope with its challenges, differently. What is needed now is a deeper and broader understanding of the challenges that LGBT families of different racial, geographic, and class backgrounds may face. In other words, what’s needed is research that no longer reacts to anti-LGBT challenges to equal treatment, but instead serves the health and well-being needs of the underserved LGBT population.

The present article suggests several promising areas for exploration. The authors note that the parents in their study reported higher levels of parenting stress, but that this did not translate into difficulties with their children's general or emotional health, or coping or learning behavior, which related research would have predicted. What could account for both the added parenting stress and the apparent resilience that protected against the associated harms to youth that other research would predict? The authors wonder "whether the cultural spotlight on child outcomes in same-sex parent families is associated with increased parenting stress," a conclusion that would comport with research on the stigmatizing impact of public scrutiny on LGBT people.¹⁹ As for the coping strengths of youths who might otherwise be expected to exhibit certain symptoms related to parenting stress, it is possible that bias resulting from self-reporting could affect results, and a study design that more fully minimizes such bias—perhaps by measuring outcomes in ways that do not rely on self-reporting—would be instructive.

It is also possible that the families being studied enjoy financial, educational, or emotional resources to which not all LGBT families have access. This could explain findings by Bos et al in 2014 in a study concluding that "adolescents with lesbian mothers had higher levels of self-esteem and lower levels of conduct problems than their counterparts in heterosexual-parent families" and hence "the few differences found on psychological well-being favored the adolescents in lesbian 2-mother families."¹⁵ Alternatively, the added societal scrutiny given to same-sex couples may spur some to devote disproportionate time and energy to parenting in an effort to prove their worth or compensate for expected shortfalls.

Further research on all these rich and nuanced questions, together with a concerted effort to include families with diverse backgrounds among sampling pools, could yield much-needed insight into how best to serve the needs of LGBT families, particularly the most vulnerable among them.

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