Gay and Lesbian Families: A research agenda

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Few issues manifest a greater disconnect between the magnitude and veracity of the policy debate and the paucity of relevant research than those concerning lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) people. In their landmark study more than two decades ago, Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) offered a fascinating portrait of the characteristics and dynamics of both same-sex and different-sex couples. Despite significant social and legal changes with regard to homosexuality since the publication of that work, contemporary social science research offers only rare and all too often rather cursory analyses into how gay and lesbian people and their families have changed. Indeed, the very notion of lesbian and gay "families" is relatively new.

One reason that Blumstein and Schwarz (1983) chose to include same-sex couples in their study was their recognition that a better understanding of the dynamics of same-sex couples and their families offers the opportunity for important insights into the broader understanding of relationship dynamics. Lesbians and gay men provide an important counterfactual. In terms of relationship formation, they offer a perspective on how relationships might form and thrive in the absence of clear social norms and legal institutions associated with marriage. Same-sex relationships also provide a chance to study how couples behave in the absence of dramatically differing gender roles and norms.

We agree with Blumstein and Schwartz that LGB families add productive variation in studies of social and legal influences on families and relationship dynamics. In addition, we would argue that a second reason for studying LGB families is their unique social and legal situations that might influence family processes and formations. In this chapter, we describe what existing research tells us about these families, suggest how the social and legal climates for the formation of these families has changed and might affect LGB families, and identify the myriad research gaps in our understanding of this population.

1. The Data Challenge

The lack of quality data represents perhaps the most daunting challenge facing researchers intent on studying the characteristics of sexual minorities. While evidence suggests that questions about sexual orientation and behavior are not problematic with regard to non-response rates and break-offs, social stigma and concerns about confidentiality most certainly lead to undercounting of all sexual minorities, including lesbians and gay men. One of the most important ways to begin to reduce this problem is by more routinely adding sexual orientation questions to surveys, especially those from national probability samples. More commonly included in health-related surveys often focused on HIV and sexually-transmitted infections, questions about sexual orientation have relevance beyond just health and sexual behavior.

Gates and Sell (2006) provide a good summary of some of the key challenges associated with collecting data on sexual minorities and demonstrate how many of these challenges can be overcome. Sexual orientation involves considering complex social and psychological constructs that include sexual behavior, sexual identity, and emotional and physical attraction (Sell and Petrulio 1996). Identification of the appropriate construct for studying a particular issue is crucial. Findings from several national probability samples including the National Health and Social Life Survey (1993) and the more recent National Survey of Family Growth (2002) demonstrate that measuring sexual orientation via gay and lesbian identity versus same-sex sexual behavior or same-sex sexual attraction can yield different groups of people. For example, the NSFG found that among men and women aged 18-44 who report being attracted either equally to men and women or primarily to individuals of the same-sex, only 60 percent of men and 56 percent of women identified as either "homosexual" or "bisexual." Conversely, 23 percent of men and 28 percent of women who identified as "homosexual" indicated an exclusive attraction to individuals of the other sex (Mosher et al., 2005).

Most surveys also find that large portions of individuals who report same-sex sexual behavior identify themselves as heterosexual and also often indicate primarily different-sex sexual attraction. For example, in the NSFG (2002), of men who said they have had some same-sex sexual experience, 46.5 percent identified as heterosexual and 54 percent said they were primarily attracted to women.[1] Some surveys (e.g., the General Social Survey) include questions about recent same-sex sexual behavior (last year or last five years). In general, the

[1] Based on author calculations.

correspondence of behavior with identity and attraction does improve when considering more recent same-sex sexual behavior, however the obvious problem with behavior measures concerns their failure to measure sexual minorities who are not currently sexually active.

Studies of family behavior are likely to find that sexual identity constructs capture relevant behavior, such as long-term partner choice or child-bearing. Measuring sexual orientation identity represents the most difficult challenge, however, as the construct is perhaps less clear for many people than questions designed to capture with whom they have had sex or to whom they are sexually attracted. Through a series of cognitive tests, Sell et al. 2006 sought to develop a sexual orientation identity question that garnered relatively consistent responses and meanings across a variety of respondents. Their work suggests several important elements to such a question:

- *Utilize both technical and vernacular terms. So include both "heterosexual" and "straight," "gay/lesbian" and "homosexual."* A significant challenge in measuring sexual orientation identity comes from the fact that the vast majority of the population, namely heterosexuals, are rarely asked to define or identify their sexual orientation. This is a crucial concern as confusion among this population can produce "false positives" that could distort the sample of genuine sexual minorities. Providing both the technical and vernacular terms seems to minimize confusion on the part of respondents, particularly heterosexuals.
- *"Bisexual" should be an option identified separately from gay or lesbian.* Because of relatively small sample sizes, researchers sometimes attempt to create the largest sample of sexual minorities by combining gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, and persons who select options that are sometimes provided like "something else" or "do no know." Such efforts are problematic for several reasons. Bisexuals and homosexuals are potentially very distinctive groups who face different social and political constraints associated with their identities.
- *Ambiguous responses should not be assumed to be gay or lesbian:* Answers to a sexual identity question like "something else", "unsure", or "do not know" should not be recoded to non-heterosexual or interpreted as indicative of a sexual minority status or identity. Such an interpretation is likely not true for large portions of this group. For

example, author analyses of the NSFG (2002) suggest that among men who responded to the sexual identity question as "something else," 88 percent indicate a primary sexual attraction to women. Conversely, 54 percent of men who said they were unsure about their sexual attraction identified as heterosexual.

As has already been mentioned, concerns about "false positives" should always be considered in relation to measures of sexual orientation. Most surveys find that less than 3 percent of adults identify as "homosexual", "gay", or "lesbian." Even small measurement error among the heterosexual population, mistakenly identifying as gay or lesbian, could create significant contamination in the sexual minority sample. Including multiple measures of sexual orientation, especially measuring at least both attraction and identity, can provide crucial information in assessing both sample biases and possible measurement error.

The addition of various measures of non-marital cohabitation to many surveys, including the "unmarried partner" category added to the 1990 U.S. Decennial Census household roster, has opened another research avenue for the study of same-sex couples. Black, et al. (2006) note that the false positive problem affects this method of identification as well. Coding procedures in the 2000 U.S. census result in different-sex married couples who miscode the sex of one of their partners being coded as same-sex unmarried partners. As a result, a non-trivial fraction of the same-sex unmarried partners (perhaps nearly a third of the sample) are likely different-sex married couples. They offer a method for minimizing the bias created by this form of measurement error that involves limiting the sample to same-sex couples who most likely originally identified as "unmarried partners" rather than spouses. While this procedure probably reduces the measurement error, it also biases the sample in other ways as it largely eliminates same-sex couples who considered themselves married. That group might differ in a variety of ways from those who identify as "unmarried partners."

Separate from identifying sexual orientation, the issue of identification of same-sex couples is not without its own unique complexities. Many surveys follow the model of the U.S. Census and include household rosters that allow for the identification of spouses and other familial and non-familial relationships within a household. One limitation of the household roster method of identifying same-sex couples is that it does not allow for the identification of individuals who are in same-sex relationships but are not the reference person or the partner in a household. Virtually all surveys routinely ask a marital status question to identify the legal marital status of individuals within the household. Currently in the United States, roughly 20 percent of the population lives in a state that provides some type of legal recognition for same-sex couples. This recognition varies from marriage in Massachusetts, civil unions in Connecticut and Vermont, and domestic partner registries in California, New Jersey, Maine, Hawaii, and the District of Columbia. But marital status questions rarely attempt to capture the legal relationships of same-sex couples. Adding options that allow same-sex couples to identify their legal status offers another mechanism for providing better data on sexual minorities.

Adding sexual orientation questions to more surveys will no doubt improve analytical research possibilities but it is not sufficient. Even the largest national probability samples will still yield relatively small samples of sexual minorities. Further, most surveys do not address many of the issues of unique concerns to sexual minorities. For these reasons, much more effort is needed in developing sound methodologies for over-sampling or separately sampling sexual minorities within the framework of probabilistic sampling techniques. In the absence of sound demographic information about sexual minorities, the development of appropriate sampling frames for such efforts presents clear challenges. However, at least two large surveys of sexual minorities have used the geographic concentrations of same-sex couples in the U.S. Census to develop probabilistic sampling frames for surveys focused specifically on sexual minorities. The Urban Men's Health Study (Catania et al., 2001) and the California GLBT Tobacco Survey (Bye et al., 2005) offer evidence of the possibility for garnering representative samples of sexual minorities.

Surveys that specifically sample sexual minorities can then begin to address an array of issues that uniquely affect their social and economic lives. Examples of these issues include:

- Measuring how "out" individuals are to friends, family, and work colleagues along with when they came out
- Incidences of stigmatization and discrimination related to LGB identity
- Partnership status including marriage, domestic partnership registration, commitment ceremonies, etc. and motivations for various choices

- For those raising children, information about how children were conceived and the nature of legal parental status both with any partners in the home and with other biological parents
- Access to domestic partner benefits and health insurance
- Perceived relationships between educational and employment choices and sexual minority status

The proliferation of policy and scholarly debates regarding marriage, adoption, and health and economic disparities associated with sexual minorities should encourage the development of better and larger data sources that include this population. Adding sexual orientation questions as a more routine demographic characteristic will both increase the capacity for scholarly research and over time will likely improve the quality of the data as respondents become more familiar and comfortable with the question. Further, if scholarship regarding the characteristics of sexual minorities seeks to understand this population with any sense of depth, a commitment to large-scale over-sampling and population-specific surveying is crucial.

2. Why LGB families might be different

While relationship behaviors and dynamics of lesbians and gay men are likely influenced by the norms and behaviors of the heterosexual world, a research framework formed without understanding the unique constraints and dynamics of same-sex coupling would be woefully incomplete. Our next section describes several research topics unique to the study of gay and lesbian relationships and families.

(a) Relationship Norms

Norms within the lesbian and gay social movement that blossomed in the 1970s following the Stonewall riots often focused on the unique ability of same-sex couples to define their relationships without the strictures of social institutions like marriage. The findings from Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) paint a picture of same-sex couples somewhat consistent with this social milieu. Similar in some ways to non-marital cohabiting couples, the same-sex couples of the early 1980s exhibited more egalitarian and often more independent household resource allocation patterns. Gay male couples, in particular, were less likely to be monogamous than either different-sex couples or lesbian couples. However, it is clear that, even then, some couples formed long-term monogamous relationships broadly structured in ways similar to their married counterparts.

Since the Blumstein and Schwartz study, political and cultural changes may have influenced relationship norms within the gay and lesbian communities. The emergence of legal partnership status and marriage rights for same-sex couples as a significant component of gay and lesbian activism evidences some of these shifting norms. Clearly, the broad social climate toward sexual minorities has changed rather markedly in the past few decades. In 1987, nearly three-quarters of General Social Survey respondents indicated that "sexual relations between two adults of the same-sex" was "always wrong." By 2000, that proportion dropped to just 54 percent (Brewer 2003). In an analysis of multiple surveys, Lewis (2005) finds that support from marriage for same-sex couples in the United States has risen from 12 percent in 1985 to 34 percent in 2005. Another factor that likely changed relationships norms, at least for gay men, is the HIV epidemic. The epidemic produced marked change in the sexual behavior of gay men. At the very least, these changes are likely to have influenced the demands for legal recognition of same-sex relationships (Chambers, 1992; Badgett, 2001; Chauncey, 2004). It seems reasonable to suggest that such changes might also have had consequences for relationship norms and behavior.

Research since Blumstein and Schwartz's landmark study has continued to find evidence of differences in same-sex couples' relationship norms (e.g. Patterson, 2005). For example, Solomon, Rothblum, and Balsam (2005) find that when compared with heterosexual married people, gay men and lesbians exhibit much more egalitarian patterns of housework and other relationship responsibilities. Lesbians in their sample have sex less frequently than heterosexual women but are no more likely to be nonmonogamous. Gay men, whether in civil unions or not, were more likely to have had sex outside of the relationship than married men and were more likely to agree that sex outside the relationship is acceptable "under some circumstances."

Research also suggests that relationship norms among same-sex couples could differ by other cultural factors like race and ethnicity. For example, most studies of lesbian couples raising children find relatively high levels of egalitarianism in child-rearing and household labor within these couples. However, Moore (2006) suggests that African-American female couples raising children show lower levels of egalitarianism and clear differences in parenting roles between biological mothers and their partners.

Our understanding of current and changing relationship norms within same-sex couples remains limited and is virtually non-existent among probability samples of lesbians and gay men. The changing social and legal climates with regard to same-sex relationships create a unique opportunity for scholars to compare relationship norms among same-sex couples living in communities with potentially different normative environments. Findings from Census 2000 suggest that they are increasingly visible in all regions of the United States, providing great variation in legal constraints and social environment including the presence of other same-sex couples and varied levels of social acceptance of sexual minorities (Gates and Ost, 2004).

(b) Sex Composition

Some of the differences in norms posited above are likely related to the sex composition of the household and the lack of (or lesser degree of) gender role differences. Two men or two women are likely to bring to a romantic or family relationship relatively similar emotional, financial, and social resources, whether those gendered resources emerge from genetic predisposition, socialization, or labor market experience. Similarly, same-sex relationships would not have strictly gender-defined roles of husband or wife to structure the allocation of household labor and resources. As a result, decision-making processes and actual decisions might vary tremendously between same-sex and different-sex couples to the extent that gendered resources and roles structure decisions and other family outcomes.

As we have observed, there is evidence that same-sex couples show relatively high levels of egalitarian behavior with regard to household resource allocations and division of labor. This could clearly be related to the lack of a gender difference in the couples. Previously cited evidence of different levels of sexual activity between same-sex female and same-sex male couples also could be a result of a greater level of conformity in the gender-based desire for and preferred methods of sexual contact.

Differences between lesbian couples and gay male couples support the idea that gender might matter for relationships in as-yet unexplored ways. For instance, Peplau, Fingerhut, and Beals (2004) find that lesbians express physical intimacy in ways other than genital sexual activity (e.g., hugging, cuddling, and kissing). Carpenter and Gates (2006) observe higher partnership rates among female couples than male couples (as does Black et al., 2000).

(c) Social and legal environment

It is difficult to discuss this topic without first addressing the broader context of the social stigma associated with homosexuality. Evidence continues to emerge of employment discrimination, harassment, violence, and prejudice in the lives of lesbians and gay men. Many lesbians and gay men are still raised in families, churches, and communities that are at best ambivalent and at worst quite condemning of a homosexual orientation and of the concept of gay and lesbian families.

Limited research has explored how this often hostile context affects the ability of lesbians and gay men to form healthy and stable unions. Studies that document the lack of family support for many same-sex couples also tend to show that lesbians and gay men rely more on friendship networks for social support (Bryant and Demian, 1994; Kurdek, 1988; Solomon, Rothblum, and Balsam, 2004). Little is known about whether or not the support of friends offers a comparable substitution for family support, although one anthropological study found complex "families we choose" among gay and lesbian people in the San Francisco area that appeared to be at least partly related to the lack of support from families of origin and from the law (Weston, 1991). Riggle, et al. (2006) find that same-sex couples who have disclosed their relationship to a higher proportion of relatives were more likely to have completed advanced planning documents in the case of a medical emergency, providing support for the idea that the couple's position in larger family networks will influence the couple's behavior.

As we have already documented, much has changed in the past few decades with regard to how society understands and supports sexual minorities and their families. Social stigma associated with homosexuality has declined significantly. Today, approximately 20 percent of the U.S. population lives in a state with some legal recognition of same-sex couples (Hawaii, Vermont, California, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Connecticut, and Maine), and 18 countries now or will soon offer recognition ranging from civil partnerships to full marriage rights. These jurisdictions are ripe for studies of the motivations and influences on same-sex couples' entrance into legal relationships.

We know very little about how the changing social and legal climate has affected relationship formation, development, and duration among same-sex couples. In at least some places, options for same-sex couples include commitment ceremonies that lack any legal standing, myriad legal documents and contracts that partially formalize a relationship, domestic partner registries, civil unions, and marriage. We know very little about which options lesbians and gay men choose, why they do so, and how those decisions affect outcomes for family stability and well-being.

Perhaps as a result of increasing social and legal acceptance, visible gay and lesbian families represent a much more diverse cross-section of society than it did twenty years ago. Same-sex couples identified in the 2000 U.S. Census are more racially and ethnically, geographically, and economically diverse than those identified in the 1990 Census. Indeed, the increasing political push toward marriage rights for same-sex couples may reflect a shift in the lesbian and gay community away from emphasizing the unique and diverse ways in which they might form families toward somewhat more traditional forms of relationships and families. As a result of these social and legal developments, researchers must be aware of the social and legal context when designing, conducting, and interpreting empirical research.

3. Contemporary family research

Having reviewed how to identify lesbians and gay men and why their families might be different, we continue the chapter with an exploration of topics commonly considered in studies of contemporary families and show how these characteristics might be similar or different in the relationships of lesbians and gay men along with how they might be changing over time. These include relationship and union formation and dissolution, fertility and child-rearing, and household resource allocation.

(a) Relationship formation

Given the wide range of milestones for same-sex couples' relationships, from cohabitation to marriage, depending on the locale, studying relationship formation among same-sex couples is difficult. The ability to identify cohabiting same-sex couples in the U.S. Census has prompted several studies that describe some of their demographic traits. Black et al. (2000, 2002) show that lesbians are more likely to be partnered, be raising children, and be previously divorced than gay men and that same-sex couples evidence geographic sorting favoring desirable urban areas. Jepsen and Jepsen (2002) compare cohabiting couples from the 1990 U.S. Census and find evidence of the same sort of homogamy for same-sex couples and different-sex couples. In particular, they find that same-sex couples are like different-sex couples in matching partners who are similar in terms of age, education, race, and investment income.

Several qualitative studies of commitment ceremonies by same-sex couples suggest that those rituals serve many of the same functions as contemporary marriage. Gay and lesbian couples hold commitment ceremonies to express their sense of commitment to each other and to express publicly the seriousness of their relationships to friends and families (Lewin, 1998; Stiers, 1999; Hull, 2003; Purvin et al., 2005; Schecter, et al., 2005). For some, the religious aspects of ceremonies provided an important motivation (Hull, 2003; Lewin, 1998), while for others these acts also had political significance for expressing messages of gender equality and the underlying similarities between gay and heterosexual couples (Stiers; Lewin). Same-sex couples who had a commitment ceremony and later married in Massachusetts reported that the commitment ceremony had been a more socially and personally significant event, attesting to the cultural power of these ceremonies that lack legal sanction (Schechter et al, 2005; see also Stiers, 1999). Those couples chose to marry to get the legal rights of marriage.

Unfortunately, the research on same-sex couples has not kept pace with the move to legally recognize same-sex relationships. Very little detailed study exists of legally recognized same-sex marriages or partnerships. One notable exception is a survey by Esther Rothblum and her colleagues of couples who formed civil unions in Vermont in the first year they were available. These studies use an innovative method for constructing a comparison group from the heterosexual siblings and unregistered but coupled gay and lesbian friends of the couples in civil unions. The one significant downside to their sample was that almost 80% of those couples lived outside of Vermont, so the civil union had no legal impact for most couples in the survey.

Although the response rate to the initial recruitment letter was only 42%, the sample was similar in sex, race, and geographic location of all first year civil unions. However, we do not know how representative these couples are of later civil unions.

The results of a series of papers based on that survey suggest some differential selection into civil unions of couples that are more stable. Comparing same-sex couples in and not in civil unions shows few statistically significant differences in economic, social, relationship, or demographic characteristics for either women or men. The lesbians in civil unions were more likely to think of themselves as married (perhaps a result of their civil union status) and reported being more "out" about their sexual orientation than did the lesbians not in civil unions (Solomon, Rothblum, and Balsam, 2004). Compared with gay men not in civil unions, gay men in civil unions were more likely to have a joint bank account, to have many mutual friends, and to consider themselves married. Gay men not in civil unions were more likely to have seriously considered and discussed ending their relationships than those in civil unions. Roughly 60% of gay men had had sex outside the relationship, but under 10% report a "meaningful love affair outside [the] relationship" (Solomon, Rothblum, and Balsam, 2005). However, more gay men in civil unions than not in civil unions had an agreement that outside sex was *not* acceptable. Gay men in civil unions earned almost $14,000 less on average than gay men not in civil unions, but those differences were not statistically significant.

The authors found more differences between the gay and lesbian couples and their married heterosexual siblings than between civil union couples and non-civil union couples, however (Solomon, et al., 2004 and 2005). The heterosexual married men and women had been together longer, were more likely to have children, divided housework and child care more traditionally, had more social support from and contact with family members than did gay men or lesbians, regardless of civil union status. In other words, sexual orientation was a better predictor of couple characteristics than was legal status.

Policy analysis has also produced some intriguing demographic estimates and questions for future research. Gallagher and Baker (2006) attempt to estimate crude marriage rates for same-sex couples. Although vital statistics agencies can provide presumably accurate counts of the numbers of same-sex couples marrying, denominators are harder to calculate. The authors use probability sample estimates of the proportion of adults identifying as gay or lesbian and multiply those rates times adult population figures to get the gay and lesbian population at risk of marriage. The resulting rates strike the authors as "a small fraction", ranging from 1% to 5% in Belgium and Canada, to 2%-6% in the Netherlands, and 6-17% in Massachusetts. (The range reflects varying assumptions about the prevalence of homosexuality.) The authors interpret these low rates as a lack of enthusiasm for marriage among gay couples.

Of course, assessing whether these estimated rates are high or low, short-run or long-run, distinctive or not, is a matter for future research. These crude marriage rate estimates will have enormous measurement error, given the problems calculating a denominator and given possible differences in the rate of couple formation among lesbians and gay men. Furthermore, the confusion of stocks and flows makes it difficult to interpret a short-term estimate. Because of pent-up demand from the stock of same-sex couples who were not allowed to marry, larger numbers of marriages will occur early on. But rates calculated from those early marriages are inappropriate to compare with marriage rates for heterosexual people. The numbers of new formal unions decline after the first year, but the stock of couples wanting to marry is still diminishing over the next few years, at least.

Badgett and Sears (2005) have quantified formalization of same-sex unions from a different perspective, calculating the percentage of same-sex couples registering or marrying. They compare the numbers of registration or marriage in Vermont, California, and Massachusetts to the counts of same-sex couples in that state from Census 2000. While the percentage of same-sex couples marrying or registering is less than for different-sex couples, which is approximately 90% (Simmons and O'Connell, 2003), the same-sex rates are much higher than implied by the Gallagher and Baker figure. In Vermont, 57% of same-sex couples have entered civil unions since 2000. Over roughly the same period, 41% of California's same-sex couples have entered domestic partnerships, and 43% of same-sex couples in Massachusetts married in the first two years of that option.

The small literature on the legalization of same-sex relationships suggests many reasons that same-sex couples might not marry right away. They may want to plan or save for a wedding, or they might disagree on the need for marriage (Stiers, 1999; Rostovsky, et al., in press;

Badgett, 2006). Couples may have already met their perceived legal needs through wills and other legal documents and their social needs through commitment ceremonies (Rostovsky, et al., in press; Hull; Stiers). Indeed, the thought of formalizing a very long-term relationship strikes some couples as an insult to their earlier years and to their past success in gaining recognition from friends and family members (Badgett, 2006). Some lesbian feminists object to marriage on principle (Hull; Stiers; Lewin, 1998; Schechter, et al., 2005), although such objections might be strongest in an older cohort and might change over time (Badgett, 2006).

Much more research is needed to understand how and why gay and lesbian people form romantic unions, and why some of those unions are formalized while others are not.

(b) Relationship duration and dissolution

Few contemporary studies have explored the formation of same-sex couple relationships and little is known about their overall duration. Consistent with many surveys using non-probability samples (Blumstein and Schwartz, 1983; Kurdek, 1988; Kurdek, 1998; Kurdek, 2006), Carpenter and Gates (2006) observe longer duration among same-sex male couples than same-sex female couples. Black et al. (2006) show that same-sex couples have co-residential stability rates (living together in the same household for at least five years) that are higher than those of different-sex unmarried couples but lower than those of different-sex married couples. Kurdek (2004) and Seltzer (2004) suggest that generally lower duration among same-sex couples can be partially explained by a lack of legal and social barriers to exit from the relationship. Research that attempts to consider the duration of same-sex relationships relative to those of heterosexual marriages or relative to unmarried heterosexual couples tends to mix apples and oranges. The group "same-sex couples" includes couples who would marry and those who would not, so we should not compare them either exclusively to married or unmarried different-sex couples. Now that same-sex couples can marry (or register) in a variety of jurisdictions, an important line of research concerns the stability of those relationships. Will divorce be more or less common among same-sex couples compared with heterosexual couples?

On one hand, some aspects of same-sex relationships would predict fewer divorces, such as the homogamy seen in Jepsen and Jepsen (2002). Such similarities in partners' characteristics tend to reduce their divorce risk (e.g. Lehrer, 2003). Also, selection into marriage (or other legal statuses) might be based on expected divorce risk. Couples who expect to divorce might be less likely to marry, since breaking up would be harder to do.

On the other hand, same-sex couples in the United States appear to have some characteristics that might lead to higher divorce rates, although not necessarily a higher individual risk of divorce. Jepsen & Jepsen also find that same-sex couples are more alike in labor market characteristics than are different-sex couples, which could reduce the gains from marriage and increase the risk of divorce. Furthermore, same-sex couples as a group are not as alike as different-sex couples. More recent data from Census 2000 also support that conclusion. For instance, in Census 2000 5.7% of married couples are interracial, while 11.5% of male same-sex couples and 10.0% of female couples are interracial (Simmons and O'Connell, 2003; see also Gates and Sears, 2006). We have already shown that on a social level, even married or registered same-sex couples may not get the same kind of social support as different-sex couples receive, as two studies of same-sex couples in the U.S. suggest (Kurdek, 2004; Solomon et al., 2004). On a couple decision-making level, they have fewer children and are less likely to own homes than are different-sex couples (Sears, et al. 2005)--economists call these "relationship-specific" goods that reduce the risk of divorce. However, teasing out causal relationships is difficult. Perhaps same-sex couples have fewer children and homes because they cannot marry. Marriage might stabilize expectations of a relationship—and provide some security of a claim on property if it ends—making children and houses more likely and divorce eventually less likely.

Therefore, many factors predict that same-sex couples could have divorce rates that are higher than for different-sex couples before controlling for between-couple differences in divorce risk factors, assuming that the selection into marriage is the same for both groups. However, some available evidence suggests that the prediction might be pessimistic. In the Netherlands, after two years of marriages by same-sex couples, their divorce rate was about 1%, or the same as that of different-sex couples marrying over the same period (von Metzke 2005). In Vermont, roughly 1% per year of in-state civil unions were dissolved between 2000 and 2003 (Badgett and Sears, 2005).

Only one study exists of divorce in same-sex legal relationships that controls for risk factors. Andersson, Noack, Seierstad, and Weedon-Fekjaer (2006) compare divorce risk for same-sex registered partners and different-sex married couples whose legal relationships in Norway and Sweden began at roughly the same time. While those legal statuses are slightly different, the divorce rules and procedures are the same. In general, they find that the same factors predict a higher risk of divorce for same-sex couples and different-sex couples: younger couples, couples with larger age differences, binational couples, and couples with less education are more likely to divorce. More surprisingly, these authors find much higher divorce risks for Swedish same-sex couples than for different-sex couples, even after controlling for age differences, age levels, education, citizenship, parenthood, marital history, and region. The risk for lesbian couples is twice that of gay male couples and both groups are more likely to divorce than heterosexual couples in Sweden. The Norwegian data did not allow for a comparison with heterosexual couples, but lesbian couples were more than twice as likely as gay male couples to divorce in that country. Those authors suggest that same-sex couples may not be bound by norms promoting lifelong relationships, perhaps because of less interest in parenting, that might increase the duration of heterosexual relationships. However, without more research, including qualitative research, we will not know whether these differences reflect cohort-specific differences that will narrow over time, differences in social support for the same-sex relationships, differences in prior relationship duration, or differences in norms or relationship dynamics for same-sex couples.

(c) Fertility and child-rearing

The mechanisms by which lesbians and gay men come to raise children are also an unexplored research topic. Public policies undoubtedly have an influence. Adoption and fostering laws vary from outright bans on adoption by lesbians or gay men to adoption only by a single parent to full two-parent adoption. Attempts have also been made to limit the access of lesbians to reproductive technologies. On an empirical level, the extent to which couples utilize various reproductive technologies and surrogate parenting, adoption, or raise children from prior heterosexual relationships is virtually unknown.

Studies of the 2000 U.S. Census suggest increasing levels of child-rearing among same-sex couples (Gates and Ost, 2004). They also demonstrate marked differences in geographic and demographic characteristics of same-sex couples by race and ethnicity (Gates et al., 2006). Census data show that the vast majority of children being raised by same-sex couples are identified as the "natural born" child of one of the partners (Sears et al., 2005). While same-sex couples are more likely to have adopted children in the household than are different-sex couples, these adopted children still only represent about five percent of the children in same-sex couple households. The presence of so many "natural born" children suggests that many of these households likely are structured as step-families. We know little about the dynamics of step-parenting within the context of same-sex couples.

Accounting for children in studies of gay and lesbian families is also an important methodological point. Kurdek (2006) compared heterosexual married couples with children to same-sex and different-sex married and unmarried couples without children across a variety of dimensions that capture how well couples are adjusting in their relationships. In general, he finds striking similarities and only very small differences among all couples without children, regardless of marital status and the sex of the partners in measurements of emotional expressiveness, positive impressions of one's partner, acceptance by partner family, frequency of sexual relations, distribution of household labor, conflict, relationship satisfaction, and separation. This study at least raises the question about whether some observed differences between gay and straight families is more of a matter of household composition and lower rates of child rearing among gay families.

While studies of child-rearing among same-sex couples are still relatively small and of varied quality (Stacey and Biblarz, 2001; American Psychological Association, 2005; Rauch and Meezan, 2005), it is an area that has received some research attention. Most of the available research has focused on lesbian parenting and the subjects are predominantly white and of relatively high economic status. However, findings across these studies are remarkably consistent in showing no negative consequences for children with regard to standard child well-being measures. The studies also sometimes find that relative to children raised by different-sex couples, children raised by lesbian parents are more willing to consider same-sex sexuality and show evidence of less conventional gender roles.

(d) Household resource allocation

As relatively "gender-difference-free" relationships, same-sex couples might not be subject to the dramatic disparities in bargaining power and social norms that different-sex couples would experience. Therefore, most social sciences would predict a less stark division of labor within same-sex couple families than in different-sex couple families. Indeed, several studies in the United States show that same-sex couples are more egalitarian in doing housework than are different-sex couples, both in intentions and in practice (Kurdek, 1993; Kurdek, 1995; Blumstein and Schwartz, 1983). For example, married women do more housework than their husbands and more than either cohabiting women or the average partner in a same-sex couple (Blumstein and Schwartz, 1983). Lesbian couples also divided child care much more evenly than did heterosexual couples in several recent studies (Chan et al, 1998; Patterson et al, 2004; see also Solomon, Rothblum, and Balsam, 2004).

While same-sex couples turn out to be *more* egalitarian than are different-sex couples in empirical studies, however, the comparisons with heterosexual couples disguise the fact that there are within-couple differences and inequalities for same-sex couples. For instance, Blumstein and Schwartz found that same-sex couples were quite similar to different-sex couples in that one partner was commonly "relationship-centered" while the other was more "work-centered." Carrington's (1999) ethnographic study of same-sex couples also found a high degree of specialization within couples, with one partner commonly specializing in what he calls "domesticity," a concept that includes emotional and mental labor as well as the more common definition of housework. Carrington also found that an egalitarian ideal among same-sex couples often hid marked differences in the actual household labor of partners. In other words, a nontrivial number of same-sex couples appear to specialize to some extent as they divide up their time within the household.

Those differences in time use are likely to show up in differences in earnings and labor force participation. Data from the 1990 Census showed that more same-sex couples than married couples had both partners working 41-52 weeks per year in the paid labor force, but in 40-50% of same-sex couples only one partner worked for the full year (Klawitter, 1995). Recent findings from Census 2000 also find somewhat surprising economic disparities within same-sex relationships. In the average same-sex couple, one partner earned almost $30,000 per year more than the other partner, while the average married couple had an earnings difference of

$37,600 per year. And while same-sex couples are less likely to have only one employed partner than are married different-sex couples, a large minority of same-sex couples are single wage earner families in the United States: 20% of childless couples and 34% of couples with children (Sears et al., 2005).

4. Recommendations

We conclude this chapter by outlining a set of recommendations for ongoing research priorities. We focus both on issues designed to provide us with a better understanding of sexual minorities and their families and on ways in which the study of same-sex couples can provide insights into the functioning of all families. We have purposely not outlined a prioritized list of topic areas for research. Rather, we outline actions that will improve the availability of data and enhance the quality of empirical analyses. Topically, we simply encourage scholars to consider the wide range of issues that we have presented in this chapter.

Add survey questions on sexual orientation and same-sex relationships: Perhaps the most obvious recommendation with regard to the study of sexual minorities concerns the need for better data, particularly data collected using methods that permit generalizations about gay men and lesbians and their families. The bulk of social science research focusing on the relationships and families of sexual minorities utilizes convenience sampling techniques. Developing routinely collected and large probability samples of sexual minorities is crucial to advancing both theory and empirical analyses in this area.

A good start to the collection of better data involves more routinely asking sexual orientation, particularly sexual identity, questions on large surveys using probabilistic sampling techniques. Common concerns relating to break-offs and non-response to these questions are unfounded. Adding them onto more surveys has the added benefit of potentially destigmatizing inquiries about sexual orientation and likely improving the quality of the data over time.

Another avenue for better data collection concerns changes to the commonly asked question regarding marital status. Often these questions do not include options for cohabiting couples, including same-sex couples, to designate their relationship status. Furthermore, as laws change and allow same-sex couples some legal recognition, existing questions that focus only on marriage are also problematic. Adding options that recognize same-sex relationships and the availability of legal statuses like civil unions and domestic partnership registries accomplishes two purposes. A new set of options improves the availability of data on same-sex couples and reduces potential stigma embedded in this question. Lesbians and gay men, especially those in legally recognized relationships that are not marriage, are often faced with a dilemma when responding to marital status questions. Do they try to fit their relationship into one of the categories presented (e.g., currently married) or answer as if they are not in a legally sanctioned relationship? We would argue that this dilemma should raise concerns for human-subject review processes. By not providing options that include at the least the legal forms of same-sex relationships, surveys could be creating an opportunity for lesbian and gay respondents to experience a form of stigmatization simply by completing the survey.

Use sampling techniques that will result in adequate sample sizes: A different approach may be necessary to analyze differences among sub-groups of the lesbian and gay population or to take into account the unique circumstances and historical development of lesbian and gay culture. While adding sexual orientation questions to more surveys would go a long way to improving research on sexual minorities, most surveys would produce relatively small samples of lesbian or gay respondents. Perhaps even more importantly, population-based surveys will not be able to ask questions that consider many of the issues specific to sexual minorities and their relationships. As outlined in our chapter, examples of lesbian and gay specific issues include measures of both individual and relationship "outness," the nature of child-rearing, and the availability of legal sanctioning of relationships or parenthood.

Therefore, we recommend continued effort to use over-sampling in probability samples or purposive sampling techniques in studies of gay and lesbian family life. Such efforts serve at least two important research purposes. First, large samples provide the only real way to begin to analyze the diversity of same-sex relationships and potential differences associated with this diversity. Existing research documents critical differences in the dynamics of relationship and family formation between male and female couples and by race/ethnicity. We know little about differences that might also be affected by such factors as socioeconomic status or geographic location. A second important outcome of efforts to specifically sample sexual minorities concerns advancement of survey methodology. Surveying sexual minorities could provide important insights into the development of more effective survey technology designed to sample populations of relatively small proportions within the general population.

For example, respondent-driven sampling (Heckathorn 1997) offers a methodological approach designed for the sampling of hidden and socially stigmatized populations. In a variant of snowballing or chain-referral sampling techniques, the method employs both Markov chain theory and the theory of biased networks to develop a procedure for collecting an unbiased sample with known properties. Given some of the challenges, not the least of which is cost, associated with garnering a random-sample of sexual minorities through standard random-digit dialing techniques, respondent-driven sampling might provide a viable and less expensive alternative for developing large samples of sexual minorities that can provide information generalized to the larger population.

Analyze existing data on gay and lesbian people more fully and carefully: While gathering more and better data is certainly crucial, we would also encourage analyses of existing data that allow identification of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people. Such analyses will require careful consideration of the methodological strengths and weaknesses of current data collection techniques and inherent differences among sexual minority populations. For example, research that somewhat arbitrarily groups bisexuals along with gay men and lesbians, or even more suspect, adds all respondents who do not answer affirmatively to being heterosexual must carefully consider whether those decisions are justified given concerns about how individuals respond to sexual orientation questions and about possible differences among gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, and individuals who choose "none of the above" type options.

Another opportunity for new research on same-sex couples involves analyses of administrative data in jurisdictions that offer formal legal status for same-sex couples. New opportunities for both analyzing administrative data and using these data as frameworks to guide sampling of same-sex couples now exist in many communities, states, and countries.

Use variation in sexual orientation to create "natural experiments": The dynamic policy climate surrounding the status of same-sex couples also creates the opportunities for "natural experiments" that can provide insights into the institutional and social roles of marriage and the formalization of relationships. Studying same-sex couples makes it possible to ask old questions in new ways about the contemporary importance of the legal status of marriage in the lives of all families. A huge literature spanning the social and health sciences has studied the impact of the legal status of marriage on individuals' and families' health and economic well-being. Marriage is associated with better physical and mental health, higher wages, changing time use, greater wealth accumulation, and longer life, although some evidence suggests that those effects may be changing over time (e.g. Gray, 1997). Studies of couples whose choice of marital status has been exogenously constrained when that constraint is exogenously lifted might help reveal the functions that legal marriage serves. Studies comparing married, "civil union-ed", or registered couples would help to understand what—if anything—is unique about marriage as a legal and social institution. This understanding could enhance theoretical development regarding the impact of marriage on both family and societal levels. Similarly, as originally suggested by Blumstein and Schwartz, theoretical development should consider the utility of same-sex couples in providing an important counterfactual to further our understanding of the impact of gender and gender-roles in relationship dynamics.

Develop more inclusive theories of gay and lesbian family behavior: If theories of the family are intended to apply broadly to the range of family types, then increased attention to the constraints and contexts faced by lesbians and gay men will be necessary. Better theories would be able to address the unique aspects of same-sex coupling and family formation. For instance, theories about fertility and child-rearing that are relevant to lesbians and gay men would need to include an awareness of the unique legal climate that complicates their decisions about adoption or pregnancy. In some locales, access to reproductive technologies is limited or difficult, and legal parental ties for non-biological parents can often not be guaranteed. Added risks and expenses for legal counsel, in particular, may be decisive roadblocks for lesbians and gay men who wish to parent. Relatedly, we would encourage scholarship that does not simply identify differences in family-related outcomes by sexual orientation, but more carefully considers the reasons for those differences. For example, studies comparing children being raised in lesbian and gay families with those from heterosexual families should attempt to measure variables that might explain any differences in child outcomes.

No discussion of research on sexual minorities and their families can avoid consideration of the perhaps uncomfortable intersection of academic scholarship and high-profile and controversial policy debates. Virtually all of the research topics presented in this chapter in some way either evolve from or have the potential to significantly impact contemporary policy debates about the rights and social status of lesbians, gay men, and their families. We consider it an ethical obligation of scholars to carefully consider how scholarship that does not include specific analyses of sexual minorities might be applied to them and how specific research on sexual minorities may be used and perhaps abused in the policy arena. These are high-stakes debates and they often take place without the benefit of input from prominent family scholars in the academy. We conclude by encouraging these scholars to provide rational and reasonable context for debates that can often become both irrational and unreasonable.

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