

New Lesbian Parenting Study Makes Claims Unsupported by the Evidence

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The National Longitudinal Lesbian Family Study (NLLFS) published by American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) offers the following conclusion: "Adolescents who have been reared in lesbian-mother families since birth demonstrate healthy psychological adjustment (p. 28)."

Authors Gartrell and Bos generalize their findings to the lesbian population at large, claiming their research offers "implications for --same-sex parenting" (p. 28). Making an enormous scientific leap, they conclude that their study provides scientific proof that there is "no justification for restricting access to reproductive technologies or child custody on the basis of the sexual orientation of the parents" (p. 34-35).

Implied, though not stated, is the notion that fathers are not necessary or important for the healthy development of children. This implication is a throwback to an article published in the *American Psychologist* in 1999 titled "Deconstructing the Essential Father." Like the authors of the *American Psychologist* article, Gartrell and Bos are on record as activists seeking public support for homosexual parenting.

However, a cursory review of this study (funded by the Gill Foundation and the Lesbian Health Fund of the Gay, Lesbian Medical Association) demonstrates significant flaws that most first-year graduate students would quickly recognize. Any reasonable observer would easily conclude that the authors overstated their findings and that in this instance, whatever external review process was utilized, was inadequate. Consider the following:

1. The problems inherent in any self-report study. The lesbian mothers' own reports that their children were well-adjusted were accepted by the study's authors uncritically. The authors should have clarified the limitation and usefulness of such qualitative, self-reported data in light of the fact that the lesbian parents knew that the study would be used to further their political cause; in contrast, the control group had no idea how their reports would be used. In addition, most mothers, lesbian or not, would likely report their children's adjustment in a favorable light. Outside observers such as the child's teachers or counselors, if consulted, could have offered a different perspective.

2. The lesbian parents were hardly typical parents: 93% were Caucasian. Most were college-educated (67%). Most were middle/upper class (82%). Eighty-five per cent were in professional or managerial roles. The control sample, however, had significantly more minorities; many more children from the South; they were very different in race composition and socioeconomic status; and the educational level of these mothers was unclear. A statistical adjustment for these differences could have been easily addressed. Had these differences been controlled, they might have been reduced, been proven negligible, or perhaps reversed.

3. The sample was far from random. Participants were recruited from gay and lesbian venues (i.e., lesbian pride events and lesbian newspapers in three major metropolitan areas--Boston, Washington, D.C. and San Francisco). Although the

authors acknowledge the non-randomness of their subject pool and the potential problems this situation could pose, this limitation did not seem to limit their conclusions. As a result, a very strong case could be made for selection bias having invalidated the findings.

Despite the obvious study flaws, the authors offer the following generalization: "The NLLFS adolescents are well-adjusted, demonstrating more competencies and fewer behavioral problems than their peers in the normative American population (p.34)."

Notably absent was data about the sexual orientation of the adolescents or the preferences or expectations for the adolescents' sexual orientation (some of this data was, in fact, collected for the 10-year study). Was this data collected and simply dismissed?

Remarkably, the authors report that the relationship-dissolution rate for the lesbian couples was 48% at the 10-year mark and 56% at the 17-year mark. (The average duration of the relationship prior to dissolution was 12 years.) When compared to the relationship-dissolution rates of the biological heterosexual sisters of the lesbians, the rate of relationship breakup is nearly double for the lesbians.

Is the reader to conclude that dissolution of the parents' relationship has no effect upon the adjustment of the adolescents? This conclusion hardly fits the existing research.

Other research, perhaps even more interesting, was released about the same time as the NLLFS study-- research conducted by Marquardt, Glenn and Clark, titled, "My Daddy's Name is 'Donor': A New Study of Young Adults Conceived Through Sperm Donation." The authors' conclusions included the following troubling negative factors: on average, young adults conceived through artificial insemination were more confused, felt more isolated from their families, were experiencing more psychic pain, and fared worse than a matched group of children who were conceived naturally in areas such as depression, delinquency and substance abuse. And the list goes on.

No research was cited in the Gartrell and Bos study regarding the outcomes of children conceived through sperm donation, when compared to children conceived through the natural union of a man and a woman. The authors address the issue of donor status in a very cursory fashion, almost dismissively.

It seems an interesting coincidence that earlier this year, another paper authored by Biblarz and Stacey (2010) offered a similar conclusion to that of Gartrell and Bos: "In fact, 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 a man with a traditional division of labor (p.17)."

Based on these two papers, could one really conclude that a double dose of mothering is superior to a mother and a father? If a double dose of mothering is superior to mother and a father, would it follow that a double dose of mothering is

vastly superior to and actually contraindicates the placement of children in homes where mothering is absent (i.e., gay men)?

Nowhere do Gartrell and Bos cite the extensive research demonstrating the importance of gender complementarity to the healthy development of children. Nowhere do these authors cite the extensive, peer-reviewed literature on the importance of both mothering and fathering for the healthy development of children.

To Gartrell and Bos's credit, they do identify some of the reasons for what appears to be politically-motivated conclusions: "The study has implications - -or the expert testimony provided by pediatricians on lesbian mother custody, and for public policies concerning same-sex parenting. (p. 34)."

What seems clear is that the flaws in this study render it unsuitable for anything other than the following brief description: "interesting." Gartrell and Bos' conclusions don't rise to the level of support for lesbian parenting that they would like. Certainly, this study does not merit inclusion in any expert witness testimony nor does it rise to the level of policy implications. Until, such limitations are addressed and more rigorous research conducted, the sought after conclusions stated by the authors are without substantial scientific support.

Perhaps the study would be better titled, "Preconceived Conclusions Seeking Research Support" or "Activism Masquerading as Science: A Study Suitable for Scrutiny by Beginning Graduate Students."

Silverstein and Auerbach, authors of the "Deconstructing Fathers" article, offered the following disclaimer: "We acknowledge that our reading of the scientific literature supports our political agenda. Our goal is to generate public-policy initiatives that support men in their fathering role, without discriminating against women and same-sex couples. We are also interested in encouraging public policy that supports the legitimacy of diverse family structures, rather than privileging the two-parent, heterosexual, married family." (p. 399).

The same could be said of this study. Gartrell and Bos should have offered the same disclaimer as Silverstein and Auerbach. But they did not.

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References

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