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Studying Complex Families in Context

“How Does the Gender of Parents Matter?” is an intriguing follow-up to Stacey and Biblarz’s (2001) meta-analysis of the research on lesbian and gay parenting, in which they asked the question “(How) does the sexual orientation of parents matter?” The authors concisely and thoughtfully summarize much of the research on lesbian and gay parenting and single parenting and raise some interesting questions about how, specifically, the gender of parents matters.

Their review stimulated me to consider several key, interrelated issues. First, it prompted me to reflect upon the ways that we have chosen to think about and study gender. Specifically, I would like us to consider a lens that seeks to probe the intersections of gender with other relevant social categories and contexts, as opposed to a framework that aims to identify how gender operates “independent” of these. Second, this review compelled me to consider some of the ways in which our definitions of family have caused us to overlook important elements of diversity within lesbian-parent and gay-parent families. Third, I was prompted to consider how the data that we rely upon as sources of knowledge—that is, quantitative and qualitative—necessarily shapes the conclusions we draw regarding the nature, meaning, and implications of gender and family. In my commentary, I discuss these three issues as they relate to the authors’ review.

Gender and Context

One major goal of the authors’ synthesis appears to be to isolate the “main effect” of gender on parenting, apart from parental sexual orientation, number of parents, marital status, and biological relatedness to one’s child. And yet their review points, again and again, to the reality that the interactions, where gender is concerned, are far more plentiful, compelling, and interesting than the main effects. Thus, although it is true, as they conclude in their abstract, that “average differences favor women over men, but parenting skills are not dichotomous or exclusive,” the findings that they present tell a far more complicated story and seriously call into question whether gender can ever be truly studied and understood independent of both the immediate (familial) environment and the broader (e.g., societal and legal) context.

Indeed, although it is statistically possible to hold constant factors such as sexual orientation, number of parents, marital status, and the biogenetic relationship of parents to the child, in order to evaluate the unique effect of gender, the practical utility of understanding how gender operates independent of these social categories is questionable. Further, even when controlling for such factors, it is debatable whether the gender that we observe in one environment or context is truly equivalent to the gender that we observe in another. Consider a study that controls for the number of parents in the household, parents’ marital status, and parents’ biogenetic relationship to their child by comparing the parenting behaviors of lesbian adoptive mothers who are married to female partners to those of heterosexual adoptive mothers who are married to male partners. We cannot say that these scenarios are equivalent except for

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parental gender. The relational context (i.e., the experience of parenting with a woman or a man) necessarily transforms the role, meaning, and function of gender. As the authors observe, in their review:

Two mothers tended to play with their children more (e.g., Golombok et al., 2003) and to discipline them less than married heterosexual parents. They were less likely to employ corporal punishment, to set strict limits on their children, or try to elicit social (and gender) conformity (Bos et al., 2004, 2007; Johnson & O'Connor, 2002; MacCallum & Golombok, 2004)... In other words, two women who chose to become parents together seemed to provide a double dose of a middle-class "feminine" approach to parenting... Parenting without men may enhance "feminine" dimensions of parenting, but also might release women from some gender constraints. (p. 11)

Thus, the data—and the authors' interpretation of the data—suggest that it is not just women's gender but also their relational context (i.e., parenting with another woman), which is inextricably tied to their gender, that influences parenting processes. In other words, lesbian women likely do not do less of certain things (e.g., discipline harshly, emphasize social conformity) simply because of their gender alone but also because of the fact that they are parenting with another woman. Equally as important as the gender of the parent is the gender of the person with whom that parent is parenting (i.e., the parenting behavior of a woman who first raises children in the context of a heterosexual marriage and then raises another set of children in the context of a same-sex union is likely uniquely shaped by these two very different relational contexts). Further, it is worth pointing out that even if parenting behavior looks similar across relational contexts, the meaning of that behavior may differ. For example, Kane (2006) found that both lesbian and heterosexual mothers appeared to emphasize some amount of gender conformity in their children (particularly sons) because of concerns about accountability to others. Kane observed, however, that lesbians' enforcement of gender norms was driven by concerns about being judged by society (i.e., as failing to provide their sons with adequate male role models), whereas heterosexual women's emphasis on gender conformity was driven by accountability to their husbands (i.e., because

of their husbands' concerns about their sons being "masculine" enough, they sought to steer their sons away from female-typed activities and toys). Thus, the experience of being partnered with a man necessarily shaped heterosexual women's parenting behaviors as they related to their children's gender.

I question whether we can ever understand how gender operates stripped away from its relational context. As the authors' review suggests, the meaning and embodiment of both the role and identity of "mother," for example, will inevitably vary depending on whether one is parenting alone, with another woman, or with a man.

Individuals' immediate relational context, however, is just one of the contexts that transform parenting processes, and, specifically, that interacts with gender to shape parenting. As the authors point out (pp. 11–12), the broader legal context may also shape parenting processes. Specifically, the authors observe that lack of access to marriage and adoption rights may have direct and indirect consequences for lesbians' and gay men's parenting. For example, the authors suggest that lesbian comothers "generally value egalitarian relationships more than other couples, but confront asymmetrical legal, biological, and cultural ties to children that exacerbate maternal competition and jealousy under conditions that reduce barriers to exiting" (p. 12). This example hints at the complex interrelationships that may exist among the broader social, political, and legal contexts and parents' gender and sexual orientation. Indeed, gay men and lesbians, because of their differing gender and relational context, may in some ways be differentially impacted by legal and social inequities. As an example, given that women (including lesbians) tend to experience greater fear of victimization than men (including gay men; Fox, Nobles, & Piquero, 2009; Otis, 2007), lesbian mothers who lack protections for their relationships and who live in particularly hostile areas may tend to engage in higher levels of parental monitoring or be more protective of their children compared to legally vulnerable gay men living in hostile areas. As another example, given that societal stereotypes of gay men as pedophiles are more predominant than stereotypes of lesbians as pedophiles (Hicks, 2006), gay men may be more hesitant than lesbians to adopt a same-sex child for fear of being scrutinized. Thus, the authors' brief

discussion of how unequal access to marriage and parenting rights may shape lesbian mothers' intimate relationships (e.g., the likelihood of relationship dissolution) can be extended to consider how various aspects of the broader legal and sociopolitical context may interact with gender and sexual minority status to shape men's and women's parental consciousness in unique and important ways.

Complex Families

For the purposes of their review and, specifically, their analysis of the role of parental gender on parenting processes and child outcomes, Biblarz and Stacey (2010) present research that compares intentional lesbian two-mother families with heterosexual two-parent families. By controlling the number of parents in the household, they seek to isolate the effects of "fatherless parenting" on children (p. 11). Thus, the authors, as well as the authors of the studies they review, appear to presume that intentional two-mother families are necessarily also "fatherless" families. Although this may be true for many families, in the sense that there is no identified male parent, it is certainly not true for all. Furthermore, the presumption that two lesbian mothers equals no father is just one example of how we as a field have failed to acknowledge the diversity inherent within lesbian- and gay-parent families.

In fact, an increasing number of lesbian mothers are using known donors because they wish to shield themselves and their children from potential scrutiny or harassment (Goldberg & Allen, 2007; Haimés & Weiner, 2000) because they want their child to know their biological father (Touroni & Coyle, 2002) and, in some cases, because they wish to secure at least one man who will have a consistent involvement with the child and will fulfill a "significant fathering role" (Chabot & Ames, 2004; Touroni & Coyle, p. 201). Although in many cases the donor's role is clearly identified as a "friend" or "uncle-like" (Haimés & Weiner, 2000), some known donors are explicitly identified as fathers who may not live with the child but who do have a parental role in the child's life (Gartrell, Deck, Rodas, Peyser, & Banks, 2006; Touroni & Coyle). For example, Gartrell et al. interviewed lesbian mothers of 10-year-olds and found that among the 27 children with known donors, about half saw their donors regularly and half saw them

occasionally. Thirteen children considered their donors to be "fathers" and therefore referred to them as "Dad." Similarly, some gay male couples pursue open adoption expressly because they want their child to have a relationship with a birth mother (Downing, Richardson, Kinkler, & Goldberg, 2009). Rather than feeling competitive with these birth mothers, these men regard birth mothers as fulfilling an important and unique maternal role. Additionally, they are aware that the presence of an active birth mother may help to ward off attacks that they are raising their child without a mother (Downing et al.).

I highlight these data not because I believe that children with lesbian mothers and children with gay fathers necessarily need or benefit from a male and female parental figure, respectively. Nor do I raise it out of hopes that critics of two-mom or two-dad parenting will "excuse" those families with an active male parent/active female parent from criticism. Rather, I aim to challenge the notion that lesbian- and gay-parent families necessarily define themselves as fatherless and motherless and also to draw attention to the complexity of lesbian- and gay-parent families. Families with two mothers and a father (or two mothers and two fathers or a lesbian mother and two gay fathers) further our understanding of "motherhood" and "fatherhood" and widen our consideration of families as being either single-parent or two-parent to considering the possibility of three-parent and even four-parent or five-parent families. Indeed, some lesbian and gay parents are neither coupled nor single but participate in more complex parenting arrangements. For example, a single lesbian woman may coparent with a single gay man or with two gay men (Lev, 2004). Importantly, the experiences of lesbians and gay men coparenting together have rarely been examined, an oversight that has necessarily limited our understanding of the true complexity and diversity of lesbian- and gay-parent families.

Qualitative Research

The data that Biblarz and Stacey (2010) discuss in their review are, for the most part, quantitative in nature. In outlining their approach to the review, they state (p. 4) that they "undertake a careful review of relevant research to assess what it can contribute to understanding how the gender of parents matters." They proceed to analyze studies that compared two-parent

families with same or different sex coparents and single-mother with single-father families. To be included, studies

had to report findings on parenting and/or child outcomes, statistically assess significance of differences between groups, and compare families with the same number of residential parents but different configurations of male and female parents. (p. 9)

On page 10, however, the authors note that few studies of gay fathers met the above criteria, and state that “to even consider concerns about ‘motherless’ parenting, we more tentatively discuss studies of gay male parents that did not meet all of our criteria.” In turn, what would have been otherwise a very limited discussion of gay male parenting is enhanced considerably by the qualitative studies they reviewed (e.g., Brinamen, 2000; Mallon, 2004). The authors also cite qualitative studies elsewhere (although they do not foreshadow or explain their inclusion), such as in their discussion of how parenting without men may release lesbian mothers from gender constraints, thereby freeing them “to express more ‘feminine’ forms of nurturance while compelling them to assume more ‘masculine’ financial and disciplinary roles, as sociological research suggests (Reimann, 1998; Sullivan, 2004)” (p. 11). The inclusion of such studies certainly strengthened the overall manuscript by providing the authors with the tools to speculate about and develop insight into topics about which we know little and aiding their interpretation of quantitative findings. And yet I was perplexed as to why more qualitative studies were not reviewed, here and elsewhere, and, likewise, how the studies they did review were selected from the larger pool of qualitative studies on lesbian and gay parenting. The authors did not explicitly state how and why qualitative studies were selected and whether they had to meet certain criteria for inclusion in their review.

It strikes me that a more systematic inclusion of qualitative studies would lend even richer insight into the nature of gender in heterosexual and lesbian- and gay-parent families. For example, on page 4, the authors raise many interesting questions:

Researchers agree that on average women and men parent somewhat differently, but they do not agree on the sources, fixity, or consequences of these differences. Beyond lactation, are there

exclusively female or male parenting abilities? Does female-only and male-only parenting differ? Does fatherless or motherless parenting create particular difficulties or opportunities for children, and are these the same for girls and boys? Research provides few unambiguous answers.

The authors go on to address these questions using mostly quantitative data. Yet it seems that the “answers” to these questions also lie in qualitative research. There are many interesting qualitative studies that would shed light on these questions that were not reviewed. For example, a study of gay fathers conducted by Schacher, Auerbach, and Silverstein (2005; which is mentioned briefly on p. 10) speaks to the question “Are there exclusively female/male parenting abilities?” Many of the gay fathers that Schacher et al. interviewed spoke to their perception that they were “degendering” parenting. Specifically, some participants expressed their belief that as gay men they were both fathers and mothers to their children: “It’s not about gender. . . . [M]ales and females can be equally mothers and fathers”; whereas others had a more “post-gender” perspective of their roles: “I wouldn’t call it a ‘mommy’ or ‘daddy’ role. . . . just primary caregiver” (p. 39). These men also spoke to the perceived advantages of raising children as two men in that they were able to overcome or avoid gendered roles: “Two men is a big advantage. . . . [Y]ou don’t have stereotypes to fall back on” (p. 39). These data, and other qualitative studies of gay fathers that were not reviewed (e.g., Benson, Silverstein, & Auerbach, 2005; Berkowitz, 2007; Berkowitz & Marsiglio, 2007; Gianino, 2008; Lassiter, Dew, Newton, Hays, & Yarbrough, 2006) provide rich insights into the nature and meaning of parenthood in the gay father context.

Likewise, insights into the question that they pose, “Does fatherless or motherless parenting create particular difficulties or opportunities for children, and are these the same for girls and boys?” can be gleaned from several qualitative studies of adults raised by lesbian and gay parents. For example, the findings of both Saffron (1998) and Goldberg (2007) speak to the advantages that both men and women perceive as a result of being raised by lesbian and gay parents. Consistent across both studies is the theme of perceiving oneself as more tolerant and open-minded as a result of having lesbian/gay parents. As one participant in Goldberg’s study

said, in reflecting on how she had been impacted by her nontraditional family constellation:

I think knowing from a very early age what it is to be different or not, to be like the mainstream or not accepted... that gives me an understanding that people just come from so many different walks of life and that respect and an open mind and encountering the world with love and flexibility is definitely how I live my life. (p. 555)

Greater use of qualitative research, and more systematic inclusion of this research, could give insight into the questions the authors pose. Indeed, the authors considered only a limited number of qualitative studies, which they seem to have consulted mainly to supplement their interpretations of quantitative data. It is interesting to consider what might have been learned and how their conclusions regarding gender and families might have been different if they had conducted a meta-synthesis (Walsh & Downe, 2005) of the qualitative studies on lesbian and gay parenting (and single parenting, for that matter) alongside their meta-analysis of quantitative studies. Meta-synthesis attempts to integrate results from a number of different but interrelated qualitative studies (Walsh & Downe), although there are several different meta-synthetic approaches: For example, some scholars aim to identify a set of common themes across studies (Beck, 2002; Meadows-Oliver, 2003), whereas others use the data to develop a set of theoretical propositions or a theoretical model (Douglas et al., 2008; Jensen & Allen, 1994). Thus, a thorough and systematic consideration of qualitative research might uncover additional themes or theoretical insights, or both, that would further our understanding of how gender shapes parenting processes in different family contexts.

Conclusion

Biblarz and Stacey's (2010) review provides many new and important insights into a highly complex topic. In many ways, they acknowledge and examine this complexity. For example, although their abstract presents a somewhat oversimplified take-home message, stating that "average differences favor women over men, but parenting skills are not dichotomous or exclusive," they present a different, more complex version of their findings in the final section of their paper:

At this point no research supports the widely held conviction that the gender of parents matters for child well-being. To ascertain whether any particular form of family is ideal would demand sorting a formidable array of often inextricable family and social variables. We predict that even "ideal" research designs will find instead that ideal parenting comes in many different genres and genders. (p. 17)

Of interest is how readers, as well as policymakers, lawyers, and judges, will interpret and utilize this review. That is, will they conclude that gender matters, or does not matter, in terms of child well-being? Further, given that the meaning and effect of gender may vary according to relational context and family structure, how will court officials utilize this knowledge—particularly if, as the authors point out on page 3, judges are relying on their "intuition" and "experience" in making custody and adoption decisions? It seems that we should anticipate that some consumers of research (e.g., court officials) may not understand that questions like "Are women/men better or worse as parents?" and "What are the effects of gender on parenting?" are overly simplistic and, in turn, may draw very different conclusions from the authors about the meaning and role of gender—and, inevitably, sexual orientation—in parenting and family processes.

As we move forward into the next decade, a major challenge for scholars continues to be how we can most effectively disseminate our research findings to policymakers and other persons in positions of power and how we can best ensure that they are accurately interpreted and appropriately utilized to inform the debates surrounding same-sex marriage, gay adoption, and so on. It is clearly not enough to write an interesting and informative synthesis of the research on lesbian and gay parenting. As the authors well know, the publication of such an article can invite misinterpretation and misrepresentation (Stacey, 2007). It is our responsibility as individual scholars and as a field to ensure that our research is not misunderstood and misused in the current policy debates. For example, speaking publicly about our findings to the lay public (Stacey), dialoguing directly with policy administrators and legislators about our policy-relevant findings (Huston, 2008; Maton & Bishop-Josef, 2006), and working with task forces (such as those within the American Psychological Association)

that produce research reports that are widely disseminated (Maton & Bishop-Josef) may help to minimize the misuse of our research findings on important and controversial topics such as those pertaining to gender and families.

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