

TIMOTHY J. BIBLARZ *University of Southern California*JUDITH STACEY *New York University**

How Does the Gender of Parents Matter?

Claims that children need both a mother and father presume that women and men parent differently in ways crucial to development but generally rely on studies that conflate gender with other family structure variables. We analyze findings from studies with designs that mitigate these problems by comparing 2-parent families with same or different sex coparents and single-mother with single-father families. Strengths typically associated with married mother-father families appear to the same extent in families with 2 mothers and potentially in those with 2 fathers. Average differences favor women over men, but parenting skills are not dichotomous or exclusive. The gender of parents correlates in novel ways with parent-child relationships but has minor significance for children's psychological adjustment and social success.

Fathers and mothers differ, just as males and females differ.

—David Popenoe

We know the statistics—that children who grow up without a father are five times more likely to live in poverty and commit crime; nine times more likely to drop out of schools and twenty times more

likely to end up in prison. They are more likely to have behavioral problems, or run away from home, or become teenage parents themselves.

—Barack Obama

In 1999 *American Psychologist* unleashed a public furor when it published an article that challenged a popular discourse on the dangers of fatherlessness. “Deconstructing the Essential Father” (Silverstein & Auerbach, 1999) contended that successful parenting is not gender specific and that children do not need fathers, or mothers either, for that matter. Rather, any gender configuration of adults could parent well. The implication that fathers were expendable incited an uproar. Wade Horn (1999), soon to become Secretary for Children and Families at the Department of Health and Human Services, labeled the article “Lunacy 101: Questioning the Need for Fathers,” and other critics were more vitriolic (e.g., Jacoby, 1999).

Complex scholarly questions about the significance of parental gender were lost in the firestorm, and the view that Silverstein and Auerbach (1999) challenged continues to dominate public policy. Thus, the 2006 New York Court of Appeals ruling against same-sex marriage found that “the Legislature could rationally believe that it is better, other things being equal, for children to grow up with both a mother and a father. Intuition and experience suggest that a child benefits from having before his or her eyes, every day, living models of what both a man and a woman are like” (Justice Robert Smith in *Hernandez v. Robles*, 2006). Presidents from both political parties concur.

Department of Sociology, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA 90089-2539
 (biblarz@usc.edu).

*Department of Sociology, New York University, 295 Lafayette St., 4th floor, New York, NY 10012.

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Former President Bush defended Florida's ban on gay adoption rights contending that "studies have shown that the ideal is where a child is raised in a married family with a man and a woman" (quoted in Bumiller, Sanger, & Stevenson, 2005). President Obama endorsed stereotypical views about fathers in 2008: "Of all the rocks upon which we build our lives, we are reminded today that family is the most important. And we are called to recognize and honor how critical every father is to that foundation. They are teachers and coaches. They are mentors and role models. They are examples of success and the men who constantly push us toward it" (*New York Times*, 2008).

The argument that children need both a mother and father presumes that mothering and fathering involve gender-exclusive capacities. The "essential father" is a disciplinarian, problem solver, and playmate who provides crucially masculine parenting. Boys need fathers, proponents claim (Blankenhorn, 1995; Popenoe, 1996; Wilson, 2002), to develop appropriate masculine identity and to inhibit antisocial behaviors like violence, criminality, and substance abuse; in contrast, fathers foster heterosexual femininity in daughters and help deter promiscuity, teen pregnancy, and welfare dependency. Dad "is the grinding stone on which his son sharpens his emerging masculinity and the appreciative audience to which his daughter plays out her femininity" (Pruett, 2000, p. 87). Mothers provide nurturance, security, and caretaking.

The belief that research supports these convictions remains widespread. At the risk of inviting charges of "Lunacy 201," we wish to revive conversation among scholars about research on gender differences in parenting and child development. 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.

We undertake a careful review of relevant research to assess what it can contribute to understanding how the gender of parents matters. There is no clearly identified body of research, however, to which we can easily turn.

An unusually diffuse array of literatures bears indirectly on these questions: studies of primary caretaker married fathers; egalitarian coparenting heterosexual couples; single mothers or fathers after a death, divorce, or desertion; heterosexual single mothers by accident or choice; lesbian mothers and gay fathers after heterosexual divorce; planned lesbian motherhood through donor insemination (DI) or adoption; planned gay fatherhood through adoption, surrogacy, or coparenting with women. Thus, to make headway on these issues we must extract scattered kernels of empirical wheat from masses of extraneous chaff. We begin by identifying genres of research from which claims about gender differences have been drawn and show that they were not designed to address these questions, nor are they capable of doing so. Next we analyze studies that do bear on these questions. Finally, we suggest a research strategy to better address intriguing unresolved questions.

Misleading Representations of Research

Conventional understanding of gender differences in parenting derives primarily from studies of married mothers and fathers. The gist of this research is unsurprising: Most married wives exceed their husbands relatively and absolutely on time spent in child care and domestic work and on most types of interaction with their children (e.g., Hall, Walker, & Acock, 1995; Hawkins, Amato, & King, 2006; Yeung, Sanberg, Davis-Kean, & Hofferth, 2001). Fathering among married couples involves more breadwinning, stereotypical masculine tasks, and play with children (e.g., Hawkins et al.). Married fathers generally spend more time with sons than daughters (Harris, Furstenberg, & Marmer, 1998; Marsiglio, 1991) and express greater interest in children's gender conformity (e.g., Pruett, 2000). These patterns have been softening over time (e.g., Bianchi, 2000; Sandberg & Hofferth, 2001), and parenting differences between families often exceed gender differences within families (e.g., Lytton & Romney, 1991). Despite stereotypes about fathers as disciplinarians, mothers physically punish children more often than fathers do because they spend much more time caring for children. Relative to the amount of time spent caring for children, however, fathers commit more physical and sexual abuse (Sedlack & Broadhurst, 1996; Straus, 2001).

The research on married couples largely reinforces what we already know—that women are more likely than men to commit to children, relationships, and homemaking. What we do not know is whether these average differences derive from gender per se, from heterosexual gender, or from other factors. Because these studies do not include single-sex parent families, they do not isolate the effects of parental gender, as public officials, advocates, and even some social scientists infer. Our two epigraphs about parental gender differences and the distinctive role of fathers rest on a similar analytical error. They draw inappropriately from studies of divorce and single mothering and conflate findings on five distinct variables that interact in complex ways—number of parents, gender, sexual identity, marital status, and biogenetic relationship to children. In a typical and weighty example of this error, an expert witness for the state of Washington drew on an “extensive review of the published research on the need that every child has for both a mother and a father” (Satinover, 2004, p. 3) to oppose same-sex marriage. The psychiatrist testified that research confirmed that “children not raised by their own married mother and father are subject to increased risk of disadvantage and harm” (p. 9). He attested that “quantifiable deficits occur in literally every area of development” (p. 10) in children who “do not live with both their biological mother and father” (p. 9). Almost all of the studies Satinover cited, however, compared single-mother with married-parent families. None compared children raised by two female parents with those raised by two males or by one male and one female. None compared primary-caretaker fathers and mothers or children adopted by single men and women.

Reputable social scientists have issued similar misinterpretations of research. Prominent scholars signed a report, “Why Marriage Matters: Twenty-One Conclusions from the Social Sciences” (Glenn, Nock, & Waite, 2002). Echoing errors in Satinover’s (2004) affidavit, the report analyzed research in which marital status, rather than gender, was the primary parental variable, but it conflated marriage with different-sex couples. To support its claim that “a child who is not living with his or her own two married parents is at greater risk of child abuse” (p. 17), the report cited studies of children who live alone with single mothers, in stepfamilies,

or with their mother’s boyfriends. It ignored research on lesbian and gay parenthood.

Because access to legal same-sex marriage is so new and rare, we do not yet have research that compares the children of married same-sex and different-sex couples. Even so, scholars have achieved a rare degree of consensus that unmarried lesbian parents are raising children who develop at least as well as their counterparts with married heterosexual parents (e.g., American Academy of Pediatrics, 2002; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001; Tasker, 2005).

Additionally, most family researchers agree that, all other things being equal, two parents (in a low-conflict relationship) generally provide more material and emotional resources to children than one parent (e.g., Amato, 2005; McLanahan & Sandefur 1994). This research, however, did not compare children in married-couple homes with children raised by same-sex couples. Moreover, too often it compared children in married-couple and single-parent families, thereby confounding the effects of number of parents with those of their marital history. None of this research investigated whether the gender of the absent parent was responsible for different child outcomes in single- versus two-parent families. Nonetheless, consequential policy decisions rest on the view that “[f]ew propositions have more empirical support in the social sciences than this one: Compared to all other family forms, families headed by married, biological parents are best for children” (Popenoe, quoted in Center for Marriage and Families, 2006, p. 1).

Research on Parental Sex Differences and Child Outcomes

Well, then, “where’s the wheat?” What research literature contributes fruitful knowledge kernels about sex differences in parenting? Surprisingly few studies examined how the gender, as distinct from the number, marital status, sexual orientation, or biogenetic relationship of parents, affects children. No study attempted to isolate the variable of parental gender by holding constant these other factors. No research compared planned parenting by couples composed of women only, men only, or a woman and a man. No studies compared single-parent adoptions by women and men. Consequently, the gender differences question requires an indirect, inductive approach. Two

bodies of research avoid some of these problems. Some studies explored parenting differences between biological, presumptively heterosexual, single fathers and mothers. Here the gender of parent varied, but the number, marital status, and genetic relationship to children did not. A related genre of studies explored differences in parenting between married wives and their husbands but did not compare single-sex with different-sex coparent families. The second, most germane body of research compared planned lesbian coparent families with heterosexual married-parent families. Although this research investigated the impact of sexual identity on parenting and children, it offers data more relevant to parental gender, particularly “fatherlessness,” because it compared families that did and did not include male parents. A new promising avenue of research compared families headed by lesbians to those headed by gay male parents (Johnson & O’Connor, 2002).

Although these research designs help to disentangle the gender of parents from the confounding variables of number and marital status, they also have limitations. Studies that compared single (heterosexual) mothers and fathers rarely controlled effects of diverse routes to single parenthood—chosen or accidental or via the loss of a coparent through death, desertion, or a divorce in which child custody was contested or granted willingly. Studies that compared lesbian comothers (or gay cofathers) with heterosexual coparents, on the other hand, rarely could control for marital status or biological relatedness of both parents, and they could not readily distinguish the impact of gender from sexual identity. Moreover, these studies were conducted in different states and nations with distinct and changing sociocultural and legal contexts for parenting, such as the Netherlands, where same-sex marriage was legalized in 2001.

METHOD

Despite these limitations, a careful analysis of these two bodies of research sheds light on ways in which growing up with both a mother and a father does and does not matter for children and our society. We examined all pertinent studies published from 1990 onward located through database searches of PsychINFO, Sociological Abstracts, JSTOR, and ProQuest; by pursuing references in published studies; and through personal contacts with family researchers. To

be included, studies had to report findings on parenting or child outcomes, or both; 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. (An appendix listing key methodological features of each study—publication type, target population, type and size of samples and comparison groups, response rate, primary dependent variables, method of data collection, and statistical approach to the data—is available on the *Journal of Marriage and Family* website). We were concerned about treating findings from studies that were somewhat weaker methodologically as equal to those from relatively stronger studies, so we experimented with rating studies on methodological dimensions. Because studies of the same dependent variables tended to log similar differences between groups even as their methodological strength varied, however, we include findings from all 33 studies of two-parent families and 48 studies of single-parent families. Thirty of the two-parent studies compared lesbian to heterosexual coparents, one compared gay male to heterosexual coparents, and two compared lesbian to gay male coparents.

Most studies of heterosexual single-parent families drew on surveys with national probability samples and self-administered questionnaires. In contrast, comparative studies of lesbian and heterosexual coparent families typically employed snowball samples or drew from fertility clinic rosters of couples who employed DI. These usually included in-depth interviews and observations and employed psychometric instruments that assess the well-being of family members and the quality of their relationships. Although researchers who examine the impact of parental sex orientation on children reported few significant differences in child outcomes between children raised by heterosexual and lesbian couples (e.g., Tasker, 2005; Telingator & Patterson, 2008), the overwhelming public consensus is that children raised by both a mother and father develop more successfully.

To vet all evidence that speaks to this counterconsensus, we focus our analysis on the comparatively rare statistically significant findings of difference between families with same- and different-sex parents or female versus male parents. Tables 1 and 2 cross-classify findings of difference from the 81 studies by whether they involved two-parent (Table 1) or single-parent

Table 1. Findings of Significant Differences Between Two-Parent Couples and Their Children by Gender Mix of Couples in 33 Studies

Outcome Variables	Direction	Sources
Parental differences		
<i>Division of labor and relationship between partners</i>		
Degree to which partners share employment, child care, family/household labor, decision making, and/or participation in activities with children	$\text{♀♀} > \text{♀♂}$ $\text{♂♂} > \text{♀♂}$	Bos et al. (2007); Brewaeys et al. (1997); Chan, Brooks, et al. (1998); Ciano-Boyce & Shelly-Sireci (2002); Fulcher et al. (2008); McPherson (1993); Patterson et al. (2004); Vanfraussen et al. (2003a)
Coparent prefers equal responsibility for child care versus less responsibility for child care	$\text{♀♀} > \text{♀♂}$	Chan, Raboy, et al. (1998); Patterson et al. (2004)
Relationship satisfaction and compatibility with division of labor and/or partner as coparent	$\text{♀♀} > \text{♀♂}$	Bos et al. (2004); Bos et al. (2007); Chan, Raboy et al. (1998)
Rate of separation/divorce/breakup while parenting	$\text{♂♂} > \text{♀♂}$	McPherson (1993)
	$\text{♀♀} > \text{♂♂}$	Johnson & O'Connor (2002)
<i>Parenting and parent-child relationships</i>	$\text{♀♀} > \text{♀♂}$	MacCallum & Golombok (2004)
Intensity of desire to have a child; time spent reflecting on reasons for having a child	$\text{♀♀} > \text{♀♂}$	Bos et al. (2003); Bos et al. (2007)
Parenting skills (such as parental awareness, concern, problem solving, availability, respect for children's autonomy, and quality of parent/child interaction)	$\text{♀(♀)} > \text{♀♂}$	Bos et al. (2007); Brewaeys et al. (1997); Flaks et al. (1995); Golombok et al. (1997); MacCallum & Golombok (2004)
Time spent in imaginative and domestic play, shared interests, and activities with children	$\text{♀(♀)} > \text{♀♂}$	Golombok et al. (2003); Golombok et al. (1997); MacCallum & Golombok (2004)
Warmth, affection, attachment	$\text{♀(♀)} > \text{♀♂}$	Golombok et al. (1997); Golombok et al. (2003); MacCallum & Golombok (2004)
Emphasis on gender conformity in children	$\text{♀♀} < \text{♀♂}$	Fulcher et al. (2008)
Emphasis on social conformity in children, limit setting, disciplinary control	$\text{♀(♀)} < \text{♀♂}$	Bos et al. (2004); Bos et al. (2007); MacCallum & Golombok (2004)
Use of corporal punishment	$\text{♀♀} < \text{♀♂}$	Golombok et al. (2003)
Frequency of disputes with children	$\text{♀♀} > \text{♂♂}$	Johnson & O'Connor (2002)
	$\text{♀(♀)} < \text{♀♂}$	Golombok et al. (1997)
Severity of disputes with children	$\text{♀(♀)} > \text{♀♂}$	Golombok et al. (1997); MacCallum & Golombok (2004)
Parents rate quality of relationship with daughters higher than with sons	$\text{♀♀} > \text{♀♂}$	Vanfraussen et al. (2003a)
<i>Experience of donor insemination and adoption</i>		
Parent's openness about DI with children and others	$\text{♀♀} > \text{♀♂}$	Brewaeys et al. (1993); Wendland et al. (1996)
Parents' desire for donor anonymity	$\text{♀♀} < \text{♀♂}$	Brewaeys et al. (1993); Wendland et al. (1996)
Proportion of children who are adopted	$\text{♀♀} > \text{♀♂}$	Sears & Badgett (2004); Sears et al. (2005)
Frequency of adopting girls	$\text{♀♀} > \text{♀♂}$	Ciano-Boyce & Shelly-Sireci (2002); Shelley-Sireci & Ciano-Boyce (2002)
Frequency of cross-racial adoption	$\text{♀♀} > \text{♀♂}$	Ciano-Boyce & Shelly-Sireci (2002); Fulcher et al. (2008); Shelley-Sireci & Ciano-Boyce (2002)

Table 1. *Continued*

Outcome Variables	Direction	Sources
Child outcomes		
<i>Psychological and social well-being</i>		
Security of attachment to parents	♀(♀) > ♀♂	Golombok et al. (1997, 2003)
Perceives parents as available, dependable	♀(♀) > ♀♂	MacCallum & Golombok (2004)
Discusses emotional issues (including own sexual development) with parents	♀♀ > ♀♂	Vanfraussen et al. (2003a)
Interest, effort, success in school	♀(♀) > ♀♂	MacCallum & Golombok (2004); Wainright et al. (2004)
Behavioral problems (especially among girls) (parent and child reports)	♀♀ < ♀♂	Brewaeys et al. (1997); Gartrell et al. (2005); Vanfraussen et al. (2002)
Teacher ratings of children's behavioral and attention problems	♀♀ > ♀♂	Vanfraussen et al. (2002)
Likelihood of getting teased at school about their family configuration or own sexuality	♀♀ > ♀♂	Vanfraussen et al. (2002)
Perception of own cognitive and physical competence	♀(♀) < ♀♂	Golombok et al. (1997)
Daughters rate quality of relationship with parents higher than sons do	♀♀ > ♀♂	Vanfraussen et al. (2003a)
<i>Gender and sexual behavior/preferences</i>		
Self-reported aggressiveness	♀♀ < ♀♂	Vanfraussen et al. (2002)
Feeling of own-sex superiority	♀♀ < ♀♂	Bos et al. (2006)
Parent or peer pressure to gender conform	♀♀ < ♀♂	Bos et al. (2006)
Tolerance of gender nonconformity in boys	♀♀ > ♀♂	Fulcher et al. (2008)
Girls' aspirations to masculine occupations	♀♀ < ♀♂	Bos et al. (2006)
Girls' heterosexual identity	♀♀ < ♀♂	Bos et al. (2006)
Boys' gender flexibility	♀(♀) > ♀♂	Brewaeys et al. (1997); MacCallum & Golombok (2004)

Note. ♀(♀) means sample from one or more studies cited included a mix of lesbian single mothers and couples. For every finding of significant difference shown in Table 1, there were roughly four or more findings of no significant difference that we do not display.

Sources: The 33 studies considered in Table 1 are Bos, van Balen, & van den Boom (2003, 2004, 2007); Bos, van Balen, Sandfort, & van den Boom (2006); Brewaeys, Ponjaert, Van Hall, & Golombok (1997); Brewaeys, Ponjaert-Kristoffersen, Van Steirteghem, & Devroey (1993); Chan, Brooks, Raboy, & Patterson (1998); Chan, Raboy, & Patterson (1998); Ciano-Boyce & Shelley-Sireci (2002); Davis & Friel (2001); Drexler (2001); Flaks, Ficher, Masterpasqua, & Joseph (1995); Fulcher, Chan, Raboy, & Patterson (2002); Fulcher, Sutfin, & Patterson (2008); Gartrell, Deck, Rodas, Peyser, & Banks (2001); Golombok et al. (2003); Golombok, Tasker, & Murray (1997); Johnson & O'Connor (2002); Kindler & Erich (2005); MacCallum & Golombok (2004); McPherson (1993); Patterson, Sutfin, & Fulcher (2004); Perry et al. (2004); Rivers, Poteat, & Noret (2008); Sears & Badgett (2004); Sears, Gates, & Rubenstein (2005); Shelley-Sireci & Ciano-Boyce (2002); Vanfraussen et al. (2002; 2003a); Wainright & Patterson (2006, 2008); Wainright, Russell, & Patterson (2004); Wendland, Bryn, & Hill (1996).

families (Table 2) and whether they pertained to parents (top panel) or children (bottom panel). The findings of difference we show are general summaries of numerous individual tests within and across studies. Even so, for every finding of significant difference in studies of same- and different-sex coparent families, there were roughly four or more findings of no significant difference that we do not display. Our focus on findings of difference increases the risk of Type I error. Because 5 of every 100 differences may

occur by chance at $p \leq .05$, as many as 20% (5/25) of the findings shown might be noise. On the other hand, some of the findings of no differences may miss real differences (Type II error) because some studies use levels of significance that may be too restrictive for their very small samples. Risking Type I error is less of a problem in studies that compare single mothers with single fathers because nearly half of these tests for difference were statistically significant.

RESULTS

Two-Parent Families

The research best suited for analyzing gender differences in parenting compares heterosexual with lesbian and gay parenthood and has progressed markedly since we conducted a systematic review in 2001 (Stacey & Biblarz). First, the shift we predicted from research on unplanned to planned lesbian parenting is in full swing. The children in most of the 21 studies we reviewed in 2001 were born within heterosexual marriages before one or both parents adopted a lesbian or gay identity, but newer research has focused on lesbians who formed families through DI or adoption. Of the 25 peer-reviewed publications and dissertations we located whose

samples included planned lesbian mothers, 16 met our criteria for inclusion.

Although research on lesbian moms investigated the impact of sexual identity on parenting, it contributes even more to understanding the effects of gender. Lesbian couples who have children with donor sperm or through adoption provide a natural experiment for assessing the effects of growing up without a male parent. Such research can control for the number of parents and their relational history. Since 2001, the quality of the samples and data has advanced notably. New waves from longitudinal studies on children approaching early adolescence have appeared (MacCallum & Golombok, 2004; Vanfraussen, Ponjaert-Kristoffersen, & Brewaeys, 2002, 2003a, 2003b), and several studies attained larger, more representative samples (Bos, van

Table 2. Findings of Significant Differences Between (Presumptively Heterosexual) Single Mothers and Single Fathers and Their Children in 48 Studies

Outcome Variables	Direction	Sources
Parental differences		
<i>Parenting and parent-child relationships</i>		
Supervision, involvement, rule setting, closeness, and/or communication/talking with children	♀ > ♂	Buchanan et al. (1992; 1996); Cookston (1999); Demuth & Brown (2004); Downey & Powell (1993); Eitle (2006); Hall et al. (1995); Hawkins et al. (2006)
Parent reports difficulty remaining firm and patient controlling children's behavior	♀ > ♂	Clarke-Stewart & Hayward (1996); Hilton et al. (2001); Maccoby & Mnookin (1992)
Parent reports difficulty monitoring children's school progress, whereabouts, friends	♀ < ♂	Maccoby & Mnookin (1992)
Participation in PTA, school, religious events; knows names of children's friends, friends' parents	♀ > ♂	Downey (1994); Downey & Powell (1993); Hawkins et al. (2006)
Playing sports, leisure activities away from home	♀ < ♂	Hall et al. (1995); Hawkins et al. (2006)
Takes child to doctor; has a usual health care provider for child	♀ > ♂	Leininger & Ziøl-Guest (2008)
Educational expectation for child ^a	♀ > ♂	Downey (1994); Downey & Powell (1993)
Visitation, interaction with noncustodial parent	♀ < ♂	Hawkins et al. (2006); Maccoby & Mnookin (1992)
Child outcomes		
<i>Behavior and achievement</i>		
Educational expectations, grades, scores on standardized tests ^a	♀ > ♂	Buchanan et al. (1992, 1996); Battle (1998); Battle & Scott (2000); Battle & Coates (2004); Downey (1994); Downey & Powell (1993); Downey et al. (1998); Powell & Downey (1997); Pike (2002)
Teacher ratings of adolescents' effort, behavior, promise in school ^a	♀ > ♂	Downey et al. (1998); Downey & Powell (1993)
Educational and occupational attainment ^a	♀ > ♂	Battle & Coates (2004); Biblarz et al. (1997); Biblarz & Raftery (1999); Powell & Downey (1997); Downey et al. (1998)

Table 2. *Continued*

Outcome Variables	Direction	Sources
Adolescents' substance abuse, misconduct, delinquent behavior	♀ < ♂ ^a	Buchanan et al. (1992, 1996); Bjarnason, Andersson, et al. (2003); Bjarnason, Davidaviciene, et al. (2003); Breivik & Olweus (2006); Cookston (1999); Demuth & Brown (2004); Downey & Powell (1993); Downey et al. (1998); Eitle (2006); Hoffmann (2002); Hoffmann & Johnson (1998); Jenkins & Zunguze (1998); Juby & Farrington (2001); Naevdal & Thuen (2004); Powell & Downey (1997)
Parental reports of various health problems in children	♀ > ♂ ^a	Bramlett & Blumberg (2007); Leininger & Ziolk-Guest (2008)

^aControlling for SES and other sociodemographic factors.

Sources: The 48 studies considered in Table 2 are Battle (1998); Battle & Coates (2004); Battle & Scott (2000); Biblarz & Raftery (1999); Biblarz, Raftery, & Bucur (1997); Bjarnason, Andersson, et al. (2003); Bjarnason, Davidaviciene, et al. (2003); Bowen, Orthner, & Zimmerman (1993); Brach, Camara, & Houser (2000); Bramlett & Blumberg (2007); Breivik & Olweus (2006); Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch (1996); Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch (1992); Clarke-Stewart & Hayward (1996); Cookston (1999); Demuth & Brown (2004); Downey (1994); Downey, Ainsworth-Darnell, & Dufur (1998); Downey & Powell (1993); Eggebeen, Snyder, & Manning (1996); Eitle (2006); Flewelling & Bauman (1990); Grall (2006); Hall et al. (1995); Hawkins et al. (2006); Heath & Orthner (1999); Hill & Hilton (1999); Hilton, Desrochers, & Devall (2001); Hilton & Devall (1998); Hilton & Macari (1997); Hoffmann (2002); Hoffmann & Johnson (1998); Jenkins & Zunguze (1998); Jonsson & Gahler (1997); Juby & Farrington (2001); Leve & Fagot (1997); Leininger & Ziolk-Guest (2008); Luoma et al. (1999); Maccoby & Mnookin (1992); Meyer & Garasky (1993); Naevdal & Thuen (2004); Pike (2002); Powell & Downey (1997); Thomson, McLanahan, & Curtin (1992); Videon (2002); Wadswy & Svedin (1993); Weitoft, Hjern, Haglund, & Rosen (2003); Zhan & Pandey (2004).

Balen, & van den Boom, 2003, 2004, 2007; Golombok et al., 2003; Rivers, Poteat, & Noret, 2008; Wainright et al., 2004; Wainright & Patterson 2008). This research remains disproportionately on White, middle-class families, partly because they can better afford assisted reproductive technology (ART) or to adopt children. Although disappointing, this does not diminish the capacity of such research to speak to issues of parental gender among middle-class families.

Comparable research on intentional gay fatherhood, on the other hand, has scarcely commenced. A first generation of studies investigated decision making, parenting arrangements, and identities of gay men who chose parenthood (e.g., Beers, 1996; Dunne, 1999; Schacher, Auerbach, & Silverstein, 2005; Stacey, 2006). Only one (McPherson, 1993) compared gay male with heterosexual couples, and one (Johnson & O'Connor, 2002) compared them with lesbian parents. We located no studies of planned gay fathers that included child outcome measures and only one (Kindle & Erich, 2005) that compared gay male with lesbian or heterosexual

adoptive parenting. To even consider concerns about "motherless" parenting, we more tentatively discuss studies of gay male parents that did not meet all of our criteria.

When Two Women Parent

A preliminary glance at the findings in the top panel of Table 1 confirms several gender stereotypes, seeming to underscore the conclusions from research on heterosexual married parents. Mothers—whether heterosexual or lesbian and biologically related to their children or not—typically spent more time than heterosexual fathers on children and family and less on paid work (e.g., Brewaeys, Ponjaert, Van Hall, & Golombok, 1997; Fulcher, Sutfin, & Patterson, 2008; Vanfraussen et al., 2003a). More women than men desired egalitarian parenting and work responsibilities, and lesbian coparents seemed to come closer than heterosexual coparents to achieving this (Chan, Brooks, et al., 1998; Fulcher et al., 2008). That helps explain why lesbian couples generally

coparented more compatibly and with greater satisfaction than heterosexual couples (e.g., Bos et al., 2004, 2007). Several studies in Table 1 found that female parents scored higher than heterosexual men on parenting awareness skills and developed warmer, closer, more communicative relationships to their children (e.g., Bos et al., 2007; Flaks, Ficher, Masterpasqua, & Joseph, 1995; Golombok, Tasker, & Murray, 1997). More lesbian than infertile heterosexual, DI coparents told their children how they were conceived (Brewaeyts, Ponjaert-Kristoffersen, van Steirteghem, & Devroey, 1993; Wendland, Bryn, & Hill, 1996; Vanfraussen et al., 2003b). 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). (Differences between means were generally a half to three quarters of a standard deviation.)

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. Some research suggests, however, that a double dose of maternal investment sometimes fostered jealousy and competition between comothers, which the asymmetry of the women’s genetic, reproductive, and breast-feeding ties to their infants could exacerbate (Chrisp, 2001; Gartrell et al., 2000; Reimann, 1998; Stiglitz, 1990). Also, although lesbian comothers shared parenting more equally than other couples, they rarely achieved parity (Chrisp; Reimann). Similar to research on heterosexual parents, studies found that lesbian biological mothers typically assumed greater caregiving responsibilities than their partners (Brewaeyts et al., 1997; Johnson & O'Connor, 2002) and enjoyed greater intimacy with their children (Bos et al., 2007; Wainright et al., 2004).

Nonetheless, gender appears to trump the influence of biological parentage. Just as heterosexual mothers generally scored higher on parenting than fathers, findings in the top panel of Table 1 favor the parenting practices of lesbian coparents, only one of whom is a biological parent, over heterosexual biological parenting couples. Studies also indicated that gender even trumps marital status. Two women

parenting *without the benefits of marriage* scored higher on several measures than married, heterosexual, genetic parents. Gender seemed to predict successful, involved parenting better than marriage or genetic parentage did.

Upon closer inspection, however, several studies complicate this picture. A longitudinal study in the United Kingdom (Golombok et al., 1997; MacCallum & Golombok, 2004) directly studied the effects of “fatherless” parenting by matching three sets of families on demographic and economic factors—families headed by lesbians, single heterosexual mothers who parented alone since infancy, and heterosexual two-parent families. Unfortunately for our purposes, the study lumped lesbian single and coparent families together and compared these with two-parent heterosexual families. This makes it impossible to disentangle the number and gender of the parents. Nonetheless, women parenting without men (whether lesbian or heterosexual, solo or coupled) scored higher on warmth and quality of interactions with their children than not only fathers but also mothers who coparent with husbands. On the other hand, mothers and children in the father-absent families reported conflicts more severe but somewhat less frequent than in father-present families (about 0.5 *SD* higher and lower, respectively). If these findings prove valid, they imply that parenting without men may enhance “feminine” dimensions of parenting but also might release women from some gender constraints, with contradictory results. It may free women 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). Such mothers may develop closer ties but also greater conflict with their children than when mothers coparent with fathers.

One finding in Table 1 implies that the superior qualities of lesbian coparenting may exact a paradoxical toll. Although research consistently indicates that such couples enjoy greater equality, compatibility, and satisfaction with their partners than their heterosexual counterparts, preliminary data hint that their relationships may prove less durable. The data are still far too limited to merit confidence (e.g., over about 5 years, 6 of MacCallum and Golombok’s [2004] 14 lesbian parent couples had broken up compared with 5 of 38 heterosexual parent couples; see also

Bos, Gartrell, van Balen, Peyser, & Sandfort, 2008; Vanfraussen et al., 2003b), but several factors lend plausibility to this finding. First, because most same-sex couples lack access to legal marriage and receive less familial, cultural, and institutional support for their relationships, they generally face fewer barriers to exiting unsatisfying unions. Secondly, unequal biological and legal bases to parental status can create distinctive fissures among lesbian comothers. Finally, the comparatively high standards lesbians bring to their intimate unions correlate with higher dissolution rates. Married heterosexual couples with egalitarian orientations face similar risks (Brines & Joyner, 1999; Lye & Biblarz, 1993).

Research among heterosexual married parents has found that new parenthood typically precipitates high degrees of stress and declining marital satisfaction (Cowan & Cowan, 1992). A study of the transition to parenthood among lesbian couples likewise found rising conflict and declining expressions of love (Goldberg & Sayer, 2006). Among heterosexuals, new parenthood reinforced traditional gender divisions of labor and power (Cowan & Cowan; Kurdek, 2001) and incited greatest dissatisfaction among women who scored lower on femininity scales (Lenz, Soeken, Rankin, & Fischman, 1985). Lesbian DI comothers strike us as particularly vulnerable to these disruptive effects. They generally value egalitarian relationships more than other couples but confront asymmetrical legal, biological, and cultural ties to children that can exacerbate maternal competition and jealousy under conditions that reduce barriers to exiting. Access to equal legal parental status and rights should mitigate but not eliminate these asymmetries. We speculate that a double dose of feminine socialization, coupled with discrimination, can lead Heather's two mommies to be among the best, but also somewhat less durable, coparenting couples.

When Two Men Parent

The slim body of research on gay male coparents suggests they do not provide a double dose of "masculine" parenting. Instead, they also appear to adopt parenting practices more "feminine" than do typical heterosexual fathers. Only two studies qualified for inclusion in Table 1 (Johnson & O'Connor, 2002; McPherson, 1993), and both found that gay male couples parented

more equally and compatibly than heterosexual couples, although somewhat less equally than lesbians. Likewise, McPherson, as well as studies not included in Table 1 (Mallon, 2004; Scallen, 1982), found gay men less inclined than heterosexual couples to promote gender conformity in children, but somewhat more so than lesbians. Johnson and O'Connor found gay male parents less likely to spank their children than heterosexual couples and, surprisingly, even somewhat less than lesbian parents. Other studies indicated that when two gay men coparented, they did so in ways that seem closer, but not identical, to that of two lesbian women than to a heterosexual woman and man (Brinamen, 2000; Mallon; Stacey, 2006).

Perhaps it is more accurate to say that parenting by gay men more closely resembles that by mothers than by most married, heterosexual fathers. After all, most gay men who choose to parent, like heterosexual fathers who win custody after divorce, are choosing primary responsibility for parenting; they engage, in other words, in what has conventionally been understood as mothering. A gay father in one study (Mallon, 2004) put it:

As a gay dad, I'm not a mom, but sometimes I think I have more in common with moms than I do with straight dads. I mean, these straight dads that I know are essentially weekend dads; they don't parent with the same intensity that I do or that their wives do. In many ways, despite being a man, I am a dad, but I am like a mom too. (p. 138)

Likewise, 6 of the 10 gay male parents in another study (Brinamen, 2000) "considered themselves mothers and were comfortable accepting the title" (p. 67). Paths to parenthood available to gay men—adoption, foster care, surrogacy, or coparenting with women friends—demand far greater motivation than heterosexual men or even women need to become parents. Gay men who clear this high bar are a select group who deviate from conventional hetero-masculinity and from cultural stereotypes about gay male lifestyles as well (Stacey, 2006).

On the other hand, preliminary data hint that gay male parents may also differ somewhat from lesbian and heterosexual mothers. Some research reported that lesbian mothers disproportionately prefer to have daughters (Chrisp, 2001; Dundas & Kaufman, 2000; Gartrell et al., 1996), but studies of gay men suggest they may be more likely than women, but less likely

than heterosexual men, to desire sons (Brinamen, 2000; McPherson, 1993; Sbordone, 1993). Gay male parents also tend to earn more and to remain more committed to full-time employment than female parents, but less so than heterosexual fathers (Sears, Gates, & Rubenstein, 2005). On the other hand, some data suggested that more gay dads are at-home parents than lesbian moms (Bellafante, 2004). Gender and sexual identity interact so that gay male parents challenge dominant practices of masculinity, fatherhood, and motherhood more than lesbian co-mothers depart from normative femininity or maternal practice (see Stacey, 2006).

Heather and Her Siblings

How do these parental gender differences matter for children? An answer to this question is the brass ring above the family policy carousel and inordinately slippery to grasp. Research consistently has demonstrated that despite prejudice and discrimination children raised by lesbians develop as well as their peers (Tasker, 2005). Across the standard panoply of measures, studies find far more similarities than differences among children with lesbian and heterosexual parents, and the rare differences mainly favor the former. To assess effects of the gender of parents, however, Table 1 omits the ubiquitous findings of no differences and focuses instead on the infrequent findings of difference that might conceivably derive from parental gender. The bottom panel displays findings from comparative studies of children coparented from infancy by two women and by heterosexual couples and yields an ambiguous portrait of outcomes. Of the 16 significant findings, 8 represent comparative benefits and 3 modest risks from this form of "fatherlessness." The valence of the remaining 5 items rests in the eyes of the beholder, and more of these strike our eyes as benefits than burdens. Research on planned lesbian parenting demonstrates that the impact of this form of "radical fatherlessness" (Blankenhorn, 1995) on children is far from radical, not always fatherless, and arguably more beneficial than not.

Studies in the bottom panel of Table 1 found greater security of attachment and fewer behavior problems overall in children parented by two mothers—gaps on the order of 0.66 to 0.75 *SD* (Brewaeyns et al., 1997; Golombok et al., 1997; Vanfraussen et al., 2002). One study

found that children with two mothers viewed their parents as more available and dependable (MacCallum & Golombok, 2004) and another that they were more likely to discuss emotional issues (Vanfraussen et al., 2003a). One study (Vanfraussen et al., 2002) reported this family structure constrained aggressive behavior in sons as well as daughters. If future research replicates these findings, it will pose substantial challenges to the view that children need both a female and male primary parent for optimal development.

The few negative findings for children with two mothers were equivocal. Teachers in a Belgian study (Vanfraussen et al., 2002) reported more attention and behavior problems for such children (about a half standard deviation difference), but this did not match teachers' ratings of the children's adjustment, and neither the children nor their mothers concurred. A second more plausible finding was that such children reported being teased about their families more, but this speaks to social disapproval of their parents' sexual identity rather than their gender. Researchers consistently find that children with lesbian parents contend with homophobia among their peers, but disagree over whether these children suffer more teasing overall or if the teasing focuses on their parents' sexual identity (Bos et al., 2008; Tasker & Golombok, 1997; Wainright & Patterson, 2008). The only clear negative finding appeared in the first wave of the UK study of fatherless families described above (Golombok et al., 1997). Six-year-old children in mother-only families (whether lesbian or heterosexual) described themselves as less competent physically and cognitively than their peers (0.75 *SD* averaging the two), but the difference disappeared when the children were interviewed again 6 years later (MacCallum & Golombok, 2004). Because this study did not control for the number of parents in mother-only families, it could not help us determine whether the absence of a male parent or just of a second parent contributed to the lower self-esteem the younger children expressed.

The remaining findings of difference concerned gender and sexuality and bear directly on public discourse on fatherlessness. A recent study in the United States (Fulcher et al., 2008) reported, predictably, that both boys and girls raised by two mothers were somewhat more tolerant of gender nonconformity in peers. More intriguing, in the UK study (MacCallum &

Golombok, 2004), 12-year-old boys in mother-only families (lesbian or heterosexual) did not differ from sons raised by a mother and father on masculinity scales but scored over a standard deviation higher on femininity scales. Thus, growing up without a father did not impede masculine development but enabled boys to achieve greater gender flexibility. This was true for sons of lesbians and single heterosexual mothers, implying an association with the gender rather than the sexual identity of parents. This study found no comparable effects of fatherlessness on daughters. Girls in mother-only families did not differ on femininity or masculinity scales from girls raised by a mother and father.

A Dutch study (Bos, van Balen, Sandfort, & van den Boom, 2006) on gender development, however, reported contrary, counterintuitive results. Sons in the two family types did not differ on gender behavior or identity, occupational aspirations, or peer pressure to conform to gender norms. Boys parented by lesbians, however, displayed less gender chauvinism than boys parented by heterosexual couples. Perhaps their positive experiences with "fatherless" parenting made them less likely to consider boys superior to girls. Yet daughters did differ more, and in surprising ways. Girls with two mothers aspired to similar "feminine" occupations but expressed fewer "masculine" occupational aspirations than girls with married heterosexual parents. Like their brothers, they displayed less gender chauvinism than peers. These "fatherless" daughters were less likely than daughters of heterosexual couples to view girls as superior to boys. Unexpectedly, they reported feeling less pressure from peers (or, predictably) from parents for gender conformity.

We found surprising the implication that "fatherlessness" had trivial influence on gender development in children generally and particularly that it encouraged gender flexibility in boys more than girls. Because women's parenting practices are generally more gender neutral than men's and women who parent without men assume paternal responsibilities, we expected their daughters to receive an equivalent boost toward androgynous interests. If such findings prove valid, they suggest that, instead, fatherlessness might remove pressure toward gender conformity that heterosexual fathers impose particularly on sons. If heterosexual fathers are more involved with sons than daughters, father absence might affect daughters less, while

removing constraints on the feminizing effects of the closer mother-daughter bond. Vanfraussen et al. (2003a) also speculated that "the presence of two female figures may strengthen the female socialization process for girls in lesbian households" (p. 88).

If, as we expect, future research replicates the finding that fatherless parenting fosters greater gender flexibility in boys, this represents a potential benefit. Research implies that adults with androgynous gender traits may enjoy social psychological advantages over more gender traditional peers (Bigner, 1999). Likewise, the Dutch study (Bos et al., 2006) found that boys who scored higher on conventionally feminine traits achieved better adjustment scores than boys with lower feminine scores, whether their parents were two women or a woman and a man. The picture might have become murkier were we also able to consider research on motherless parenting. We lack data on the impact of planned gay fatherhood on child gender outcomes, but some research on divorced gay fathers suggested that they also seemed to promote greater gender flexibility in sons than do heterosexual fathers (Bigner). Thus, it may not be fatherlessness that expands gender capacities in sons but *heterosexual* fatherlessness. When gay men, lesbians, or heterosexual women parent apart from the influence of heterosexual masculinity, they all seem to do so in comparatively gender-flexible ways that may enable their sons to break free from gender constraints as well (see Drexler & Gross, 2005).

We know very little yet about how parents influence the development of their children's sexual identities or how these intersect with gender. An important longitudinal British study (Tasker & Golombok, 1997) that did not meet criteria for inclusion in Table 1 compared children brought up by lesbian and straight mothers after divorce. On the basis of interviews with the children in young adulthood, the study reported no differences in sexual attractions or identities, but significantly more daughters of lesbians, but not sons, had considered or engaged in homosexuality. The study had a small sample, the confounding effects of divorce, and did not control for number of parents. The newer Dutch study, however, compared a larger sample of preadolescent children raised by planned lesbian and heterosexual couples and reported compatible data (Bos et al., 2006). It found no differences in heterosexual identity scores for sons with two

mothers. Daughters of lesbian mothers, however, scored 0.75 *SD* lower on heterosexual identity than daughters of heterosexual couples.

We need comparable data for children reared by single heterosexual mothers or exclusively by men to distinguish the impact of gender from sexual identity here. Did having exclusively female parents or lesbian parents reduce preadolescent daughters' expectations for future heterosexual relationships? The fact that lesbian parenting did not diminish heterosexual desires in sons supports research finding greater fixity in male and fluidity in female sexual desires over the life course (Butler, 2005; Diamond, 2008). The lower heterosexual identity scores of these girls (but not their brothers) might reflect this gender difference.

Single-Parent Families

By holding the number of parents constant while varying their gender, comparative studies of single moms and dads also can offer leverage in detecting how single-sex parenting affects children's development. Unfortunately, vastly different processes select men and women into single parenthood, and many of these selection effects are impossible to measure or control for. Some factors put single fathers at a disadvantage. Single-father households tended to be newer and inhabited by children who had switched custody arrangements (e.g., Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1992, 1996). Single fathers more often received custody of boys, older children, and those with behavioral problems (Grall, 2006; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992; Meyer & Garasky, 1993). Single-father families often formed when mothers lacked interest in parenting, lost custody because of neglect or abuse, or when their children actively sought to live with their fathers (e.g., Hamer & Marchioro, 2002) because of conflicts with mothers, step-fathers, or their mothers' partners. Most single fathers were widowers or divorced. Divorced, custodial, single fathers more frequently sued for custody, whereas mothers frequently gained custody through mutual agreement (Grall). Women more often became single parents intentionally, through planned or unplanned pregnancies, and were more likely than heterosexual fathers never to have been married (Hertz, 2006).

Other selection factors disadvantaged single mothers. Single fathers generally enjoyed higher incomes and job status, lower poverty rates, more

stable employment, and better returns to education than single mothers (e.g., Biblarz & Raftery, 1999; Bramlett & Blumberg 2007; Hoffmann & Johnson, 1998; Leininger & Ziol-Guest 2008). Single fathers received more social support than single mothers (e.g., Clarke-Stewart & Hayward, 1996; Hilton & Kopera-Frye, 2007), parented fewer residential children, and were more likely to be White and older and less likely to receive public assistance (Zhan & Pandey, 2004). Single mothers shouldered relative disadvantages on every socioeconomic dimension and on some dimensions of stress and psychological well-being as well (Hilton, Desrochers, & Devall, 2001; Hill & Hilton, 1999). Even so, Ziol-Guest, DeLeire, and Kalil (2006) found that single mothers devoted a greater share of their household food expenditures to grains, vegetables, fruit, and milk, whereas single fathers spent more on food away from home and on alcohol.

Yet studies rarely statistically accounted for pathways to single parenthood. Unfortunately, no research compared single mothers and single fathers who adopted children in infancy. This design would substantially reduce selection processes that differentially sort men and women into single parenthood.

Nonetheless, differences reported in the 48 studies (Table 2) that compared parenting by single mothers and fathers mirrored those between married moms and dads. The top panel of Table 2 shows that when socioeconomic attributes were held constant, more single mothers than fathers were skilled at developmental styles of parenting and actively involved with their children. Like married mothers, they spent more time with children talking and participating in school-related events (though less time in sports), and they displayed more affection and warmth (e.g., Buchanan et al., 1992, 1996; Hawkins et al., 2006; but see Thomson, McLanahan, & Curtin, 1992, for an exception). More single mothers than fathers knew the names of their children's friends and parents, participated in PTA, and monitored children's homework (e.g., Downey, 1994; Hawkins et al.; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). Single mothers more often than single fathers reported that their children had health problems, took them to a doctor, and had (usually public) health insurance (Bramlett & Blumberg 2007; Leininger & Ziol-Guest 2008). It is unclear whether their children actually had more health problems or

if single mothers were more likely to notice and respond to such problems.

Single-parent studies did not support popular claims that fathers are better able to keep boys in line or command authority and respect from their children. Surprisingly, studies more often found that single mothers achieved greater parental control, in part through more rule setting and supervision (e.g., Demuth & Brown, 2004). Maccoby and Mnookin (1992) found that, although more custodial mothers than fathers expressed difficulty remaining firm and patient, they reported less difficulty monitoring children's school progress, health habits, friends, and interests. Yet single fathers also displayed some "maternal" capacities that seemed to remain latent in married dads when women were around to provide them. Hawkins et al. (2006) showed that the gap between married mothers' and fathers' involvement with children was roughly twice that between single mothers and fathers. Single fathers scored higher on parenting scales, did more housework, and enjoyed warmer, more verbal relations with their children than married fathers (Hilton & Devall, 1998; Hilton et al., 2001). Risman (1987) found that parenting behavior of fathers who coped with unexpected single parenthood converged with mothering. They did not, however, fully close the gap with women who parented alone (Hawkins et al.).

Children From Heterosexual Single-Parent Families

The relative parenting strengths of heterosexual single mothers reported in the top panel of Table 2 often translated into more positive child outcomes. Of course, children raised by male and female single parents were similar on many dimensions, including mortality and morbidity risks, relationships with peers, and psychiatric symptoms (e.g., Pike, 2002; Videon, 2002; Weitoft, Hjern, Haglund, & Rosén, 2003; Clarke-Stewart & Hayward, 1996, is an exception). Single mothers suppressed problematic behavior more successfully than single fathers, however. Counterintuitively again, findings contradicted stereotypical claims that masculinity better equips fathers to inhibit antisocial behavior in children. Most studies found that children from single-mother families averaged lower rates of delinquency than children with single fathers (e.g., Breivik & Olweus, 2006;

Demuth & Brown, 2004; Naevdal & Thuen, 2004; Videon is an exception). Several studies reported that children in single-father families abused alcohol, marijuana, and other substances more than children with single mothers (e.g., Bjarnason, Andersson, et al., 2003; Hoffmann & Johnson, 1998). Findings on children's achievements were similar. Adolescents living with single mothers exhibited higher security of attachment, fewer behavioral problems, higher test scores, and higher educational expectations than those living with comparable single fathers (e.g., Battle, 1998; Downey, Ainsworth-Darnell, & Dufur, 1998; Pike). Evidence suggested that they achieved higher educational attainment and occupational status as well (e.g., Biblarz & Raftery, 1999; Powell & Downey, 1997).

Greater maternal involvement, support, and control may underlie their children's modest advantages. Studies by Demuth and Brown (2004) and Buchanan et al. (1992, 1996), for example, found that comparatively lower levels of supervision, involvement, and closeness by single fathers partly explained their children's higher delinquency and adjustment difficulties. If contemporary mothering and fathering seem to be converging and fathers often rise to the occasion when circumstances demand or opportunities allow, research shows that sizable average differences remain that consistently favor women, inside or outside of marriage.

DISCUSSION

Family Ideals and Ideal Families

The entrenched conviction that children need both a mother and a father inflames culture wars over single motherhood, divorce, gay marriage, and gay parenting. Research to date, however, does not support this claim. Contrary to popular belief, studies have not shown that "compared to all other family forms, families headed by married, biological parents are best for children" (Popenoe, quoted in Center for Marriage and Family, p. 1). Research has not identified any gender-exclusive parenting abilities (with the partial exception of lactation). Our analysis confirms an emerging consensus among prominent researchers of fathering and child development. The third edition of Lamb's (1997) authoritative anthology directly reversed the inaugural volume's premise when it concluded that "very little about the gender of the parent seems to be

distinctly important” (p. 10). Likewise, in *Fatherhood*, Pruett (2000), a prominent advocate of involved fathering, confided, “I also now realize that most of the enduring parental skills are probably, in the end, not dependent on gender” (p. 18).

Evaluating the importance of being parented by both a female and a male parent requires research on families with the same number and status but a different gender mix of parents. Our review of research closest to this design suggests that strengths typically associated with mother-father families appear at least to the same degree in families with two women parents. We do not yet have comparable research on children parented by two men, but there are good reasons to anticipate similar strengths among male couples who choose parenthood. A vast body of research indicates that, other things being equal (which they rarely are), two compatible parents provide advantages for children over single parents. This appears to be true irrespective of parental gender, marital status, sexual identity, or biogenetic status. Most reviews of this research, however, conflate the number of parents with the other four variables (Amato, 2005; Glenn et al., 2002; Popenoe, 1996). Thus, to be true to the best scientific evidence, one should say: Compared to all other family forms, families headed by (at least) two committed, compatible parents are generally best for children. Whether the participation of three or four parents—as in some cooperative stepfamilies, intergenerational families, and coparenting alliances among lesbians and gay men—would be better or worse has not yet been studied.

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 man with a traditional division of family labor. Lesbian coparents seem to outperform comparable married heterosexual, biological parents on several measures, even while being denied the substantial privileges of marriage. This seems to be attributable partly to selection effects and partly to women on average exceeding men in parenting investment and skills. Family structure modifies these differences in parenting. Married heterosexual fathers typically score lowest on parental involvement and skills, but as with Dustin Hoffman’s character in the 1979 film *Kramer v. Kramer*, they improve notably when faced with single or primary parenthood. If parenting without women

induces fathers to behave more like mothers, the reverse may be partly true as well. Women who parent without men seem to assume some conventional paternal practices and to reap emotional benefits and costs. Single-sex parenting seems to foster more androgynous parenting practices in women and men alike.

Every family form provides distinct advantages and risks for children. Married heterosexual parents confer social legitimacy and relative privilege but often with less paternal involvement. Comothers typically bestow a double dose of caretaking, communication, and intimacy. We suspect, however, that their asymmetrical biological and legal statuses and their high standards of equality place lesbian couples at somewhat greater risk of splitting up. Gay male-parent families remain underresearched, but their daunting routes to parenthood seem likely to select more for strengths than limitations.

At the outset, we identified five parental variables routinely conflated by those who claim that children need both a mother and a father in order to thrive—number, gender, sexual identity, marital status, and biogenetic relationship to children. To adequately assess the impact of any one of these requires a research design that matches or controls for the others. Current claims that children need both a mother and father are spurious because they attribute to the gender of parents benefits that correlate primarily with the number and marital status of a child’s parents since infancy. 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.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

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Appendix A: Main Features of 81 Studies Considered in Biblarz and Stacey (2010) Tables 1 and 2.

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