A Critique of Research on Same-sex Parenting

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Scholarly Research on Same-sex Parenting

Among the most controversial issues surrounding homosexuality is that of the effects on children from being reared by gay or lesbian parents. This issue is frequently debated in the public forum because it is relevant for many decisions that are made within the legal system, such as whether same-sex marriages will be recognized, whether gay or lesbian couples may adopt children or serve as foster parents, or whether the sexual orientation of parents should be considered in making custody decisions following divorce. Because of this it is an issue debated with some passion.

In the 1996 case before the Court of Appeals of Hawaii which dealt with the question of same-sex marriage, both the state—in its defense of the state law restricting marriage to heterosexual couples—and the plaintiffs in the case decided to argue the case almost entirely around the issue of the possible effects on children of allowing same-sex marriages. All of the witnesses called for both sides of the case either were social scientists, or commented on social psychological research in order to persuade the court which family structure would ultimately be in the best interest of the child.[1] The essence of the argument was that there is no direct social scientific evidence that the sexual orientation of the parents has any negative effects on children. While this may not be precisely true, given the body of research presented in this volume regarding the beneficial influences of parents and stable families on children's lives and development, it is true that there is a lack of direct empirical tests of the hypothesis that parents' sexual orientation negatively affects children's cognitive or emotional health and development. What research studies have been carried out specifically on the topic of same-sex parenting have generally not reported adverse effects on children nor notable negative differences in parenting. The argument then is that since the research has failed to show an effect, the conclusion that the sexual orientation of parents is irrelevant is warranted. Whether it is indeed warranted based on evidence depends on the logic involved in drawing conclusions from a lack of findings, and on the quality of the extant research. The rest of this essay is devoted to an evaluative review of the research findings in this area.

Research on the Effects of Parents' Sexual Orientation on Children

In discussions of the effects of parents' sexual orientation on children, the same rather sizeable body of literature is almost always cited. There have been one hundred or more published (in one form or another) studies on homosexuality and variables related to parenting. However, a close examination of the literature and the way it is used reveals two basic problems. First, the research is interpreted as support for the thesis that sexual orientation has no effect on children; however, it used in a way that violates the logic of rigorous empirical science. Second, the research itself has little scientific merit because of errors in design, subject selection, and measurement (*See also* Belcastro). Based on these two problems, it is my professional opinion that there is no empirical support for the conclusion that parents' sexual orientation has no effect on children. Because of this, the issue must be decided on other grounds—such as evidence about the relative quality of life in intact families, the role of fathers and the effects of fathering versus father absence, and moral and legal principles. We will first turn attention to the logical problems entailed in the research literature on sexual orientation and parenting.

Predicting and Proving "No Effect"

The conclusion wrongly but most often drawn from the literature on the effects of parents' sexual orientation on children is that the studies show that there is no effect on children growing up in a home headed by homosexual parents. When an empirical study fails to find a difference, they conclude that there is no difference, and that this lack of evidence as a positive finding in favor of an hypothesis of "no effect." This, however, violates one of the fundamental tenets of scientific logic. It is illegitimate to predict that no effect will be found, and then claim, on the basis of not finding one that there really is no effect in the real world. The reason for this is that the failure to find an effect is exactly what would be predicted if a study were poorly designed or if the measuring instruments were inappropriate and insensitive. In other words it is in principle impossible to separate "no effect" because there is none, from "no effect" because the study is fatally flawed by design errors. A research strategy that predicts, finds, and touts no effect has no scientific merit. This problem is usually phrased in more philosophical language as a maxim: It is impossible for science to prove a negative.

Some who would acknowledge this problem and grant that existing studies are not of good quality would propose that even though scientific logic has been violated it is still better to base a decision on poor data rather than no data at all. This argument not only dismisses the scientific requirement of logical consistency, but is refuted

by the study of history. In the nineteenth century the mortality rate was very high for women following childbirth due to "childbed fever." The best medical research and practice of the day revealed no evidence that the disease was spread by the germs on doctors' hands. However, subsequent theory and research produced strong evidence otherwise. The price of acting on "no effect" was tragically high. It is, in principle, inadvisable to base important decisions on a body of non-effects. Absent findings do not aggregate.

Statistical Significance

The body of research that is purported to show "no effect" for parental sexual orientation all relies on traditional statistical significance testing. When an empirical study finds a statistically significant effect or difference, it simply means that a pattern of numerical relationship was found in the data (often a correlation or a difference between groups) that was so large that there is a small probability of its coming about by chance alone. Statistical significance is usually claimed only when the chances are fewer than five in 100 that the numerical effect could have occurred by chance alone. This, however, is a very conservative criterion; it was devised chiefly to prevent social scientists from being too liberal with themselves, claiming to have found something that is not really there. There may be many findings that are highly significant morally, socially, clinically, or legally that would not show up as statistically significant, but the experimental results would be used to support a finding of "no effect." For example, a study could conceivably find that abused women are not statistically significant from nonabused women on a measure of parenting skill. One would hardly want to conclude on the basis of such evidence that spouse abuse has no effect on parenting. The traditional logic of hypothesis testing is not the best criterion to apply to the question of the effects of parents' sexual orientation.

We want to turn attention now to a more particular evaluation of the literature on the sexual orientation of parents. I conducted a review of the research literature in this area in 1996 as part of my preparation as a witness in the Hawaii court case mentioned above. In a subsequent review of the literature I have found no studies that change the findings. In an attempt to deal with the large volume of research literature, I decided to apply two very simple but fundamental criteria of scientific rigor. I excluded any study from the review that did not meet two very minimal standards. First, I excluded any study that did not include two groups of children, one reared by heterosexual parents and one by homosexual parents. Without these two groups, there could really be no information about comparative effects on children of parents' sexual orientation. Second, I included only studies that actually gathered data from children, rather than just from parents' ratings of themselves and their children. When these criteria were applied, the body of one hundred or so research studies shrank to nine studies.[2] This fact is strong testimony of the lack of scientific rigor of the body or research and the inadvisability of drawing conclusions from it. In addition to this global lack of rigor, there were more particular problems within the studies.

Same Size and Sample Selection

Sample sizes in all of the studies were small, never exceeding thirty parents or fifty children per group. The majority of the studies were much smaller than these figures. Sample size is a problem for two reasons. First, small size works in favor of finding "no effect," since sample size is directly related to the power of a statistical test to detect effects in the data. Second, the samples were too small to permit generalization of the entire population of homosexual or heterosexual parents. Thus scientific merit is compromised on two counts.

All homosexual parents who participated in the studies were not randomly selected from a known population. They were recruited through homosexual newspapers and other publications, or from personal acquaintances. Often the same nonrandom procedures were used to select heterosexual participants as well. It is not clear whether participants were informed as to the purpose of the studies. Their knowing its purpose could have a significant biasing effect. Here again the generalizability of the findings is, in my judgment, fatally compromised.

Intervening Variables

One of the vital aspects of good research design is the control of extraneous or potentially intervening variables. That is, a good study that provides valid findings about the effects of some variable must be designed in such a way that other variables could not possibly be found to be responsible for the effect. Thus, in order to effectively study two groups of children (reared by heterosexual versus homosexual parents) to see the effects of parent's sexual orientation, the study must be designed to insure that no other variable other than parents' sexual orientation would be at work in the two groups. None of the studies solved this problem. In all but one of the studies the children had lived for a period of time with parents of both genders in the home (generally before a divorce). In the one study (Patterson, 1995) where children were never reared by parents of both sexes, there was no real control group of children of heterosexual households; comparisons were made to test norms. Other potentially intervening variables in the study were educational level, socio-economic status, age of children, parents living arrangements, contact with biological fathers, among other things. It is important to note also that none of the studies involved gay men as parents; all homosexual parents were lesbian.

Inappropriate Measures

One of the primary difficulties in studies of parents' sexual orientation is the selection of measures on which to evaluate the effects on children. Often in the literature on this ques-

tion there is no theoretically derived reason to use any particular measure. Sometimes the measures are not appropriate. Flaks, et. al. (1995) found no difference between children reared in lesbian versus heterosexual households on "cognitive development." The measure employed was the traditional Wechsler IQ test. This test has been specifically designed to be insensitive to as many social, cultural, and family variables as possible. It is therefore not surprising that no differences were detected in the study. This seems an odd choice of a measure of cognitive development because cognitive development is often distinguished from IQ. Also, a study designed to assess potential group differences on some variable ought to use a variable that has not been designed specifically to be immune to group differences. Especially where no effect is found, it is crucial that we are absolutely convinced that we have measured what is most relevant to our concerns, and that we have measured it validly. The research on this topic cannot satisfy either concern.

Summary

This brief review can do no more than introduce the problems in the literature on same-sex parenting. Of greater importance, perhaps, is that there are indications in the literature that parents' sexual orientation does make a difference in the lives of children. These findings are often not reported or elaborated. Perhaps the best designed study available was that done by Golombok and Tasker (1983; 1996). This was the only study that followed the children of lesbian and heterosexual parents into adulthood to look for differences that might be expected to appear only in adulthood. The follow-up study in 1996 showed children of homosexual parents were significantly more likely to have a) considered engaging in a homosexual relationship, and b) actually engaged in a homosexual relationship. In the report of the research, little is made of this finding, and it does not dissuade the authors from concluding that there is no evidence of an effect of parents' sexual orientation. This oversight is difficult to explain, but is found in other studies as well. Huggins (1989), for example, found differences in the variability of self-esteem (i.e., how spread-out the children were along the self-esteem scale) between children of homosexual versus children of heterosexual parents. However, she did not bother to test them for significance—although my analysis found the difference to be significant. She chose not to comment on them further. Patterson (1995) found, but left unreported, a similar difference, and Lewis (1992), in a qualitative study, found evidence of emotional and social difficulties in the lives of children of homosexual parents but such findings did not affect her conclusion that there were no effects.

The much publicized conclusion that there is no research evidence of an effect on children of parents' sexual orientation is conceptually problematic, violates the logic of scientific rigor, and is empirically untrue. At the same time, we should not be surprised at the lack of a large body of research finding effects on children. Given the ethical constraints on social scientific research, such research likely could not be carried out. It would not only be potentially politically charged, but gaining access to good samples would be very difficult, especially if potential participants understood the potential effects of findings of significant effects on children. The most reasonable conclusion to be reached in this matter at this point in time is that the body of research on the topic of effects of parents' sexual orientation on their children is of little scientific merit. The current body of research certainly does not justify a conclusion that there is no effect on children of parents' sexual orientation. On the contrary, there is some evidence of such effects.

Social scientific research can provide useful information and evidence in support of important public policies, but it must be of the highest quality in its design, instrumentation, and conceptual rigor. At the same time, such empirical research can never provide ultimate justification for decisions and policies that are essentially moral, and that reflect our deepest values. In the final analysis, the justification must derive from our vision of the highest and most noble things of which we as cultures and individuals are capable. If this vision is worthy, we ought not be timid about confronting the issues and seeking support for the vision in the research arena.

NOTES

1. The fact that the legal system would put such faith in the social sciences and in their scientific knowledge base is of deep import and problematic for at least two reasons. First, there is a strong argument that a legal system, as well as the culture on which it is based, and whose values that system ought to reflect, should be based on principles and, in the words of our Declaration of Independence, "self-evident truths," which can achieve some degree of transcendence of time and circumstance. The rule of law requires adherence to principles of moral value, which can be applied with some degree of independence of transient circumstances and accidents of nature, in order to assure that such laws are applied equally to all. Scientific findings are notoriously, and in the most mature sophisticated of sciences, self-consciously transient. Scientific knowledge in our contemporary age has a very short life span. Therefore, for the legal system to rely on what appears at any point in time to be scientifically valid for making legal judgments is short sighted and revolutionary in the history of democratic societies. Important legal precedents are to be set on the basis of constitutional and moral principles, not on the basis of whatever scientific theories and findings happen to enjoy some currency at a particular point in history.

The second reason why it is problematic to decide important legal and social issues based on social scientific data has to do with the scientific status of the social sciences and the empirical data which support it. There is an abundance of scholarly literature that persuasively argues that the social sciences along with their methods and data do not rise so the status of scientific credibility enjoyed by the more mature natural sciences (c.f., Bernstein, 1983; Bohman, 1991; Dupre, 1993; Polkinghorne, 1983; Stife and Williams, 1995; & Williams, 2000). Thus, it can be persuasively argued that the social sciences do not have the intellectual and epistemological grounding sufficient to offer conclusive opinions on questions of decisive cultural and legal impact. This issue, however, is beyond the present discussion.

2. Those studies are: Flaks, D. K., Ficher, I., Masterpasqua, F., & Joseph, G., 1995; Golombok, S., Spencer, A., & Rutter, M., 1983; Golombok, S., Spencer, A., & Rutter, M., 1983; Gottinan, J. S., 1990; Green, R., Mandel, J., Hotvedt, M. E., Gray, J., & Smith, L., 1986; Huggins, S. L., 1989; Javaid, G. A., 1993; Kirkpatrick, M., Smith C., & Roy, R., 1981; Patterson, C. J., 1995.