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UNDERSTANDING HOW THE SOCIAL SCIENTIFIC STUDY OF SAME-SEX PARENTING WORKS

1. INTRODUCTION

It is nearing nine years since a study I oversaw about the outcomes of adult children who reported their mother or father had been in a same-sex relationship was published in the journal *Social Science Research*.¹ It was a study whose results challenged the scholarly claim that there are “no differences” between children who grew up in opposite-sex, married households and those who spent time—commonly measured then in years rather than decades—with a biological parent in a same-sex relationship. The controversy that study’s publication ignited has receded, but the fundamental challenge of doing research on the children of same-sex parents remains. The topic has become only mildly less politicized. Better data indeed has emerged, enabling scholars to understand more thoroughly how children in such households tend to fare, and yet there remain disputes about the conclusions these analyses have reached. I find what scholars have learned largely still fits what I witnessed in 2012, that scholars and activists remain quick to praise or ignore research depending on its conclusions. This is not how science ought to work.

While large-scale, population-based, longitudinal data collection projects on this topic are beginning to grow in number, what remains rare is a frank conversation about how such data tend to be analyzed and interpreted, given that

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¹ M. REGNERUS, *How different are the adult children of parents who have same-sex relationships? Findings from the New Family Structures Study*, “Social Science Research” 41 (2012), No. 4, pp. 752–770.

same-sex parents commonly come to have children in ways distinctive from the manner in which opposite-sex parents do. This poses problems few researchers frankly discuss. Understanding how scholars conduct research on same-sex households with children is the subject of this manuscript. This begins with an examination of the measurement of same-sex households, how that process is prone to minor errors that lead to notable overestimates, and how social scientific conclusions about children may hinge on mistaken measures. It concludes with a lengthier discussion of how the analytic decisions made in light of differential relationship dissolution rates commonly affect outcomes. Face-value differences between children in same-sex and opposite-sex households often disappear when this important distinction is controlled for.

2. THE SHIFTING DEMOGRAPHICS OF SAME-SEX HOUSEHOLDS WITH CHILDREN (AND WHY THIS MATTERS)

The 2019 U.S. Census data found that 15 percent of same-sex households had at least one child under 18 (compared to 38 percent of opposite-sex couples).² Among same-sex married couples, women are much more likely than men to be raising children: 27 percent of female and nine percent of male same-sex married couples had children in the home³ (if you include all cohabiting couples, 23 percent of female couples and seven percent of male couples have children). This translates into over 161,000 same-sex couples raising children, with an estimated 292,000 children that had a parent who was living with a same-sex partner or spouse.⁴

Accurate measurements are challenging, however, and have historically been subject to considerable error, given that many data collection efforts do not ask about sexual orientation, and it is not enough to simply make deductions about orientation from the presence of two unrelated men or women in a household.⁵ In 2017, the US Census Bureau expanded its categories and changed its inquiry

² D. TAYLOR, *Fifteen percent of same-sex couples have children in their household*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Census Bureau, Sept. 17, 2020.

³ B. GLASSMAN, *Same-sex married couples have higher income than opposite-sex married couples*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Census Bureau, Sept. 17, 2020.

⁴ TAYLOR, *Fifteen percent*.

⁵ For instance, potentially thousands of same-sex roommate—particularly discernible in the oil patches of western Canada—were found to be misclassified as same-sex couples in Canada’s 2011 Census. S. WAITE, N. DENIER, *A research note on Canada’s LGBT data landscape: Where we are and what the future holds*, “Canadian Review of Sociology” 56 (2019), pp. 93–117.

process when it became evident that a small amount of random error on the part of opposite-sex married couples was significantly impacting the estimates of same-sex married couples. Because the two groups differ so greatly in size, an error rate (in misreporting opposite sex couples as same-sex couples) as small as 0.5 percent would lead to an inflated estimate of same-sex married couples by over 70 percent.⁶ The problem in Europe is no better, where “the number of same-sex couples is grossly overestimated due to errors in the declaration or coding of sex among the different-sex couples.”⁷ Mistakes in coding make little difference in estimates of the number of heterosexual couples, given their size. The effects of such mistakes on homosexual couples, however, quickly lead to dramatic overcounts.

Another poignant example of this comes from the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), which in 2015 discovered a coding error that had misclassified between 66 and 84 percent of opposite-sex married couples as same-sex married couples. An advisory was issued against analyzing this subgroup of data for the three years affected.⁸ In 2016, a study on child health outcomes in same-sex versus opposite-sex married and cohabiting couples included data from the “embargoed” NCHS years and thus had inadvertently included opposite-sex married couples in their same-sex group.⁹ After the study authors removed the misclassified cases, their re-analysis revealed a few striking results, including that same-sex married parents were actually *more* likely to report serious emotional difficulties with their children not only when compared to opposite-sex parents (almost three times more likely), but also compared to same-sex cohabiting parents (who were twice as likely to report problems as opposite-sex married parents).¹⁰

To be fair, my own 2012 New Family Structures Study data—drawn from a large, random sample in which 248 cases reported that a parent had had a same-sex relationship at some point during their upbringing—was also subsequently found

⁶ R. KREIDER, B. GURRENTZ, *Changes to the household relationship data in the Current Population Survey*, SEHSD Working Paper #2019-13, Population Association of America Annual Meeting, Austin, TX, 2019, p. 5.

⁷ C. CORTINA, P. FESTY, *Same-sex couples and their legalization in Europe: Laws and numbers*, in *Same-sex families and legal recognition in Europe*, Springer: Cham, 2020, pp. 45–71. The quote is from page 49.

⁸ D. SULLINS, *Sample errors call into question conclusions regarding same-sex married parents: A comment on “Family structure and child health: Does the sex composition of parents matter?”*, “Demography” 54 (2017), No. 6, pp. 2375–2383.

⁹ D. SULLINS, C. RECZEK, R. SPIKER, H. LIU, R. CROSNOE, *Family structure and child health: Does the sex composition of parents matter?*, “Demography” 53 (2016), pp. 1605–1630.

¹⁰ C. RECZEK, et al., *The promise and perils of population research on same-sex families*, “Demography” 54 (2017), No. 6, pp. 2385–2397.

to have a small number of questionable cases that could justifiably be discarded¹¹ (analyses of the improved data, however, found that discarding these cases actually strengthened the original findings).

The point is that this is difficult territory to measure accurately, which presents challenges to obtaining high-quality, valid data. Researchers and data collection agencies are continually seeking to improve the process and thus the accuracy—to their credit—but such difficulties and imprecision are not what you would expect in a domain of science characterized as “settled” and displaying a “clear consensus.”¹²

3. FROM AN OLD TO A NEW CONSENSUS

Prior to the scholarly debate over same-sex parents, biology and sexual differentiation were widely believed to matter for children’s outcomes. That is, there was a presumption of differences in outcomes because such has been found in studies of step-parents and adoptive parents.¹³ A commonly quoted review at the time had observed:

Children growing up with stepparents also have lower levels of well-being than children growing up with biological parents. Thus, it is not simply the presence of two parents, as some have assumed, but the presence of *two biological parents* that seems to support children’s development.¹⁴

Research on adoptive parents and children has confirmed the helpfulness of the two-parent biological connection to child wellbeing. Despite the fact that adoptive parents are, in general, highly committed and have higher than average incomes and education, adoption remains a risk factor for increased childhood troubles, including mental health difficulties, behavioral disorders, academic

¹¹ S. CHENG, B. POWELL, *Measurement, methods, and divergent patterns: Reassessing the effects of same-sex parents*, “Social Science Research” 52 (2015), pp. 615–626.

¹² J. ADAMS, R. LIGHT, *Scientific consensus, the law, and same sex parenting outcomes*, “Social Science Research” 53 (2015), pp. 300–310.

¹³ S. NILSEN et al., *Divorce and family structure in Norway: Associations with adolescent mental health*, “Journal of Divorce & Remarriage” 59 (2018), No. 3, pp. 175–194; M. KEYES et al., *The mental health of US adolescents adopted in infancy*, “Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine” 162 (2008), No. 5, pp. 419–425; B. MILLER et al., *Comparisons of adopted and non-adopted adolescents in a large, nationally representative sample*, “Child Development” 71 (2000), No. 5, pp. 1458–1473.

¹⁴ K. MOORE, S. JEKIELEK, C. EMIG, *Marriage from a child’s perspective: How does family structure affect children, and what can be done about it?*, Washington, DC: Child Trends 2002, p. 6.

difficulties, and risk of attempting suicide—even for some children that are adopted in infancy.¹⁵

With respect to same-sex parenting, two elements long considered ideal for family structure are absent by design: (1) there can be at most the presence of one biological parent, and (2) there is no sexual differentiation, by definition. But in the case of same-sex households, a new scientific “consensus” has emerged, namely that children from same-sex households fare as well as (or better than) children raised in opposite sex households.¹⁶ That is, there are “no differences” discernible in developmental outcomes. Is this claim real, or is it socially constructed—and how might one tell the difference?

A social network analysis of patterns of “citational networks” in the same-sex parenting literature concluded that there is indeed a consensus that claims there are “no differences.”¹⁷ I hold the alleged scientific consensus is the result of early and methodologically-limited evaluations that formed a politically expedient narrative. Indeed, the new consensus was declared by its proponents well before there were adequate studies or data on which to base it:

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.¹⁸

But do biological mothers and fathers make unique contributions to parenting and child development? Yes.¹⁹ From differential effects of father absence on sons and daughters, to attachment theory and the unique mother-infant bond in early childhood, to the ways fathers contribute to their children in a distinctive manner, mothers and fathers are found to be neither entirely replaceable nor interchangeable.²⁰ To be sure, children can successfully grow up without one or the

¹⁵ M. KEYES et al., *Risk of suicide attempt in adopted and nonadopted offspring*, “Pediatrics” 132 (2013), No. 4, pp. 639–646; N. ZILL, W.B. WILCOX, *The adoptive difference: New evidence on how adopted children perform in school*, Charlottesville, VA: Institute for Family Studies 2018.

¹⁶ T. BIBLARZ, J. STACEY, *How does the gender of parents matter?*, “Journal of Marriage and Family” 72 (2010), No. 1, pp. 3–22; D. MAZREKAJ, K. DE WITTE, S. CABUS, *School outcomes of children raised by same-sex parents: Evidence from administrative panel data*, “American Sociological Review” 85 (2020), No. 5, pp. 830–856.

¹⁷ J. ADAMS, R. LIGHT, *Scientific consensus*.

¹⁸ T. BIBLARZ, J. STACEY, *How does the gender*, p. 5.

¹⁹ C. PAKALUK, J. PRICE, *Are mothers and fathers interchangeable caregivers?*, “Marriage & Family Review” 56 (2020), No. 8, pp. 784–793.

²⁰ S. MCLANAHAN, L. TACH, D. SCHNEIDER, *The causal effects of father absence*, “Annual Review of Sociology” 39 (2013), pp. 399–427; R. PARKE, *Gender differences and similarities in parental*

other, but it remains widely understood that the loss of a parent—however it occurs—is both unfortunate and consequential.

This conventional wisdom, however, is increasingly at odds with a recent turn in the scholarship on sex differences. Sociologists Timothy Biblarz and Judith Stacey, who have long been adamant in their support for same-sex parenting (and marriage access), claim the only sex difference in parenting is lactation. They note that child development scholar Michael Lamb reversed his own previous assertion about gender and parenting, and now claims there is “no empirical support for the notion that the presence of both male and female role models in the home promotes children’s adjustment or well-being.”²¹

Nevertheless, it stands to reason that, absent sexual differentiation among couples with children, distinctive behaviors associated with men and women may be magnified in same-sex households. For example, two “fathers” bring more access to resources (e.g., money), while two “mothers” are thought to bring more attentiveness to children. Each of these—resources and attentiveness—is believed to be a net positive for child development. What is less well understood is exactly what is lost (as distinct from what may be gained) when the parental sexes are consolidated (in same-sex households) rather than differentiated. This is commonly left unexplored.

4. HOW THE “NO DIFFERENCES” NARRATIVE WORKS

So how exactly does the consensus narrative work? The story of “no differences” between same-sex and opposite-sex households with children hinges on a pair of repetitive themes in the published research: small and nonrepresentative sampling strategies, and analytic strategies that all but guarantee the ability to “explain away” any baseline observable differences between children from same-sex and opposite-sex households.

Data and Sampling Strategies

The hallmark of a rigorous study is a large, representative pool of participants drawn from a population-based random sample. Indeed, it is very difficult to

behavior, in *Gender and parenthood: Biological and social scientific perspectives*, eds. W.B. Wilcox, K.K. Kline, New York: Columbia University Press 2013, pp. 120–163; P. RAEBURN, *Do fathers matter? What science is telling us about the parent we’ve overlooked*, New York: Scientific American/Farrar, Straus, and Giroux 2014.

²¹ BIBLARZ, STACEY, pp.16-17; M. LAMB, *Mothers, fathers, families, and circumstances: Factors affecting children’s adjustment*, “Applied Developmental Science” 16 (2012), No. 2, pp. 98–111.

draw reliable conclusions from small-sample studies because the conclusions cannot be confidently extrapolated to the general population and the risk of erroneously attributing statistical insignificance to between-group comparisons (that is, mistakenly concluding there are no differences between groups) is high. This is a concern in all social science, but one that is even more important when there may be personal and/or political motivation to confirm the null hypothesis (that is, that there are in fact no statistically-significant differences between groups).

Indeed, out of 49 studies of same-sex parenting outcomes conducted before 2010, only four used a random sample.²² Additionally, an examination of 23 studies published before 2000 found only one that used a sample whose participants were “blind to” or unaware of the study’s goals.²³ Moreover, it has been common to *exclude* biologically intact, married (mother and father) households from analyses altogether, or to “match” a small sample of same-sex households with comparable heterosexual households—such as stepfamilies and single-parent arrangements.²⁴ When these sampling approaches are taken, the children of gay or lesbian single and stepparents appear, on average, to fare comparably to those from heterosexual single and stepfamilies. Hence there tend to be “no differences” across types of solitary, fractured, and reconstituted households. This approach featured prominently in a variety of studies intended to generate an “apples vs. apples” type of comparison. Since it is impossible for two mothers or two fathers to both participate in the conception of a child—one cannot but be a stepparent—it is understandable why researchers often elect to drop the children of biological parents from the analysis.

While this approach can have merit, the popular presentation and interpretation of this move is deceptive. When media consumers read “no differences,” they presume it means no differences *in general*. But what it really means, in this situation, is no differences among households already exhibiting reduced kinship ties. It is a subtle but very important distinction. Thus, the early rush to declare a “consensus” was not the product of many rigorous, sustained examinations of

²² D. ALLEN. *High school graduation rates among children of same-sex households*, “Review of Economics of the Household” 11 (2013), No. 4, pp. 635–658.

²³ N. ANDERSSON, C. AMLIE, E. YTTERØY, *Outcomes for children with lesbian or gay parents. A review of studies from 1978 to 2000*, “Scandinavian Journal of Psychology” 43 (2002), No. 4, pp. 335–351.

²⁴ A wide-ranging literature review published in 2012 showed that out of 33 studies employing heterosexual comparison groups, 13 of them used single-parent heterosexual families for the comparison, not intact opposite-sex married families. See p. 741 of L. Marks, *Same-sex parenting and children’s outcomes: A closer examination of the American Psychological Association’s brief on lesbian and gay parenting*, “Social Science Research” 41 (2012), No. 4, pp. 735–751.

high-quality data over time, across countries, and using different measurement strategies and analytic approaches. Rather, it was a politicized narrative generated by lots of small studies of tiny, non-representative samples misinterpreted as applying to the entire population of same-sex parents.²⁵ Other studies included no comparison group (of heterosexual parents), or a representative comparison group that was matched with a convenience sample of self-selected same-sex couples. The authors of a 2017 study admitted as much:

Prior research comparing children of same-sex and heterosexual couples is limited by methodological issues such as not including male same-sex couples and not using appropriate comparison groups of heterosexual couples.²⁶

It is worth observing, then, that one particular recruited convenience sample, the National Longitudinal Lesbian Family Study (NLLFS), is responsible for at least 28 peer-reviewed studies upon which this “no differences” consensus was based. And yet the NLLFS consists of only 78 children, tracked over the course of nearly 30 years now. Their mothers are by no means representative of Americans or even lesbians: they are whiter (94%), more educated (67% are college graduates), of higher socioeconomic status (82% held professional or managerial positions), and more politically motivated than lesbians who do not frequent the events or bookstores wherein their participation was solicited. Anything that is correlated with educational attainment, for example—better health, more deliberative parenting, greater access to social capital and educational opportunities for children—will be biased in analyses. Any claims about a population (in this case, American lesbian parents) based on a subgroup that does not represent the whole will be distorted, since its sample is far less diverse (given what we know about it) than a representative sample would be. Indeed, there is nothing “national” about the NLLFS.

It’s not just sample selection bias—who wishes to participate in the first place—that is at work in the NLLFS and studies like it. Social desirability bias, or the tendency to give answers that offer a more favorable impression, remains probable. Sociologist Luke Gahan’s study of same-sex parents who had

²⁵ Even researchers that affirm the “no differences” premise acknowledge this. For example, demographer Michael Rosenfeld wrote “the universally small sample sizes in the existing literature has left room for several critiques, including the argument that small sample sizes would not have the statistical power to identify the effects of homosexual parents on childhood outcomes even if such effects did exist”. M. ROSENFELD, *Nontraditional families and childhood progress through school*, “Demography” 47 (2010), No. 3, pp. 755–775. The quote is from p. 757.

²⁶ M. RICHARDS et al., *Adult children of same-sex and heterosexual couples: Demographic thriving*, “Journal of GLBT Family Studies” 13 (2017), No. 1, pp. 1–15. The quote is from p. 1.

recently separated noted up front the challenge to social desirability that same-sex couples' separations posed to both analysts and politicians:

Separated same-sex parents were...concerned that their families would disrupt efforts to achieve social and political acceptance—and this created challenges with recruitment and interviewing techniques with male participants in particular.²⁷

Gahan admitted that he was frequently encouraged to “withhold the research findings until after marriage equality had been achieved,” and observed that the national debate and scrutiny on same-sex partnerships had “only heightened the pressure to demonstrate the worthiness of same-sex parented families by presenting idealized images of LGBTI people.”²⁸

Faalty to one's family and impression management is natural and understandable. And yet it must also be expected to harm the validity of the data collected from the children of same-sex parents, especially those who were aware of the study's purpose and its implications. The original NLLFS participants are now in their late 20s. It is beyond implausible that they are unaware of the purpose of the overall study, its goals, and the fact that its results have proven politically expedient to LGBT causes covered favorably in the media.

Analytic and Interpretive Strategies

Nevertheless, data quality and sampling strategies are improving. What has remained constant however, is an analytic strategy that typically ensures a “no differences” conclusion, if such an interpretation seems helpful (it doesn't always²⁹). The strategy begins by ignoring, or even failing to present, the *baseline* outcome distinctions between children who grow up in different types of households, such as heterosexual married, heterosexual stepfamilies, single-parent households (gay or straight), and coupled same-sex households—whose children may come by way of a partner's childbirth (artificial insemination or in vitro fertilization by a maternal partner, or the product of a previous heterosexual union), adoption, surrogacy (common among gay couples), or foster placement. It is worth observing, too, that these are not mutually exclusive categories: for example, a child

²⁷ L. GAHAN, *Separated same-sex parents: Troubling the same-sex parented family*, “Sociological Research Online” 23 (2018), No. 1, pp. 245–261. The quote is from p. 245; see also page 383 of: D. SULLINS, *Bias in recruited sample research on children with same-sex parents using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)*, “Journal of Scientific Research & Reports” 5 (2015), No. 5, pp. 375–387.

²⁸ L. GAHAN, *Separated*, pp. 257–258.

²⁹ Documented deficits in LGBT physical and mental health, when contrasted with heterosexuals, commonly leads to conclusions that call for greater efforts at reducing stigma, boosting cultural acceptance, and expanding funded health services access.

in a single-parent household at one point may later find themselves in a same-sex coupled household, or a heterosexual stepfamily. Western households are becoming more dynamic, or “fluid,” to employ a term now commonly used to describe sexuality.

While differences are often apparent at face value, once you control for (or set aside) sexual minorities’ greater household instability, it becomes relatively easy to conclude that the sexual orientation of parents does not *directly* cause problems for children (I have never claimed it does.). But this analytic approach, together with its concomitant interpretations, means that indirect effect—the pathways via which most suboptimal child outcomes happen—are ignored. This common pattern characterizes most analyses of high-quality data on same-sex parenting and child outcomes since 2010, unless the outcome considered involves little risk of readers perceiving a consequential deficit.³⁰

Where deficits would be considered consequential and potentially harmful to admit, controlling for household instability is nearly ubiquitous. For instance, a 2016 study using data from the population-based Early Childhood Longitudinal Study—Kindergarten cohort found that the children of same-sex parents wellbeing measured significantly lower on measures such as interpersonal skills and both internalizing and externalizing wellbeing when compared to the children of married opposite-sex parents. But then the authors employ the familiar tactic:

After including family change and early childhood transitions in the model, differences in the externalizing well-being, internalizing well-being, and interpersonal skills of children in same-sex parent households were no longer significantly different from their peers in married, two-biological parent families.³¹

This is how researchers get to no “differences,” that is, by controlling for—hence ignoring—household turmoil.

Others simply obscure the results in their discussion of them. For example, in a 2018 study which compared the mental health of the NLLFS’s then-25-year-old donor-conceived children of lesbian parents to a population-based sample of children from opposite-sex households, the authors reported “no significant

³⁰ For example, one recent publication observed that, compared with a small “matched” sample from the much-larger, representative National Survey of Family Growth, NLLFS participants were “more likely than their peers to demonstrate diversity in sexual attraction, identity, and expressions”. See N. GARTRELL, H. BOS, A. KOH, *Sexual attraction, sexual identity, and same-sex sexual experiences of adult offspring in the U.S. National Longitudinal Lesbian Family Study*, “Archives of Sexual Behavior” 48 (2019), No. 5, pp. 1495–1503. The quote is from p. 1495.

³¹ D. POTTER, E. POTTER, *Psychosocial well-being in children of same-sex parents: A longitudinal analysis of familial transitions*, “Journal of Family Issues” 38 (2016), No. 16, pp. 2303–2328. The quote is from p. 2303.

differences in measures of mental health” between the two groups.³² And yet the evidence presented in the study itself reveals that the NLLFS children reported demonstrably higher levels of “depression or anxiety” than the control group.³³ Nevertheless, the next year the same authors mentioned how their 2018 study conclusions “provide no justification for restricted access to reproductive technologies, adoption, foster care, or civil liberties for lesbian, gay, or bisexual people.”³⁴

My concern is not at all with the use of control variables and regression analyses. These are, after all, standard approaches. The problem is that this method is often misemployed to “control away” how reality and social processes work, and to ensure a high likelihood of a “no differences” conclusion.

The most common way this occurs is by controlling for parental relationship dissolution, rates of which vary dramatically between gay and straight couples. How dramatically? Estimates vary, but they never reveal lower breakup rates among same-sex households with children. A 2020 study of over 1.2 million children in the (gay-friendly) Netherlands revealed that 55 percent of children living with same-sex parents—the vast majority of which were female couples—experienced parental separation, well above the 19 percent of children of opposite-sex parents who experienced the same.³⁵ The story in the Netherlands has not changed; the same pattern was observed using data from no later than 2000 in which (mostly cohabiting) same-sex couples experienced 3.1 times higher dissolution odds than opposite-sex cohabiting couples and 11.5 times higher odds compared with married couples.³⁶

One may claim, following minority stress theory, that if societies were more tolerant, sexual minorities wouldn’t feel the need to hide their identities and enter heterosexual relationships, only to see them “inevitably” fail, followed by the formation of relationships considered more “authentic.” But this is the Netherlands—it doesn’t get more tolerant than that. Even data from Sweden shows that women in same-sex marriages have a divorce rate nearly

³² N. GARTRELL, H. BOS, A. KOH, *National longitudinal lesbian family study—mental health of adult offspring*, “The New England Journal of Medicine” 379 (2018), No. 3, pp. 297–299. The quote is from p. 297.

³³ See Table 1, row 6, p. 298. „Anxious or depressed”: NLLFS sample Mean =8.27±0.65 (CI=6.99–9.55) Normative sample Mean=5.65±0.65 (CI=4.38–6.93) p value=0.01

³⁴ N. GARTRELL, H. BOS, A. KOH, *Sexual attraction*. The quote is from p. 1501.

³⁵ D. MAZREKAJ, K. DE WITTE, S. CABUS, *School outcomes*.

³⁶ M. KALMIJN, A. LOEVE, D. MANTING, *Income dynamics in couples and the dissolution of marriage and cohabitation*, “Demography” 44 (2007), No. 1, pp. 159-79.

twice that of opposite-sex married couples.³⁷ And despite the fact that the NLLFS drew upon a particularly privileged set of recruited American lesbians, 62 percent of the young adults in that study reported in 2019 that their parents—typically a biological and social mother—had already broken up, a rate well above what we would expect to see among the offspring of opposite-sex parents.³⁸

A recent re-examination of three nationally-representative datasets from the United States and Canada similarly revealed that dissolution rates were different—but not profoundly so—for couples with no children: 9% for same-sex vs. 5% for opposite sex in one study, 27% and 17% in another, respectively. However, for couples *with* children (in a formalized union), the results were strikingly different, with dissolution rates of 43% for same-sex couples vs. 8% for opposite-sex. The presence of children tended to stabilize opposite-sex couples, but destabilize same-sex couples.³⁹ The authors suggest that “parental instability is an important factor through which parents’ sexual orientation influences children’s outcomes.”⁴⁰

The elevated break-up rate of female same-sex couples is a central mechanism here that is under-theorized. The consistent story is *not* about a direct effect of sexual orientation on children’s outcomes, but rather about the indirect effects of consolidating sex (or gender) preferences and behaviors. Even key proponents of the “no differences consensus” had long predicted this pattern, stating their suspicion that the “asymmetrical biological and legal statuses” and “high standards of equality” present in lesbian relationships would put them at a heightened risk of dissolution.⁴¹ Their suspicion has proven to be correct.

It is plausible, even likely, that household instability—via parental romantic-relationship fragility—is a key pathway or mechanism by which children come to have difficulties in one or more domains of life. This tendency to overlook *pathways* in favor of *controls* reflects a typical misguided tendency in social science research to always search for “independent” effects of variables, thereby missing the ways in which social phenomena actually operate and

³⁷ M. KOLK, G. ANDERSSON, *Two decades of same-sex marriage in Sweden: A demographic account of developments in marriage, childbearing, and divorce*, “Demography” 57 (2020), No. 1, pp. 147–169.

³⁸ A. KOH, H. BOS, N. GARTRELL, *Predictors of mental health in emerging adult offspring of lesbian-parent families*, “Journal of Lesbian Studies” 23 (2019), No. 2, pp. 257–258.

³⁹ D. ALLEN, J. PRICE, *Stability rates of same-sex couples: With and without children*, “Marriage & Family Review” 56 (2020), No. 1, pp. 51–71.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 65.

⁴¹ BIBLARZ and STACEY, p. 17.

outcomes come to be.⁴² Controlling for the effect of a parent's same-sex relationship with a "household instability" variable and concluding that there are "no differences" between children of same-sex and opposite-sex parents is tantamount to "controlling for the pathways." It is unhelpful for describing and understanding how social reality works.⁴³

This is exactly how Simon Cheng and Brian Powell re-analyzed and thus "explained away" the obvious differences observed in Tables 2-4 of my 2012 study.⁴⁴ That is, they *simplified social reality* by problematizing particular combinations of household structures simply because they are complex. The NFSS was a basic overview of an early, large, random-sample data collection project aimed at comparing the lives of (adult) children who experienced a parent in a same-sex relationship. It is difficult to deceive readers when you are displaying basic associations, a practice that Cheng and Powell did not continue. Instead, they jumped straight to regression models in which they added controls for household stability and a *second* control for household SES (a measure of receiving social welfare in addition to the income control already present). Since 70 percent of households featuring a mother and her partner received social welfare at some point while the respondent was growing up, little variation in such households remained.⁴⁵ Moreover, they did not present the face-value differences in how respondents fared in their new re-arrangement of household types. Hence, readers were unable to visualize the baseline magnitude of distinctions between children in biologically-intact families and those living in every other possible permutation, because the authors chose not to disclose them. In an era of data openness, this method seems duplicitous and politically-motivated.

This approach of controlling for household instability assures that scholars treat household upheaval and parental romantic decisions as *independent* phenomena, unrelated to each other and to sexual orientation. Kansas State University professor Walter Schumm, after testing for indirect effects on child outcomes in the NFSS, concluded that "It is one thing to say a direct effect was not significant but another

⁴² M. REGNERUS, *Parental same-sex relationships, family instability, and subsequent life outcomes for adult children: Answering critics of the New Family Structures Study with additional analyses*, "Social Science Research" 41(2012), No. 6, pp. 1367–1377.

⁴³ C. SMITH, *What is a person? Rethinking humanity, social life, and the moral good from the person up*, The University of Chicago Press: Chicago 2010. The quote appears on p. 293.

⁴⁴ S. CHENG, B. POWELL, *Measurement, methods*.

⁴⁵ When analyzed in this way, because there are so few stable same-sex relationships in the data, the statistical power to detect real differences diminished considerably. That's how one can go from a majority of 40 outcome variables displaying significant differences in the original NFSS to just a few. In reality, instability was endemic to the same-sex relationships in the NFSS, not stability.

entirely to say that structure did not matter” (i.e. household structure).⁴⁶ That’s because household structures, namely stability or lack thereof, often indirectly foster better or worse outcomes.

5. QUEERING SOCIAL SCIENCE?

There has been nothing short of a tsunami of research on sex—sexuality in particular—emerging in the West since the late 1990s. Peer-reviewed journals devoted to these matters have sprouted, publications in which are offered a scholarly veneer. Valid research conclusions in a new area, however, are made more difficult by what Stanford professor John Ioannidis described as the “flexibility in designs, definitions, outcomes, and analytical modes” that typically characterize developing fields.⁴⁷

Unfortunately, any published work that comes to conclusions, or even raises evidence contrary to the consensus that has (prematurely) formed, is typically taken hostage, first, by pseudonymous strangers at keyboards, then by opportunistic scholarly critics who hold data and results they dislike to a standard far higher than that of which they approve. Occasionally even researchers’ own universities “pile on”, as mine did briefly after the publication of my 2012 study caught them unprepared for the criticism that followed.⁴⁸

This is the queering of family studies.⁴⁹ That is, we are witnessing an academic discipline and topic “pushed to reconceptualize the dominant heterosexual cisgender paradigm.”⁵⁰ This is further outlined in some detail in an article entitled “Queering Methodologies to Understand Queer Families,” a federally-funded review article that appeared in *Family Relations*.⁵¹ Long-standard research methods, the authors argue, are in need of *adaptation*: “Queering questions that which is normative.”⁵² They openly counsel connecting science

⁴⁶ W. SCHUMM, *A review and critique of research on same-sex parenting and adoption*, “Psychological Reports” 119 (2016), No. 3, pp. 641–760. The quote is from p. 708.

⁴⁷ J. IOANNIDIS, *Why most published research findings are false*, “PLoS Med” 2 (2005), No. 8, p. 124.

⁴⁸ My university has long since dropped inquiries of me, and even promoted me in 2018.

⁴⁹ M. REGNERUS, *Queering Science*, “First Things” (2018), <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2018/12/queering-science>.

⁵⁰ C. RECZEK, *Sexual-and gender-minority families: A 2010 to 2020 decade in review*, “Journal of Marriage and Family” 82 (2020), No. 1, pp. 300–325. The quote is from p. 317.

⁵¹ J. FISH, S. RUSSELL, *Queering methodologies to understand queer families*, “Family Relations” 67 (2018), No. 1, pp. 12–25.

⁵² *Ibidem*, p. 12.

to progressive politics, and implore researchers to put their studies to work “in ways that best represent and strengthen (queer) families.”⁵³

By contrast, comparing “marginalized” to “dominant” groups—which is what many believe I did in my 2012 study of adult children of parents who had been in same-sex relationships—is considered heteronormative and “based on assumptions that monogamous coupling and parenthood are normal relationship characteristics.”⁵⁴ The authors of “Queering Methodologies” call the politicized research they envision “compensatory work,” meaning it is intended to bring justice to those powers that have historically “erased” or oppressed LGBT families. In other words, they must be shielded from data analysis results that could be construed as threatening.⁵⁵

As a result, it is difficult to conduct solid social science research on such topics, when the world of scholarship on sexuality has tacitly ruled some conclusions more worthy of publication than others. Scientific neutrality is out. Political expedience is in.

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⁵³ Ibidem, p. 20.

⁵⁴ Ibidem, p. 15.

⁵⁵ Walter Schumm documented clear bias in social science citation rates, when comparing similar studies with favorable vs. less favorable findings on same-sex parenting outcomes. See W. SCHUMM, *Evidence of pro-homosexual bias in social science: Citation rates and research on lesbian parenting*, “Psychological Reports” 106 (2010), No. 2, pp. 374–380.

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UNDERSTANDING HOW THE SOCIAL SCIENTIFIC STUDY OF SAME-SEX PARENTING WORKS

Summary

The social scientific study of same-sex households with children has come a long way in 10 years. Better quality data collection is now available. However, this is no guarantee that consistently sensible analyses and reasonable conclusions are imminent, because the “consensus” that children from same-sex households fare no differently than children from opposite-sex households—in particular, married families—is a carefully guarded social construction. The consensus is the result of sampling decisions, analytic comparisons, and interpretations of results that often indicate baseline differences prior to statistical controls for household instability, after which they commonly disappear. It is this variable—relationship dissolution—that remains demonstrably different between same-sex and opposite-sex relationships, even in the most tolerant of societies. The point of this article is neither to trumpet nor dispute any particular study’s conclusion in the domain of parental influence on children’s outcomes. Rather, I seek to explain how the consensus around “no differences” came to be, and how it is reinforced, despite evidence that it was, and remains, premature.

Keywords: same-sex parenting; social scientific study; variables.

ZROZUMIEĆ BADANIA SPOŁECZNE DOTYCZĄCE RODZICIELSTWA OSÓB TEJ SAMEJ PŁCI

Streszczenie

Badania w obszarze nauk społecznych dotyczące gospodarstw domowych osób tej samej płci z dziećmi przeszły długą drogę w ciągu 10 lat. Współcześnie dostrzega się większe możliwości gromadzenia danych. Nie ma jednak gwarancji, że konsekwentne i sensowne analizy oraz rozsądne wnioskowanie jest oczywiste. Występuje bowiem ścisła konstrukcja społeczna oparta na strzeżonej „zgodzie”, że dzieci z gospodarstw domowych tej samej płci nie różnią się od dzieci z gospodarstw domowych przeciwnej płci – w szczególności z rodzin małżeńskich. Konsensus ten jest wynikiem decyzji dotyczących doboru próby, porównań analitycznych i interpretacji wyników. Często wskazują one na różnice wyjściowe przed statystycznymi kontrolami niestabilności gospodarstwa domowego, po których zwykle zanikają. Zwłaszcza zmienna – rozpad związku – pozostaje wyraźnie różna między związkami osób tej samej i przeciwnej płci, nawet w najbardziej tolerancyjnych społeczeństwach. Celem artykułu nie jest promowanie bądź kwestionowanie wniosków z badań dotyczących wpływu rodziców na wyniki dzieci. Starano się raczej wyjaśnić, w jaki sposób powstał konsensus dotyczący „braku różnic” i jak jest wzmacniany, pomimo dowodów na to, że był i pozostaje przedwczesny.

Słowa kluczowe: rodzicielstwo osób tej samej płci; badania społeczne; zmienne.