



Claiming a Place at the Family Table: Gay and Lesbian Families in the 21st Century

A Review of

Lesbian and Gay Parents and Their Children: Research on the Family Life Cycle

by Abbie E. Goldberg

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In light of recent setbacks to marriage equality, *Lesbian and Gay Parents and Their Children: Research on the Family Life Cycle* is particularly timely. Many who oppose legal recognition for gay and lesbian couples and families argue that these relationships are detrimental to children and threaten the integrity of the heterosexual family unit. Weighing against this opposition, Abbie Goldberg has done a commendable job of summarizing the literature on gay and lesbian parenting, leaving little doubt that these are viable family variants and worthy of legal recognition. The research reviewed in this volume counteracts claims that children can thrive only within a traditional heterosexual family structure and instead promotes a more inclusive understanding of what constitutes effective parenting.

In this comprehensive and readable volume, Goldberg uses a life-span perspective to organize her presentation of the research findings. She begins with a review of gay and lesbian coupling and then follows with chapters dedicated to the transition to parenthood, lesbians and gays as parents, the experiences of children of gay and lesbian parents, and finally the experiences of young adults who have grown up in gay and lesbian households. Goldberg's approach provides an insightful and original developmental perspective on the process of gay and lesbian family formation and the experiences of the children who grow up in these families. One of her stated goals is to examine the perspectives of both parents and children in gay- and lesbian-headed households. She not only achieves this goal but does so in a way that offers a unique way of organizing the research findings.

Researchers will benefit from the candid discussion of methodological weaknesses and challenges involved in studying gay and lesbian families as well as from suggestions for the direction for future studies in this area. The book is not a "how to" manual for clinicians who work with gay and lesbian families, nor does it purport to be. However, it is essential for clinicians who work with these families to be familiar with the empirical literature, and *Lesbian and Gay Parents and Their Children* fills that need by providing a comprehensive, readable, and well-organized presentation of this literature.

Adding to the book's value and appeal to a wide audience are lists of resources at the end of each chapter. It is a minor criticism to note that missing from these lists are recommended readings for clinicians who are looking for guidance on treating members of gay and lesbian families. There are some excellent resources available (e.g., Bieschke, Perez, & DeBord, 2007; Bigner & Wetchler, 2004), and a listing of some of these could have

enhanced the book's appeal to a clinical audience.

Also guiding Goldberg's analysis is an ecological perspective that emphasizes the influence and interaction of multiple contexts on development. She does so by examining the influence of the social and societal context on individual outcomes. This perspective is important because of the negative social climate in which gay men and lesbians attempt to form and maintain families. Although there has been slow progress on this front in recent years, opposition to same-sex marriage remains strong, and some states continue to oppose custody and adoption by gay and lesbian parents (Patterson, 2009).

An ecological perspective on gay and lesbian families is timely because societal opposition to same-sex parenting runs the risk of promoting a self-fulfilling prophecy. Promulgation of negative societal messages and false claims that gay and lesbian families are "dangerous" to children can reinforce the external pressures on these families, challenge their intrafamilial coping processes, and so increase the chance that the parental unit will break up or the child will experience emotional stress.

As have other scholars in this field, Goldberg reminds us that comparative studies that contrast gay and lesbian families with heterosexual families run the risk of implying that heterosexual-headed households are the "gold standard" against which gay and lesbian parents must compete. Instead, the existence and success of gay and lesbian families challenge the field to revise and reconstruct the concept of *family* itself.

Goldberg points out that gay and lesbian families are both assimilationist and revisionist—they accommodate to societal expectations regarding family roles while also creatively modifying these roles in accordance with their unique structures. Men engage in activities traditionally associated with mothering, and women engage in activities traditionally associated with fathering, thus affirming that mothering and fathering are functions and behaviors rather than roles that are linked to gender. The limited amount of research that has been done so far suggests that the intrafamilial processes that promote positive child adjustment—a strong parent-child bond, minimal parenting stress, and a positive relationship between the parents—are uncorrelated with sexual orientation (e.g., Wainright & Patterson, 2006).

The inclusion of a chapter on young adult children of gay and lesbian parents provides insight into ways in which young adults experience their childhood growing up in a nontraditional family. Many of these young adults talk about the pressure they feel to educate others and to avoid confirming negative stereotypes about children raised by gay men or lesbians. But they also credit their experience growing up in a nontraditional family as important in facilitating their tolerance of difference and promoting more flexibility in their ideas about gender and parenting.

A strength of this book is its attention to the diversity that exists within gay and lesbian families. Goldberg provides a thorough and informative review of the many different routes to formation of a gay or lesbian family. For example, some gay and lesbian adults are parenting children who were conceived in an earlier heterosexual relationship. These families must deal with postdivorce issues, the child's reaction to the parent's disclosure of his or her sexual orientation, and the presence of a same-sex stepparent in the home.

The unique challenges faced by these families are different from those experienced by families created by choice via alternative insemination, adoption, or surrogacy. Goldberg summarizes the limited extant literature examining the diversity within gay and lesbian families and acknowledges that more research is needed, particularly studies on gay fathers and their children, families of diverse ethnic backgrounds, ways in which families headed by lesbians and gay men differ from one another, transgender parents, single gay men and lesbians raising children, and relationships between children and their gay and lesbian stepparents.

In conclusion, *Lesbian and Gay Parents and Their Children* is an important contribution to the literature on gay and lesbian families. While there are perhaps more succinct summaries of the literature on child outcomes

(e.g., Patterson, 2009), this book is unique in presenting a life-span perspective on gay and lesbian families and in situating the research on child outcomes within this perspective. It also provides insights from studies of young adult children of gay and lesbian parents. Each chapter stands alone, but as a whole the book provides a panoramic view of this new and creative variant of the family.

This book could be used as a supplemental text in courses in human diversity and family studies. Graduate students and prospective investigators will find in this book a wealth of ideas for future research. Clinicians working with gay and lesbian couples and families will find it a useful sourcebook offering many valuable resources for clients.

It does not detract from the fact that this book makes an important scholarly contribution to acknowledge that the battle for acceptance (and *battle* is an apt term) faced by gay and lesbian families will not be won only by amassing scientific evidence demonstrating that gay men and lesbians are capable of sustaining committed relationships and raising healthy and competent children. In fact, as the scientific evidence weighs ever more strongly against opponents of gay and lesbian families, the countervailing forces of anti-intellectualism are likely to increase in intensity.

Studies such as those reviewed in this book are undoubtedly essential, but one cannot afford to underestimate the intensity of the opposition to legal recognition for gay and lesbian families, and the emotional, nonrational forces that drive this opposition. It is here that personality and social psychology can make a contribution, as the push for equality for sexual minorities will require changes in deep-seated attitudes and anxieties that are inherent in our culture. In the face of this prevalent and vocal opposition to their existence, it is even more to the credit of gay men and lesbians who are parenting children that they are able to be as successful as they have been.

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