Family Lives of Lesbian and Gay Adults

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Charlotte J. Patterson

How do lesbian and gay identities figure in family lives today? From the standpoint of social science, answers to this question focus on couples, parents, children, other family members, and on their relationships and interactions with one another. In the shifting contexts that contemporary families inhabit, these relationships and interactions are changing over time, but they are nevertheless shaped in fundamental ways by sexual identities. Likewise, the experiences associated with lesbian and gay identities are affected by their positions in family lives. How to understand the impact of family relationships on lesbian and gay individuals, on the one hand, and the impact of individual lesbian and gay identities on families, on the other, are the twin topics of this essay.

Sexual orientation, as a concept, must be understood in its cultural and historical context. The notion of identities defined by sexual orientation seems to have arisen in Western industrialized nations at the end of the nineteenth century, and to have gradually gained ground in public awareness during the more than 100 years since that time (Adam, 1987). As knowledge and attitudes about sexual orientation have shifted over time, so have the experiences of nonheterosexual people. Even the very terms used to describe sexual orientation have been transformed. What was "homosexual" to one generation was called "gay or lesbian" by the next generation and is now called "queer" by at least some members of yet another generation (Gamson & Moon, 2004). To study the role of sexual orientation in family lives is, of its nature, to follow a moving target that is also changing shape. Social scientists do this by collecting and interpreting data about people who find themselves at the intersections of many different currents of change.

This article presents an overview of social science research and theory on sexual orientation and contemporary family lives, with special attention to the family lives of lesbian women and gay men. The article focuses on recent studies conducted in Western industrialized countries. Research on lesbian and gay couples is described first, followed by studies of lesbian and gay parents and their children, and by research on other family relationships. The review of research is followed by a discussion of significant theoretical and conceptual issues, an overview of some limitations of existing work, and by suggestions about directions for future research.

Couple Relationships

Research on lesbian and gay couples has ranged across a number of different issues. This section provides an overview of findings on love and commitment, power and the division of labor, sexual behavior, problems and conflict in relationships, and the ending of couple relationships.

C.J. Patterson, PhD (✉)
Department of Psychology, Gilmer Hall,
University of Virginia, P.O. Box 400400,
Charlottesville, VA 22904, USA
e-mail: cjp@virginia.edu

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This is followed by a discussion of recent changes in law and policy, such as recent steps toward legal recognition of same-sex couple relationships, and of research on their impact on family lives. For other recent reviews of research and theory on lesbian and gay couples, see Kurdek (2005), Peplau and Fingerhut (2007), and Rothblum (2009).

Love and Commitment

Most lesbians and gay men express the desire for an enduring love relationship with a partner of the same sex. When D'Augelli and his colleagues surveyed a group of lesbian and gay youth about their hopes for the future, fully 82% of boys and 92% of girls expressed the hope that they would be involved in a coupled relationship in the future (D'Augelli, Rendina, Sinclair, & Grossman, 2006/2007). Many youth also expressed the hope that they would someday be able to marry same-sex partners (D'Augelli et al. 2006/2007). For these young lesbian and gay people, being involved in a couple relationship was central to their vision of the good life.

Research findings suggest that many lesbians and gay men are successful in creating such couple relationships. Initial survey data suggested that 40–60% of gay men, and 45–80% of lesbian women could be said to be involved in steady romantic relationships (see Morris, Balsam, & Rothblum, 2002; Peplau & Cochran, 1990; Peplau, Veniegas, & Campbell, 1996). Working with nationally representative data from adults in the United States, Black, Gates, Sanders, and Taylor (2000) reported that 28% of gay men and 44% of lesbians were involved in couple relationships. More recently, drawing on probability samples of adults in California, Carpenter and Gates (2008) have reported that between 37 and 46% of gay men and between 51 and 62% of lesbian women are involved in couple relationships. Despite some variations among samples, the available data suggest that many lesbian and gay individuals are in couples, and that lesbian women are more likely than gay men to be coupled.

When asked about their current relationship, the great majority of coupled lesbians and gay men describe themselves as happy with it (Kurdek, 1998; Kurdek & Schmidt, 1986a, 1986b; Peplau, Padesky, & Hamilton, 1982). For example, in Kurdek's (1998) longitudinal study of married heterosexual and cohabiting lesbian and gay couples, members of all three couple types described themselves at the beginning of the study as being satisfied with their relationships. Over the 5 years of the study, members of all three couple types experienced a drop in satisfaction with their relationships, but there were no differences among lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples in this regard (Kurdek, 1998, 2001).

Research has also focused on factors related to differences in relationship satisfaction among couples. As predicted by exchange theory, the correlates of relationship quality for lesbian and gay couples include feelings of having equal power, perceiving many attractions and few alternatives to the relationship, endorsing few dysfunctional beliefs about the relationship, placing a high value on the relationship, and engaging in shared decision-making (Kurdek, 1994, 1995). The combination of satisfaction with social support and absence of ineffective arguing is also related to satisfaction with the relationship (Kurdek, 2004).

Power and Division of Labor

How should power be allocated in a couple? The great majority of lesbian and gay couples believe that an equal balance of power is desirable (Peplau & Spalding, 2000), but not all report that they achieve equality. In Peplau and Cochran's (1990) study, only 59% of lesbians, 38% of gay men, 48% of heterosexual women, and 40% of heterosexual men reported that the balance of power in their current relationship was exactly equal. Others have found that majorities of gay as well as lesbian couples report equal power (see Peplau et al., 1996; Solomon, Rothblum, & Balsam, 2004).

When power is unequal in a relationship, which partner has more, and why? Social

exchange theory predicts that the person in a couple who has more resources (e.g., income, education) should have greater power (Peplau, 1991). Results of a number of studies have supported this view (Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007). In early research, Harry reported that older, wealthier men generally had more power in their intimate relationships (Harry, 1984; Harry & DeVall, 1978). In a study of young lesbians, Caldwell and Peplau (1984) reported that wealthier, better educated women tended to have more power than their partners. In partial contrast, Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) reported that the partner with greater financial resources had more power in money management issues in gay, married heterosexual, and unmarried (but cohabiting) heterosexual couples, but not in lesbian couples. Solomon et al. (2004) reported that the partner who earned more money did less housework among heterosexual but not among lesbian or gay couples. The extent to which financial resources affect balance of power in lesbian and gay couples remains unclear (see Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007).

Although some people anticipate that, in same-sex couples, one partner plays a traditionally "male" and one a traditionally "female" role, researchers have found that this is rarely the case. Relatively equal sharing of household tasks has been reported as more common among same-sex couples—both those with and those without children (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Chan, Brooks, Raboy, & Patterson, 1998; Dunne, 1998; Gartrell et al., 1999; Khor, 2007; Kurdek, 1993, 2007; McPherson, 1993; Patterson, 1995a, 1995b; Patterson, Sutfin, & Fulcher, 2004; Solomon et al., 2004; Sullivan, 1996; Tasker & Golombok, 1998). Lesbian and gay couples report that egalitarian ways of dividing up labor are the most common.

There is some evidence, however, suggesting that stepfamilies may be a special case. In stepfamilies, in which one partner joins the family when the other has already had children, the division of labor appears to be more specialized. For instance, Moore (2008) studied African American lesbian stepfamilies, and found that the biological mother was responsible for more of the unpaid labor involved in household and childcare than was her partner. A similar result has been reported for gay stepfamilies (Crosbie-Burnett & Helmbrecht, 1993; Current-Juretschko & Bigner, 2005).

It is worth noting that most studies of household division of labor have employed similar methodologies. Members of couples have usually been asked to describe their divisions of labor for various household tasks (e.g., cooking dinner, taking out the trash) on Likert scales, where one end of the scale means that "I do it all the time," the other means "my partner/spouse does it all the time," and the middle of the scale means that "we do this equally." These questions require participants to summarize their daily activities and assign quantitative scores to them. Relying instead on qualitative, in-depth interviews from several same-sex couples, Carrington (1999) has suggested that the quantitative data tell only part of the story. Carrington (1999) has suggested that same-sex couples are much more diverse in their approaches to the allocation of household labor than the quantitative literature would suggest, and has stressed contrasts between what members of a couple say and what they actually do in practice. No studies have yet employed both quantitative and qualitative approaches to the study of division of labor among same-sex couples, however, so this issue remains unresolved.

Sexual Behavior

Sexual behavior among lesbian, gay and heterosexual couples is extremely diverse, but some generalizations appear to be warranted on the basis of existing research findings (Peplau, Fingerhut, & Beals, 2004). First, for all types of couples, the frequency of sexual relations is highest at the beginning of a relationship, and declines over time. Such declines are least pronounced among gay couples and most significant among lesbian couples (Kurdek, 1995). Overall, the research findings suggest that lesbian couples have sexual relations less frequently than do gay and heterosexual couples (Farr, Forssell, & Patterson, 2010; Solomon et al., 2004).

Why might differences in frequency of sexual relations among lesbian, gay and heterosexual couples exist? One possibility is that women have less inclination and experience than men in initiating sexual encounters (Peplau et al., 2004). Another is that women's sexuality may be expressed in a wider array of ways than men's, leading to forms of sexual expression among lesbian couples that do not necessarily result in penetration or orgasm. Yet another possibility is that the survey methodology that has most often been used in this research may be inappropriate for lesbian couples (Rothblum, 2009). As Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) reported, lesbians may place greater value on nongenital expressions of love, such as hugging and other affectionate behaviors, and hence may answer survey questions about frequency of sexual relations from a different perspective than do gay or heterosexual men.

Another area in which strong gender differences emerge is in that of the degree of a couple's sexual exclusivity. Lesbians and heterosexual couples have been found to be more supportive than gay men of monogamy in their relationships, and their reported behavior corresponds to these views. In their classic study, Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) reported that, among couples who had been together at least 2 years, most lesbian and heterosexual couples preferred and experienced monogamous sexual relationships, whereas most gay couples did not. These data were collected before the HIV/AIDS epidemic had gained public attention. However, data collected during 1988–1989, after HIV infection had become widespread in the United States, revealed the same pattern of results (Bryant & Demian, 1994). Solomon et al. (2004) recently found that a majority of gay couples reported having sex outside their primary relationship, whereas only 15% of men in heterosexual relationships reported that they did so; among women, there were no differences as a function of sexual orientation. Current work with gay couples suggests that many have agreements about whether or not to allow sexual activities with partners outside the couple, and that many such agreements allow for outside sex within certain limits (Hoff & Beougher, 2010; Hoff et al., 2009). Despite differences in preferences and in actual behavior, however, lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples all report similar satisfaction with their sexual relationships (Bryant & Demian, 1994; Kurdek, 2004; Solomon et al., 2004). Thus, although gender differences in sexual attitudes and sexual behavior would appear to be substantial, reported sexual satisfaction within couple relationships has not varied as a function of sexual orientation or gender of partners (Peplau et al., 2004).

Problems and Conflict

When lesbian and gay couples experience problems in their relationships, many concern the same issues that heterosexual couples must also face. As in heterosexual relationships, difficulties can emerge due to different religious, racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic backgrounds of partners, and due to the different values that these backgrounds may have engendered. Relationship difficulties can also arise as a result of problems at either partner's job, financial pressures, friction with members of extended family networks, and so forth, just as they do in heterosexual relationships. Kurdek (2005) reported that the top five areas of conflict for lesbian and gay couples were finances, driving style, affection/sex, being overly critical, and division of household tasks.

There are, however, some conflicts that are more characteristic of lesbian and gay couples than of heterosexual couples. Prominent among these are issues created by negative social attitudes toward homosexuality. Because of prejudice and discrimination directed toward lesbians and gay men, many are unwilling to disclose their sexual identities to family members, neighbors, coworkers, and sometimes even to friends. When a couple disagrees about the extent to which they should disclose the lesbian or gay nature of their relationship, problems in their relationship can ensue (James & Murphy, 1998; Kurdek, 2005). Resolution of such conflicts may be central to the success of the couple relationship over time (Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007).

There is also some research on the ways in which couples seek to resolve conflict in their relationships.

Survey data suggest that same-sex couples may argue more effectively than do heterosexual couples. For instance, members of same-sex couples may be less likely than those in heterosexual couples to withdraw from arguments, and more likely to suggest compromises or other solutions (Kurdek, 2004). In videotaped assessments of couples discussing problems in their relationships, same-sex couples have also been described as more likely than heterosexual couples to maintain a positive tone (Gottman et al., 2003).

The longevity of lesbian and gay relationships has also been a topic of interest. Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) reported that, for couples who had already been together 10 years, breakup rates over the 18 months of their study were low; only 6% of lesbian couples, 4% of gay couples, and 4% of married couples separated during this period. For couples who had been together less than 2 years, 22% of lesbian couples, 16% of gay couples, 17% of cohabiting (but unmarried) heterosexual couples, and only 4% of heterosexual married couples had separated; thus, being married was associated with low breakup rates, but otherwise there were no differences. More recent studies (see Kurdek, 1995, 2004) have also found low rates of separation, and no differences in breakup rates between lesbian and gay couples. Dissolution rates for same-sex couples do, however, appear to be higher than those for heterosexual married couples.

Kurdek and Schmidt (1986a) compared the attractions that a relationship held for the partners and also the barriers to exiting a relationship for lesbian, gay, unmarried (but cohabiting) heterosexual, and married heterosexual couples. They found no differences among these four types of couples in the strength of attractions toward their relationships, but did find significant differences in barriers to leaving the relationships. Specifically, married heterosexual spouses reported more obstacles to leaving the relationship—ranging from financial to emotional to moral and religious issues—than did members of the other three types of couples. Thus, higher breakup rates for same-sex couples may be attributable to higher barriers to exit from a relationship for heterosexual as compared to lesbian or gay individuals (Kurdek, 1998).

Changes in Law and Policy

Dramatic changes in the legal recognition afforded to same-sex couples have recently taken place in some jurisdictions. Looking back, it can be difficult to recall that, in 1990, same-sex couple relationships were not legally recognized in any way, in any part of the world. The marriages of same-sex couples are now recognized under the laws of Belgium, Canada, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, South Africa, Spain, and Sweden. Registered partnerships or registered cohabitation agreements for same-sex partners have attained legal status in at least fifteen more countries (Badgett, 2009).

In the United States, legal recognition of same-sex couple relationships has emerged in some, but not other jurisdictions. In 2004, Massachusetts was the first state to provide legal recognition of same-sex marriages, and since that year, a handful of other states have followed. Still other states have offered civil unions and domestic partnerships as mechanisms for recognizing same-sex couple relationships under the law. In most parts of the United States today, however, lesbian and gay couples do not have access to marriage or any other form of legal recognition for couple relationships. Nowhere in the United States today are same-sex couples' relationships recognized by federal law (Badgett, 2009). Public opinion has, however, been shifting in favor of same-sex marriage and other forms of legal recognition. Adults in the United States are divided about whether the law should provide for marriages, domestic partnerships, or civil unions, but a clear majority favors legal recognition of some kind for same-sex couple relationships (Harris Interactive, 2008).

The changes in legal recognition for same-sex couples over the last 20 years seem likely to affect the qualities of these relationships. For instance, legal marriage might serve as a barrier to dissolution of same-sex couple relationships and, in this way, result in lower rates of separation.

With legal recognition of same-sex marriage, breakup rates of same-sex couples might be expected to fall closer to the lower rates characteristic of married heterosexual couples. In support of this view, von Metzke (2005) reported that divorce rates of lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples in the Netherlands are about equal. Research in Sweden, however, has shown that lesbian and gay couples are more likely than heterosexual couples to end registered partnerships (Badgett, 2009). Factors such as social support from family members and others may also be relevant, and may vary among couple types (Solomon et al., 2004), regardless of their legal status. Intriguing questions thus remain unanswered about the impact of legal status on the longevity of same-sex couple relationships, as well as on other aspects of these relationships.

Legal status of a couple's relationship could also affect other aspects of a couple's life together (Badgett, 2009). In particular, legal recognition of same-sex couple relationships might affect many economic decisions for couples, and might also influence the degree to which couples feel comfortable with divisions of labor that involve considerable specialization. With the added security provided by a legally recognized relationship, perhaps more lesbian and gay partners will feel able to give up a paid job and depend upon financial support from a partner, in order to care for young children or elderly parents. If so, then married same-sex couples may shift to more specialized divisions of labor, more like those shown by heterosexual couples. These and many related issues remain to be explored in future research.

Lesbian and Gay Parents and Their Children

Lesbian and gay people become parents through a number of different routes (Goldberg, 2009; Johnson & O'Connor, 2002; Patterson, 1992, 1997, 2000; Patterson & Riskind, 2010). In some families, children were born or adopted in the context of heterosexual marriages that later dissolved when one or both parents came out as lesbian or gay. In other families, children were born or adopted after parents had affirmed lesbian or gay identities. Families of the first type have usually undergone the difficulties and reorganizations characteristic of parental divorce and separations. Families of the second type, however, have not necessarily experienced such transitions. The experiences of family members are therefore likely to be quite different in these two types of families. For this reason, the data on each are presented in separate sections below.

Divorced Lesbian and Gay Parents

Many lesbian mothers and gay fathers who became parents in the context of earlier heterosexual marriages have faced legal challenges to their parental rights upon divorce (Joslin & Minter, 2009). In the context of such legal challenges, derogatory stereotypes and other negative assumptions about lesbians and gay men have sometimes been voiced by lawyers, judges, and other parties (Patterson & Redding, 1996). For instance, in the context of child custody and visitation disputes, the mental health and parenting abilities of lesbian and gay parents have frequently been questioned (Falk, 1989, 1994). Indeed such notions have frequently been offered as justifications for removing children from the custody of lesbian and gay parents (Richman, 2009). In an effort to provide empirical evaluation of such claims, much early research compared mental health and parenting ability of divorced lesbian mothers with those of divorced heterosexual mothers. Such studies consistently showed that lesbian mothers were at least as likely as heterosexual mothers to be in good mental health and to exhibit good parenting abilities (for a review, see Patterson, 1992, 1997).

The early research did, however, identify some differences between divorced lesbian and divorced heterosexual parents. For example, divorced lesbian mothers reported more fears about loss of child custody than did divorced heterosexual mothers (see, for example, Lyons, 1983; Pagelow, 1980). Thus, early research led to the conclusion that, although lesbian and heterosexual mothers did not differ in their overall

mental health or parenting abilities, lesbian mothers nevertheless had some special concerns (Falk, 1994; Patterson, 1992).

It might be tempting to dismiss these findings as outdated, were it not for some recent evidence suggesting that such concerns may still be very real. Shapiro, Peterson, and Stewart (2009) studied aspects of mental health among lesbian and heterosexual mothers, most of whom were probably divorced, and all of whom were living either in the United States and Canada. The contrast between those living in the United States and Canada is interesting because, despite many similarities between the two countries, Canada provides a more supportive legal climate for lesbian mothers and their children. For example, adoption and marriage rights are available to lesbian mothers in Canada, but not to those in many parts of the United States. Shapiro et al. (2009) found that lesbian mothers in the United States reported more worries about legal problems and about discrimination based on sexual orientation—but not more general family worries—than did lesbian mothers in Canada. Among heterosexual mothers, whose family relationships enjoyed protection of law in both countries, there were no differences among those living in the United States and Canada. Thus, legal and policy climates are important parts of the environment for lesbian and gay parents, and they may influence mental health.

Possibly because most divorced gay fathers have not been custodial parents, and have therefore not lived with their children after divorce (Patterson & Chan, 1998), there has been little research about mental health and parenting abilities of gay fathers. The available evidence suggests that divorced gay fathers describe much the same reasons for becoming parents and show parenting abilities that are at least as well developed as those of divorced heterosexual fathers (Bigner & Bozett, 1990; Patterson & Chan, 1998). In this way, findings from research on divorced gay fathers have paralleled, to some degree, those from research on divorced lesbian mothers.

Much research on divorced gay fathers, however, has arisen from concerns about changes over time in the gay father identity. Early work by Miller (1978, 1979) and Bozett (1980, 1981a, 1981b, 1987) attempted to conceptualize the processes through which men who considered themselves heterosexual fathers came to view themselves as gay fathers. The pivotal nature of identity disclosure and also of reactions to disclosure by others in a man's social network was emphasized by both authors. Emerging relationships in the gay community were seen as crucial to men's integration of their parental and sexual identities. As men came out, fell in love, and disclosed gay relationships to others, even while remaining connected to their children, they came to integrate their parental and their sexual identities, and to call themselves gay fathers (Patterson & Chan, 1998). This was once the main pathway through which men became gay fathers. As gay men come out earlier and consider other pathways, divorced gay fathers perhaps are not as numerous today, but they still form an important group of nonheterosexual parents (Tornello & Patterson, 2010).

Lesbians and Gay Men Choosing Parenthood

Whereas it was once expected that lesbian women and especially gay men would remain childless, this is less and less the case. Increasingly in recent years, lesbian women and gay men have been choosing to become parents in the context of already-declared nonheterosexual identities (Hermann-Green & Gehring, 2007; Johnson & O'Connor, 2002; Mallon, 2004; Rabun & Oswald, 2009). This trend has created new types of families that may be called planned lesbian- and gay-parent families, and that have some different issues than do the lesbian- and gay-parented families that resulted from divorce. With lesbians and gay men choosing parenthood, questions about the desire for children, the transition to parenthood, and related issues come into view (Patterson & Riskind, 2010).

What proportion of lesbians and gay men want to have children? To decide that they want to become parents, both lesbians and gay men must overcome antigay sentiments that portray

parenting as an exclusively heterosexual prerogative (Berkowitz & Marsiglio, 2007; Gianino, 2008; Mallon, 2004). Apparently, lesbians and gay men are succeeding in doing this in large numbers. In research with childless gay men, both Beers (1996) and Sbordone (1993) found that at least half reported that they would like to become fathers. Gates, Badgett, Macomber, and Chambers (2007) analyzed data from the (United States) National Survey of Family Growth, and found that 41% of childless lesbians and 52% of childless gay men expressed a desire to have children; these numbers were somewhat lower than those for heterosexual adults. Moreover, gay men who expressed a desire to become parents were less likely than their heterosexual peers to express the intention to become parents; in other words, there was a bigger gap between desire and intention for gay than for heterosexual men (Riskind & Patterson, 2010). This was not true for women; lesbian women who desired parenthood were just as likely as other women to intend to become parents (Riskind & Patterson). Overall, it is clear that many lesbians and gay men do wish to become parents, but that some may be uncertain about how to make this happen.

Recent research has also found strong expectations of parenthood among lesbian and gay youth. In a study of lesbian and gay youth in New York City, D'Augelli et al. (2006/2007) found that 86% of young men and 91% of young women described themselves as likely to rear children someday. These figures are closer to those for heterosexual individuals, suggesting the possibility that shifts may be occurring over time in the likelihood that lesbian and gay individuals see themselves as able to become parents.

Having made a decision to pursue parenthood, a number of issues are likely to emerge for lesbian women and gay men (Goldberg, 2009; Patterson, 1994b, 2000). Questions about support from partners, friends, and members of the family of origin may all surface. Similarly, issues about access to accurate information, as well as to medical, legal, and other resources may also arise. Many adoption agencies across the United States are working with lesbian and gay prospective adoptive parents (Brodzinsky et al., 2003), but it may be difficult for some individuals to find them. Many reproductive health services are available to lesbian and gay adults, but it may be challenging for some individuals to locate the agencies and clinics that are open to all. As they begin to pursue parenthood, these and/or related general issues are likely to emerge for lesbian and gay individuals.

Some other issues are specific to lesbian and gay couples. For instance, if a couple has not chosen adoption, they may need to decide which partner should be their child's biological parent. For lesbian couples, this decision will mean that one member of the couple will become pregnant and give birth to the child. She will almost certainly be seen by most people around the couple as the child's "primary" mother (Patterson, 1998), and in many states, she will also be the child's parent whose status is recognized by the law (Joslin & Minter, 2009; Richman, 2009). For gay couples who are pursuing surrogacy, one member of the couple will become the child's biological progenitor (Bergman, Rubio, Green, & Padron, 2010). The child is thus likely to resemble the biological father in one or more ways, which will no doubt affect the responses of those around the family. As in the case of lesbian couples, the biological father is, in many states, the only one who is likely to have legal standing as a parent. Should same-sex parenting couples ever separate, the parent whose relationship to the child is recognized under the law is far more likely in most jurisdictions than the other parent to find his or her relationship with the child protected by the courts (Patterson, 2009b; Richman, 2009). As consequential as these decisions may be for all who are affected by them, they have as yet occasioned relatively little research (Goldberg, 2009).

Regardless of parental sexual orientation, the transition to parenthood has many similar elements. Becoming a parent is a major life transition, and it has both exciting and stressful aspects (Cowan & Cowan, 1992). As happy as new parents may be about this change in their lives, they must also master new tasks, cope with new demands on their time, and deal with role transitions of various kinds. These realities characterize the transition to parenthood for lesbian and

gay parents, just as they do for heterosexual parents (Bergman et al., 2010; Gianino, 2008; Goldberg & Sayer, 2006; Mallon, 2004). Satisfaction with couple relationships often declines during this transition, and this seems to be as true of lesbian couples as it is of heterosexual couples (Goldberg & Sayer, 2006). No data have yet emerged on changes in relationship quality across the transition to parenthood for gay couples.

Although there are many similarities, the transition to parenthood is also different in many ways for lesbian and gay than it is for heterosexual individuals (Goldberg, 2009). Prospective lesbian and gay parents are less likely than others to be sure that they can depend upon support from the members of their families of origin, or from their friends. For instance, in their study of lesbian women during their pregnancies, Gartrell et al. (1996) found that most expected at least some support from relatives, but 15% of the women did not expect any of their family members to recognize the baby as a relative. Goldberg (2006) also reported that some lesbian women, interviewed just before the birth of their child, reported a notable lack of support from their families of origin. Three months after the baby's birth, however, lesbian mothers agreed that their families had become more supportive (Goldberg, 2006). Especially because social attitudes and other contextual factors are likely to loom so large in this regard, much remains to be learned about the ways in which transitions to parenthood are experienced by lesbian and gay individuals.

In summary, research on lesbian women and gay men choosing parenthood is burgeoning, but much remains unstudied. In particular, lesbian and gay individuals and couples may pursue diverse pathways to parenthood, and little research is yet available on some of these (e.g., surrogacy). Even pathways such as lesbians' use of donor insemination remain in need of additional research (Goldberg, 2009; Tasker & Patterson, 2007; Telingator & Patterson, 2008). The role of sexual orientation in family formation is only beginning to be understood, and further research in this area seems likely to be fruitful (Patterson & Riskind, 2010).

Lesbian- and Gay-Parented Families in Context

Research on the relationships of people within lesbian- and gay-parent families has resulted in a generally positive picture (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010). Both children and adolescents have been found to have warm and supportive relationships with lesbian and gay parents (Brewaeys, Ponjaert, Van Hall, & Golombok, 1997; Golombok, Spencer, & Rutter, 1983; Kirkpatrick, Smith, & Roy, 1981; Wainright, Russell, & Patterson, 2004). Most of the research has focused on lesbian mothers, and has highlighted the greater involvement of co-mothers than of fathers or stepfathers in heterosexual parent families (Tasker & Golombok, 1997). The relatively egalitarian division of labor that has been reported by most lesbian and gay couples has, in some studies, been associated with positive adjustment among their children (Chan, Brooks, et al., 1998; Ciano-Boyce & Shelley-Sireci, 2002; Patterson et al., 2004; Tasker & Golombok, 1998; Vanfraussen, Ponjaert-Kristoffersen, & Brewaeys, 2003).

There are fewer data on gay-father families, but much of what is known is similar to the findings on lesbian mothers (Barrett & Tasker, 2001). Bigner and Jacobsen (1989a, 1989b) reported that divorced gay fathers described themselves as more likely to use reasoning during disciplinary encounters, more responsive to their children, and somewhat more strict in setting standards than did divorced heterosexual fathers. Gay fathers who had partners were more likely to express satisfaction with their lives and described themselves as being more successful at meeting common challenges involved in parenting than did those who were single (Barrett & Tasker, 2001; Crosbie-Burnett & Helmbrecht, 1993).

Research has also focused on children's contacts with members of the extended family, especially grandparents (Fulcher, Chan, Raboy, & Patterson, 2002; Patterson, Hurt, & Mason, 1998). Patterson and her colleagues found that most children of lesbian mothers were described by their mothers as being in regular contact with grandparents. In one study that included both children of lesbian and heterosexual parents,

there were no differences in frequency of contact with grandparents as a function of parental sexual orientation (Fulcher et al., 2002). Gartrell et al. (2000) have also reported that most grandparents acknowledged the children of lesbian daughters as grandchildren. Thus, available evidence suggests that inter-generational relationships in lesbian mother families are satisfactory. Again, much remains to be learned about the nature and influence of these family relationships.

Children's contacts with adult friends of their lesbian mothers have also been assessed (Fulcher et al., 2002; Golombok et al., 1983; Patterson et al., 1998). All of the children in these studies were described as having contact with adult friends of their mothers, and most lesbian mothers reported that their friends were a mixture of lesbian, gay, and heterosexual individuals. Children of lesbian mothers were no less likely than those of heterosexual mothers to be in contact with adult men who were friends of their mothers (Fulcher et al., 2002). Thus, findings to date suggest that children of lesbian mothers have positive contacts with many adults in the context of their family lives.

Issues may emerge for some parents as they attempt to decide how open to be about their nonheterosexual identities in different settings. For instance, some lesbian mothers report withholding information about their sexual identities in healthcare settings, particularly if the situation does not seem safe for disclosure (Perlesz et al., 2006; Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan, 2001). Some lesbian and gay parents also report selective disclosure at their children's schools, based on their evaluations of individual attitudes and school climate (Casper & Schultz, 1999; Perlesz et al., 2006). Most lesbian and gay parents express desire for as much openness as possible in the context of maintaining a safe and welcoming environment for themselves and their children (Tasker & Patterson, 2007).

Children with Lesbian and Gay Parents

Research on the children of lesbian and gay parents first emerged during an era when parental rights of lesbian and gay parents were often contested in the courts. As a result, much of the research has been designed to address issues that were seen as relevant in legal proceedings. In particular, three major types of concerns about the development of children with lesbian and gay parents have guided much of the research. The first is that development of sexual identity may be impaired among children of lesbian and gay parents. The second category of concerns involves possible problems with aspects of children's personal development other than sexual identity, such as self-esteem. A third category of concerns is that children of lesbian and gay parents may experience difficulty in social relationships, especially with peers. As the following review will reveal, none of these concerns have been supported by the results of empirical research. Other reviews of this literature can be found in Biblarz and Stacey (2010), Bos, van Balen, and van den Boom (2005), Meezan and Rauch (2005), Patterson (1997, 2000, 2009a), Perrin (2002), Short, Riggs, Perlesz, Brown, and Kane (2007), Stacey and Biblarz (2001), and Tasker (1999).

Sexual Identity

Research has considered three aspects of sexual identity: *gender identity*, which concerns a person's self-identification as male or female; *gender-role behavior*, which concerns the extent to which a person's activities, occupations, and the like are regarded by the culture as masculine, feminine, or both; and *sexual orientation*, which refers to a person's sexual attractions, which may be homosexual, heterosexual, or bisexual. Research relevant to each of these three major areas of concern is summarized below.

Gender identity. In studies of children and adolescents, results of projective testing and related interview procedures have revealed that development of gender identity among children of lesbian mothers follows the expected pattern (Green, 1978; Green, Mandel, Hotvedt, Gray, & Smith, 1986; Kirkpatrick et al., 1981). More direct assessment techniques have been used by Golombok et al. (1983) with the same result; all children in this study reported that they were

happy with their gender, and that they had no wish to be a member of the opposite sex. No evidence has been reported in any of the studies to suggest difficulties among children of lesbian mothers. A recent study of young children of gay fathers also reported no difficulties (Farr et al., 2010), and the same was true of a recent study of school-aged children with lesbian mothers (Bos & Sandfort, 2010).

Gender-role behavior. A number of studies have reported that gender-role behavior among children of lesbian mothers falls within typical limits for conventional sex roles (Brewaeys et al., 1997; Farr & Patterson, 2009a, 2009b; Golombok et al., 1983; Gottman, 1990; Green, 1978; Green et al., 1986; Hoeffer, 1981; Kirkpatrick et al., 1981; Kweskin & Cook, 1982; MacCallum & Golombok, 2004; Patterson, 1994a; Sutfin, Fulcher, Bowles, & Patterson, 2008). For instance, Kirkpatrick et al. (1981) found no differences between children of lesbian vs. heterosexual mothers in toy preferences, activities, interests, or occupational choices.

Gender-role behavior of children was assessed in a study by Green et al. (1986). In interviews with the children, no differences between the 56 children of lesbian and 48 children of heterosexual mothers were found with respect to favorite television programs, favorite television characters, or favorite games or toys. There was some indication in interviews with children themselves that the offspring of lesbian mothers had less sex-typed preferences for activities at school and in their neighborhoods than did children of heterosexual mothers. Consistent with this result, lesbian mothers were also more likely than heterosexual mothers to report that their daughters often participated in rough-and-tumble play or occasionally played with "masculine" toys such as trucks or guns, but they reported no differences in these areas for sons. Lesbian mothers were no more and no less likely than heterosexual mothers to report that their children often played with "feminine" toys such as dolls. In all cases, children's sex-role behavior was seen as falling within the expected range.

Brewaeys et al. (1997) assessed gender-role behavior among children who had been conceived via donor insemination by lesbian couples, and compared it to that of those who had been conceived via donor insemination by heterosexual couples, and to that of those who had been naturally conceived by heterosexual couples. They used the Preschool Activities Inventory (Golombok & Rust, 1993), a maternal report questionnaire designed to identify "masculine" and "feminine" behavior among children, and found no significant differences between children of lesbian and children of heterosexual parents on preferences for gendered toys, games, and activities (Brewaeys et al., 1997). Similar results have been reported by Farr and Patterson (2009b), who studied lesbian-, gay-, and heterosexual-parented adoptive families, and by MacCallum and Golombok (2004), who studied older children with single lesbian or single heterosexual mothers. Despite some controversy (e.g., Stacey & Biblarz, 2001), the overall findings suggest that children of lesbian mothers develop patterns of gender-role behavior that are much like those of other children.

Sexual orientation. A number of investigators have also studied a third component of sexual identity, sexual orientation (Bailey, Bobrow, Wolfe, & Mikach, 1995; Bozett, 1980, 1987, 1989; Golombok & Tasker, 1996; Gottman, 1990; Green, 1978; Huggins, 1989; Miller, 1979; Paul, 1986; Rees, 1979; Tasker & Golombok, 1997). In all studies, the great majority of offspring of both lesbian mothers and gay fathers described themselves as heterosexual, and the results suggest that rates of homosexuality are similar among the offspring of lesbian, gay, and heterosexual parents. For instance, Huggins (1989) interviewed 36 adolescents, half of whom had lesbian mothers and half of whom had heterosexual mothers. No children of lesbian mothers identified themselves as lesbian or gay, but one child of a heterosexual mother did; this difference was not statistically significant. Bailey et al. (1995) asked gay fathers whether their adult sons were heterosexual, bisexual, or gay and found that the large

majority were heterosexual, with only 9% identified as gay or bisexual.

Golombok and Tasker (1996; Tasker & Golombok, 1997) studied 25 young adults reared by divorced lesbian mothers and 21 young adults reared by divorced heterosexual mothers. They reported that offspring of lesbian mothers were no more likely than those of heterosexual mothers to describe themselves as feeling attracted to same-sex sexual partners. If they were attracted to same-sex partners, however, young adults with lesbian mothers were more likely to report that they would consider entering into a same-sex sexual relationship, and they were more likely to have actually participated in such a relationship. They were not, however, more likely to identify themselves as nonheterosexual (i.e., as lesbian, gay, or bisexual). These results were based on a small convenience sample, and should be interpreted with caution. At the same time, the study is the first to follow children of divorced lesbian mothers into adulthood, and it offers a detailed and careful examination of important issues. Understanding of issues in this area could benefit from additional research. Regardless of the outcomes of future studies, however, it should be emphasized that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and heterosexual identities are all normal variants of human sexual orientation.

Social Development

Questions have been posed about the social development of children and adolescents with lesbian and gay parents. These have often focused on the possibility that youngsters might be teased, bullied, or excluded from peer activities because of parental sexual orientation. A number of investigators have reported that children and youth may encounter antigay sentiments at school and in their neighborhoods (e.g., Gartrell, Deck, Rodas, Peyser, & Banks, 2005; Kosciw & Diaz, 2008; Ray & Gregory, 2001). For instance, in a recent survey of 154 adolescents with lesbian and gay parents, a majority had heard derogatory comments about lesbian and gay people at their school (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008). As Gartrell et al. (2005) have reported, those who had heard such remarks reported feeling disheartened by them, particularly when teachers failed to intervene (see also Bos & van Balen, 2008).

On the other hand, when researchers have compared the development of peer relations among children with lesbian mothers and those with heterosexual parents, no differences have emerged. For example, Golombok et al. (1983) reported no differences in the overall quality of peer relations among children with divorced lesbian vs. those with divorced heterosexual mothers. A similar result was reported by Vanfraussen and her colleagues (2003) for children from planned lesbian mother families vs. heterosexual parent families, and by Wainright and Patterson (2008) for adolescents reared by same-sex vs. opposite-sex couples. Both Wainright and Patterson (2006) and Rivers, Poteat, and Noret (2008) found that adolescents from families with same-sex parents were no more likely to be victimized at school than were those from opposite-sex parent families. Thus, research findings suggest that, despite some encounters with antigay sentiments, the overall quality of peer relations among children and youth with nonheterosexual parents is often no different than that among children and youth with heterosexual parents.

Other Aspects of Personal Development

Studies of other aspects of personal development among children of lesbian and gay parents have assessed a broad array of characteristics. Among these have been separation-individuation (Steckel, 1987), psychiatric evaluations (Golombok et al., 1983; Kirkpatrick et al., 1981), behavior problems (Bos, van Balen, & van den Boom, 2007; Brewaeys et al., 1997; Chan, Raboy, & Patterson, 1998; Flaks, Ficher, Masterpasqua, & Joseph, 1995; Gartrell et al., 2005; Golombok et al., 1983, Golombok, Tasker, & Murray, 1997; Patterson, 1994a; Tasker & Golombok, 1997; Wainright et al., 2004), personality (Gottman,

1990; Tasker & Golombok, 1997), self-concept (Bos & Sandfort, 2010; Golombok et al., 1997; Gottman, 1990; Huggins, 1989; Patterson, 1994a; Puryear, 1983; Wainright et al., 2004), locus of control (Puryear, 1983; Rees, 1979), moral judgment (Rees), school adjustment (Wainright et al., 2004), and intelligence (Green et al., 1986). The research findings suggest that concerns about difficulties in these areas among children of lesbian mothers are unwarranted (Patterson, 2009a, 2009b; Perrin, 2002; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001; Tasker, 1999). As was the case for sexual identity and for social development, studies of these aspects of personal development have revealed no major differences between children of lesbian vs. heterosexual mothers. Much less attention has been devoted to children of gay fathers, but the available data (e.g., Farr et al., 2010; Farr & Patterson, 2009a, 2009b) yield similar conclusions.

Individual Differences

While few if any group differences between children of lesbian/gay and heterosexual parents have been reported, there are many variations in adjustment within the group of those reared by lesbian and gay parents. Most prominent among the predictors of within-group differences is the quality of relationships between children and adolescents, on the one hand, and the parents with whom they live, on the other (Golombok, 1999). Consistent with data on other children, research on lesbian- and gay-parented families has revealed that the overall quality of children's relationships with their parents is the best predictor of children's adjustment (e.g., Bos et al., 2007; Chan, Raboy, et al., 1998; Farr & Patterson, 2009a, 2009b). Similarly, among adolescents, research has shown that the best predictor of most indexes of positive adjustment is the degree to which relationships with parents are seen as warm, close, and supportive (Patterson & Wainright, 2010; Wainright & Patterson, 2006, 2008). More important than parental sexual orientation for children's adjustment, in short, is the quality of relationships with the parents they have.

Research on Other Family Relationships

In addition to parent–child and couple relationships in which they may participate, lesbians and gay men are likely also to maintain contacts with their siblings, parents, and other members of their families of origin (Cohen & Savin-Williams, 1996; Herdt & Beeler, 1998; Laird, 1998; Patterson & D'Augelli, 1998; Savin-Williams, 1998, 2005). Although, as Herdt and Beeler (1998), Laird (1998) and others have emphasized, many other issues are undoubtedly significant. The largest amount of research to date has focused on the concerns of young lesbians and gay men about disclosing their sexual identities to members of their families of origin, especially to parents.

After acknowledging lesbian or gay identities, many people begin to wonder whether and how to disclose such identities with (i.e., "come out to") people who are important to them. Most lesbian and gay youth come out first to close friends, and only later—if at all—to family members (Herdt & Boxer, 1993; Savin-Williams, 1998). Young people are more likely to come out first to mothers rather than to fathers, usually because they expect more positive responses from mothers (Bryant & Demian, 1994; Cohen & Savin-Williams, 1996). For example, Remafedi (1987) studied a sample of gay and bisexual teenagers, and found that most had come out to their mothers but not their fathers, and almost all had come out to at least one friend; similar results were reported by D'Augelli, Hershberger, and Pilkington (1998). Recent research suggests that lesbian and gay youth may be coming out to parents and others at younger ages today than in earlier years (Floyd & Bakeman, 2006; Herdt & Boxer, 1993; Savin-Williams, 2005).

Although it is difficult to predict parental reactions to disclosure of a nonheterosexual orientation by their offspring, the most common initial reactions have been described as negative (Cohen & Savin-Williams, 1996; D'Augelli et al., 1998; Strommen, 1989a, 1989b). Negative reactions are likely to be more pronounced among older

parents, those with less education, and those whose parent–child relationships were troubled before the disclosure. Although interactions between lesbian and gay young people and their parents often deteriorate immediately after disclosure, they generally improve again over time. The best predictor of postdisclosure relationships between lesbian and gay young adults and their parents is the quality of their relationships before the disclosure (Cohen & Savin-Williams, 1996; Savin-Williams, 1990, 1998; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000).

Is disclosure of lesbian or gay identity to parents related to youths' or young adults' well-being? Because of the significance of parent–adolescent relationships, one might expect parental acceptance to be associated with favorable outcomes. Consistent with this view, Savin-Williams (1990) found that adolescent and young adult lesbians who reported that their parents were accepting of their sexual identities (or would be accepting if they knew) also reported feeling more comfortable with their sexual orientation. This was true for young men, however, only if they also described their relationships with parents as important to their self-image (Savin-Williams, 1990). Because the research to date has been correlational in nature, it remains unclear whether parental acceptance makes lesbian and gay youth feel better about themselves, or whether youth who already have high self-esteem are more likely to disclose to parents, or whether cyclical processes may be involved. Identification of causal pathways represents an important challenge in this area.

Parental reactions to disclosure of sexual minority identities are also associated with physical and mental health among adolescents. For example, Rosario, Schrimshaw, and Hunter (2009) have recently reported that parental reactions to youths' disclosure of lesbian and gay identities accounted for more variation in their health outcomes than did the fact of disclosure itself. In particular, adolescents whose disclosures were met with negative or rejecting reactions reported more use of alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana than did those whose disclosures were met with more positive responses. Similarly, Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, and Sanchez (2009) found that sexual minority young adults who experienced negative family reactions to disclosure of their sexual identities were more likely than others to experience depressive symptoms, to participate in unsafe sexual activities, and to use illegal drugs. Physical and mental health outcomes for sexual minority youth and young adults thus appear to be significantly associated with family support or rejection. Again, however, this research is correlational in nature, and identification of causal pathways remains a challenge for future research.

While some studies have focused on young adults' disclosure of lesbian and gay identities to parents, other studies have shown that, among samples of older lesbian and gay adults, there are many who have never come out to parents or other family members. When a lesbian or gay identity has not been disclosed, any one of several coping strategies may be employed by the individual and by other members of the family (Brown, 1989). A common one is distancing, whether emotionally or geographically (or both) from the family of origin. Another is the unspoken agreement that nobody in the family will discuss the lesbian or gay individual's personal life; which might be called the "I know you know" strategy. A third approach is to disclose to one family member, who is thought to be supportive, on the condition that no others be told; this approach appears to depend on coalitions among subgroups within a family. Although these strategies may or may not be viewed as problematic by those who employ them, they all block the achievement of true intimacy, and add in this way to the stress experienced by lesbian and gay adults (Brown, 1989).

When a family member's nonheterosexual orientation becomes known, Strommen (1989a, 1989b) has described the family's reaction as involving a two-stage process. First, the family members struggle to understand and assimilate this new information about one of its members. The family may reject the lesbian or gay person, or it may reorganize itself to accommodate this shift in identity while still including the lesbian or gay person in family activities. Parents often

find the process of reorganization to be difficult. Efforts to reorganize the family also may extend over substantial periods of time. In the end, some family members discover that the experience has brought them unexpected benefits (Bernstein, 1995).

Disclosure of nonheterosexual identity is only one issue of many that are relevant to lesbian and gay family lives. Research has not yet explored at any length the ways in which sexual identities affect other aspects of parent–child or sibling relationships in adulthood (Allen & Demo, 1995). How are experiences in romantic relationships, parenting, grandparenting, and occupational lives affected by an individual's assuming either a lesbian or gay identity? How do the sexual identities of family members affect responses to illness, death, and bereavement? How indeed does sexual orientation affect understandings of family membership itself? There is much territory here for research to explore, and there have been some intriguing efforts (Badgett, 1998; Herdt & Beeler, 1998; Orel & Fruhauf, 2006; Oswald, 2002; Patterson & D'Augelli, 1998; Weinstock, 1998; Whalen, Bigner, & Barber, 2000); such explorations should lead to a more inclusive understanding of family lives.

Role of Theory in Research on Lesbian and Gay Family Lives

The guidance of research by theory has not been as explicit in this field as it has been in some other areas of research on families. Much research has been guided by questions suggested by negative stereotypes rather than by formal theories. Other studies have been guided by concern about problems experienced by populations such as gay youth. Overall, theoretical formulations have not been in the forefront of scholarship in this area.

Although specific theoretical formulations may be rare, two general conceptual orientations—the assimilationist and the separatist—have competed for the attention of scholars over the years. From the standpoint of one such orientation, lesbian and gay people are seen as being very much like other people. By assimilating lesbian and gay individuals' experiences of family life to those of the normative heterosexual model, mainstream theories may be seen as applying to all. From this perspective, differences between heterosexual and nonheterosexual family lives are either absent or insignificant, and so mainstream theories are useful in comprehending lesbian and gay as well as heterosexual experience.

This assimilationist perspective has had some notable successes. For instance, exchange theory has been useful in accounting for some of the behavior of lesbian and gay couples, just as it has in accounting for the behavior of heterosexual couples (Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007). The predictors of positive adjustment among children and adolescents with lesbian and gay parents have also proven to be very similar if not identical to those among the offspring of heterosexual parents (Bos et al., 2007; Chan, Raboy, et al., 1998). In some respects, lesbian and gay people and their families seem to be just like other people and families.

The lives of lesbian and gay families, on the other hand, are undeniably different, in many respects, from those of others. For instance, lesbian and gay youth face the task of disclosing their sexual identities to family members, a highly charged undertaking that has no clear parallel among heterosexual youth. In most parts of the world, lesbian and gay couples live without legal recognition of their relationships, and hence must survive without legal rights and benefits that other couples expect; again, there is no clear parallel for these experiences among heterosexual couples. Even when gay and lesbian couples must accomplish the very same tasks as others, there are indications that they may do so in different ways. Studies of lesbian and gay parenting couples, for example, suggest that they are far more likely than others to share the work involved in childcare (e.g., Chan, Brooks, et al., 1998). Thus, theories that describe division of labor for heterosexual parents may not fit the choices made by lesbian or gay parents nearly as well.

From this second perspective, lesbian and gay family lives are fundamentally different from those of heterosexual people. Often embraced by those writing from explicitly feminist standpoints,

this approach emphasizes the radical challenge to heterosexuality and to patriarchy posed by the advent of openly lesbian and gay couples, and especially by lesbian- and gay-parented families (Clarke, 2000; Riggs, 2006). This can be called a separatist perspective, in that it emphasizes the various ways in which lesbian and gay family lives must be seen as distinct from those of other people. To comprehend the new approaches to family lives embodied by lesbian and gay parents and their children, the separatist approach suggests that new theories will be required.

Neither assimilationist nor separatist approaches are likely to be useful in every case. One of the challenges in this area of research, then, is to know when to think in terms of similarity or assimilation, and when to think in terms of difference or separatism. When, and for what purposes, are the family lives of lesbian and gay people just like those of other people? When, and for what purposes, must lesbian and gay family lives be seen as fundamentally different from those of other people? In domains where sexual orientation has little impact on attitudes or behavior, research should reveal that existing theories are successful. In areas where sexual orientation is important, however, new theories may be needed. Either way, continued research should stimulate a more inclusive understanding of family lives through the development of new as well as existing theory.

Discussion and Directions for Future Research

Research on sexual orientation and family lives has grown tremendously in recent years. In this section, a summary of major research findings to date is provided. A brief discussion of implications of the research for theories of human development and for public policy is also presented, followed by some suggestions for future research.

Research on lesbian and gay family lives has expanded greatly over the last several years. Beyond their witness to the sheer existence of family lives among lesbian and gay people, the results of existing studies, taken together, also yield a picture of resilience, even in the midst of discrimination and oppression. Indeed, the evidence suggests that, despite obstacles, lesbian and gay couples are often able to create supportive relationships and social networks. The evidence also suggests that home environments provided by lesbian and gay parents are as likely as those provided by heterosexual parents to enable psychosocial growth among family members. Lesbian and gay youth struggle against antigay prejudice in many areas of their lives; when their families are supportive, they do so with greater success. In short, the literature is beginning to provide glimpses of the conditions under which family lives of lesbian and gay people go well.

As discussed above, considerable amounts of research on lesbian and gay parenting has focused primarily on comparisons between lesbian and gay families, on the one hand, and heterosexual families, on the other. At least to some extent, this approach reflects the concern of researchers to address prejudices and negative stereotypes that have been influential in judicial decision-making and in public policies relevant to lesbian and gay couples, parents and their children in the United States (Herek, 2007; Patterson, 2009b). Now that results of research have begun to converge so clearly on answers to questions posed in this way, it may be time for research also to address a broader range of issues in this area.

Many important research questions arise from a focus on the interests of lesbian and gay parented families themselves. For instance, many lesbian and gay couples with children are interested in distinctions between the experiences of biological and nonbiological parents (Patterson, 1998). How important, they ask, are biological linkages in influencing experiences of parenthood? Similarly, both lesbian and gay parented families are concerned about the qualities of children's experiences at school, and significant research in this area has been reported (e.g., Kosciw & Diaz, 2008). It would seem likely that, in the future, scholarship will increasingly concern itself with the study of sources of strength and resilience in lesbian and gay couples as well as among lesbian and gay parents and their children.

In the meantime, however, the central results of research to date have important implications. If psychosocial development among children born to lesbian mothers and gay fathers is, as research suggests (Patterson, 1994a), essentially normal, then traditional theoretical emphases on the importance of parental heterosexuality need to be reconsidered. Although many possible approaches to such a task are possible (Patterson, 1992), one promising approach is to focus on the significance of family process rather than structure. Thus, structural variables such as parental sexual orientation may ultimately be seen as less important in mediating children's developmental outcomes than qualities of family interactions, relationships, and processes. By including variables of both types, future research will facilitate comparisons between them (Patterson & Wainright, 2010).

Results of research with lesbian and gay parents and their children also have implications for family law and policy (Patterson, 2009b). If, as would appear to be the case, neither parents nor children in lesbian and gay families run any special risk of maladjustment or other psychosocial problems, then a good rationale for prejudice and discrimination becomes more and more difficult to provide. Without such a rationale, many legal precedents and public policies relevant to lesbian and gay families require reconsideration. Ultimately, lesbian and gay couples and parents might come to be viewed as couples and parents like others, whose unique qualities are unrelated to family law. Policies might be designed to protect their legitimate interests, as well as those of their family members (Herek, 2007; Patterson, 2009b). Considerable progress has been made in this area over the years (Joslin & Minter, 2009; Richman, 2009), but much remains to be done.

A number of issues have gone all but unstudied to date in the research literature on the family lives of lesbians and gay men. For instance, with notable exceptions, little attention has been devoted to the specifics of assessment of sexual orientation (Meyer, Rossano, Ellis, & Bradford, 2002) or to possible changes over time (Diamond, 2008). Similarly, the phenomena associated with bisexuality (Fox, 2003) have received relatively little study. With some exceptions (e.g., Moore, 2008; Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2004; Rosario et al., 2009) ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic diversity of lesbian and gay family lives have yet to be systematically explored. Related challenges have emerged from queer theory (Gamson & Moon, 2004). These and other issues all provide important opportunities for future research.

From a methodological perspective, it would be valuable to have more studies that follow couples or parents and their children over time. Some promising beginnings have been made in this regard (Diamond, 2008; Goldberg, 2009; Goldberg & Sayer, 2006; Tasker & Golombok, 1997). Longitudinal studies of the relationships between lesbians, gay men, and members of their families of origin over relatively long periods of time could also be helpful in describing predictable sequences of reactions to distinctive life events (e.g., coming out to parents). To avoid the pitfalls associated with retrospective reporting, these studies should utilize prospective designs that follow participants over time.

Another methodological issue in the literature to date is the relative dearth of observational data. Observational studies of couples, parents, and children, as well as of lesbian and gay adults with members of their families of origin could provide rich information about family processes in the family lives of lesbian, gay, and heterosexual youth and adults. Such observational data could be collected from dyads or triads or larger family groups, at home or in the laboratory, in a single visit or in repeated sessions over time; and could add tremendously to knowledge about the families of lesbians and gay men. The observational work of Gottman and his colleagues on modes of conflict resolution among lesbian, gay and heterosexual couples is an important step in this direction (Gottman et al., 2003), and more such efforts are needed.

Overall, the study of lesbian and gay peoples' family lives can be seen as a context in which to explore the limits of existing theoretical perspectives, and it can be seen as an opportunity to develop new ones. It can also inform discussions of public policy. Future work in this area has the potential to improve understanding of lesbian and

gay peoples' family lives, broaden existing theoretical notions about family structure and process, and inform legal decision-making relevant to lesbian and gay family lives. Rapid change in attitudes, social climates, and legal rulings relevant to lesbian and gay family lives during recent years has transformed the daily lives of many lesbians and gay men. The experiences associated with lesbian and gay family lives will no doubt also be affected by future events. Another role for research in the years ahead is to document the ways in which changes over time in attitudes, behaviors, and public policies both influence, and are influenced by lesbians, gay men, and their families.

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