

Research Review

Are Planned Children from Lesbian Couples more likely to become Lesbian or Bisexual?

New Research Challenges the “No Differences” Conventional Wisdom.

Reviewed by Christopher H. Rosik, Ph.D.

Gartrell, N., Bos, H., & Koh, A. (2019). Sexual attraction, sexual identity, and same-sex experiences of adult offspring in the U.S. National Longitudinal Lesbian Family Study. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*. Advance online publication. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/x10508-019-1434-5>

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As noted by Schumm (2018), “For decades some, if not most, scholars have denied any relationship between parental and child sexual orientation” (p. 113). He later goes on to observe,

One might well assume that with so many absolute denials in place for over forty years of scholarship (not to mention the imprimatur of the U. S. government, if not U. S. courts) that there would be absolutely no evidence of any association (much less a causal connection) between parental and children’s sexual orientation in the research literature, other than random chance results. (p. 116)

Schumm concludes his review of the literature by indicating, “After decades of denial about the effects of same-sex parenting in this area, science may finally be getting around to the facts” (p. 135). As if almost on cue, new and longitudinal research by Gartrell, Bos, & Koh (2019) now appears to prove Schumm to have been rather prophetic.

Gartrell et al. report on findings inclusive of the sixth wave of the U. S. National Longitudinal Lesbian Family Study (NLLFS), which is the largest, longest-running, prospective study of planned lesbian families. Offspring of these lesbian couples were 25 years of age at the time of the sixth assessment, older than participants in prior comparative studies of sexuality in children from planned lesbian families. The NLLFS cohort initially consisted of 84 such families and at the time of the sixth wave there remained 77 families for a 92% retention rate. In the current study, these offspring were compared with a matched sample from the 2013-2015 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), a nationally representative database whose recruitment criteria was unrelated to parental sexual identity, thus presumably limiting sampling bias. A subset of participants in this NSFG sample were of the same age as the NLLFS adult offspring at the time of data collection and the survey assessed sexual attraction, identity, and behavior, questions that were also posed to the NLLFS adult children and allowed for comparison. Comparisons using the fifth wave of the NLLFS, when lesbian family offspring were 17 years of age, yielded no significant differences with matched, similar aged NSFG adolescents in terms of sexual identity, and same- and different-sex sexual contacts (Gartrell, Bos, & Goldberg, 2012).

The NLLFS sixth wave sample totaled 76 adult children, 48.7% (37) of whom reported being female and 90.8% identified as White. All participants had attended college. Due to low cell counts, bisexuals were combined with those who identified as lesbian, gay, or homosexual. These issues are common in this literature and do limit the ability to generalize from this research to the offspring of all planned lesbian families.

Results indicated that NLLFS females were significantly more likely to report sexual minority attraction and same-sex sexual experiences than the NSFG females. Of all females, 70.3% in the NLLFS identified as “heterosexual or straight” while 87.8% of females in the NSFG sample so identified. For the males, significantly more NLLFS than NSFG males reported they were not “only attracted to females,” identified as gay or bisexual, and had same-sex experiences. Of the NLLFS males, 89.7% identified as “heterosexual or straight” while 97.6% of the NSFG males so identified. Comparing the NLLFS offspring by gender, significantly fewer females (31.4%) than males (73%) reported feelings of attraction only to the other sex. NFFLS females were also less likely than males to identify as “heterosexual or straight” (70.3% vs. 89.7%). There was no significant difference by gender among NFFLS offspring with regards to reported same-sex behavior (females 54.1% vs. males 33.3%).

Gartrell et al. conclude that, “...the 25-year-old offspring of lesbian parents were significantly more likely to report same-sex attraction, sexual minority identity, and same-sex sexual experiences” (pp. 6-7). They later add for emphasis, “The current investigation is the first comparative study to find a greater likelihood of sexual minority identity among the offspring of lesbian parents” (p. 7). Also intriguing is the authors reporting of trends in the trajectories of these variables between the fifth and sixth waves of this ongoing survey:

Among the NLLFS female offspring, the percentage identifying as sexual minorities decreased from 48.6 to 29.7% between the ages of 17 and 25. In contrast, the percentage of NLLFS females who had engaged in same-sex sexual behavior increased from 15.4 to 54.1% over this 8-year interval. During this same time period, the percentage of NLLFS male offspring identifying as sexual minorities decreased from 21.6 to 10.3%, and the percentage reporting same-sex sexual experiences increased from 5.6 to 33.3%. These findings support prior studies demonstrating variability and fluidity in sexual development, expression, and self-identification over time, particularly in the span from adolescence to early adulthood. (p. 7).

These trends suggest that despite increased sexual activity and experimentation in late adolescence and early adulthood, there is still a considerable pull toward heterosexuality, even among children of intentional lesbian families. However, in comparative terms, this pull does not appear to be as pronounced as it is for children of heterosexual couples. As Gartrell et al. acknowledge, “Our findings suggest that being raised by sexual minority parents may lead to more diverse sexual expression for both female and male offspring, and greater likelihood of same-sex attraction and sexual minority identity” (p. 8).

As implied by the aforementioned observations of Schumm (2018), perhaps the most important take home lesson from Gartrell et al. is to raise the question of how so many decades of researchers could be so wrong in perpetuating the “no difference” hypothesis. I do not advocate any sort of conspiracy as an explanation here. What seems to me to be a much more reasonable answer is that for all this time, researchers and activists found advantage culturally and politically in prematurely foreclosing the scientific record around the “no difference” conclusion. Social scientists should have known better the limitations of convenience samples and the heretofore utter lack of long-term, longitudinal data on sexuality outcomes among children of same-sex couples finally provided by the NFFLS. Certainly, it is fair to wonder what other “conventional wisdoms” in this field, such as the current certitude that therapy-assisted fluidity in sexual attractions is impossible, also represent a premature foreclosure of the scientific enterprise. Hopefully, we will still be permitted to find out.

References

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Reviewer Note

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