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Parental same-sex relationships, family instability, and subsequent life outcomes for adult children: Answering critics of the new family structures study with additional analyses

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ABSTRACT

The July 2012 publication of my study on the outcomes of young adults who report parental same-sex relationship behavior raised a variety of questions about the New Family Structures Study and my analyses and interpretations of it. This follow-up article seeks to address a variety of the more common criticisms that have been raised, to offer new commentary and analyses, and to pose questions for future analysts of the NFSS and other datasets that are poised to consider how household dynamics are associated with youth and young-adult outcomes. The new analyses I present here still reveal numerous differences between adult children who report maternal same-sex behavior (and residence with her partner) and those with still-married (heterosexual) biological parents. Far fewer differences appear between the former and several other groups, most notably never-married single mothers.

1. Introduction

The July 2012 publication in this journal of my study on the young-adult children of parents who have had a same-sex relationship created more criticism and scrutiny than have most sociological studies. The intensity of the response can be attributed largely to the fact that the results of this study—based on a large population-based sample—differed markedly from earlier research based largely on small, nonrandom samples of same-sex families. Others would no doubt disagree. Apart from criticisms about measurement or sampling issues, concern has been expressed about all manner of minutiae, as well as details about the publication process, the funding agencies, and even the data collection firm.[1] Some perceive it as a tool for this or that political project, a role it was never designed to fill. It cannot answer political or legal questions, and is by definition a retrospective look at household composition and dynamics. The controversy surrounding its publication and reception has also aptly generated concern about freedom of inquiry in general. But in this manuscript I wish to get back to the basic task at hand—addressing concerns, describing the data in greater detail, and pursuing additional analyses of them.

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[1] The audit of the publication process of the original study—a rather uncommon and disturbing experience in social science research—appears elsewhere in this issue. While its author has long harbored negative sentiment about me, the audit nevertheless ought to dispel suspicions of malfeasance in the review process. It concluded that an ideologically-balanced pool of reviewers recommended publication. Concern has been also raised about the relationship of the author to the pair of funding agencies. As noted in the study, I have always operated without strings from either organization. No funding agency representatives were consulted about research design, survey contents, analyses, or conclusions. Any allegations that the funders might have improperly influenced me are simply false. Finally, Knowledge Networks is a premier online research organization, and their data collection efforts are featured in hundreds of published articles in the social sciences, public opinion, health, and other journals—including the August 2012 issue of the *American Sociological Review* (see Rosenfeld and Thomas, 2012)—and are utilized by the American National Election Studies. Simply put, the KnowledgePanel® is a high-quality data source.

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While sample size issues—as well as concerns about representativeness—have long hampered the general line of inquiry into same-sex parents and child outcomes, prior to the NFSS most suppositions about possible problems with studies based on nonrandom samples were intellectual rather than data-based. That is, it was easy for scholars to admit the limitations of their study samples. What was more difficult, however, was to grasp just how nonrandom they were and how that might affect their results (Marks, 2012). Even while family scholars have long acknowledged the likelihood of demographic diversity among same-sex households, most have been unable to document the extent of this diversity in a statistically-meaningful way. National probability surveys have typically been constrained by the relatively small number of same-sex households in the general population, resulting in small sample sizes and limited statistical power to detect between-group differences. Most research has instead relied on snowball and convenience samples, which often minimize genuine racial, socioeconomic, and geographic heterogeneity (Tasker, 2005). Others have turned to the Census and the American Community Survey for more representative demographic characteristics of same-sex couples with children (Rosenfeld, 2010; Gates and Ost, 2004). However, these population-based resources are not able to tell us about gay or lesbian single parents or non-residential parents. In addition, Census data provide very little detail about the diversity of family structures experienced by children of same-sex parents over time.

Thus the original NFSS study, while subject to its own documented limitations, suggested the possibility that previous nonrandom studies were painting a rosier picture of child outcomes than would be the case were a more random sample to be employed or if the outcomes were based on the reports of young adults themselves rather than relying on parental self-reports. In other words, the original study muddied what had largely been, up to that time, a relatively consistent, positive portrait of child outcomes in gay and lesbian households (however defined).

In this article, I address six areas of concern with the original study, including an extended discussion of the challenges of dealing with household and relational instability in analyses, before briefly reporting the results of alternative approaches to presenting overview data. Throughout the article I make greater use of the NFSS's detailed family history calendar data to look at the variety of family structure experiences in the households in which young adults reported maternal same-sex relationship behavior.

2. Responses to criticisms

2.1. What constitutes an LM or GF respondent?

Concern about the use of the acronyms LM (lesbian mother) and GF (gay father) in the original study is arguably the most reasonable criticism. In hindsight, I wish I would have labeled LMs and GFs as MLRs and FGRs, that is, respondents who report a maternal (or mother's) lesbian relationship, and respondents who report a paternal (or father's) gay relationship. While in the original study's description of the LM and GF categories I carefully and accurately detailed what respondents fit the LM and GF categories, I recognize that the acronyms LM and GF are prone to conflate sexual orientation, which the NFSS did not measure, with same-sex relationship behavior, which it did measure. The original study, indeed the entire data collection effort, was always focused on the respondents' awareness of parental same-sex relationship behavior rather than their own assessment of parental sexual orientation, which may have differed from how their parent would describe it. Therefore, I will use the (albeit awkward) dual acronyms of LM/MLR and GF/FGR to provide orienting reference to the original study's acronym while capitalizing on the more appropriate acronym, which I begin using exclusively in the section on new analyses.

Some critics have correctly noted that the LM/MLR measure includes respondents who appear to have lived both with their mother and her romantic partner for many years, as well as respondents who never lived with their mother's romantic partner. The relationship(s) may or may not have been brief—the NFSS survey did not directly inquire about their number or duration. While it is possible that a one-night stand might have sufficed as a definition here, it stretches the imagination to hold that many respondents would have (a) been aware of such solitary experiences, (b) classify it/them as a "romantic relationship", and (c) list it when queried. In my own studies of heterosexual behavior, romantic relationships are typically perceived as enduring for far longer than an evening. In Wave III of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, less than three percent of all young adults' sexual relationships that were identified by respondents as "romantic" in content (rather than nonromantic) lasted for only a day (Regnerus and Uecker, 2011). However, it is a fair request to assess those LM/MLR respondents who lived with their mother and her romantic partner separately from those that did not. I do so below.

2.2. Comparing apples to oranges?

The most consistent criticism is that the original study's analyses "compare apples to oranges". That is, the primary comparison is between LM/MLRs, GF/FGRs, and intact biological families (IBFs), and that given prevalent instability in the NFSS sample of the former pair's households, that to compare them to IBFs is to cause the former pair to look poorly. However, if stability is a key asset for households with children, then it is sensible to use intact biological families in any comparative assessment. But this has rarely been the approach employed in past research: Rosenfeld (2010: 757) notes that of the 45