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A Review of “Gay and lesbian parents and their children: Research on the family life cycle; Who's your daddy? And other writings on queer parenting; Becoming parent: Lesbians, gay men, and family”

Arlene Istar Lev^a

^a School of Social Welfare, Choices Counseling and Consulting and the University at Albany, Albany, New York, United States

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MEDIA REVIEWS

ANDREW GOTTLIEB, MEDIA REVIEWS EDITOR

- Goldberg, A. E. (2010). *Gay and lesbian parents and their children: Research on the family life cycle*. Washington DC: American Psychological Association.
- Epstein, R. (2009). *Who's your daddy? And other writings on queer parenting*. Toronto, CA: Sumach Press.
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Queer parenting has come of age, or perhaps it's just that we queer parents are showing our age! Only a few years ago, gay and lesbian parenting was considered an oxymoron; you simply couldn't be gay—or at least not out about it—and maintain legal custody of a child. You had to choose between one or the other, gay *or* parent, not gay parent. Of course, gay and lesbian people have always parented children; you just couldn't be an out legal queer parent if you were, well, *queer*. Having or maintaining a relationship with children depended on appearing straight, as heteronormative as possible. Becoming a parent, through birth, adoption, surrogacy, or foster care, simply meant being closeted, invisible, and completely unobtrusive.

Well, that is all changing rapidly, at least within Western, developed countries. Same-sex-headed couples are visible, publicly out about their relationships, and have often become parents after coming out—not as the consequence of a heterosexual marriage. They have become parents through a conscious decision. Indeed, gay and lesbian parenting in the past decades—GLBTQ parenting—has become very, very queer, and is, finally, breaking out of tired, worn-out assumptions about how gay parents are just like straight parents. GLBTQ parenting is moving into a brave new world of recognizing our particular uniqueness as parents, the gifts we give our children *because* we are queer, not in spite of it. At least that is what is being revealed in some of the newest writings on GLBTQ parenting, representing diverse, international perspectives that include the finest professional research, the deepest theoretic exegesis, as well as colorful and personal parenting narratives from the trenches.

I want to start by looking at Abbie E. Goldberg's hot-off-the-press *Gay and Lesbian Parents and Their Children: Research on the Family Life Cycle*. Let's begin with some basics: Dr. Goldberg is no slouch! Her curriculum vitae shows no fewer than 10 book chapters and well over 20 peer-reviewed journal articles, most of them written in the past 4 years. She also teaches college and raises a child, and I wouldn't be surprised if, as the saying goes, she could dance backward in high heels like Ginger Rogers. Goldberg is a rising star in the world of GLBTQ parenting. She is an Assistant Professor of Psychology at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts, and received her PhD in clinical psychology five years ago from the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. She is both prolific and easily readable, researching subjects such as gay and lesbian adoption, lesbian couple relationships, and children of GLBTQ families. She is also a co-investigator (with Katherine Kovalanka) of a longitudinal study of transgender/gender-variant youths and their families. Goldberg is the winner of numerous awards and honors too long to cite.

Her book is no less impressive. Goldberg has succeeded in bringing together the past three decades of research on GLBTQ coupling, parenting, and family building, and creating a comprehensive compendium of everything you ever wanted to know about GLBTQ families. For those of us immersed in this field, you know that the research has been published in journals across diverse disciplines, and gathering, reviewing, comparing, and examining the data is time-intensive and complex since researchers come at their subject matter from so many different perspectives. Goldberg has brought together this research, both qualitative and quantitative studies, into one thorough document and presented it in an organized and structured format. She utilizes an ecological, family life cycle perspective, and incorporates work across professional disciplines, including psychology, sociology, anthropology, social work, human development, child and adolescent psychology, and family therapy. She also includes much cutting-edge work from gender studies and queer studies, and hers may be the first research-oriented GLBTQ family book that actually includes the "T" and the "Q" in more than just the acronym. This is truly a long-awaited, much-needed, scholarly achievement.

The overview of the research compiled is organized utilizing a life-cycle approach, mirroring the themes of the book. Goldberg starts out discussing coupling in gay and lesbian relationships, and then addresses the transition to parenting, the experiences of parents, the adjustment of children reared in gay and lesbian households, and then the voices of those children as adults. She carefully outlines not only the research findings, but also the gaps in the literature and directions for future research. Every PhD student in the country will find her book the "go-to" place not only for what we already know, but to learn where research needs to be headed.

It is difficult for younger people to realize how quickly change has happened regarding GLBTQ parenting. When lesbians first began challenging

the U.S. courts to maintain custody of their children following a heterosexual divorce, the concern of the judicial system was that it was unhealthy for children to be reared in a home without a father; that it was not in the best interests of the children. Having a lesbian mother was assumed to be inherently damaging because it was assumed that children would be unable to develop normally conventional sex roles. Until 1972, lesbians customarily lost custody of children and were even refused visitation when divorcing their husbands, despite the prevailing bias of courts toward mothers. Lesbians became embroiled in extensive court battles in the 1970s, and Lesbian Mothers National Defense Fund adopted the motto "Raising children, bearing children, adopting children is a human right, it's not a heterosexual privilege." In most U.S. jurisdictions today, although not all, lesbianism will not be taken in consideration during custody proceedings.

However, bias remains against gay male parents. Gay fatherhood *still* appears to be less common than lesbian motherhood, in part because mothers are more likely to retain custody of children during divorce, and also because having children through both surrogacy and adoption can be expensive, and fraught with battling societal stereotypes about gay men as fathers. Gay men are caught between gender-based sexism that presumes men to be biologically less prepared to nurture children and the harsh societal homophobia replete with images of gay men as sex-obsessed child molesters. The very concept of gay fathers is *still* unimaginable for many, such as the student in an undergraduate course I taught who insisted that women are naturally prepared to be mothers, and that all fathers, not just gay fathers, don't have and could never have what it takes to raise healthy children. Children without mothers are believed to suffer from a lack of mothering, as if only women had skills to nurture and as if all mothers naturally had those skills. Gay men are *still* presumed to be sexually promiscuous, child abusers, and incapable of daily child care. As Stephen Hicks (2006) points out, when gay men have been approved as foster and adoptive parents, it is through the creation of a discourse of gay men being more maternal than heterosexual men, as if it is necessary to demasculinize and desexualize gay men to make them acceptable parents.

As Goldberg outlines, research into these nascent family structures is emerging and ongoing, yielding much-needed, scientifically based reassurance that heterosexual parenting is not necessary for children to thrive. Numerous research studies have been reviewed that examined many areas of family life, including psychological adjustment, self-esteem, sexual abuse, bullying in schools, social relationships, and academic performance. This research unambiguously shows that the children of lesbian parents do not show any signs of psychological problems. Indeed, the research results imply that many children reared in lesbian homes exhibit specific strengths compared to peers.

This research has been instrumental in changing laws to support same-sex parents in custody battles and adoption decisions and has been the foundation of the sponsorship leveraged by virtually every national professional organization, including the American Psychological Association, the National Association of Social Workers, the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy, the Family Therapy Academy, the American Medical Association, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, the American Academy of Family Physicians, and the American Academy of Pediatrics. All mainstream national children's health and welfare organizations oppose restrictions on gay parenting, including the Child Welfare League and the North American Council on Adoptable Children (Cooper & Cates, 2006).

Challenges to the research on gay and lesbian parenting have always existed, primarily by conservative organizations immersed in religious ideology about family values. However, in recent years, this research has been contested by those known for their progressive and supportive views on same-sex parenting—re-evaluations from within the ranks of GLBTQ parenting researchers. Stacey and Biblarz (2001) in particular opened up a pivotal discussion regarding the research on GLBTQ parenting research. The focus of their critical scrutiny rests on the assumptions of “normality” in the extant literature, raising sophisticated questions about the role of heterosexism in social science research. These authors observe a “hetero-normative presumption governing the terms of the discourse—that healthy child development depends upon parenting by a married heterosexual couple” (p. 160). They analyze the impact of heteronormative assumptions on research, saying that it limits the populations that are being studied and the questions being raised. Heteronormativity wields a double-edged sword as social scientists attempt to legitimize newly emerging family forms within the only discourse imaginable.

It is in response to this criticism that *Gay and Lesbian Parents and Their Children* truly shines. Goldberg incorporates a social constructionist perspective in her writing that critically examines the complex issues of what it means for researchers to have to prove that gay and lesbian families are healthy, normal, and just like heterosexual parents. She raises important questions about the role of gender in same-sex families and the impact of divorce particularly without the legal rights to marry, and does not avoid addressing alternative family forms such as butch-femme couples or the role of stigma and internalized homophobia in family building.

Goldberg is also sensitive to the limitations of the research and notes that many forms of GLBTQ parenting have not been studied; that many populations have not been included in the research, most notably bisexual parents and transgender/transsexual parents. Although the acronym GLBTQ has some useful benefits for discussing family development, it can too easily conflate the important distinctions between each of these populations. Much

of what is known empirically about GLBTQ parenting is derived from studies of lesbians and inferred to other populations. Research typically lags behind social evolution, and although we have solid evidence regarding lesbian motherhood, research on gay fatherhood is newly emerging and studies on bisexual, transgender/transsexual, and queer parenting is still in its infancy. Goldberg notes that more research is needed on multiracial couples and transracially adopted children as well as on stepfamilies.

It is into this vacuum that Rachel Epstein's anthology *Who's Your Daddy? And Other Writings on Queer Parenting* begins. Epstein, a lesbian mom and founder of the Toronto-based Dykes Planning Tykes and the GLBTQ Parenting Network, has been a queer parenting activist, educator for 20 years, and is the 2009 recipient of the Steinert and Ferreiro Award, Canada's largest recognition of leadership in the GLBTQ community.

Who's Your Daddy? is a collection of writings from Canada, England, Australia, and the United States and includes more than 30 essays on diverse topics impacting GLBTQ parents, including transgender parenting, butches as parents, young queer parents, critical examinations of fertility clinics and adoption practices, and race and class issues. Epstein invites diversity, highlighting the parenting perspectives of those in polyamorous relationships (Alessandra/Alex Iantafii) as well as those who see themselves defending very traditional, albeit lesbian, families (Joanna Radbord).

I was especially thrilled to see writings by transgender parents. Sadly, transgender and transsexual parents are currently facing the same legal challenges that lesbian parents did 40 years ago. Despite the lack of evidence that shows negative outcomes for children with transgender parents, the judicial system reveals the same prejudices as it had regarding same-sex parenting, recycling the same concerns about the children's psychological adjustment and exhibiting bias in decision making so that parents often lose custody of their children when they transition. Nonetheless, transgender, transsexual, and genderqueer people who desire to parent have developed creative ways to form families and are challenging gendered assumptions of family life. Maura Ryan examines the way transmen challenge patriarchal fatherhood by conceiving and birthing their own children; Syrus Marcus Ware describes the experience of being a pregnant man going through a quintessential female process and how that challenges the medical profession, raising questions about embodiment and identity.

The book includes numerous articles by queerspawns, the GLBTQ children of GLBTQ parents, discussing the unspoken issues of being raised in queer families and facing discrimination, the need for education, and others' assumptions about identity and experience. Other essays examine racial issues, such as Karleen Pendleton Jiménez's "Little White Children: Notes from a Chicana Dyke Dad," which addresses complex issues of being a lesbian of color raising her white partner's biological children and how that impacts her family of origin. N. Gitanjali Lena writes on her perspective as a Canadian

of Sri Lankan descent and titles her article “All Our Roots Need Rain,” highlighting the challenges of managing multiple identities. She describes herself as an “unwed mother of mixed Tamil and Sinhalese ancestry” (p. 262). She is parenting a child, whose biological father is from Bangladesh, with her partner, who is a black woman adopted into a white family. She says there are no “simple recipes for ‘cultural’ authenticity” (p. 262).

Some chapters initiate discussion on topics not yet examined in the scholarly literature, such as Laurie Bell’s essay on how butch parents pass masculinity on to their sons. Suzanne Pelka reflects on how some lesbians minimize the importance of biological ties, yet “go to great lengths and expense to conceive children to whom they are biologically connected” (p. 83). For example, they may use donor eggs from one partner and conceive a child in the other partner’s womb.

If Epstein’s anthology gives depth and breadth to the complex lived lives that Abbie Goldberg’s research overviews, it is the third author, Damien Riggs, who brings a theoretical and sociological perspective to this field. Riggs is the author of *Becoming Parent: Lesbians, Gay Men, and Family*, and is a Lecturer at the School of Social Work, Flinders University in Adelaide, Australia. Riggs is the author of 7 books, nearly 30 book chapters, and more than 50 peer-reviewed articles in the past 6 years. His writing is insightful, reflective, and examines diverse topics including post-colonial race studies, gay men’s health and sexuality, adoption and foster care, and gay and lesbian parenting. He also works as a therapist, informed by narrative and family therapies with an emphasis upon the effects of power in relationship. Riggs’ work is steeped in queer theory and is a multifaceted deconstruction of heteronormativity.

In a recent article in the *American Family Therapy Academy Monograph Series*, Hudak and Giammattei (2010) say that heteronormativity “is an organizing principle that shapes and constrains family therapy theory, practice, research, and training” (p. 50). This thread—the examination and interrogation of heteronormativity—which is woven throughout all these texts, becomes the fabric in the work of Riggs. This book is narrative in the sense that it uses a first-person pronoun and encompasses Riggs’ personal journey to “become parent,” at the same time that it offers a scholarly critique of the ways that queer parenting has been conceptualized. Basing his work on the work of Suzy Stiles, Riggs sees the act of parenting and family building as verbs, not something we “are,” but rather something we “do.” He says that “the ways in which we ‘become parent’ are configured through particular social and cultural lenses that shape who will be recognized as a parent . . . [and locates us] within a particular relationship to language, and [encourages us] to adopt certain postures that are considered indicative of ‘a parent’” (p. 5).

Riggs examines gay parenting, particularly gay foster parenting, through a particular Australian lens—one that is similar to yet different from other

Western countries. For example, foster parents cannot easily become adoptive parents in Australia, and, therefore, have a more tenuous legal connection to their children than they do in the United States, which he says is “unsettling,” but also challenges “notions of ownership and property” (p. 31). Riggs’ work is part of a larger project, whereby he challenges notions of privilege as it relates to race, class, and parental status. He deconstructs and examines some of the myths about gay parenting (gays and lesbians are radicals; children of gays and lesbians will suffer discrimination), as well as about the role of biology in forming families and how gay people may reify biological connections to their children as a way to make their families more real (than foster or adoptive families).

Above all, Riggs interrogates the heterosexist norms that surround the nuclear family and examines how heteronormativity impacts gay and lesbian parents when being “the same as,” or “just like,” or “normal” is the entrance card to being a parent within the established legal systems. Although *Becoming Parent* is a small book, it is chock-full of big ideas that impact our values and thoughts about GLBTQ family building.

When I first wrote *The Complete Gay and Lesbian Parenting Guide* (2004), I was clear that the book was neither complete nor simply about gays and lesbians. My original working title was *How Queer–Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Parenting*, but Penguin Press thought that too risqué, too outlandish, too *queer*. They refused to put the words bisexual and transgender in the title and insisted on only having white families on the cover. I spent pages in the introduction defending the term *queer* and boldly talked about transgender and bisexual parents in every chapter. I warned Penguin Press that if they took away the word *queer* and mainstreamed a book about GLBTQ families to make it more palatable, I would tell everyone that they did that. I kept my promise. Now the term *queer parenting* is moving into the mainstream, on the cover of books, and defined in scholarly works. We’ve come miles in a short time—a mere five years later.

Gay and lesbian parents, GLBTQ parents, queer parents by whatever name: We’re here, we’re queer, and they’re getting used to it. The research proves that we are fine, healthy, and normal; our scholars question whether being normal matters; and best of all, queer parents, many of whom would never read the research and mostly couldn’t care less about the theory, are building their families, on the edge of what was once a dream. We are finally beginning to move past defending our right to be here, justifying our right to parent, and insisting on simply being visible as we are.

Arlene Istar Lev, LCSW-R, CASAC
Choices Counseling and Consulting
and the University at Albany, School of Social Welfare
Albany, New York, United States

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