

Attitudes of Lesbians and Gay Men Toward Lesbian and Gay Parents

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Abstract

As increasing numbers of lesbians and gay men become parents, it is important to understand how such parents are perceived across a range of communities. Previous Australian and international research has produced conflicting findings in regards to heterosexuals' perceptions of lesbian and gay parents. Thus far, however, there has been no research targeted at understanding attitudes toward lesbian, gay and heterosexual parents within lesbian and gay communities. The present study thus sought to establish the current direction of lesbian and gay attitudes in this regard in an Australian sample. The findings suggest that lesbian and gay community members hold significantly more positive attitudes toward lesbian and gay parents than they do toward heterosexual parents. This may suggest both an increased awareness of the numbers and positive experiences of lesbian- and gay-headed households, and the effectiveness of ongoing campaigns aimed at changing laws and protecting lesbian- and gay- headed families.

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Introduction

Across Australia, increasing numbers of lesbians and gay men are choosing to start families involving children. Some of these children are born in previous heterosexual relationships, and remain with their newly identified lesbian or gay parents post-separation. Other children are born into lesbian or gay headed families, primarily through the use of self-insemination or assisted reproductive technologies amongst lesbian mothers (Perlesz, Brown, McNair, Lindsay, Pitts, & de Vaus et al., 2006), and through surrogacy amongst gay fathers. Lesbians and gay men also choose to start families involving children through foster care and overseas adoption, or through shared cared arrangements between (primarily) lesbian women and gay men (Riggs, 2007). This broad range of kinship structures thus provides lesbian and gay men with many ways in which to start families that take a diverse range of forms, including two-parent or single parent 'first' families, step, foster and adoptive families, and families involving multiple parents.

Despite the growing number of lesbians and gay men who are raising children in a diverse range of contexts, Australian laws and public opinion continue to lag behind. In regard to the law, some Australian states continue to deny children the right to have both of their parents named on their birth certificate; to deny lesbians access to donor sperm via clinics (Short, 2007); to deny gay men access to surrogacy within Australia; and to prohibit both lesbians and gay men from adoption within Australia (Duffy, 2007).

In regard to public opinion, research examining heterosexual's attitudes towards lesbian and gay men is minimal and presents contradictory findings. Early research in the US (Crawford & Solliday, 1996) found that college students rated gay men depicted as adoptive parents in

vignettes as less emotionally stable and less deserving of an adoptive placement than heterosexual parents. Similar research has also found that US college students predicted that sons of gay fathers would experience gender confusion and that, overall, adopted children are better placed with heterosexual rather than gay parents (McLeod, Crawford, & Zechmeister, 1999). Notably, the findings reported by McLeod et al. would suggest that whilst overall ratings demonstrate negative perceptions of gay parents amongst heterosexual college students, gay fathers were actually rated as more loving and likely to spend more quality time with their children than heterosexual fathers. Nonetheless, the context of a heterosexual family was considered by participants to be the most appropriate adoptive placement for children.

More recent research conducted by Massey (2007), however, suggests quite a different set of attitudes amongst heterosexual US college students toward lesbian, gay and heterosexual parents. Interestingly, Massey found that gay male couples in vignettes were perceived as raising children who were viewed as responsible for their own behaviours, rather than attributing blame for negative behaviours to the gay fathers. Whilst these findings were mediated by the gender of the participant and their levels of measured prejudice, gay fathers were overall rated more positively than lesbian mothers or heterosexual parents. Lesbian mothers were also rated more positively by participants than heterosexual parents.

In Australia, research on public opinion toward lesbian and gay parents is equally contradictory. In their examination of Australian students' attitudes to the reproductive decisions of heterosexual and lesbian women, Rowlands and Lee (2006) found that lesbian women who wanted children were rated as happier and more mature than lesbian women who did not, and happier than all heterosexual women. Contrarily, Morse, McLaren, and McLachlan (2007) found

that the majority in their large community sample of Australian heterosexual people held negative attitudes toward lesbian and gay parents. Participants reported believing that lesbian and gay parents raise children who are gender confused and who are more likely to experience peer discrimination than children raised by heterosexual parents. Public opinion amongst Australian heterosexual people toward lesbian and gay parents may thus still be considered primarily negative.

Yet despite the adverse legal and social contexts in which lesbian and gay parents live, they continue to produce families that thrive (see Short, Riggs, Perlesz, Brown & Kane, 2008, for a summary of findings in this regard). What is not known, however, is whether this is solely due to the strengths of individual families, or whether this is also a result of support from within lesbian and gay communities. Understanding the attitudes that lesbians and gay men hold toward lesbian and gay parents is thus a necessary area of research.

Whilst no research has been conducted to date directly on this topic, it is possible to surmise some degree of insight into the potential attitudes of lesbian and gay non-parents toward lesbian and gay parents. This is indicated in previous research on the experiences of lesbian and gay parents. For example, Mallon (2004) reports that the gay fathers in his US research often felt alienated from their non-parent peers. The fathers in his research reported that gay men who are not parents often see gay fathers as 'conforming to a heterosexual lifestyle', and that this results in them being alienated from non-parent gay communities. Similarly, Hicks (2006) suggests, in his research on UK lesbian and gay foster parents and adopters, that some gay foster fathers experience some gay men as not being supportive of their decision to foster, and that lesbian and gay parents sometimes face 'harsh criticism' within lesbian and gay communities. Finally,

Gabb's (2004) research on UK lesbian mothers suggests that some mothers experience a 'rupture' with lesbian friend networks when they become parents, and that having a family is not always perceived as conducive to a 'lesbian lifestyle culture'.

This summary of findings from research with lesbian mothers and gay fathers would suggest the possibility that lesbian and gay non-parents may hold negative attitudes toward lesbian and gay parents. Nonetheless, this is an extrapolation from research not specifically focused on attitudes toward lesbian and gay parents within lesbian and gay parents. Furthermore, no research exists that indicates the direction of lesbian and gay men's attitudes toward *heterosexual* parents. What is required, then, is research that focuses on how lesbians and gay men perceive lesbian, gay and heterosexual parents. This is important due to the aforementioned negative legislative and public contexts in which lesbian and gay parents live. It is important to understand how these contexts potentially negatively impact upon attitudes towards parenting within lesbian and gay communities, and conversely, how these broader contexts may be resisted by lesbian and gay communities. Furthermore, it is important to understand how lesbian and gay parents are perceived by lesbian and gay non-parents, as this may impact upon support within lesbian and gay communities for parents.

The research presented here aimed to 1) assess the attitudes of lesbians and gay men toward lesbian, gay, and heterosexual parents, 2) assess the impact that sexual orientation has upon attitudes to parenting and 3) assess the impact that parenting status and number of children has upon attitudes toward parents. From the limited previous research on lesbian and gay attitudes toward lesbian and gay parents cited above, it was hypothesised that parent participants would rate parents in vignettes more positively than would non-parent participants. Due to the lack of

previous research on lesbian and gay attitudes to parenting, it was not possible to hypothesise the possible relationship between the sexual orientation of participants and their attitudes toward parenting, nor the relationship between the number of children had by participants and their attitudes toward parenting.

Method

Participants

The sample analysed here consisted of 118 gay men (48.2%) and 127 lesbians (51.8%). The mean age of the participants was 37.35 years ($SD = 12.02$), with ages ranging from 18 to 84 years. The majority (67.3%, $n = 165$) of participants did not have children (78.6% of gay men reported not having children and 58.4% of lesbians reported not having children). Participants came from across three Australian states, with 51.4% ($n = 126$) from Victoria, 34.3% ($n = 84$) from Queensland, and 14.3% ($n = 35$) from New South Wales.

Materials

A series of questions were used to elicit each participant's gender, sexual orientation, parenting status and number of children.

To measure attitudes towards gay, lesbian and heterosexual parents, a vignette was devised. The vignette depicted a problematic family situation involving a 16-year-old child and their parents. All elements of the vignette were held constant, with the exception of the names of the parents (to indicate the sexual orientation of the parents). Within the vignette, the parents' sexual orientation was manipulated (gay male parents; lesbian parents; heterosexual parents). After

reading the vignette, participants reported their attitudes towards the parents presented in the vignette. Participants rated how emotionally stable, responsible, competent, loving, nurturing, and sensitive to the child's needs they felt the parents were, along with how likely they were to spend quality time with their child, and be suitable role models. Participants rated their attitudes towards the parents on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = not at all; 4 = very much), with higher scores indicating a more positive view of the parents. These 8 qualities were summed to produce an overall score of attitude toward parents.

Procedure

During a six-month period participants were recruited in a variety of ways. Initially, e-mail invitations were sent to the secretaries of gay male and lesbian organisations. This invitation described the purpose of the study, and requested that, with the organisations approval, the invitation be forwarded on to its members. The invitation provided the website address, user name, and password required to access the online questionnaire. The invitation stated that participation in the study was voluntary and participants would remain anonymous, as all e-mail addresses would be automatically removed from completed questionnaires when the submit button was selected. To facilitate a snowballing effect, the recipient was invited to forward the invitation on to anyone they might know who would be interested in participating in the study.

The third author also set up stands and distributed printed questionnaires at The Melbourne Queer Film Festival, The Bendigo Queer Film Festival, and The Brisbane Pride Festival. The second author participated in a radio interview with Joy FM in Melbourne, in an effort to promote the research. Several community groups also assisted in promoting the research by

providing links to the research website on their own websites. These groups included: The ALSO Foundation, Gay and Lesbian Health Victoria, and the Australian Psychological Society.

Printed and online questionnaires were counterbalanced to minimise order effects. In addition, the different versions of the vignette were randomly distributed, to prevent demographic variables from confounding the results.

Results

Data from completed questionnaires were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for Windows (SPSS Inc, 1999).

Chi-square tests were used to test for differences between gay male and lesbian participants in regard to parenting status. As can be seen from Table 1, lesbians were more likely to be parents than gay males.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics and chi-square value for parenting status ($N = 245$)

Status	Gay Men		Lesbians		χ^2	df
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%		
Not Parent	92	79	73	58	11.40*	1
Parent	25	21	52	42		

* $p < .001$.

Given that a significant difference was found in parenting status between lesbian and gay participants, parenting status was entered as a variable in the examination of attitudes toward lesbian, gay and heterosexual parents.

A 2 (parent status of participant: yes or no) x 3 (sexual orientation of parent in vignette: gay parent, lesbian parent or heterosexual parent) x 2 (sexual orientation of participant: lesbian or gay) between groups ANOVA was performed to analyse the effects of parent status and sexual orientation on attitudes of lesbian and gay participants towards lesbian, gay and heterosexual parents. There was a main effect for parenting status such that parent participants ($M = 31.05$, $SD = 1.49$) demonstrated more positive attitudes towards all parents represented in vignettes than non-parent participants ($M = 30.13$, $SD = 2.50$), $F(1, 230) = 7.10$, $p = .008$. There was also a main effect for the sexual orientation of parents depicted in vignettes, such that both lesbian ($M = 30.88$, $SD = 1.73$) and gay ($M = 30.80$, $SD = 2.15$) parents were significantly more favourably rated than heterosexual parents ($M = 29.68$, $SD = 2.59$), $F(2, 230) = 6.09$, $p = .003$. Finally, for the main effect of sexual orientation of participants, the difference between lesbian ($M = 30.90$, $SD = 1.94$) and gay ($M = 29.91$, $SD = 2.48$) participants in their views of all parents approached significance, $F(1, 230) = 3.41$, $p = .066$. There was no significant interaction between any of the independent variables (all $p > 0.189$).

T-tests were used to test for differences between gay male and lesbian participants on number of children. Results can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics and *t*-test value for number of children (*N* = 245)

Status	Gay Men		Lesbians		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
No. of Children	0.45	1.02	0.94	1.56	-2.87*	240

**p* < .05.

As can be seen from the results presented in Table 2, lesbian participants reported having more children than gay participants. Due to the significance of the difference between lesbian and gay participants in regard to number of children, correlations were performed to assess the impact that number of children may have upon attitudes toward parents.

A weak but significant positive correlation was found between number of children and attitudes towards parents, $r(240) = .195, p = .002$. The more children that participants had related to more positive attitudes towards all parents in the three vignettes. When this was split according to the sexual orientation of the parent in the vignette, however, only gay male parent vignettes demonstrated a weak but significant correlation with the number of children of participants, $r(75) = .230, p = .046$. Ratings of lesbian parent vignettes, $r(76) = .157, p = .17$ and heterosexual parent vignettes, $r(86) = .183, p = .089$ did not display a significant correlation between the number of children of participants.

Discussion

The findings presented in this paper indicate that the lesbian and gay parents depicted in the vignettes were rated as better parents than the heterosexual parents depicted in the vignettes. Moreover, lesbian or gay participants who were parents rated all parents more highly than did non-parents, though the fact of higher ratings for lesbian and gay parent vignettes in comparison to heterosexual parent vignettes remained the same amongst lesbian and gay parent participants.

A significant correlation was also found between the number of children had by participants and their attitudes toward all parents, where the more children that participants had, the more highly they rated all parents in the vignettes.

Perhaps surprisingly, no differences were found between lesbian and gay participants' attitudes. There were no significant interactions between the sexual orientation of the participant and the sexual orientation of the parent in the vignette, nor between the parenting status of participants and the sexual orientation of the parent in the vignette.

The findings from this research may be explained in a number of ways. First, the overwhelmingly positive attitude toward lesbian and gay parents in comparison to heterosexual parents may be the result of ongoing campaigns in Victoria and New South Wales (the two states where the majority of participants were recruited from) to achieve equality for lesbian- and gay-parented families. High profile campaigns in both states have targeted both parent and non-parent members of lesbian and gay communities in order to lobby governments for legislative change.

Members of lesbian and gay communities may thus be highly aware of the needs of lesbian and gay parents, and in particular the legislative need to support their families.

Second, in regard to the overwhelmingly positive attitude toward lesbian and gay parents in comparison to heterosexual parents, the ongoing attention being paid to campaigns for family rights for lesbians and gay men and their children has resulted in a considerable degree of media coverage in recent years in Australia, a fair proportion of this being positive. Awareness of positive stories amongst lesbian and gay communities may help to increase awareness of the existence of lesbian- and gay-headed families, and their strengths.

Furthermore, a growing body of research has found not only that lesbian and gay parents are 'as good as' heterosexual parents, but that lesbian and gay parents may in some respects be better parents, in regard to division of household labor and caring for children (see Short, Riggs, Perlesz, Brown, & Kane, 2008, for a summary of this research). Positive attitudes toward lesbian and gay parents are thus perhaps not at all surprising given the fact of this growing research base and its promotion amongst lesbian and gay communities.

In regard to the relationship between having more children and having more positive attitudes toward parents, previous research (Morse et al., 2007) with similar findings has suggested that increased exposure to and raising of children results in increased understanding and awareness of the experiences of other parents, and thus potentially a sympathetic reading of other parents in general. There is no reason not to presume this would not be the case amongst lesbian and gay parents with higher numbers of children.

In regard to the finding that approached significance, that of a main effect for the differing attitudes of lesbian and gay participants toward parents, further research examining this, and the potential match or mismatch between sexual orientation of participant and sexual orientation of parent in the vignette would seem important. Whilst the research findings presented here report a relatively homogeneous image of lesbian and gay participants, there will, in everyday settings, be important differences between the attitudes of lesbians and the attitudes of gay men, and indeed *amongst* the attitudes of lesbians and *amongst* the attitudes of gay men toward parenting. Exploring further the factors that mediate these differences in attitudes will be important for the implications they may hold in regard to the effectiveness of community awareness programmes and campaigns for the rights of families, parents and children.

In regard to limitations, it is of course important to acknowledge the relatively small sample size of the data presented here. A larger sample size would allow not only for a clearer understanding of the intersections of sexual orientation, parenting status and number of children with attitudes, but also other important factors such as class, cultural background and age. Drawing out attitudes toward lesbian, gay and heterosexual parents within lesbian and gay communities may also be extended in future work through the inclusion of measures that assess the impact that the gender of the child and the number of parents presented in the vignette may have upon attitudes. Likewise, vignettes that vary the age of the child could provide further information as to how such factors impact upon attitudes. It could be argued that the presentation of vignettes including a younger child and their parents, or a single gay father with a teenage son, or a child with 3

parents may well produce markedly different results, according to the ways in which these families are viewed within lesbian and gay communities.

In conclusion, attitudes toward lesbian and gay parents within the broader Australian community, and amongst policy makers and parliamentarians, represent a particular dominant view of lesbian and gay families, one that is under constant (and justified) contestation. Despite the changing demographics of Australian society, this (typically negative) view of lesbian and gay families (and one whose corollary is often the promotion of the heterosexual family as the most acceptable form of family) continues to hold sway. Yet despite this, attitudes and understandings of lesbian and gay families within lesbian and gay communities do not necessarily mirror dominant views. The results presented here suggest that lesbians and gay men hold different views to those of heterosexual people in regard to lesbian and gay parents, thus potentially evidencing the success of campaigns aimed at promoting the rights of lesbian- and gay-headed families, and the support of lesbian and gay communities for members of their communities more broadly. As such, the findings presented here highlight the strengths of lesbian and gay communities in the face of the slow move towards legislative change and shifts in public opinion.

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