

## Diversity within Lesbian and Gay Families: Challenges and Implications for Family Theory and Research

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Demo, David H., and Katherine R. Allen. (1996). Diversity within lesbian and gay families: Challenges and implications for family theory and research. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 13, 415-434.  
DOI: [10.1177/0265407596133007](https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407596133007)

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### **Abstract:**

This paper describes and discusses diversity among lesbian and gay families along central dimensions of social stratification: gender, sexual orientation, generation, age, race and ethnicity. We examine implications of this diversity for traditional family theories, identify and discuss sexist and heterosexist assumptions of dominant family theories and suggest the usefulness of an integrative approach that combines insights from positivist and post-positivist theories. We conclude by proposing research questions, directions and methods to guide future empirical work, facilitate theory development and enrich our understanding of diverse family forms.

### **Key Words:**

family theory, lesbian and gay families, sexual orientation

### **Article:**

Lesbian and gay families challenge dominant theories of family structure and process. These families exist - and even thrive - in a society that stigmatizes them. They break the mold of the benchmark family by disturbing sexist and heterosexist norms. Common sense dictates that diversity within lesbian and gay families exists along many dimensions, yet we know little about the correlates, consequences or intersections of this diversity.

Lesbian and gay family diversity is of interest to family scholars because (1) these families have been stereotyped as a monolithic group, so their heterogeneity reveals diversity within diversity; (2) their diversity helps to illustrate and elaborate our understanding of how diverse all families are; and (3) lesbian and gay families pose serious challenges and exciting opportunities for testing, revising and constructing family theories. Specifically, the composition and structure of lesbian and gay families differ according to the number, gender and sexual orientation of adult(s) heading the household, length of couple relationship, household size, the presence and number of children and sibling structure. Lesbian and gay families are also diverse in family processes - in the nature of involvement, support, nurturance, communication, conflict, tensions and stresses among family members. The central objective of this paper is to discuss and assess the utility of family theory for understanding the diversity characterizing lesbian and gay families.

In this paper we describe substantial diversity among lesbian and gay families along central axes of social stratification - notably gender, sexual orientation, generation, age, race and ethnicity - and we discuss and critique how dominant family theories are challenged by lesbian and gay family diversity. We ask what family theories have to share regarding lesbian and gay families, what family theories can tell us about diversity across and within lesbian and gay families and what the implications are for understanding families, revising family theories and conducting and designing research.

DIVERSITY WITHIN LESBIAN AND GAY FAMILIES: TAKING A CLOSER LOOK

We argue that lesbian and gay families are defined by the intimate, enduring interaction of two or more people who share a same-sex orientation (e.g. a couple) or by the enduring involvement of at least one lesbian or gay adult in rearing a child (Allen & Demo, 1995). Many lesbian and gay adults simultaneously live in two worlds - their heterosexual family of origin and the lesbian or gay family they maintain as adults - creating an extended family environment that may be termed a 'mixed gay/straight' or 'dual-orientation' family (Laird, 1993). Within these families, lesbians and gay men have relationships with brothers, sisters, parents, grandparents, children, grandchildren, extended and chosen kin. In many cases, these relationships involve lesbians and gay men with heterosexual kin (e.g. parents), while in other cases they share relationships with a lesbian sister, a gay uncle or a bisexual step-parent. Of course, it is important to recognize that many heterosexual children and adults also live in dual-orientation families and that many gay and lesbian couples create and maintain dual-orientation families when they rear heterosexual children. In this section we highlight some of the dimensions of this rich diversity across and within lesbian and gay families, before turning to our examination of family theories.

### *Interfamily diversity*

Gender and sexual orientation diversity. Gender and sexual orientation, though often paired, e.g. 'gay man', are not essential, fixed categories but are emergent, fluid, changing and contested. Just as there are many ways to 'do gender' (West & Zimmerman, 1987), there are many ways to 'do sexual orientation' and the myriad influences of gender and sexual orientation are likely to intersect in different ways over the life course. In constructing new ways of analyzing social structure and human experience, feminists have argued for the integrative lens of race, class and gender (Andersen & Hill Collins, 1994). Yet, it is also important to examine sexual orientation - not just as a subcategory of gender but also through a distinct lens. Future research on families needs to disentangle the separate and combined influences of gender and sexual orientation.

Regarding sexual orientation, a widely accepted model for explaining its variation is to use the metaphor of a continuum, with one extreme representing individuals exclusively interested in same-sex relationships and the other extreme representing those exclusively interested in opposite-sex relationships (Kinsey et al., 1948, 1953). According to this view there are many variations in bisexuality, with some individuals more strongly inclined than others towards heterosexual relations, some equally interested in same-sex and other-sex partners and still others more strongly attracted to same-sex unions. Although Kinsey and his followers sought to distinguish between sexual orientations and sexual acts and to discourage the classification and labeling of people, the scale's reliance on behavior minimized important variations in identity. Elaborating Kinsey's scale, Klein (1990) incorporates seven variables in the concept of sexual orientation: sexual attraction, sexual behavior, sexual fantasies, emotional preferences, social preferences, self-identification and lifestyle.

Many individuals who think of themselves as heterosexual have occasional attractions towards, fantasies about or sexual relations with same-sex partners, yet they think of themselves as heterosexuals not bisexuals. Similarly, many lesbians and gay men identify themselves as lesbians and gay men, both in their self-reflections and in public discourse, but have occasional (or more frequent) attractions for and/or sexual experiences with other-sex partners. One distinction here is that of defining sexual orientation on the basis of behavior vs identity; another issue is the merit of researcher-imposed definitions (which are often based on available and somewhat arbitrary classification schemes) vs self-definitions (which are likely to show much broader variation). However sexual orientation is conceptualized and whether there are seven categories or countless categories, changes in sexual orientation over time and over stages in the life course add further complexity to the task of understanding how family relationships are influenced by sexual orientation and how diverse family structures evolve.

At the couple level, empirical evidence on lesbian and gay partnerships has been accumulating over the past two decades. This area of research provides an important context for examining how gender and sexual orientation interact. A consistent finding regarding gender differences in lesbian and gay couples is that lesbian couples tend to be more sexually exclusive in their partnerships than gay male couples (Kurdek, 1995). A consistent finding regarding gender similarities is that lesbian and gay male couples, in comparison to heterosexual couples, tend to follow more closely an ethic of equality in their partnerships and to relate to each other more as

best friends (Kurdek, 1995). Kurdek also found that in comparisons across gender and sexual orientation, four couple types (gay male, lesbian, heterosexual married and heterosexual cohabiting) are similar in terms of relationship satisfaction and stability.

An example of new insights regarding how gender and sexual orientation interact involves the controversy about the degree to which lesbian couples experience intense closeness or fusion. Surprisingly, an important consideration that is often overlooked in this debate is the underlying gender ideology that women are more relationally oriented than men (Laird, 1993). The conventional line of reasoning is that due to female socialization, an intimate relationship between two women leads to 'merger' and as dependency deepens, this decreases interest in sexual desire and could eventually cause the relationship to end. Yet Laird (1993) explains that descriptions of fusion or merger are based on the male heterosexual norms contained in family systems theory, which defines lack of differentiation as problematic. In contrast to the family systems view that autonomy and attachment are opposite ends of a single continuum in which male styles of relating are depicted as autonomous and female styles of relating are depicted as enmeshed, Peplau (1994) suggests that autonomy and attachment are two separate dimensions. Peplau's research shows that lesbians 'who valued autonomy were no more likely than women who de-emphasized autonomy to have close and loving relationships' (p. 37). The intersection of gender and sexual orientation in lesbian couples thus provides new ways of looking at and conceptualizing close relationships.

To date, much of the research on gender and sexual orientation has taken an individual or couple perspective. How does our thinking about gender and sexual orientation change when families are the unit of analysis? For example, what are the gendered meanings and processes associated with having three females in a family - a biological mother, a lesbian co-mother and a female child? How does gender influence the dynamics of these families? What are some of the invisible properties of gender that coincide with the absence of males living within these nuclear households? In a second example, how has the crisis of AIDS impacted previously documented patterns that gay male partnerships were the least sexually exclusive in comparison to married, heterosexual cohabiting and lesbian partnerships? Laird (1993), in pointing out that lesbian and heterosexual women are far more monogamous than heterosexually married men and gay men, calls into question the earlier finding that gay men's greater prevalence of sexual non-monogamy is linked to sexual orientation. Instead, Laird concludes that 'monogamy seems to be more related to gender socialization than to sexual orientation' (p. 313).

The diverse intersections of gender and sexual orientation expose hidden assumptions about sex and gender as biological givens and they expose the androcentric norms of family systems theory, later discussed in greater detail. It is important to recognize that there is greater variability within gendered categories than between males and females as gender groups. Gender and sexual orientation produce countless variations for individuals, couples and families that we are only beginning to explore.

**Generation and age diversity.** There is an age bias in research on lesbian and gay experiences, as most of our knowledge about lesbian and gay couples and families is based on studies of young adults (Kurdek, 1995; Laird, 1993). We know far less about how lesbian and gay adolescents perceive their families, how they adapt and cope within their families or how older lesbians and gay men perceive their family careers, past and current relationships and lifelong partnerships.

More research on children and adolescents of all ages is needed to understand the development of a gay identity and the psychosocial factors that contribute to sexual orientation-in any kind of family structure-because most lesbian and gay adults were raised by heterosexuals. The need for this research is amplified by the demographic abundance of youths with same-sex orientations. Savin-Williams & Rodriguez (1992) reviewed studies of youths' sexual behavior and identity, concluding that 4-15 percent of youths' self-identity is bisexual, gay or lesbian. Boxer et al. (1991) cite a conservative estimate from 1983 that there are approximately 3 million teenagers who are 'homosexually inclined' (p. 60).

Intergenerational issues are particularly worthy of attention. Parents of lesbian and gay children typically are influenced in profound ways by their children's sexual orientation, coming out and relationship choices. In many cases, children may be so fearful of their parents' reactions that they refuse to disclose their sexual orientation to parents (Chafetz et al., 1974) and it is quite common for them to come out to everyone else before they have the courage to face their parents (Brown, 1989a). Parents may experience anger, shame, guilt and self-blame (Krester, 1988; Saghir & Robins, 1973), sometimes even disowning or attempting to disown their children. Where children do not come out to their parents, the 'conspiracy of denial ... may preserve family harmony and maintain connection, but it dilutes the intimacy and undermines authenticity in family relationships' (Laird, 1993: 298).

Other parents are very supportive over long periods of time, including some who initially were not supportive or understanding. PFLAG, an international organization which stands for Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, was founded in 1981 to help families and their lesbian and gay members learn to understand and accept one another. PFLAG provides support groups, public education, AIDS activism, youth programs and gay rights advocacy. Literature distributed by PFLAG recognizes that, due to the misinformation that exists about the nature, causes and consequences of homosexuality, parents may have a difficult time accepting their child's identity. An important direction for future research is identifying the family histories, personal trajectories and intergenerational dynamics associated with parental acceptance. To capture the nuances and divergent realities characterizing family relationships, informants will need to represent the broad spectra of age and generational membership.

**Racial and ethnic diversity.** Morales (1990) observes that lesbians and gay men who are from diverse racial and ethnic groups are 'a minority within a minority' (p. 219). He defines 'ethnic minority' as people of color, including African Americans, Latins/Hispanics, Asian-Americans, Pacific Islanders and Native Americans. A multi-minority status has at least three societal intersections. First, ethnic minority lesbians and gay men confront mainstream society, where they are likely to experience prejudice in terms of race and sexual orientation (and, for lesbians, the further threat of sexism). Second, within their respective ethnic minority communities, their sexual orientation is problematized. Conservative and stereotyped attitudes towards gender roles, as well as repressive views about sexual activity, contribute to negative opinions about lesbians and gay men. In many ethnic groups, homosexuality is viewed as a 'white people's problem' (Morales, 1990: 25; see also Hom, 1994). Third, ethnic minority gays and lesbians report that they face racism within the gay community. Morales (1990) found that lesbian and gay people of color in the San Francisco area faced discrimination and underrepresentation in the lesbian/gay work force in that city.

Confronting and living with the combined prejudice from racism and homophobia has led many lesbian and gay people of color to feel as if they are 'living three lives' (Morales, 1990: 224). Young people, in the midst of forming their identity, may find that their multi-minority status has both distressing and advantageous possibilities. Minority youths may feel rejected and ostracized if they do not fit into any of their three cultural communities. At the same time, one's ethnic or racial background provides resources, particularly strong family bonds, that may offset homophobia in the wider culture (Savin-Williams & Rodriguez, 1992). It is clear that education at all three levels is needed to 'help gay youths of color develop a healthy perspective with positive integration of these multiple identities' (Savin-Williams & Rodriguez, 1992: 96).

There are few empirical investigations of lesbian and gay families that incorporate racial and ethnic diversity. Laird (1993) points out that the 'overwhelming profile of the subject in most research has been the young, white, well-educated, middle class male' (p. 291). At the relational level, research on lesbian and gay couples has been conducted on disproportionately white, well-educated respondents (Kurdek, 1995) and studies examining the adjustment of children raised by lesbian or gay parents have relied on homogeneous samples of white, middle- to upper-middle-class, formerly married lesbians (Patterson, 1992). Repeated investigations of homogeneous (often convenience) samples obscures multiple layers of diversity within lesbian and gay families and restricts our ability to document the special problems as well as the special strengths of lesbian and gay families.

**Regional, residential and community diversity.** Another source of variability within lesbian and gay families is how they interact and adjust within diverse community contexts. In urban communities, political and cultural diversity among lesbians and gay men can be accommodated because there are many gay-sponsored institutions that diverse members of the community can join. These possibilities may not exist in smaller communities or rural areas. In communities isolated from the broader culture, insensitivity to lesbian or gay families can be painful reminders of the oppression faced by minority group members. Yet being out to one's children, family and community is a survival strategy that many lesbians and gay men employ, even if they fear reprisals from their disclosure.

Kurdek (1988) and Crosbie-Burnett & Helmbrecht (1993) found that for most lesbians and gay men, partners and friends are more reliable and constant sources of social and emotional support than family of origin members. As a result, relations within the community assume a special significance for lesbian and gay individuals and their families. Boxer et al. (1991) define 'gay' as 'a cultural identity that is part of a richer and more supportive environment of gay and lesbian adults, institutions, and ... younger generations of youth' (p. 60). Although the emerging gay cultural system is a source of pride and support for lesbians and gay men, transactions with the outside world can be problematic and can contribute to isolation, stigma and harassment. On a daily basis, lesbian and gay parents and stepparents must confront internalized and externalized homophobia when they come out to their children's teachers, the parents of their children's peers and other members of the community. Even routine tasks, such as filling out forms at a child's day-care center that ask for information about 'mother' and 'father' are daily reminders that mainstream heterosexual society neither recognizes the child's family (Clay, 1990) nor accommodates lesbian or gay stepparents (Crosbie-Burnett & Helmbrecht, 1993).

Lesbian and gay families are distinguishable in their connections to and embeddedness within their communities (Brown, 1989b; Weston, 1991). These families do not form a monolithic group, nor do they have one voice, one lifestyle or one agenda. For example, separatists, who advocate for the right to safe woman-only spaces, may seek to deny males - including male children - access to their gatherings. Others may be opposed to lesbians and gay men raising children in nuclear family arrangements because it seems to valorize heterosexual marriage. Lesbian mothers and gay fathers experience biculturalism, which is the contradiction of living in two cultures - the mainstream heterosexual culture in which they interact as parents of their children and the gay and lesbian community in which they relate with peers who share a same-sex identity (Brown, 1989b). As our knowledge base expands on aspects of lesbian and gay family diversity, it will be important to investigate the correlates and consequences of neighborhood, workplace and community support for family members' well-being.

### *Intrafamily diversity*

To this point we have concentrated on diversity across lesbian and gay families, illustrating characteristics that distinguish one lesbian or gay family from another. We also want to emphasize the need for researchers to address diversity within lesbian and gay families, or intrafamilial diversity. Adapting Bernard's (1972) famous description of marriage, it is essential to recognize that each lesbian partnership consists of two-partnerships: hers and hers; likewise, each gay male partnership consists of two partnerships: his and his. At the family level, different life-course trajectories characterize each family member and each experiences the family differently.

**Levels of analysis.** Many studies have been conducted at the individual level, investigating outcomes for children reared by lesbians and gay men (Patterson, 1992). A smaller body of mostly clinical (Jones, 1978; Robinson et al., 1989) and descriptive research (Griffin et al., 1986; Muller, 1987) has examined parental reactions to children's disclosure of homosexuality. Strommen (1989) concludes that 'our knowledge of how families respond to the disclosure of homosexual identity by a family member is at best fragmentary and incomplete' (p. 50). Although studies reporting on the personal adjustment of individual family members are useful and important, they tell us little about characteristics of relationships (communication, decision-making, support, power, conflict and violence) in the family system. At the dyadic or relational level, some studies have

examined intragenerational relationship quality, e.g. relations between lesbian partners or gay partners (Kurdek, 1995), but very few studies have explored relationships that lesbians or gay men have with their siblings, stepsiblings, cousins or other kin. At the intergenerational level, there is limited information on relations between parents and children (Bozett, 1987), even less information on relations between stepparents and stepchildren and, to our knowledge, there have been no studies designed to describe relationships that lesbians or gay men have with their grandparents, grandchildren, nieces, nephews, aunts, uncles or other extended kin. Family level analyses, incorporating multiple intra- and intergenerational perspectives, remain largely unexplored (see Crosbie-Burnett & Helmbrecht, 1993), thus restricting our understanding of how these families function, how they define their boundaries, make decisions, divide labor, resolve conflicts, experience and cope with internal and external stressors, indeed, how they legitimate their very existence.

As discussed later, several family theories propose that individuals within a family maintain divergent perceptions of their experiences and relationships. How is the family perceived and experienced by a gay male who lives with his partner and who has nonresident children from a previous marriage, and how is it perceived by his partner who acts as a stepfather to the children? In what ways are their perceptions and experiences similar and/or different if the children reside (temporarily or permanently) in the household? How is the experience of motherhood unique for the biological mother in a lesbian partnership and in what ways do the similarities of lesbian partners - notably including gender and sexual orientation - facilitate shared parenting values, beliefs, experiences and meanings? Questions of this type illustrate the need for family (rather than individual) level investigations, capturing multiple and divergent vantage points on family boundaries, histories, rules, rituals and related dynamics.

**Preliminary insights.** A recent and pioneering study designed to investigate these kinds of questions was conducted by Crosbie-Burnett & Helmbrecht (1993). The authors assert their study is the first investigation of family dynamics and perceptions of social support in gay male step families. They studied 48 families and obtained data from three members of each family: the gay biological father, gay stepfather and oldest or only child of the biological father. Of particular interest, they found that the adolescent children of gay fathers were more closeted about their family circumstances than were their gay biological fathers or stepfathers and that stepfathers were more closeted about their stepfamily than were biological fathers. Among family members, there were also similarities and differences in the aspects of family life that predicted couple and family happiness, indicating highly variable intrafamily experiences.

Exciting new research on the formerly invisible perspective of family members of lesbians and gay men suggest what is to be gained by acquiring a family lens. Parents report contradictory feelings in their relationships with their lesbian or gay children: hurt, guilt, self-blame and helplessness, as well as acceptance, sympathy, support and pride (Bowen, 1994; Crosbie-Burnett, 1994). Parents' support from friends is not always or uniformly strong, reflecting 'the confusion, concerns, and fears about homosexuals that are dominant in our society' (Bowen, 1994: 12). In some cases, heterosexual siblings may become victims of benign neglect as a result of parental overattention to their lesbian or gay sibling (Bowen, 1994).

Because of distinct qualities of sibling relationships (e.g. less hierarchical than parent-child relationships, strong value attached to loyalty), siblings are often told (or learn) before parents are told or find out and they then have a 'burden of knowing' (Murray, 1994). Murray observes that siblings may not have the same need as parents to 'save face'; they often feel angry and confused, though they may not experience the guilt that parents do. In some families an older sibling may know before a younger sibling or some siblings may know before either parent knows, creating multiple layers of invisibility and family secrets, simultaneously strengthening and straining family relationships. It is apparent that there are ambiguous norms for communicating this family knowledge. Who should siblings tell of their sib's sexual orientation? In what ways does sexual orientation have similar and/or different influences on same-sex and other-sex sibling relationships? Murray argues that 'the issues of identity and intimacy are confounded for siblings by trying to find the right balance of individuality, particularly in terms of self-demarkation - ways we are not alike-and loyalty, in terms of sharing, availability, and protection - in response to ways we are alike' (p. 11). Clearly, an intrafamilial perspective illuminates the

intricacies and complexities of lesbian, gay and dual-orientation families, complementing and extending the insights gained from an interfamily perspective. Recognizing the multiple and intersecting dimensions of lesbian and gay family diversity, what do family theories suggest about these families and how do these families challenge dominant theories?

#### APPLYING, ASSESSING, AND EXPANDING FAMILY THEORIES

Lesbian and gay families provide a fertile testing ground for family theories and simultaneously pose interesting and provocative challenges for dominant family theories. These families force us to ask how well existing theories and frameworks explain family development and functioning in diverse and changing families. Most lesbian and gay families do not look like the families portrayed in mainstream family theories. Families that consist of same-sex couples, families formed through partnerships that are not legally recognized, families that do not involve children and families where children are present but the children's parental role models are of one sex, challenge prevailing theories and provide myriad opportunities for testing, revising and expanding our theories of family structure and dynamics.

In this section we discuss major theories that describe and explain family structure and family process, identify important assumptions and biases within these theories and examine whether these theories can be expanded or revised to incorporate the challenges presented by the diversity of lesbian and gay families. Most family theories were developed without consideration to sexual orientation diversity, meaning that lesbian and gay families challenge the automatic assumption of heterosexuality as exclusive and normal. We identify and discuss sexist and heterosexist assumptions of dominant, positivist family theories; we examine similar assumptions in selected theories of human development that have important implications for families; and we review the assumptions and values of feminist theories as they relate to the study of lesbian and gay families. It should be clear that our objective in examining these theories is not to dismiss any of them; nor do we intend to suggest that there is one grand theory that can explain all family systems or processes. Instead, our purpose is (1) to demonstrate that the presumption of heterosexuality is foundational to many traditional family theories and theories of human development; and (2) to argue that a multiplicity of theories is necessary to understand ever-increasing family diversity. We argue that traditional family theories, rooted in positivist assumptions of objectivity and neutrality, are insufficient in and of themselves and that in addition to mainstream approaches we need theories that posit the social construction of reality and recognize the inevitability of differences and the instability of concepts. Our discussion includes structural functional, psychoanalytic, social learning, social exchange, family development, family systems, life course and feminist theories.

Structural functional theory, along with other highly influential theories such as psychoanalytic, family development and family systems theories, have stressed the importance - indeed the necessity - of the mother's and father's presence and involvement for normal child development, family stability and social order. According to structural functionalists, the nuclear family is defined by the 'socially sanctioned cohabitation of a man and woman who have preferential or exclusive enjoyment of economic and sexual rights over one another and are committed to raise the children brought to life by the woman' (Pitts, 1964: 56). In this family, for both biological and cultural reasons, the husband is assigned 'instrumental' activities and responsibilities, while his wife is assigned 'expressive' activities (Parsons & Bales, 1955; Pitts, 1964). For present purposes, it is important to recognize that functionalists view conformity to this role structure as essential for family stability, shared values and norms and social order and that functionalist assumptions and propositions continue to underlie recent family theories and research (Kingsbury & Scanzoni, 1993).

Parsonian structural functionalism suggests a number of direct and dire implications for families headed by lesbian and gay adults, for family members and for society. First, regardless of the number of adults heading the household, the absence of a gender-based division of labor eliminates an institutionalized pattern of social interaction that functionalists view as necessary for integrating personality systems and culture into the social system (Turner, 1982). Viewed from this perspective, non-gender-based divisions of labor evoke new, ambiguous and contradictory role expectations, challenge existing values, undermine family stability and threaten social equilibrium. This view is rarely questioned, widely endorsed and highly influential. Kingsbury &

Scanzoni (1993: 205) argue that 'the central theoretical issue that dominates contemporary family studies is the condition of equilibrium - maintaining a steady state in the face of external and internal threats to that homeostasis' and that the pervasive assumption throughout research on family stress is that 'nonbenchmark patterns are vulnerable to a great deal of disequilibrium and thus stress' (p. 208). A second dimension of many lesbian and gay families that is problematic from a structural functional perspective is single-parent family structure. Parsons and others view this pattern as deviant and dysfunctional largely because it is assumed to deprive children of interaction with and support from two parents. Parsons (1965) also attributed considerable significance to the presence and influence of the same-sex parent, contending that the gravest consequences are experienced by boys living without their fathers. The implications of structural functional theory for other types of lesbian and gay families (e.g. dual-orientation families, childless families) are less clear and represent an important avenue for future theoretical and empirical work. Although structural functionalism can be criticized for its sexist and heterosexist assumptions and its imposition of a deficit model, the perspective is valuable in reminding us of the interdependence both of different systems (e.g. personality, cultural and social) and of micro- and macro-levels of organization (Turner, 1982).

Like structural functionalism, psychoanalytic and social learning theories also emphasize the importance of the same-sex parent for the child's appropriate gender role development and healthy adjustment. Freud (1933/1974) argued that identification with the same-sex parent is necessary and normal, that it represents 'a very important form of attachment to someone else' and that 'if a boy identifies himself with his father, he wants to be like his father ... ' (1933/1974: 124, original italics). Upon the resolution of the Oedipus complex, children develop proper gender role identification and acquire other socially acceptable traits. Social learning theories (e.g. Bandura, 1977) also emphasize the influence of the same-sex parent but posit different mechanisms to account for parental influence. From this perspective, the child learns appropriate and acceptable expectations for her or his behavior through observational and vicarious learning and through imitating and being positively reinforced for imitating the same-sex parental role model. Through similar processes, the child learns that many behaviors modeled by the other-sex parent are inappropriate for her or him.

Theories emphasizing the influence of same-sex and other-sex parents suggest social and psychological adjustment problems for children reared by lesbian or gay parents but key assumptions of these theories have not been examined systematically. First, these theories do not preclude the very real possibility that most children learn by observing two parents - whether they are residential or nonresidential parents and whether they embody one sex or two sexes - as well as by observing and imitating a variety of other extended and chosen family members and friends. That many children display tendencies to act in sex-typed ways may simply reflect that they receive greater rewards and fewer punishments from others for doing so (Bandura, 1977). Second, these theories are often interpreted to suggest that certain behaviors - such as heterosexuality, masculinity among males and femininity among females - are indicators of 'normal' development and adjustment, yet Freud (1905) pioneered the effort to conceptualize sexual orientation, masculinity/femininity and other behaviors as overlapping continua and as traits that coexist in every individual.

Social exchange theory also may be valuable to the study of lesbian and gay families. This theory directs attention to the bargaining process and balancing of power in families and, unlike many conventional family theories, it recognizes that the quality of marital interaction is more important than marriage per se in predicting adult well-being. A marital relationship provides many highly subjective costs and rewards that determine whether the relationship is profitable for the individual. Most studies of marital quality implicitly rely on a social exchange framework (Glenn, 1990) and this model could benefit substantially by being extended to - and tested on - lesbian and gay partnerships. Research on heterosexual married couples indicates that frequent marital interaction and effective communication and problem-solving are associated with higher marital quality (Lewis & Spanier, 1979). Using this perspective, we would expect that, regardless of sexual orientation, adult well-being would be higher in situations where the adults assess their family relationships favorably, where they report nurturing and supportive relationships, where couple and parent-child communications are characterized by open and constructive communication and where their current situations compare favorably to their comparison level for alternatives. As with singular use of any theory, there are limitations in relying exclusively



on a social exchange framework in that it assumes rational actors making rational choices and ignores the timing and sequencing of events within personal and family careers.

The developmental approach adopted the structural functional perspective on normative role arrangements but it also provided the original framework for understanding normative and non-normative life transitions (Hill & Rodgers, 1964). The model directs attention to timing (Neugarten & Datan, 1973), sequencing and duration of events and life stages - concepts that are valuable for the study of lesbian and gay families. The developmental model is static, however, in that it reifies and glorifies gender roles and emphasizes stages rather than family processes, dialectics and change. Although reformulations of the theory are more dynamic (White, 1991), the theory continues to emphasize a gender norms model and to conceptualize the family in heterosexist terms, valuing the nuclear family, marriage and the presence of children (Rodgers & White, 1993: 237). It is presumed that if a child grows up without two parents - and specifically, one biological mother and one biological father - the child will be disadvantaged. As alluded to above, this view is widely embraced and notarized in the larger society, including the judiciary, where it is believed that children raised by lesbian mothers will experience confusion in their gender role identity (Falk, 1989). One focal question becomes: how well are children's (and parents') needs met when there are two mothers or two fathers? A related question of substantial importance for family researchers and theorists is how well children's and parents' needs are met in families headed by a single lesbian or gay male and in a variety of other family structures involving lesbians and gay men.

Another salient issue for lesbian and gay family members and an important consideration for family researchers, is that we lack institutionalized terms, labels, guidelines and norms for relationships involving lesbian and gay family members. Cherlin (1978) introduced the now famous concept of remarriage as an 'incomplete institution', riddled by ambiguous norms for stepfamily relations. A similar and perhaps stronger case could be made for lesbian and gay families, whose very existence is denied, questioned and challenged by the wider society. Under what circumstances - and using what term - does an adolescent refer to her biological mother's lifelong partner? How should family members and others refer to the abiding family friend whose frequent and nurturing involvement with the family resembles a loving uncle or brother? What if he is also the daughter's biological father through donor insemination? How do lesbian and gay adults know how to act in their partnerships, in parenting and/or stepparenting contexts and in other family roles when their family of origin experiences, in most cases, were heterosexual family relations? In what ways do lesbians and gay men (like heterosexuals) adopt and/or modify the relational styles, childrearing values and parenting behaviors of their own parents? Further, what terms and norms govern how lesbian or gay partners refer to and interact with their affinal kin, such as their partner's parents or siblings? Whether viewed legally or socially, it is clear the term 'in-law' does not apply, nor does it capture the realities, complexities or nuances of these relationships.

Many dominant theories posit the importance of marriage and parenthood for adult well-being. Family development theory posits a priori categories of gendered family roles and a priori stages of marital and parental progression, suggesting normative and non-normative family structures. As discussed earlier, structural-functional theory proposes that role differentiation within marriage and the nuclear family reduces role strain and enhances adult wellbeing. Family systems theories emphasize that there are advantages for families that are characterized by clear boundaries (Minuchin, 1974) rather than boundary ambiguity (Boss & Greenberg, 1984), because boundaries define who is in the family and their respective tasks and functions. From these perspectives, adults living in lesbian and gay families would be predicted to have problems establishing and maintaining boundaries due to societal ambiguity and intolerance of such families and, for many, complications created by ongoing relationships with former spouses, children from previous marriages, stepkin and chosen kin. In short, stresses associated with lesbian and gay family complexity and role ambiguity compound problems inherent in heterosexual single-parent or stepfamily systems. However, a possibility that these theories neglect is that lesbian and gay families have created and sustained new ways of relating that are positive for postmodern family functioning.

Life-course theory is valuable in that it recognizes and directs attention to greater complexity and variability in life experiences. This framework focuses on the multiple trajectories and social contexts (e.g. family,

employment and community) shaping individual lives and the unique and overlapping pathways and trajectories within families. The transitions and turning-points lesbians and gay men experience from their families of origin through the families they form and maintain as adults remain uncharted territory for researchers interested in families and personal relationships. To fully understand lesbian and gay families, these relationships need to be studied as multiple, simultaneous and interdependent careers or trajectories through the life course. By examining social age, developmental age and historical age, researchers can identify cohorts who experience similar slices of history from different developmental vantage points, thereby illuminating the intersections of biography and history (Elder, 1991). The process of coming out and its timing in the life course, for example, are likely to have different consequences for personal adjustment and family experiences depending on the prevailing social climate and the intensity of antigay sentiment. Although the life-course framework continues to energize and enrich the study of families, this paradigm does not challenge the status quo, does not explain the marginalization of certain family types and does not recognize the influence of intersecting power hierarchies (e.g. race, gender and sexual orientation) that have been identified by feminists and other critical theorists.

Feminism offers a critique of traditional family theorizing and proposes a corrective that expands our ability to describe and explain our observations of diversity across families. For two decades feminists have critiqued family theories that propose a unitary and reified version of 'The Family' by taking as problematic the underlying assumptions made about what is normative in identities, behaviors and relationships among family members. Feminists have exposed the sexist and heterosexist underpinnings of any definition of family that takes as given that there is one type of family that can stand in for all other types and that the identities and behaviors of family members can be described by using the concept of 'gender role'. Feminists deconstruct standard conceptions of family and gender roles by pointing out the endless variations in the ways family members behave that depart from these reified conceptualizations of normative behavior.

One contribution of feminist rethinking of functionalist and developmental accounts of family structure and process is their critique of the concept of 'gender role'. Reducing gender to a role ignores the structural features of gender and its interconnectedness to other dominant ways in which groups are differentially provided opportunities and oppressed. Feminists have shown how gender infiltrates human experience and is embedded within social institutions. A role, on the other hand, reduces gender to the more narrow and depoliticized realm of interpersonal relationships. Feminist sociologists Lopata & Thome (1978) draw an analogous case to race and class roles. Sociologists do not describe class or race inequality as 'class role' or 'race role', recognizing that such descriptions hide the power relations of social stratification beyond individual experience or interpersonal interaction. Thus, when family scholars use 'gender role', it reduces the structural importance of gender as a major way in which lives are stratified. The concept of role attempts to contain in too neat a conceptual package the encompassing nature of gender as integrated into all systems of social relations. Although role-typed behaviors have developed within the context of gender, such behavior is not inherently tied to biological sex, as the egalitarian quality of lesbian and gay relationships reveals (Kurdek, 1995). Gender is not simply an individual characteristic, nor is gender a role that can be adopted or learned. Rather, gender is socially constructed through interactions, it is dynamic and changing.

Another contribution of a feminist perspective is its attention to the highly variable, gendered and contentious nature of marital and family dynamics (Ferree, 1991). This perspective recognizes and values diversity across families, acknowledges different and sometimes contradictory life experiences and realities within families and emphasizes that some families are marginalized, oppressed and stigmatized. From this perspective we would expect to see gendered, hierarchical, contentious and problematic aspects of lesbian and gay family life and, at the same time, the resilient, expressive, sensitive, supportive, rewarding and fulfilling nature of lesbian and gay family life. Ferree states that 'a feminist perspective redefines families as arenas of gender and generational struggles, crucibles of caring and conflict, where claims for an identity are rooted, and separateness and solidarity are continually created and contested' (1991: 117). How accurate are these descriptors for lesbian and gay families? In what ways are gender struggles similar and different? How are claims for an identity complicated in these families and in what ways are they made easier?

A current debate among feminist scientists and theorists surrounds the question of whether feminists are generating too many contradictory theoretical approaches. Can feminist studies accommodate so many competing ways of looking at gender and its intersections with other axes of social stratification (race, sexual orientation, class, age, etc.)? In response to critics who say we need one feminist framework, Harding (1987) argues instead that the proliferation of a multiplicity of feminist theories is inevitable and necessary because feminists must generate new and more accurate knowledge that includes women's standpoint as well as the competing process of deconstructing the essentialist belief in 'women's way of knowing'. That is, because women have been systematically excluded from most scientific research, it is necessary to generate new knowledge that accurately represents women's voices and experiences (i.e. feminist standpoint theory) and, at the same time, we must not reify women's experiences as if there were just one kind of experience that all women necessarily have by virtue of being women. The primary method for recognizing the differences among women (and among men and among families) is deconstruction: feminist postmodernists deconstruct the very notion of gender as an essentialist assumption.

### *Towards theoretical pluralism*

Like feminist theory, the study of lesbian and gay family issues involves previously unseen or mislabeled phenomena, thus posing new challenges to understanding families in general. Just as feminists have suggested that multiple perspectives should be respected in the interests of developing more accurate ways of knowing about gender and social life, we suggest that multiple perspectives are needed to incorporate new insights and thus revise knowledge about families by including what was formerly invisible or excluded. In our view, a promising direction is to use the insights and applications of both positivist and post-positivist approaches. As Sprey (1988) pointed out, although most published research in family studies is conducted from a positivist viewpoint, insights from critical theory, hermeneutics and feminist theory are crucial to developing more accurate knowledge. In fact, mainstream family scholars seem to have abandoned the quest for a grand theory or explanation of family functioning and recognize that the direction of the field is towards the proliferation of approaches (see Klein & Jurich, 1993).

We suggest that the feminist approach of encouraging the proliferation of multiple and often competing perspectives is a wise approach for creating new theories and changing existing theories to represent more accurately the intersections of gender and sexual orientation in families. Lather's (1991) description of four competing theories and epistemologies in social science provides a model for visualizing how positivist and post-positivist enquiries may be bridged to study family diversity. Grounded in Habermas' (1971) thesis of the three categories of human interest that underscore knowledge claims, Lather (1991: 6-7) adds a fourth category and describes these theoretical approaches according to their epistemological goals: (1) traditional approaches to science are rooted in positivism, in which the goal is to predict; (2) hermeneutic, naturalistic and interpretive approaches to science are rooted in phenomenology, in which the goal is to understand; (3) critical approaches to science, which overlap with neo-Marxist and feminist perspectives, are praxis-oriented, in which the goal is to emancipate; and (4) poststructural or postmodern approaches, in which the goal is to deconstruct.

Lather suggests that this 'unprecedented cross-disciplinary fertilization of ideas opens up possibilities' for theorizing and helps us think about 'what it means to do research and teaching in an unjust world' (1991: 7). Because being lesbian or gay remains a highly stigmatized identity and discrimination against lesbians and gay men is codified in law, family scholars cannot take a strictly positivist approach, thus claiming a falsely neutral position, regarding the investigation of families in which members have diverse sexual orientations. The presence of lesbian and gay people in families requires us to use what we already know about families and at the same time presents us with possibilities for new and more advanced understandings of families.

For these reasons, we advocate an approach that involves selecting enduring theoretical insights from a variety of family theories and combining these insights with feminist perspectives on the social construction of difference. This serves the dual purpose of critiquing mainstream ideas and facilitating the creation of more accurate knowledge about families. Our approach is to do this by positioning ourselves both inside and outside

the conversation about family diversity, requiring a praxis of reflective dialoguing about our own personal experiences with difference and our intellectual theorizing about families.

## RESEARCH REFLECTIONS AND DIRECTIONS

We would like to comment on the utility of a collaborative approach in the study of lesbian and gay families—indeed of any group whose members have been stigmatized and about whom new knowledge is needed. Through our discussions of family diversity and change we found ourselves dissecting family theories and attempting to recast concepts that did not fit the lives we lived and observed around us. The recognition that one of us resembled the standard blueprint of family development more closely than the other provoked our desire to pool our divergent interests to pursue new conceptualizations of families. A provocative mix of traditional and innovative perspectives forged our collaboration, making it difficult to predict how our professional interests and our personal experiences with gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity and family would inform our current perspectives on family diversity and change.

Our differences of gender, sexual orientation, marital career history and research training, as well as our similarities by age, parental history, race, class and theoretical training, among others, allow us to ask reflective questions of each other and the research we examine that are rooted in both personal experience and knowledge of our research disciplines. From a feminist perspective, this kind of reflection leads to more informed knowledge by working with both insider and outsider perspectives (Westkott, 1979). As Peplau (1994) points out, the politics of studying lesbian and gay relationships cannot be discounted. One advantage of research conducted by someone who is heterosexual is that it cannot be 'immediately discounted as "self-interested" or as designed to serve a "political agenda"' (Peplau, 1994: 41). Integrating the research team with the intensity of someone who has experienced first hand the dynamics of a contested sexual orientation and the sensitivity of someone who is aware of their own benefits from heterosexual privilege, maximizes the collaborative potential of insider/outsider viewpoints. Of course, the tremendous diversity characterizing lesbian and gay families requires us to recognize inherent limitations in our collaboration, as we are both outsiders to the family lives of gay men, bisexuals, ethnic minority families and other groups discussed earlier. These considerations underscore the urgent need for researchers of diverse backgrounds to bring their perspectives to bear on the study of lesbian and gay families.

An important part of this research collaboration mirrors a process in feminist pedagogy. Feminist teachers often serve as simultaneous translators in the classroom, 'hearing and giving back in other words what another person has just said, and at the same time presenting an explanation in another language which will illuminate the issue for a second group without alienating the first' (Davis, 1985: 250). We, too, have served as simultaneous translators for each other, teaching each other ways of relating and knowing about families that are drawn from our respective training, expertise and personal stake in social change. The most obvious differences between us are easily discarded as we deconstruct our assumptions about families and incorporate missing knowledge about family members who are lesbian or gay. Using our own lives and relationships as guideposts - but not as standards - this process of deconstructing social categories and labels soon makes it impossible to classify us according to obvious group membership. As we ask questions of ourselves that we were not trained to ask, we find that new possibilities of conceptualizing families emerge. As noted, one such linkage is extending the familiar concept of 'remarriage as an incomplete institution' (Cherlin, 1978) to thinking about lesbian and gay families. Another is the challenge imposed by trying to incorporate bisexual identities into definitions of family. The opportunity to study the unique political contexts and problems of these families challenges our notions of what stress is, what coping is and how resilience is experienced and conceptualized. More fundamentally, these families speak to untheorized aspects of family diversity and exhort us to not categorize or dichotomize experience in obvious or socially acceptable ways.

A comprehensive review of more than 8000 articles published since 1980 in leading journals in family studies, developmental psychology, sociology and personal relationships indicates that families of lesbians and gay men, even broadly defined, have been virtually ignored by family researchers (Allen & Demo, 1995). Although some important empirical evidence has begun to accumulate on outcomes for children reared by lesbians and

gay men (Patterson, 1992) and on relationships between lesbian and gay parents (Kurdek, 1995; Peplau, 1994), most of the attention to date has focused on individuals and dyads, with little examination of family structure and family interaction. As a result, our knowledge of lesbian and gay families is uneven in that we know much more about lesbian and gay partnerships than we do about other relationships in the family system (parent-child, sibling, extended and chosen kin relations), we know more about the outcomes for children of lesbian and gay parents than we do about outcomes for other family members and we know very little about important systemic, structural and processual characteristics of these families.

In the absence of systematic knowledge regarding the structure and internal dynamics of these families, many aspects of diversity within lesbian and gay families are concealed, fostering myths and images that depict lesbian and gay families as a monolithic group. In her authoritative review of the literature, Laird (1993) observed that 'much of the clinical and research literature to date has stressed the differences rather than the similarities between gay/lesbian and heterosexual families and, at the same time, has emphasized the commonalities rather than the diversity among lesbian and gay families' (p. 319). Research is needed to examine lesbian and gay families in incorporative ways, describing their unique characteristics, strengths and problems, as well as qualities they share with other family forms. As knowledge accumulates on these families, researchers need to be mindful that much of what we know is based on convenience samples of volunteers and members of lesbian and gay organizations. We know nothing about the family relationships of lesbians and gay men who are closeted. Crosbie-Burnett & Helmbrecht (1993) also suggest that we need to learn more about adolescents and adults who may remain closeted for their own benefit and the implications of this for their relationships with parents, immediate and extended family members, peers, future partners and others.

Lesbian and gay families bring a unique dimension to the study of diversity. Part of this uniqueness is that their very right to existence is denied - by politics, religion, law and other institutions. They provide an opportunity for family researchers to examine the politics of family life, posing entirely new research questions. How can family researchers unravel the layers of invisibility and oppression these families encounter? How do contradictory feelings of shame, embarrassment, guilt, denial and self-doubt coexist with feelings of pride, happiness, compassion and warmth within lesbian and gay family relationships? What are the effects of invisibility on lesbian and gay families, their relationships and well-being? How do families support and shield, buffer and adapt, when lesbian and gay family members interact with others to whom they are not out - coworkers, friends, neighbors, acquaintances, strangers? How are family relationships negotiated and renegotiated to provide mutual support, growth, stability and development?

Many strategies can be pursued to generate new knowledge about lesbian and gay families. Laird (1993) recommends that the first priority should be studies examining these families from their own standpoints - qualitative, holistic, ethnographic investigations of their daily lives. In addition, comparative studies of lesbian, gay and heterosexual partnerships are valuable because the 'comparison of matched samples might prove especially effective in refuting negative stereotypes' (Peplau, 1994: 38). For example, comparative research would be helpful in refuting the myth that lesbians and gay men cannot form satisfying or lasting partnerships. To contest negative stereotypes that same-sex relationships are inferior to heterosexual relationships, Peplau (1994) has found it helpful to use quantitative methods, with 'fairly large samples and standardized measures of relationship functioning, to conduct statistical analyses, and to make comparisons among gay, lesbian, and heterosexual couples' (p.45).

Until recently, much of the literature on lesbians and gay men has taken a reactive, defensive or deficit stance (Laird, 1993). Proactive research that values family plurality documents the high levels of resilience within the families of lesbians and gay men, whose relationships offer a model of egalitarian partnerships and gender flexibility (Brown, 1989a; Kurdek, 1995; Peplau, 1994). Considering the children of lesbian and gay parents, the available evidence suggests that they learn to tolerate and value diversity, to develop considerable empathy for others, to follow their own feelings about sexuality and intimacy and to redefine the very foundations (i.e. that a person can have only one mother or one father) upon which notions of families are based (Laird, 1993). Integrating a variety of theoretical and methodological approaches promises exciting opportunities to more fully

understand the increasingly diverse family experiences of lesbian and gay families and to simultaneously sharpen our understanding of other postmodern families.

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