Gay Fatherhood: What We Know, and What We Need to Know

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Why is it important to study gay fathers?

The number of gay fathers is increasing
- In 2010, 314,000 male same-sex couples were living in the US; of these, 10% were raising children

Studying gay fatherhood has the potential to challenge and refine our understanding of “fatherhood” in general
- Offers opportunity to test our theoretical assumptions about fatherhood, parenthood, and gender
- Challenges us to refine our assumptions about, and vocabulary for describing, fatherhood
What Do We Know About Gay Fathers?

- Note about data sources
- Small samples
- White middle class men
- Qualitative and quantitative data
- Most studies use volunteer, convenience-based sampling methods
What Do We Know About Gay Fathers?

- **Research in the 1980s**
- Focus on gay fathers who came out after having children in heterosexual marriages
- Most children responded positively; those who responded negatively worried about peer reactions; tried to control their environment and their fathers’ behavior (Bigner & Bozett, 1989; Bigner & Jacobsen, 1989a, 1989b)
- Older children struggled more than younger children
- Men married because they strongly desired children and hoped that marrying would eliminate their homosexuality (see Bigner, 2004)
What Do We Know About Gay Fathers?

- **Research in the 2000s**
  - Increased research on gay fathers after 15+ years of focusing mainly on lesbian mothers (see Biblarz & Stacey, 2010; Goldberg, 2010)
  
- **Early 2000s: shift to studying planned lesbian/gay parent families**

- **These studies have focused on:**
  - Motivations for parenthood
  - Barriers to parenthood
  - The transition to parenthood
  - Parent and child adjustment
Motivations for Parenthood

• Initially, many gay men view coming out as synonymous with relinquishing their dreams of fatherhood (Berkowitz & Marsiglio, 2007; Goldberg, Downing, & Moyer, 2012)
  • Turning points: social and political progress; meeting other lesbian/gay parents; overcoming internalized homophobia

• Like heterosexual fathers, gay fathers emphasize a love of children, desire to care for and raise children, and partner’s desire for children as motivations for parenthood (Goldberg et al., 2012)
Barriers to Parenthood

- Barriers to parenthood
- *The legal system:* many states do not allow same-sex partners to adopt (Downing, Richardson, Kinkler, & Goldberg, 2009; Mallon, 2004)
- *Adoption agencies* may refuse to work with gay men or pressure them to hide their sexual orientation (Downing et al., 2009; Gianino, 2008; Goldberg, in press; Hicks, 2006; Mallon, 2004; Matthews & Cramer, 2006)
- *Families of origin* may resist gay men’s parenthood aspirations and threaten abandonment (Goldberg, in press)
The Transition to Parenthood

- Perceived parenting skill increases for all new adoptive parents (Goldberg & Smith, 2009)
- Mental health declines for all new adoptive parents (Goldberg & Smith, 2011)
  - Predictors: Low social support, neighborhood and workplace homophobia, and living in states with unfavorable legal climates
- Intimate relationship quality declines for all new adoptive parents (Goldberg, Smith, & Kashy, 2010)
  - Predictors: poor mental health, poor coping skills, and dissatisfaction with one’s adoption agency
The Transition to Parenthood

- Division of unpaid labor is more equal in same-sex couples (Goldberg, Smith, & Perry-Jenkins, in press)
- Gay male couples are often dual-earner, (Goldberg, in press; Silverstein, Auerbach, & Levant, 2002)
- Gay men often report changes in their social support networks upon becoming parents (Bergman et al., 2010; Gianino, 2008; Goldberg, in press; Mallon, 2004)
Parent and Child Experiences and Outcomes

- **Work-family roles**
  - Sharing family labor common among gay adoptive and surrogate fathers; associated with relationship satisfaction (Farr & Patterson, 2012; Kruczkowski et al., 2012)

- **Parenting stress**
  - Gay adoptive fathers report similar stress levels as do lesbian and heterosexual adoptive parents (Farr et al., 2010)
  - Associated with older children, adopting at older ages, less social support, and less positive gay identity (Tornello et al., 2011)
Parenting approaches

- Using effective discipline techniques similar among adoptive gay, lesbian, and heterosexual parents; no significant differences (Farr et al., 2010a)

Coparenting

- Gay adoptive fathers least supportive, compared with lesbian and heterosexual adoptive couples, but less undermining than heterosexual couples (Farr & Patterson, 2012)
Parent and Child Experiences and Outcomes

- **Relationship quality**
  - High on average among gay adoptive and surrogate fathers (Farr et al., 2010; Kruczkowski et al., 2012); associated with parenting stress (Farr et al., 2010)

- **Child behavior**
  - Few behavior problems, no different from other families (Averett et al., 2009; Erich et al., 2005, 2009; Farr et al., 2010)
  - No more likely to be gay (Bailey et al., 1995), but more flexible attitudes re: gender and sexuality (Goldberg, 2007)
Parent and Child Experiences and Outcomes

- **Gender development**
  - Preschoolers with gay, lesbian, and heterosexual adoptive parents gender-typical; no significant differences (Farr, Doss, & Patterson, 2010; Farr et al., 2010)
  - Gay fathers have no shortage of females in their lives (Goldberg, in press)

- **Visibility/other unique issues**
  - Gay fathers likely to adopt transracially (Farr & Tornello, 2010; Farr et al., 2010; Goldberg, in press)
  - Questions about “where’s the mom?” (Gianino, 2008; Goldberg, in press; Mallon, 2004; Silverstein et al., 2002)
What Do We Need to Know?

- Longitudinal studies
- Questions about sexual orientation and parenthood route
- Funding
- Validation of measures
- Diverse samples
- Gay fathers who are “divorcing”
- Relevance to law, policy, and practice
Questions?

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Resources

Resources

- Farr, R. H., & Patterson, C. J. (under review). Coparenting among lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples: Associations with adopted children’s outcomes.
Resources