

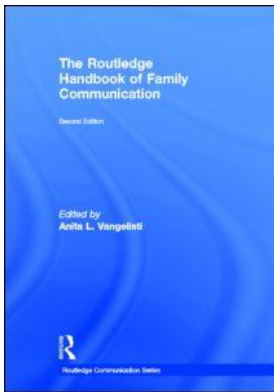
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The Family Relationships of Sexual Minorities

Lisa M. Diamond, Kendrick A. Rith, and Molly R. Butterworth

Introduction

After decades of invisibility, the unique family experiences of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (collectively denoted *sexual minority*) individuals are finally receiving systematic attention. Whereas much early research on this population focused on *individual*-level dynamics and challenges, such as identity development and mental health, the past several decades have witnessed an explosion of research on their *interpersonal* experiences. These studies have broadened our knowledge of the sexual-minority life course and have advanced our understanding of the processes through which sexual orientation shapes day-to-day interpersonal functioning. The present chapter reviews the state of contemporary research on the family experiences of sexual-minority individuals, focusing on their romantic relationships and parenting practices.

First, however, some clarifications bear mention. Throughout this chapter we refer to “sexual-minority” (instead of “gay/lesbian/bisexual”) individuals and families. *Sexual minority* denotes any individual with same-sex attractions or relationships, and we use this term because not all individuals with same-sex attractions and/or relationships identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual: In fact, the *majority* of such individuals do not (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994; Mosher, Chandra, & Jones, 2005). Similar findings have emerged from surveys conducted in other countries (Wichstrom & Hegna, 2003) and in studies of adolescents (Garofalo, Wolf, Wissow, Woods, & Goodman, 1999). Despite the diversity of these individuals’ experiences, one thing they undeniably share is that their same-sex attractions and relationships place them outside conventional norms prescribing uniform and universal heterosexuality, potentially exposing them to self-stigmatization, denigration by others, and lack of public acknowledgement of their relationships. This is why they are considered *sexual minorities*. In this chapter we will review what is known about the specific processes and mechanisms through which an individual’s sexual-minority status shapes his/her family dynamics and functioning, calling attention to the most important areas for future research.

Same-Sex Romantic Relationships

Sexual-minority individuals have long been stereotyped as unable and/or unwilling to pursue long-term relationships, but research resoundingly contradicts this view. Between

40 and 60 percent of gay men and 50 and 80 percent of lesbians are partnered (reviewed in Peplau & Spalding, 2000), and the majority of lesbian–gay–bisexual individuals would like the option of formalizing such relationships through same-sex marriage (Kaiser Foundation, 2001). In fact, recent representative data reveal that 27 percent of the country’s 581,000 cohabiting same-sex couples *consider* themselves spouses, even if U.S. law does not (National Center for Family & Marriage Research, 2010). Research shows that same-sex couples meet, fall in love, and maintain their relationships through the same processes as do heterosexual couples, and that they show notable similarities regarding communication, conflict resolution, and levels of intimacy, autonomy, equality, and mutual trust (Conley, Roesch, Peplau, & Gold, 2009; Kurdek, 2004; Roisman, Clausell, Holland, Fortuna, & Elieff, 2008; Solomon, Rothblum, & Balsam, 2005). They have even been found to fight about the same core issues: finances, affection, sex, criticism, and household tasks (Kurdek, 2004; Solomon et al., 2005), and to show similar levels of physiological reactivity to conflict (Gottman et al., 2003; Roisman et al., 2008). Also, as with heterosexual couples, same-sex couples with higher levels of overall relationship satisfaction report higher levels of sexual satisfaction (Deenen, Gijs, & van Naerssen, 1994; Kurdek, 1991). What, then, *distinguishes* same-sex from heterosexual couples? First, their social stigmatization and invalidation introduces persistent strain that may erode relationship quality and commitment (Green, 2008; Lehmillier & Agnew, 2006). Second, “combining” two individuals of the same gender produces distinctive dynamics regarding communication, intimacy, and sexuality.

Lack of Formal Recognition for Same-Sex Relationships

Recent debates over same-sex marriage have provided a “natural experiment” for examining the effects of social marginalization on the functioning of same-sex couples. Studies have consistently found that same-sex couples who have the opportunity to formalize their relationships experience numerous benefits, whereas those living in areas that specifically forbid same-sex marriage show poorer well-being. For example, a number of recent studies have directly compared same-sex cohabiting couples in “civil unions” to same-sex cohabiting couples *without* civil unions, and also to the married heterosexual siblings of civil union couples (Solomon, Rothblum, & Balsam, 2004; Solomon et al., 2005; Todosijevic, Rothblum, & Solomon, 2005). These couples started out quite similar to each other on overall satisfaction or functioning, yet a three-year follow-up assessment found that the same-sex couples in civil unions were less likely to have broken up than same-sex couples who had not pursued civil unions (Balsam, Beauchaine, Rothblum, & Solomon, 2008). These findings support the notion that *barriers to dissolution* play a key role in influencing couples’ attitudes about, and motivations to deal with, hurdles in their relationships (Kurdek, 1998), although it is also important to consider self-selection effects. Specifically, couples who eventually sought civil unions may have started out with greater overall levels of commitment than couples who did not eventually seek civil unions.

Even in highly committed and satisfied couples, relationship formalization can have additional positive effects. Same-sex couples report that formalizing their relationships makes them feel more “real” (Lannutti, 2007) and Solomon and colleagues (Solomon et al., 2005) found that 54 percent of same-sex couples reported increased love and commitment to one another after having had a civil union. One question awaiting future research is whether these benefits would also accrue to same-sex couples pursuing other means of formally acknowledging their relationships, such as naming one another as

insurance beneficiaries and/or legal heirs, purchasing property together, giving one another power of attorney, legally taking the same last name, or merging finances (Badgett, 1998; Beals, Impett, & Peplau, 2002; Suter & Oswald, 2003). Such investigations call for careful attention to the specific *mechanisms* through which relationship formalization relates to relationship functioning, and in this respect it is important to distinguish between *symbolic* and *legal* formalization. Fingerhut (2010) found that couples who had formalized their relationships *symbolically* (through commitment ceremonies or weddings with no legal bearing) reported greater life satisfaction and relationship satisfaction, whereas those who formalized their relationships *legally* (through registered domestic partnerships) reported greater investments in their relationship. This suggests that symbolic formalization has particularly strong implications for personal and moral aspects of commitment, whereas legal formalization has relatively stronger implications for structural aspects of commitment (M. P. Johnson, 1999). Importantly, some same-sex couples choose not to pursue symbolic formalization because they believe that rituals such as commitment ceremonies lack meaning if they do not have legal standing (Reczek, Elliott, & Umberson, 2009).

Both symbolic and legal formalization appear to play a role in reducing what Green (2008) has called “relational ambiguity,” or the lack of standard cultural “rules” by which partners can gauge the progress and future status of their relationship. Green notes that heterosexual marriage involves a set of cultural expectations that guide partners’ behavior, such as cohabitation, pooled property and finances, and caring for one another in times of illness. Without the clear demarcation of *marriage*, same-sex couples must make such decisions on a case-by-case basis, and must openly and repeatedly revisit questions about whether their relationship is “serious” enough to warrant certain commitments and sacrifices (such as giving up a job opportunity, allowing elderly parents to share the household, etc). In some cases, same-sex couples cannot even identify a reliable marker of when their relationship *began* (Reczek et al., 2009). Hence, pursuing either symbolic or legal formalization may help to decrease relational ambiguity and create a set of shared expectations about the status and future of the relationship.

Relationship formalization may also help to buffer couples from the day-to-day stress of social marginalization. Fingerhut (2010) found that the association between internalized homophobia and psychosocial adjustment was attenuated among individuals who had legally or symbolically formalized their relationship. Similarly, Riggle, Rostosky, and Horne (2010) found that same-sex couples in legally recognized relationships reported significantly less psychological distress than those in committed—but not legally recognized—relationships. This does not, however, suggest that formal recognition for same-sex relationships would provide a “magic buffer” against the stress of social stigmatization. In their study of same-sex couples who entered into civil unions in Vermont, Todosijevec and colleagues (2005) found that many of these couples continued to struggle with familial rejection of their relationship. Similarly, Eskridge and Spedale (2006) noted that same-sex married couples in Denmark and other Scandinavian countries (which have significantly more accepting attitudes toward same-sex sexuality than does the U.S.A.) continue to confront daily prejudice and social rejection. The often-vociferous debates over same-sex marriage have been observed to take a notable toll on same-sex couples’ views of themselves and their relationships (Rostosky, Riggle, Horne, & Miller, 2009).

This raises the broader question of how same-sex couples’ formalization practices are related to their *other* familial ties. As argued by Cohler and Hammack (2007), sexual-minority individuals live “linked lives,” such that *all* of their social relationships are

intrinsically interbraided. Accordingly, the decision to legally formalize a same-sex relationship has “ripple effects” across the couple’s entire social network. Same-sex couples who decide to formalize their relationship enter into a protracted period of relationship re-negotiation with *all* of their important social ties, which may be extended over many years (Smart, 2007). Currently, we understood little about how these renegotiations unfold, particularly in cases where close friends and family members express ambivalence, confusion, or even hostility regarding same-sex sexuality, and this is a key area for future research. Smart (2007) notes that marriage is a “fateful moment” during which sexual-minority individuals must confront, make sense of, and potentially resolve complicated family ties. Yet marriage is obviously not the only such “fateful moment:” Consider, for example, the *dissolution* of a long-term same-sex relationship: Do the parents of sexual-minority individuals treat such changes as equivalent to a conventional heterosexual divorce, or do they inadvertently discount the emotional ramifications? When same-sex couples have children, how does the grandparents’ behavior depend on the circumstances of the child’s birth (i.e., adoption, surrogacy, birth) and on the status of their child as a biological versus nonbiological parent? These are some of the questions that deserve substantive attention in future research.

Gender-Related Dynamics in Couple Functioning

Of course, the signature characteristic of same-sex couples is that both partners have the same gender role and same history of gender-related socialization, and this similarity appears to facilitate smoother day-to-day communication, support, and negotiation (Gottman et al., 2003; Roisman et al., 2008; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). Similarity in day-to-day experiences also appears to facilitate relationship functioning: For example, one study found that lesbian women suffering from PMS (Premenstrual Syndrome) reported high levels of responsiveness, understanding, open communication, and responsibility-sharing by their female partners, which contrasts notably with the findings from research on *heterosexual* women, who typically report that male partners fail to understand, support, or validate their symptoms (Ussher & Perz, 2008).

Although both male–male and female–female couples appear to benefit from gender similarity at the level of day-to-day communication and functioning, female–female couples appear to have an additional advantage owing to women’s relationally oriented socialization (Choderow, 1978; Jordan, 1987). Women are encouraged from an early age to seek and to prioritize high levels of connectedness and intimacy within their close interpersonal ties (Cross & Madson, 1997), and as a result they tend to surpass men with respect to interpersonal sensitivity, empathy, emotional awareness, and emotional expressivity, especially in their romantic relationships (Barrett, Lane, Sechrest, & Schwartz, 2000; Thomas & Fletcher, 2003). In contrast, men are socialized to emphasize autonomy, independence, and self-reliance, which has historically been observed to interfere with intimacy and expressiveness in their romantic ties (reviewed in Green, Bettinger, & Zacks, 1996).

Consequently, lesbian couples tend to exhibit more emotional connectedness, cohesion, and intimacy than gay male or heterosexual couples (Green et al., 1996; Kurdek, 1998; Zacks, Green, & Marrow, 1988), greater capacity for mutual empathy (Ussher & Perz, 2008), more egalitarianism and more shared and flexible decision-making (Green et al., 1996; Matthews, Tartaro, & Hughes, 2003), and more adaptability in dealing with emotional needs and household tasks (Connolly, 2006). Observational research has found that they

show more effective patterns of conflict resolution characterized by more positive emotional tone and more effective negotiation (Metz, Rosser, & Strapko, 1994; Roisman et al., 2008). Initially, investigators critiqued the heightened connectedness of female–female couples as evidence of problematic “fusion” or “merger” (Burch, 1986; Hill, 1999), yet more recent work indicates that female–female couples manage to *balance* emotional expressiveness and sharing with boundary-setting and autonomy (Ackbar & Senn, 2010; Ussher & Perz, 2008).

Importantly, there is more evidence for interpersonal *strengths* in female–female couples than for interpersonal *deficits* in male–male couples. Initially, researchers expected that because men are socialized to value independence and autonomy over connectedness and intimacy, male–male couples would be characterized by distance and disengagement (Kresten & Bepko, 1980). Yet this does not appear to be the case. Most studies detect no differences (or trivial differences) between levels of support, intimacy, cohesion, and satisfaction between male–male and male–female couples (Kurdek, 2001, 2004, 2006; Means-Christensen, Snyder, & Negy, 2003), and in many cases male–male relationship functioning appears to *surpass* that of male–female couples (Green et al., 1996; Kurdek, 2006).

The one area in which male–male couples appear distinctive is sexual exclusivity: Male–male couples are more likely than either male–female or female–female couples to report engaging in extra-dyadic sexual activity, usually with the explicit knowledge of their partner (see also Bonello, 2009; Solomon et al., 2004). This is commonly attributed to the fact that men are socialized to separate sex from love more easily than are women, making it possible for two men in a committed, enduring bond to mutually agree that extradyadic sexual activity does not threaten their emotional commitment to one another (reviewed in Bonello, 2009). Such couples explicitly distinguish *emotional* monogamy from *sexual* monogamy (Adam, 2006; LaSala, 2004), and often negotiate guidelines to ensure that extradyadic sex does not lead to romantic attachment (for example, forbidding one another from having extradyadic sex with the same person more than once). A number of studies have compared relationship functioning and satisfaction in sexually monogamous versus nonmonogamous male–male couples, and have found no significant differences in satisfaction or stability (reviewed in Bonello, 2009). The exceptions were couples who had difficulty communicating effectively about their respective needs and desires, especially desires to renegotiate the “rules” around their arrangement, and couples in which one partner explicitly violated the rules (Bonello, 2009). Overall, the literature on nonmonogamy demonstrates the importance of treating salient differences between same-sex and heterosexual couples *not* as evidence of dysfunction, but instead as potentially adaptive strengths.

Overall, then, the factors that make same-sex romantic relationships different from other-sex romantic relationships appear to have far more to do with gender than with sexual orientation. Sexual-minority and heterosexual individuals do not go about the processes of forming and maintaining romantic ties all that differently from one another, but *men and women* do, and such differences are echoed and magnified in same-sex couples. Before leaving the topic of romantic relationships, however, it bears reiterating that over the course of their lives, the majority of sexual-minority individuals will have romantic relationships with *other-sex* as well as same-sex partners. For many sexual minorities, these relationships are most likely to take place in adolescence and young adulthood, before they have developed a sexual-minority identity and before they have had opportunities to meet potential same-sex partners. Among sexual-minority individuals with nonexclusive (i.e., bisexual) attractions, alternating between other-sex and

same-sex partners may remain a consistent pattern over the life course. One fascinating, unanswered question is how such individuals perceive and experience similarities and differences between their interactions with same-sex versus other-sex romantic partners, particularly regarding gender-related patterns of thought and behavior. This is clearly an area in which greater attention to the distinctive, underinvestigated experiences of bisexual men and women has particular potential to advance our understanding of romantic relationship dynamics more generally.

Parenting

Perhaps one of the most fascinating changes in the lesbian–gay–bisexual community over the past 20 years has been the increasing number—and increasing visibility—of same-sex couples raising children, sometimes called the “gayby boom” (S. M. Johnson & O’Connor, 2002). Census data reveal that 24 percent of same-sex couples have a child under 18 in the home (this figure is larger—34 percent—among female–female couples, Gates & Ost, 2004). Historically, simply possessing a same-sex sexual orientation was enough to disqualify an individual from “fitness” for parenthood in the eyes of society (Clarke, 2002; Golombok, 2000). Yet studies have increasingly demonstrated that same-sex parents show equal or even *higher* levels of parental involvement, time spent with children, warmth, affection, shared decision-making, shared childcare, and overall satisfaction with their parenting roles than heterosexual couples (Dunne, 2000; Fulcher, Sutfin, & Patterson, 2008; Golombok et al., 2003).

Numerous dynamics within the household appear to predict the parenting skills of same-sex parents. One important consideration is biological relatedness. Studies of female–female households have consistently found that the mother who gave birth to the child tends to take on a stronger parenting role and to develop a closer tie to the child, even when parents consciously strive for egalitarian parenting roles and practices (Bos, van Balen, & van den Boom, 2007; Dundas & Kaufman, 2000; S. M. Johnson & O’Connor, 2002). Biblarz and Savci (2010) argued that these trends suggest that lesbians are just as vulnerable as are heterosexuals to the societal ideology of “biologism,” which implicitly posits biological parents as more “authentic” parents. Numerous studies demonstrate that nonbiological mothers in same-sex couples often are not acknowledged as “real” mothers by their friends, families, and society at large (reviewed in Bergen, Suter, & Daas, 2006). One manifestation of this phenomenon is the lack of language to refer to the nonbiological mother in a same-sex parenting couple. On one hand, the lack of a widely agreed-upon term (such as “co-mother,” “second mother,” or “nonbiological mother”) might be viewed as socially and politically progressive, since it decouples the social role of mothering from the biological act of childbirth (Dunne, 2000). On the other hand, however, the lack of a linguistic category may impede nonbiological mothers’ development of the unique and powerful social identity as “mother” (Hequembourg & Farrell, 1999).

Several studies have found that lesbian couples adopt a variety of symbolic strategies and practices to formalize the parenting role of the nonbiological mother, such as settling on distinctive address terms for children to use for each mother (such as “Mommy” and “Mama,” or “Mama B” and “Mama P”), incorporating the nonbiological mother’s last name into the child’s last name, avoiding references to biological relatedness in the household, and assigning critical childcare tasks (such as feeding and bathing) to the nonbiological mother (Bergen et al., 2006; Hequembourg & Farrell,

1999). In the absence of formal legal recognition for the nonbiological mother (which is only available through second-parent adoption, an option that is unavailable to same-sex parents in many states) these strategies play an important role in creating both a public and private sense of family. Additionally, they may promote relationship stability, given that large discrepancies between co-mothers' parenting roles have been associated with jealousy, dissatisfaction, and greater risks for dissolution (Chrisp, 2001; Sullivan, 2004). One important question for future research is whether these linguistic practices are less common and carry less import in geographical regions that grant more protections and legal rights for same-sex couples.

The small amount of research conducted on gay male parents who have children through surrogacy provides no evidence that the father who donated the sperm takes a larger day-to-day parenting role, or is considered a more "authentic" father (Bergman, Rubio, Green, & Padron, 2010). This may reflect the fact that (1) the process of bearing and nursing a child takes considerably more time and physical effort than donating sperm, creating a more substantial discrepancy between the parenting role of the biological and nonbiological mother than between the roles of a biological and nonbiological father; (2) there is much more extensive cultural and historical ideology about the "natural bond" established between mothers and their children during the processes of birth and nursing, which may lead biological mothers and their families to *expect* that they will be more involved with, and more emotionally connected to, the child. One key question for future research is whether the differences that have been observed between biological and nonbiological mothers will diminish as society becomes progressively more accustomed to alternative family forms and structures. Recent data suggest that approximately 90 percent of gay and lesbian adolescents report that they would like to have children (D'Augelli, Rendina, Sinclair, & Grossman, 2006/7). By the time this "next generation" of sexual-minority parents begins rearing children, they may have developed substantially different and more flexible ideologies about the role of gender and biology in parenting.

Adjustment of Children in Same-Sex Households

Considerable research has investigated whether being raised in a same-sex household has repercussions for a child's psychological adjustment, sexual or gender identity, and social relationships, and has found no significant effects (Patterson, 2002). Children and adolescents raised by same-sex couples show no elevations in psychological problems, school difficulties, or behavioral problems (Bos et al., 2007; Golombok et al., 2003; Wainright, Russell, & Patterson, 2004); they show no problems with respect to quality of family interaction or parent-child relationships (Perry et al., 2004), no differences regarding peer relationships, peer acceptance, and the size of their friendship networks (Wainright & Patterson, 2008), no significant problems with self-esteem, anxiety, or depression (Vanfraussen, Ponjaert-Kristoffersen, & Brewaeys, 2003; Wainright et al., 2004), no differences in rates of delinquency, school connectedness, or school performance (Wainright & Patterson, 2006; Wainright et al., 2004). Altogether, evidence clearly indicates that it is the presence of *two high-quality* parents, rather than a parent of each gender, that has the strongest influence on child development (Golombok et al., 2003; Wainright et al., 2004).

Gender identity development in the children of same-sex parents has been a persistent concern: Critics of same-sex parenting have argued that children raised by two women or two men will fail to internalize appropriate gender roles and identities, either because of their observation of an "abnormal" relationship between their parents or the absence

of both female and male adult role models in the household on a day-to-day basis (reviewed in Clarke, 2002; Golombok, 2000; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). Early studies investigating this question were hampered by reliance on fairly limited measures of gender identity, which primarily focused on children's interest in conventionally masculine versus feminine activities and occupations (reviewed in Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). More recent research has adopted more sophisticated conceptualizations of gender identity (for example Egan & Perry, 2001) which focus on the child's subjective experience of comfort in his/her gender, experiences of pressure to conform to gender stereotypes, and attitudes about the relative value of his/her own versus the other gender. Research using these more sophisticated assessments has found that children of lesbian families, compared to those raised in heterosexual families, experience *less* pressure to conform to gender stereotypes and are less likely to view the other gender as superior to their own (Bos & Sandfort, 2010).

Interestingly, parents' household labor appears to be one of the mechanisms through which the children of lesbian parents develop their ideas about gender identity and gender roles. A study comparing the children of lesbian and heterosexual parents (Fulcher et al., 2008) found a strong association between parents' division of household labor and their children's gender stereotypes. Specifically, in *both* lesbian and heterosexual households, children whose parents divided household labor unequally reported more gender-stereotypical occupational preferences. This is particularly notable given that Fulcher and colleagues (2008) also found (similar to many other studies) that lesbian parents endorsed more flexible gender roles for their children. Clearly, children attend to what their parents *do*, and not simply what they *say*, when it comes to household gender roles. When women are observed doing "all" the housework (even if there is another woman in the household doing fairly little), this provides a potent message to young children about women's roles as homemakers.

Perhaps the most controversial focus of inquiry is the sexual orientation of children raised in same-sex households, despite consistent evidence that practically all of the children of lesbians and gay men grow up to identify as heterosexual (Golombok et al., 2003; Patterson, 2004). However, longitudinal research has shown that in young adulthood, girls raised by lesbian mothers are significantly more likely than girls raised by heterosexual parents to consider and to experiment with same-sex relationships, regardless of heterosexual identification (Golombok & Tasker, 1996). Notably, however, the heightened same-sex exploration of girls raised by same-sex parents does *not* apparently lead such girls to identify as lesbian. It is possible that such a trajectory of heterosexual development, in which individuals have the freedom and familial support to *question* their sexuality instead of simply presuming their own heterosexuality by default, may actually prove adaptive, potentially leading to a greater sense of sexual self-determination and autonomy. Clearly, we need additional longitudinal research on such questions.

Conclusions and Future Directions

Perhaps the most significant weakness of extant research on the family relationships of sexual minorities is that it has addressed only a small fraction of the sexual-minority population. As noted in the beginning of this chapter, most individuals with same-sex attractions and relationships do *not* openly identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, and yet the vast majority of research on same-sex romantic relationships and same-sex parenting has been conducted with lesbian–gay–bisexual-identified men and women. We do not yet know whether and how individuals' decisions about sexual identification influence their

family ties. Historically, it was presumed that sexual-minority individuals who chose not to label their sexual identities were still struggling with the sexual questioning process, or suffered from internalized homophobia, and yet we now know that this is not the case (Diamond, 2008). In many cases, individuals choose not to label their sexual identities because they have sexual attractions and relationships with *both* men and women, and may not know about, or feel comfortable with, the term “bisexual.” It bears noting that whereas bisexual individuals were once thought to be relatively uncommon, we now know on the basis of several random representative studies, conducted in the U.S. and internationally, that individuals with bisexual attractions and relationships *far* outnumber individuals with exclusively same-sex attractions and relationships (Garofalo et al., 1999; Laumann et al., 1994). Despite this fact, the identity category of “bisexual” has been much slower to receive cultural legitimacy than the categories of “gay,” and is frequently misunderstood and denigrated even within lesbian–gay communities (Mohr & Rochlen, 1999; Mulick & Wright, 2002; Ochs, 1996; Rust, 1995). Researchers must strive to identify and recruit bisexual individuals and to assess how their nonexclusive attractions and relationships have shaped their interpersonal experiences across the life course.

Ethnic and socioeconomic diversity is also an important issue: Although the majority of published research focuses on white, middle-class parents, Census data reveal that ethnic-minority same-sex couples are more likely to have children than white same-sex couples (by a factor of 2 among women and by a factor of 4 among men, reviewed in Gates & Romero, 2009). Although only 24 percent of individuals in same-sex couples are ethnic minorities (Romero, Baumle, Badgett, & Gates, 2007), fully 40 percent of same-sex couples raising children are ethnic minorities, and 50 percent of the *children* of same-sex couples are ethnic minorities. Another important issue is income: Same-sex couples with children have lower median household incomes (approximately \$46,000) than heterosexual cohabiting couples raising children (approximately \$60,000) and married heterosexual couples raising children (approximately \$75,000, Romero et al, 2007). This is all the more striking given that cohabiting male–male couples *without* children generally have higher median incomes than heterosexual couples (National Center for Family & Marriage Research, 2010). Furthermore, same-sex couples raising children are approximately twice as likely to be receiving public assistance as married couples with children, across all ethnic groups (although their rates of public assistance pale in comparison to those of unmarried heterosexual households with children, Gates & Romero, 2009). Despite these notable demographic trends, very little research on same-sex parenting has specifically addressed issues of ethnicity and social class, and this remains among the most important areas for future research.

Another chronic weakness is the lack of attention to gay–bisexual *fathers* (with some notable exceptions, such as Bergman et al., 2010; Golombok & Tasker, 2010). Given that sexual-minority women have historically been more likely to parent than sexual-minority men, this imbalance is understandable. Yet as the number of male–male parenting households continues to increase, it will become increasingly important to investigate whether and how gender-related dynamics create substantially different parenting practices among male–male versus female–female and male–female couples (paralleling the investigations reviewed above on *couple* functioning in these three types of dyads). The *child’s* gender must also be taken into account. Some studies have found that lesbian parents report greater comfort raising daughters than sons (Chrisp, 2001; Dundas & Kaufman, 2000), and that lesbians with daughters report higher-quality mother–child interactions than do lesbians with sons (Vanfraussen, Ponjaert Kristoffersen, & Brewaeys, 2003). Such

findings raise provocative questions about the degree to which male–male and female–female couples may be guided in their parenting decisions by different implicit assumptions about the “nature” of male versus female children. Notably, such assumptions have a long and stubborn history: Courts have historically treated the legal rights of same-sex parents quite differently depending on the gender of the parents *and* the child, reflecting long-standing cultural expectations about what female and male children *need*, and what female and adult parents are capable of *providing* (Rosky, 2009). Clearly, we need additional research investigating the potentially unique ways in which male–male and female–female parents interact with male and female children, and such gendered patterns of parenting emerge and unfold over time.

Another intriguing area for future research concerns “alternative” family arrangements and practices, such as maintaining separate residences from a primary partner (Hess & Catell, 2001), maintaining long-standing ties with ex-lovers (Weinstock, 2004), pursuing multiple and/or nonmonogamous partnerships (Munson & Stelbourn, 1999; West, 1996), developing romantic, emotionally primary, but nonsexual relationships (Rothblum & Brehony, 1993), or forgoing “primary” ties altogether in favor of “chosen families” of close friends (Nardi, 1999; Weinstock & Rothblum, 1996). We know little about the prevalence of these practices and their implications for day-to-day family processes. Yet greater attention to these phenomena has the potential to advance researchers’ understanding of the psychological and behavioral mechanisms through which adaptive interpersonal ties are crafted, managed, and maintained over the life course.

In conclusion, it bears emphasizing that perhaps the single most defining characteristic of sexual-minority individuals’ family relationships is that they have no single defining characteristic. Sexual-minority individuals are as diverse as the American population more generally, with similarly diverse family practices and processes. Hence, future research must go beyond simply testing for differences between sexual-minority and heterosexual individuals, and should instead attempt to reveal the specific interpersonal *processes and mechanisms* through which individuals’ status as a sexual minority shapes the formation, functioning, and long-term development of their closest interpersonal ties. Such research has the potential to greatly advance our understanding of the diversity and complexity of the sexual-minority life course.

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