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Brenda McKerson

Raising the Next Generation: What's Gender Got to Do with It?

One year after passage of the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964, the United States government declared itself on the precipice of what it regarded as a new crisis in race relations – how to ensure its Black citizens' equality in the wake of their newly found liberty. For this cause, then Assistant Secretary of Labor and sociologist, and later U.S. Senator, Daniel Patrick Moynihan was tasked with defining the root cause of Black poverty in America. What resulted was the report titled "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action." The report, more familiarly known as "The Moynihan Report," while acknowledging the effect of limited educational and employment opportunities resulting from racial discrimination and injustice, focused on the matriarchal structure of the poor Black family, calling it the country's most "dangerous social problem." Moynihan argued that this unconventional family structure was unstable to the point of being "pathological" because of its lack of a strong father figure, and that, if it were allowed to persist it would result in the cycle of poverty and disadvantage repeating itself among these families' children who would continue to blight society at large.

Fast forward a half century to today when the focus is no longer Black families but rather same-sex families. In his article "Children of Homosexuals Fare Worse on Most Outcomes," Peter Sprigg, Senior Fellow for Policy Studies at the Family Research Council, lauds the research of University of Texas sociologist Mark Regnerus, calling it "the most careful, rigorous, and methodologically sound study ever conducted" -- the "gold standard" in its field. Sprigg is referring to Regnerus' New Family Structures Studies and related report, titled "How Different are the Adult Children of Parents who Have Same-Sex Relationships?" According to Sprigg, Regnerus' "virtually irrefutable" research shows that statistically significant outcomes exist in the differences between children of married heterosexual parents (which Regnerus terms "intact biological families") and the children of homosexual parents. According to Sprigg, Regnerus' research shows that the latter "are much more likely to have received welfare...to have lower educational attainment... to suffer from depression...to have been arrested more often...and, if female, to have had more sexual partners -- both male and female." Further, Sprigg writes that Regnerus' research supports findings that children of lesbian mothers additionally "are more likely to be currently cohabiting... are more likely to have 'attachment' problems...use marijuana more frequently...are more likely to be sexually abused." When Moynihan assesses

the “social pathology afflicting the Negro community” in 1965, he finds its center to be a non-traditional family structure which he criticizes as detrimental to its children and “out of line with the rest of American society.” Similarly, when Regnerus analyzes results from the 2012 New Family Structures Study, he finds that the same-sex family structure, by the very nature of its being different, is subject to “forces uniquely problematic for child development” (766). Each of these researchers is looking at an alternative family style within a minority population and finding it out of step with the mainstream. Could it be that Regnerus’ “Findings from the New Family Structures Study” is the new “Moynihan Report,” and “gay” is the new “Black?”

The subject of same-sex parenting, barely a blip on the radar a decade ago, now accounts for a paradigm shift in family research. Social scientists, psychologists, proponents and detractors of same-sex parenting alike are weighing in on the possible outcomes for children with same-sex parents. They are seeking to determine whether this family form provides an environment for children that is equivalent to the traditional, marriage-based, nuclear family (having a male father and a female mother), or whether “having gay parents or the stigma of gay parents is detrimental to a child’s development” (Rimalower and Caty 18). This paper examines some of the issues raised and opinions voiced as a result of studies performed on behalf of notable authorities and stake holders in the debate on same-sex parenting (e.g. the American Psychological Association, National Council on Family Relations, Family Research Council, etc.). This paper concludes that the findings of these studies do not form the basis for consensus and that parenting is not a monolith to be evaluated on a single factor.

In her 1989 review of literature concerning children of lesbian and gay parents, Julie Schwartz Gottman looks at the issue from the perspective of clinical implications and judicial decisions related to child custody. Gottman’s research comes at a time when an increasing number of lesbian and gay parents are no longer hiding their gender identities and are attempting to maintain guardianship of their children during court custody disputes, despite social stereotypes that confront their abilities to parent.

Gottman first reviews the literature and finds that problems surrounding same-sex parents raising their children resulted more from societal forces than from the parenting itself:

In general, none of the ...studies on children of lesbian mothers and gay fathers reported negative effects on children relative to their parent’s sexual orientation. Children did not appear deviant in gender identity, sexual orientation or social adjustment. Issues that emerged during their upbringing related more to society’s rejection of homosexuality than to poor parent-child relationships. (186)

Then, citing the limitations of the above studies due to their lack of control groups, their small sample sizes, and their predominate focus on younger children, Gottman conducts her own study in an attempt to address some of these weaknesses – particularly in light of her contention that “it is difficult to predict sexual orientation, gender identity, and social adjustment in children of homosexual parents without looking at later adult development” (187).

From the standpoint of their legal implications, Gottman’s own findings support those of the earlier research in their assessment of the apparent normalcy of the children of lesbian mothers and gay fathers with regard to gender identity, sexual orientation, and social adjustment. In addition, Gottman concludes that “Parental homosexuality does not appear to directly or

indirectly harm the child. Children may have issues to contend with concerning how society perceives them when a parent's homosexuality is revealed. However, it appears that children develop strategies to protect themselves when necessary" (191).

From the standpoint of their clinical implications, Gottman's findings support the conclusions that although "children do not demonstrate pathology related to their parents' homosexual orientation...there appear to be issues that the clinician should be sensitive to in children of gay and lesbian parents":

[P]arental homosexuality does not in itself signal pathology in the family or in the child...The time and manner in which parents disclose their homosexuality to children appears to be important...Adolescents seem the hardest hit by disclosure...The children would probably do best if the parent was secure in both his or her sexual identity and parental role...given the implications of homosexuality in a homophobic culture. (191-192)

In their 1995 assessment of the prevailing mainstream family literature regarding how sexual orientation impacts family experience, particularly the psychological and social development of children from same-sex families, Katherine Allen and David Demo find that the body of research is limited, primarily because "Sexist and heterosexist assumptions continue to underlie most of the research on families by focusing on heterosexual partnerships and parenthood." (112). Elucidating their theory as to the absence of what may be an uncomfortable subject from researchers' studies of family phenomena, Allen and Demo define heterosexism as a bias that cannot conceptualize human experience in other than strictly heterosexual terms and that, consequently, ignores and invalidates other relationships and lifestyles:

Heterosexism operates in personal belief systems and in institutional practices. Like racism, sexism, and classism, heterosexism is a form of institutional oppression designed to ridicule, limit, or silence alternative discourses about identity and behavior. Societal institutions reinforce heterosexism by shaping and controlling knowledge. (122)

Allen and Demo further assert that this heterosexual bias reflects society's belief that "gayness and family are mutually exclusive concepts, a belief that prevails because the same-sex family, more than any other form, challenges fundamental patriarchal notions of family and gender relations" (112). Despite finding a void in same-sex family research, Allen and Demo's investigation cites a 1993 Downey and Powell study analyzing 35 social, psychological, and educational outcomes of children in different living arrangements in order to evaluate what they refer to as the "same-sex parent argument" which insists that "the presence of and identification with the same-sex parent is necessary for the child's healthy emotional adjustment and appropriate gender role development" (118). It would follow, then, from this argument that a heterosexual female daughter could not identify appropriately with a lesbian mother, and a heterosexual male son could not achieve appropriate emotional adjustment and gender role development when raised by a gay father. No evidence was found by the Downey and Powell study to support this argument, which Allen and Demo find is used to challenge the competency and adequacy of lesbian and gay parents.

Another implication cited by the Allen and Demo research, and one worth noting here because of its effect on children, is the need to further explore the liminal aspect of the same-sex family. Allen and Demo's position, based on a 1989 Brown study, is that lesbian mothers and gay fathers exhibit "Biculturalism – the contradiction of being between two cultures" in the sense that they interact as parents of their children within the mainstream heterosexual culture while relating as peers with the gay community in which they share a same-sex identity (122). Further, Allen and Demo, citing the Brown study and a 1993 Laird study, find that this biculturality offers a collateral advantage of "resilience and creative adaptation" in an environment of minority group oppression – similar to the "dual socialization that many Black parents provide for their children, preparing them for institutionalized racism they will confront and at the same time helping them to become self-sufficient, competent adults" (123).

A decade after Allen and Demo survey the landscape for studies pertaining to same-sex parenting and find it lacking, Lucy Rimalower and Caren Caty find that a slowly emerging body of research exists from which to conclude that "children raised by same-sex parents are not disadvantaged compared with their peers raised in households headed by heterosexual parents" (17). With their focus on the effects of gay parents on a child's development, Rimalower and Caty review literature and studies of this "highly contended issue" from the perspectives of the involvement of same-sex parents in their children's school system; the role of heterosexism, gender identity, and sexual orientation in the lives of same-sex families; and the emotional and developmental issues facing children of same-sex parents in contrast with children having heterosexual parents.

Noting that children with same-sex parents -- regardless of their parents' legal or biological status -- are entering school systems, creating issues for both the families and the faculties, Rimalower and Caty cite 2004 Wainright, Russell, and Patterson research finding that children with same-sex parents are more connected to their school communities than their peers with heterosexual parents. This suggests, they observe, the importance of same-sex parents' efforts toward making school a welcoming and safe place for their children. Because having same-sex parents is not necessarily an obvious trait, same-sex parents and their children are confronted with the issue of if, when, and how to disclose their non-traditional family structure to school personnel and other families. And while these children may have no problem understanding and describing their families to others and may start school feeling proud of their families, Rimalower and Caty cite research which finds that negative reactions and disapproval from these children's teachers and/or peers, or the children's being discriminated against or excluded from the family norm at school can negatively impact these children's well-being and "denies these children a sense of legitimacy and inhibits their sense of future potential" (22).

Maintaining that homophobia and heterocentrism continue to be socially relevant and politically charged issues for same-sex families, Rimalower and Caty cite the 2004 Clarke, Kitzinger, and Potter study indicating that these factors may cause school-aged children, particularly adolescents, of these families to be bullied, harassed, ostracized, stigmatized, taunted and rejected by their peers and schoolmates, and even assumed to

have the same sexual orientation as their parents (25). These same studies, finding a negative correlation between experiencing stigma and self-esteem and a positive correlation between positive coping and self-esteem, speak to the importance of children and families having support groups as well as engaging in conversations about sexual orientation in the same ways and degrees that heterosexual parents might educate their children about relationships and sexuality.

Addressing another issue surrounding same-sex parenting research -- gender identity and sexual orientation -- Rimalower and Caty cite research that dispels stereotypes which assume, for example, that gay mothers are less maternal than heterosexual mothers, or that effeminacy in gay fathers precludes children's ability to achieve their own healthy gender development (26). In addition Rimalower and Caty refute the notion that gay fathers and gay mothers necessarily raise gay children by citing the American Psychological Association's positions that, first, homosexuality is not a psychological disorder and, second, that "there is no evidence... that children raised by homosexual parents are more likely to have sexual or romantic attraction to the same sex than children raised by heterosexual parents" (27).

Finally, Rimalower and Caty look at research that questions whether, all else being equal, there are significant differences important to the well-being of the children in households with same-sex parents versus those with heterosexual parents. Rimalower and Caty point to research that shows "there are no significant differences across a spectrum of dimensions including emotional functioning, gender identification, sexual orientation, and social relationships" and "no significant differences in psychiatric disorders and psychological problems." Further, despite the unique challenges facing same-sex parents, Rimalower and Caty cite research reporting that "there are more similarities than differences in parenting styles between heterosexual and homosexual parents" (27).

From the studies included in their review, Rimalower and Caty conclude most notably that no significant differences exist that would impair the development of children raised by same-sex parents compared to children raised within traditional family structures. Further, they find that the research overwhelmingly demonstrates that "it is the quality of parent-child relationships, more than biological or legal status, which has an impact on children's development" (Rimalower and Caty 29).

While echoing many of the same sentiments and findings as the Rimalower-Caty report on the subject of same-sex families, a 2011 *Journal of Nursing Law* article examines the issue from a different standpoint: the impact of recognizing the legal relationship of same-sex parenting couples on family health and well-being. To illustrate the extent to which this impact could be felt, the article cites figures from the 2000 U.S. Census; approximately 960,000 children younger than the age of 18 being raised by 740,000 lesbian or gay parents, including more than 200,000 female-female or male-male couples. The article asserts that, as a social construction, parenting and family life are central to participation in society and to the experience of full citizenship (Weber 39). Further, it cites 2004 R. J. Green research suggesting that these citizenship relations

inherently provide the advantages of “links to economic progress, legal protections for partner relationships, and increased parental rights that ...strengthen legal rights of children” (Weber 43). Conversely, as indicated by G. M. Herek’s 2004 research, lacking access to these legal frameworks causes sexual minorities (and by implication, their children) to experience more difficulty and a kind of social inadequacy (Weber 42). So important is family, the article contends, that most people trace their well being and social status to traditional features of family life and partnered relationship recognition. Therefore, the article maintains, “the well-being of children raised by lesbian and gay couples is undermined when laws and social customs do not recognize their families,” causing the stability and cohesiveness of these families to be weakened (Weber 43). Accordingly, the article cites G. M. Herek’s 2006 research suggesting that government recognition of same-sex partnership is likely to affect children positively because it can afford them “a stable legal bond with the parent that gives the child much needed security and continuity and minimizes the likelihood of conflicting or competing claims by nonparents for the child’s custody” (Weber 46).

So, where are we in the academic debate over same-sex parenting? Among others, including some research cited here, findings from the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Psychological Association, the National Council on Family Relations, and the National Longitudinal Lesbian Family Study are that sexual orientation of parents is not a major determinant in children’s emotional development and that what really matters is the quality of parenting and the family’s economic health. Still, others argue that many of these studies lack the quality and amount of demographic data that would make them definitive. And the earlier research of Julie Gottman seems to dispel the assumption that parents’ homosexuality harms the child, but also tells us that parents’ homosexuality does affect the child, even though the effect may be due to social stereotypes rather than the parenting itself.

In sharp contrast to those positions is the harsh stance taken by the American College of Pediatricians, socially conservative former members of the American Academy of Pediatrics who disagree with positions held by the larger Academy on same-sex parenting. The American College of Pediatricians discourages adoption by same-sex couples or single parents, arguing that “the fundamental mother-father family unit, within the context of marriage” is the “optimal setting for the development and nurturing of children.” The group goes further by condemning gay parenting, maintaining that “rooted in the best available science” is support for their position that “there is significant risk of harm inherent in exposing a child to the homosexual lifestyle” and that it is “potentially hazardous to children and dangerously irresponsible to change the age-old prohibition on homosexual parenting, whether by adoption, foster care, or reproductive manipulation” (Hausman 9).

In addition, Mark Regnerus’ report, which is the subject of much criticism from mainstream researchers, is cited by some scholars and detractors of same-sex families like Jennifer Marshall, Director of Domestic Policy Studies for the conservative Heritage Foundation, as an indication that “there is not enough evidence that [children of same-sex households] are going to be the same [as those having heterosexual parents]. There’s

every reason to believe that different family structures will have different outcomes” (Somashekhar 2). Similar views were voiced by Supreme Court Justices Antonin Scalia and Anthony M. Kennedy during recent arguments on same-sex marriage. Justice Scalia asserted that “There’s considerable disagreement” among experts over whether “raising a child in a single-sex family is harmful or not.” Kennedy remarked, “We have five years of information to weigh against 2,000 years of history” (Savage and Dolan).

All this disagreement begs the question: how good are we at forecasting social outcomes? It is not difficult to understand why there are conflicting views on the part of those currently attempting to predict the effect of same-sex parenting on the next generation. Years from now, however, when social scientists look back on these predictions and evaluate them against actual outcomes, they may find themselves in the same position as those who now, with several decades of history and data to analyze, disagree on the answer to the question: “Was Moynihan right?”

Ron Haskins, senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, contends that Moynihan was right and that “it was inevitable that the facts would overcome the political correctness of ignoring the family’s role in the growth of the black underclass” (282). Acknowledging that “family dissolution has greatly increased among blacks and has spread to all demographic groups in the nation,” Haskins, while attempting not to malign the single Black mother, insists that the continuing demise of married-couple families has had the greatest negative effect on Black children:

Of all the consequences of family dissolution that are harmful to blacks, none is more important than the effect of lone parenting on the development of black children...It is not necessary to demean the efforts of single mothers to observe that their children would be better off on average if the mother and father were married and provided a low-conflict environment for their children. (Haskins 285)

Social science educators and researchers Kathryn Edlin, Laura Tach, and Ronald Mincy, focusing their research on contemporary unwed fathers’ involvement in their children’s lives and using data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, conclude that from the standpoint of the children affected, Moynihan was right to be concerned about the increasing instances of non-traditional families on future generations. These researchers find that “among U.S. couples, cohabiting unions among parents with children are extraordinarily fragile”; that these unions have led to “repartnering” which may cause children to experience fatherhood as “a series of temporary commitments rather than a lifelong obligation”; and that the impact of these unions now extends beyond Black families to a significant minority of all American children (Edlin, Tach, Mincy 170,172). Finally, these researchers conclude that “it is unlikely that many children in this situation will receive the same level of emotional or financial investment enjoyed by those who live stably with both their biological mothers and fathers” (Edlin, Tach, and Mincy 172).

When researcher Damaur Quander evaluates “The Moynihan Report,” she disputes Moynihan’s contention that Blacks’ inability to attain the “American Dream” is directly

related to matriarchy within Black culture, “a social system Western culture claims is detrimental to the successful development of children” (iv). What Moynihan deemed as “destructive and oppositional to the preferred nuclear family model – where the father figure stabilizes the ascribed imbalance caused by matriarchy,” Quander finds to be “the oldest social construct for family...that is reclaiming itself by natural selection in modernity” (v). She concludes that matriarchy, this non-traditional family form by Western standards, is not detrimental to children’s well-being and is actually forward-thinking and beneficial in the long term:

Theirs [Blacks’] was not the small and vulnerable nuclear family of white America, but the extended kinship system of rural folk and of the poor who cooperate that each child may live and survive, no matter what befalls its own father and mother. (Quander 486)

This historical period during which “The Moynihan Report” was written predates the feminist movement and a number of economic, demographic and cultural changes. The effects of these changes on the Western family are yet evolving. While there is no consensus, but in fact sharp disagreement, among scholars over the effects of same-sex parenting on children and on society as a whole, several things seem clear from the research reviewed here. First, the effects of parenting cannot be evaluated by a uniform standard or evaluated on the basis of a single issue, as reinforced by several researchers’ concluding that the quality of the parenting is at least as important as the biology and gender identity of the parents. Secondly, as several of the researchers suggest, many of the issues that arise from this non-traditional family form are not due to the family form itself, but rather to how the rest of us perceive and react to it. Even Moynihan, in 1965, and Regnerus, in 2012, agree on this point. Moynihan writes that it is the non-conventionality of matriarchy in an era of male dominance that is the problem:

There is, presumably, no special reason why a society in which males are dominant in family relationships is to be preferred to a matriarchal arrangement. However, it is clearly a disadvantage for a minority group to be operating on one principle, while the great majority of the population, and the one with the most advantages... is operating on another...A subculture, such as that of the Negro American, in which this [male leadership in public and private affairs] is not the pattern, is placed at a distinct advantage. (Moynihan)

Similarly, Regnerus admits that children do not need a married mother and father joined in a heterosexual union to turn out well as adults and that external forces can contribute to negative outcomes cited by his research as being associated with same-sex parenting:

The tenor of the last 10 years of academic discourse about gay and lesbian parents suggests that there is little to nothing about them that might be negatively associated with child development, and a variety of things that might be uniquely positive...the findings reported herein may be explicable in part by a variety of forces uniquely problematic for child development in gay and lesbian families – including a lack of social

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support for parents, stress exposure resulting from persistent stigma.
(Regnerus 766)

It seems obvious that the issue of same-sex parenting is one that goes to people's core values and convictions. It is one that has created a dividing line, not only among society at large, but also within individuals who find themselves torn between their principled or religious objections and their evolving attitudes away from those objections. A shift in attitudes toward support of same-sex parenting is occurring and will likely continue to do so because "same-sex couples ...will continue to raise children [and] American courts are finding arguments against gay marriage decreasingly persuasive" (Regnerus 766), and because of the impact of a younger generation that seems broadly accepting of this family form.

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