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The Hetero-Gay Family: An Emergent Family Configuration

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ABSTRACT. The hetero-gay family is a relatively new family configuration that is headed by a heterosexual mother and gay father who conceive and raise children together, although residing separately. This article presents the unique characteristics of hetero-gay families and the potential implications for child development of growing up in a hetero-gay family. Recent research on non-marital motherhood and fatherhood among gay men is used to inform the debate. Comparisons of hetero-gay families to other family configurations help highlight central issues and offer directions for future research. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2005 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

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Over the past four decades, the traditional two-parent family has given way to an array of family patterns (Erera, 2002). This article considers one such family configuration: the hetero-gay family. This family is comprised of a gay man and a heterosexual woman who choose to conceive and raise a child together outside of marriage. This relatively new family configuration came to our attention through the involvement of one of the authors in a ten-year-old non-profit organization. This organization was founded by two social workers in an attempt to assist gay men and heterosexual women seeking to have shared parenthood outside the boundaries of traditional marriage. The organization is based on the premise that being a parent is an inalienable human right regardless of a person's ability or desire to be married, and that the fulfillment of that right can be made possible in the setting of an alternative family. Since its foundation about 30 children have been born to participants via artificial insemination.

This hetero-gay family resembles the post-divorce *binuclear family* (a term suggested by Ahrons, 1980) in two key aspects. In hetero-gay families, as in many post divorce binuclear families, both birth parents share parental responsibilities although they do not share a residence. Second, the children usually reside with only one of the parents, typically the mother. In contrast to post divorce binuclear families, in hetero-gay families, the parental partnership does not stem from a previous intimate relationship between the parents.

The evolution of this family pattern is linked to several social and technological changes. These include the women's liberation movement, the sexual revolution, medical advances in assisted reproduction technologies, women's increased social and economic opportunities (especially for middle-class educated women), the emergence of values emphasizing personal freedom and fulfillment, and the decreased social stigma attached to non-marital child-rearing. These changes have all contributed to an increase in non-marital motherhood (Anderson & Stewart, 1994; Burns & Scott, 1994; Miller, 1992). In addition, the growing numbers of gay men and lesbians who are coming out of the closet along with greater social acceptance of same-sex relationships has generated new family patterns in which one or both parents identify themselves as homosexual. Although to date most lesbian and gay parents conceived their children within the context of a previous heterosex-

ual relationship, increasing numbers of lesbians and gay men are becoming parents after coming out (Beers, 1996; Patterson, 1992). These developments, along with the increasing availability of artificial insemination, which enables women and men to fulfill their biological parenthood without intercourse and without an attachment to a partner, contribute to the emergence of hetero-gay families.

To the best of our knowledge, hetero-gay families have not yet received scholarly or clinical attention despite the growing interest in new family patterns. Several reasons may account for this. First, the number of these families is small. Second, hetero-gay families start their families at the point where divorced parents already are: co-parenting their shared children while being divorced as a couple. Thus, their families appear, on the surface, to resemble divorced families. Being less visible, they do not evoke controversy among professionals, academicians, or the public at large, and they are difficult to find and recruit for research. Third, it is conceivable that unlike divorced families, parents in hetero-gay families are less likely to be involved in legal struggles regarding custody, visitation, and child support as they most probably negotiate these aspects prior to becoming co-parents. Fourth, being the birth parents of their children, their decision to parent does not intersect with public policies governing adoption and foster care as it often does in the case of lesbian or gay families (Erera, 2002; Patterson, 1992).

This article has two purposes: (1) to explore the central features of hetero-gay families; and (2) to identify the research questions that need to be addressed in order to understand this family configuration. We begin with an overview of recent research on non-marital motherhood and its effects on the quality of the mothers' lives and then examine the research on fatherhood among gay men and its effects on the fathers' lives. After identifying the unique characteristics of hetero-gay families and drawing upon research on children in father-absent households, we consider the implications for child development of growing up in a hetero-gay family.

NON-MARITAL MOTHERHOOD

Heterosexual women who elect to co-parent with gay men represent a unique subgroup among heterosexual women who have elected non-marital motherhood. Non-marital motherhood has increased dramatically over the last few decades in most industrialized countries (Burns & Scott, 1994). The statistical data indicate that the rapid increase of

non-marital motherhood is particularly apparent for upper-middle class educated professional women in their late 30s or 40s (Mattes, 1994; Siegel, 1998). In the United States for example, during the years 1980-1990 the number of non-marital births for women between the ages of 30-34 increased by 120 percent corresponding to an increase of 78 percent for women aged 35-39 and 38 percent for those aged 40-45 (Mattes, 1994). During the 1980s, the rate of non-marital births doubled for women in academia and nearly tripled for women with professional or managerial jobs (Ludtke, 1997; Mattes, 1994). Thus, in contrast to previous decades, when non-marital motherhood was largely a phenomenon associated with teenage girls from low social-economical backgrounds, today it is mostly associated with a population of older women from higher socio-economical backgrounds (Bock, 2000; Ludtke, 1997).

These statistics point to the emergence of a unique group of unwed mothers referred to as *single mothers by choice* (Bock, 2000; Hertz & Ferguson, 1997; Mannis, 1999), defined as women who have chosen to raise their children outside of marriage or an alternative long-term partnership (Mattes, 1994; Pakizegi, 1990). It should be noted, however, that the choice made by these women refers to becoming a mother rather than to becoming a single mother. Most of the heterosexual single mothers by choice state that they would have preferred to raise their children within a marriage (Bock, 1995; Hertz & Ferguson, 1997; Ludtke, 1997) emphasizing that the inability to find a suitable partner is the determinant that led them to the second best choice–raising a child on their own (Linn, 1991; Ludtke, 1997).

One of the issues raised in literature is why these mothers could not find a suitable marital partner. While many single mothers by choice support the institution of marriage, they tend to harbor an idealized image of what marriage should be (Siegel, 1995), and they are unwilling to settle for less (Bock, 1995). Single mothers by choice tend to be very cautious about intimate relationships with men because they believe that such relationships may undermine their autonomy and independence (Miller, 1992; Renvoize, 1985). Compared to married mothers, these mothers are less inclined to accept the give-and-take of a marital relationship believing that marital relationships are too demanding and limiting of their personal freedom (Siegel, 1995). This is consistent with research indicating that married women often relinquish independence, autonomy and control, especially in traditional marriages (Anderson & Stewart, 1994).

It would appear, then, that while most single mothers by choice declare their wishes to marry, in reality many are apprehensive of it. Indeed, the empirical findings of Segal-Engelchin (2001) reveal that single mothers by choice, in comparison to married mothers, report higher levels of fear of intimacy in close heterosexual relationships.

Pathways to Single Motherhood

As single mothers by choice approach their late thirties and early forties, they confront the biological clock. They contemplate whether they want and will be able to raise children. Usually, they see two choices: (1) becoming mothers by establishing a family without a spouse; or (2) alternatively foregoing a family and remaining single and childless (Hertz & Ferguson, 1997; Ludtke, 1997). Although most of these women view the traditional two-parent family as the ideal family pattern (Hertz & Ferguson, 1997; Ludtke, 1997; Mattes, 1994), they divide the dream of a family into two distinct parts: motherhood and marriage. They are determined to realize the part they believe is under their control: motherhood (Anderson & Stewart, 1994; Bock, 1995; Ludtke, 1997).

Women who choose to fulfill their motherhood usually do so via one of three major pathways: (1)sexual intercourse; (2) donor insemination; or (3) adoption (Bock, 1995; Hertz & Ferguson, 1997; Siegel, 1998). Women who want exclusive control over their children's lives often choose a father whose identity remains unknown (e.g., insemination from a sperm bank), thereby foreclosing future involvement of the birth father (Anderson & Stewart, 1994; Bock, 1995, Hertz & Ferguson, 1997). Women who are interested in the involvement of the birth father tend to choose a father whose identity is known (e.g., via sexual intercourse or a sperm donation from a known donor). This course of action leaves a window of opportunity for a future relationship for the child with her or his birth father. In making such choices, these women act as gatekeepers in the formation of the father-child relationship (Hertz & Ferguson, 1997). Nevertheless, when the father's identity is known, the nature of the father-child relationship is not entirely under the mother's control. In reality, there is tremendous diversity in these families with respect to the parental involvement of the fathers. Some fathers are actively involved in raising the child despite the fact that they do not reside with the mother and child. Some prefer a minimal involvement in the child's life while others never visit their children nor provide any child support (Hertz & Ferguson, 1997; Ludtke, 1997; Renvoize, 1985).

Families of single mothers by choice in which fathers participate in childrearing resemble the post-divorce binuclear family pattern in which the birth parents co-parent although they reside in separate households. Similarly, mothers in hetero-gay families may resemble divorced mothers in sharing the parental responsibilities with the non-residential birth father. Yet, in contrast to divorced mothers, the parental partnership of mothers in hetero-gay families with the birth fathers does not stem from a prior intimate relationship which theoretically might render co-parenting easier by virtue of less past conflict.

Several important questions arise in regard to mothers in hetero-gay families. For instance, what are their motivations for non-marital motherhood? What were the considerations that led them to choose a gay man as a co-parent over other available options? Did they explore other options for fulfilling their motherhood such as adoption or sperm donation? How do they compare with other mothers who have elected non-marital motherhood with respect to such issues as: views of marriage and family life, perception of gender relations, and the distribution of labor and child rearing? To the best of our knowledge, none of the published work to date has addressed these questions. Research into these issues will advance our understanding about these mothers' experiences and, furthermore, may provide a more comprehensive picture of factors related to women's family choices.

The Effects of Non-Marital Motherhood on the Quality of the Mothers' Lives

The impact of family structure on mothers' well being has been extensively examined. A review of these studies indicates that alongside family structure there are other variables that are important in shaping mothers' well-being including the quality of family relationships and mothers' personal resources such as education and earning capability (Acock & Demo, 1994; Demo & Acock, 1996; Katz, 1991). Typically, these studies focus on comparisons of married and single mothers overlooking important distinctions within groups (Demo & Acock, 1996). This is especially problematic in the case of mothers who have deliberately elected non-marital motherhood as they have not been included (or identified) in most comparative studies. The few studies that have specifically addressed single mothers by choice are mostly based on small samples (Lewin, 1993; Miller, 1992; Siegel, 1995).

An exception is Segal-Engelchin's (2001) study comparing the quality of life of three groups of mothers with similar levels of personal re-

sources (education, professional skills, and earning capability): non-marital mothers by choice, divorced, and married mothers. Her study focused on four components of quality of life: physical, psychological, social, and cultural. Her findings indicate significant similarities between the three groups with respect to all four components. This suggests that family structure, in and of itself, has a negligible effect on the quality of life of mothers with high levels of personal and economic resources. This is supported by previous research showing that equating family structure with family functioning is both wrong and harmful (Acock & Demo, 1994; Hill, 1998; Silverstein & Auerbach, 1999). It might well be that the high level of personal resources which allows the mothers greater freedom of choice and independence is more important than family structure *per se* in explaining mothers' quality of life. High levels of education translate into higher financial resources which in turn empower women in many areas of their lives (Bock, 2000). Mothers with high incomes can provide high quality day care and schools for their children (Ludtke, 1997). They can pay for help with child-rearing (Bock, 1995) and home-making which makes up for the lack of a partner or husbands. Financial resources also allow mothers to continue with their personal and professional lives.

It should be noted, however, that in Segal-Engelchin's study (2001) significant differences were found between married mothers, non-marital mothers, and divorced mothers in economic status due to the additional income from fathers among married women and divorced women receiving child support. A significant difference was also found in the level of the fathers' paternal involvement. The married mothers in her study were significantly advantaged in this respect compared with non-marital and divorced mothers. After controlling for paternal involvement and economic status, however, the quality of life of non-marital mothers was significantly higher than that of married mothers in all four components of quality of life. This suggests that although personal resources play a significant role in shaping mothers' quality of life it does not substitute for the advantages entailed in fathers' involvement in childrearing, alongside with the economical benefits.

The Importance of Co-Parenting for the Mothers

Research findings consistently point to the importance of co-parenting for mothers. Studies of two-parent families, for example, indicate that husbands' support, including involvement with child care tasks, is significantly related to women's lower levels of role strain (Erdwins, Buffardi,

Casper, & O'Brien, 2001). When couples equally share child care as well as other family responsibilities, women experience a relief from the stress of having primary responsibility for family tasks (Haas, 1980; Smith & Reid, 1986) thus contributing significantly to the mother's well-being (Blaisure & Allen, 1995; Pina & Bengton, 1993) and marital happiness (Gerson, 1993; Hochschild, 1989; Suitor, 1991).

The importance of paternal involvement is further supported by research on mothers in single parent families. Studies of divorced families, for example, indicate that the active involvement of the non-resident fathers in child rearing reduces mothers' strain and increases their ability to meet their own individual needs (Andrews & Stewart, 1994). Conversely, studies of non-marital mothers show that their daily lives entail many strains due to their lone parenthood (Bock, 1995; Ludtke, 1997; Mannis, 1999). Compared with partnered mothers, single mothers, regardless of the causes of their single parenthood, typically encounter higher levels of role stress and overload due to financial strains, child care challenges, and parenting alone (Demo & Acock, 1996; Katz, 1991). The strain and overload are often experienced as fatigue, depression and a chronic scarcity of time (Riessman, 1990). As Riessman (1990) describes it, single mothers "transform the public issue–the lack of social provisions for single women and their children–into their own private 'trouble'" (p. 127).

Given these findings as well as findings suggesting that many non-marital mothers highly value their independence and sense of control (Bock, 1995; Miller, 1992; Renvoize, 1985), it seems reasonable to assume that single mothers who have chosen to co-parent with gay men enjoy the advantages granted to mothers in both single and partnered family structures and experience a higher quality of life if, in fact, their gay co-parent is actually shouldering a significant amount of the child care burden. Mothers in hetero-gay families sharing responsibilities with the birth father may be able to reduce the stress of parenting. In addition, they do not have to relinquish their independence as many married women in traditional families often do (Anderson & Stewart, 1994). They have the freedom and are in control of decisions regarding finances, work, scheduling, friendships, and leisure.

Taking into consideration the negative societal attitudes toward gay and lesbian parenting (Erera, 2002; Patterson, 2000), the quality life of mothers in hetero-gay families may not be all positive. These mothers are in fact confronted with two stigmas: (1) their non-marital motherhood; and (2) their co-parenting with a gay man. Despite the moderation in society's negative attitudes towards women who elect non-marital

motherhood (Mattes, 1994), they still are subject to social stigma (Bock, 2000) as contemporary society continues to hold the traditional two-parent family as the ideal family model (Erera, 2002; Mannis, 1999). Due to the widespread yet invalidated belief that homosexual parenting has a negative impact on children's psychological and social development (Golombok, Tasker & Murray, 1997; Patterson, 1992, 2000), it is conceivable that a single woman's choice to co-parent with a gay man increases the stigmatization attached to her family status. Stigma may affect her self-esteem. This, in turn, may adversely affect her quality of life as self-esteem has been identified as one of the major contributing factors in quality of life (Evans et al., 1993).

Further research is needed to expand our knowledge of the benefits and disadvantages of hetero-gay families for mothers and also to explore the ways in which these benefits and challenges express themselves in the mothers' perceived quality of life. Future studies addressing the quality of life of mothers across diverse family structures would clearly benefit from incorporating mothers of hetero-gay families in their samples. Their inclusion would provide an opportunity to determine whether a live-in father figure in itself or the degree of father's involvement in childrearing is the salient factor in shaping mothers' quality of life. In other words, studies including mothers of hetero-gay families will allow us to uncouple family processes from family structure. Moreover, it will expand the available knowledge of the role that each of these variables plays in the mother's quality of life.

FATHERHOOD AMONG GAY MEN

Most gay men who have become fathers have done so in the context of a previous heterosexual relationship. However, an increasing number of gay men are undertaking fatherhood in the context of an existing gay identity (Beers, 1996). These men become fathers through a variety of means including adoption, foster care, sexual intercourse, and sperm donation. Gay fathers who raise their children on an every-day basis often do so with a co-parent. Some choose to co-parent with a gay partner, others choose an unmarried woman (heterosexual or lesbian), and some choose to co-parent with a lesbian couple (Patterson, 1992). We focus on gay men who have elected biological fatherhood with a heterosexual woman.

Studies addressing custodial gay fathers found that they are usually highly invested parents whose parenting style incorporates consider-

able emotional expressiveness and nurturing (Bigner, 1996, 1999). Compared with heterosexual fathers, gay fathers go to greater lengths to promoting their children's cognitive skills consistently emphasizing the importance of setting and enforcing limits. They were found to be more responsive to their children's needs and more prone to offer resources for activities with their children (Bigner & Jacobson, 1989). Research findings confirm that the parent-child bond in gay and lesbian families may be closer than in traditional families (Green & Bozett, 1991) and that homosexuals are effective parents who provide a home life at a similar quality to that of heterosexuals. It has also been found that gay men, like lesbians, often have a close network of fellow gays whom they often regard as an extended family who provide validation, emotional, social, and material support (Hare, 1994; Hunter & Mallon, 1998). Based on choice and mutual agreement these extended families perform many of the same functions as networks based on marriage and kinship (Weston, 1997) and are often a more reliable and consistent support than families of origin (Demo & Allen, 1996; Green, Bettinger, & Zacks, 1996).

To date most of the literature on lesbian/gay family life addresses lesbians rather than gay men as lesbian families are more prevalent than gay families (Erera, 2002). Consequently, little is known about the reasons motivating openly gay men to pursue parenthood as well as their decisions about which pathway to parenthood to choose. It would seem reasonable to assume that the motivations to adopt a child, for instance, are different than those to pursue biological fatherhood. The decision of gay men to raise their children jointly with a heterosexual woman is especially interesting. Given the findings indicating that many gay men are involved in steady relationships with male partners (Peplau, Veniegas, & Campbell, 1996) which they usually perceive as satisfying (Peplau & Cochran, 1990), one could assume that they would prefer to raise their children together with their gay partners rather than with heterosexual women.

There are several possible explanations why some gay men may choose hetero-gay families. One explanation may be that they cannot adopt infants in their home countries or that they cannot afford foreign adoption. Another explanation may be that they do not have a steady partner or that their partner does not desire to rear a child. It is also possible that gay men who choose to co-parent with a heterosexual woman are more traditional in their family values compared with other gay men. That is, they may view the traditional family which includes two parents of a different sex as the preferred family for child development

regardless of the parents' living arrangements. This would suggest that these men perceive intimate partnership and parenthood as two separate matters. Another possibility is that, although they want to conceive and raise children, they do not want to undertake the full commitment of parenting on a 24-hour basis. Opting for non-residential fathering allows them to have the benefits of fatherhood without undertaking the full burden of parenting. In choosing a woman who will carry out the lion's share of child rearing responsibilities, these fathers may resemble heterosexual married fathers who usually rely on their wives as the primary care givers. Still another possibility is that men choosing a hetero-gay family are either closeted or not quite open about their sexual orientation. Having their children raised in a separate residence enables them to pass as heterosexuals and avoid the stigma attached to gay families especially if they are not living with a gay partner.

Another issue, as yet not addressed, concerns the unique characteristics of gay men who have chosen to co-parent with a heterosexual woman. It has been found that gay men who have become fathers after coming out report higher self-esteem and fewer negative attitudes towards homosexuality in comparison to childless gay men (Sbordone, 1993). In addition, gay men who reported that they would like to become fathers in the future showed higher levels of psychosocial development (in accordance with the Eriksonian framework) and identity formation with regard to their gay identities (Beers, 1996). It should be noted, however, that none of the published work to date has examined whether there are differences in gay fathers' characteristics across diverse family types as well as their motivations for distinct family choices. This would be a valuable direction for future research, as it will expand our knowledge about the factors associated with gay men's family lives.

The Effects of Fatherhood on the Quality of Life of Fathers

Until recently, the implications for men of becoming a father have received relatively little scholarly attention. In an attempt to fill this void, Eggebeen and Knoester (2001) conducted a study examining fathers' well-being in different family configurations (childless men, fathers living with their young children, fathers living separately from their young children, fathers of adult children, and step-fathers) and across different levels of fathers' involvement with their children. These were examined in four domains of well-being: (1) psychological and physical health; (2) social interactions; (3) family relationships; and (4) work life. Their

findings show that fatherhood does indeed impact men's well-being. It decreases their social and leisure activities, it strengthens their intergenerational family ties, and it lessens their likelihood of being unemployed. Additionally, family status is associated with different outcomes: fathers who do not reside with their minor children are involved in a wider variety of social and leisure activities; stepfathers are less involved with their extended families; and fathers with co-resident children are less likely to be unemployed. The most pervasive effects of parental involvement were for residential fathers. However, non-resident fathers who were involved with their children had higher life satisfaction scores and were more likely to be involved in community groups compared with other non-resident fathers. It should be noted that in Eggebeen and Knoester's study, non-resident fathers were treated as a homogeneous group. It could very well be that the cause of non-resident fatherhood (e.g., divorce, non-marital childbearing) in itself impacts fathers' well-being. Nonetheless applying Eggebeen and Knoester's findings (2001) to non-resident fathers in hetero-gay families, their quality of life may be relatively high.

Further research is needed to explore the unique parenting experiences of fathers in hetero-gay families and the implications for fathers' quality of life. Given the social bias against gay parenthood, it is especially important to investigate the social attitudes these fathers encounter, and the ways in which such attitudes are associated with their parenting and their quality of life. It might well be that fathers in hetero-gay families experience more social support and acceptance, compared with gay fathers raising their children alone or with their partners, due to the fact that the hetero-gay family is more similar to the traditional family. The children are raised by both their birth parents, and they typically reside with the birth mother who is usually regarded as a "natural" parent. Hence, another logical direction for future studies would be to examine how the quality of life of these fathers compares with that of other gay fathers as well as of heterosexual fathers in diverse family arrangements.

CHARACTERISTICS OF HETERO-GAY FAMILIES

Hetero-gay families resemble other non-traditional families in several key aspects. First, as in families headed by lesbian and gay couples and by cohabiting couples, and in contrast to traditional families, the parents in hetero-gay families are not legally married. Second, as in

families headed by single mothers and families choosing celibacy, in hetero-gay families intimate partnership is separated from parenthood. Third, as in many post-divorce families, stepfamilies and adoptive families and contrary to traditional families, the birth father does not live with the mother and the children in hetero-gay families.

While representing a non-traditional family pattern, hetero-gay families also resemble the traditional family pattern in several important aspects. First, both traditional and hetero-gay families are headed by two parents of the opposite sex. Second, in both, the parents are the birth parents. Third, the family life is centered on childrearing (see Lewin, 1993 on the centrality of childrearing in lesbian families and their resemblance to traditional heterosexual families).

This comparison suggests that hetero-gay families combine characteristics of both traditional and non-traditional families. This unique combination raises many important questions. For example, how do these parents share the parental tasks? Do they follow the traditional gender line characterizing most two-parent families whereby the mothers assume most of the household and childcare labor (Acock & Demo, 1994; Hochschild, 1989)? How do these parents reach decisions and resolve disagreements about child rearing issues? How do they resolve issues related to their different cultural, ethnic, or religious backgrounds in charting a course in child rearing? Does being the resident parent grant the mothers more power in child-related decision-making? How critical a factor is the sexual orientation of the mother? How does the co-parenting manifest itself in the daily lives of these families?

Furthermore, we need to consider the implications of significant life changes made by the parents over the course of the family life cycle. For example, what if the gay father becomes partnered? What if the hetero mother cohabitates, marries, has other children, or comes out as a lesbian? Additional questions for future research are to what extent are hetero-gay families an option exercised only by affluent parents? Also, to what extent is this family to be found among diverse cultural and ethnic populations?

Much remains to be done to understand the characteristics and internal dynamics of this unique family lifestyle. Future studies on these families have the potential not only to shed light on the characteristics and family dynamics of this relatively new family but also to enrich the available knowledge on the dynamics of both traditional and non-traditional families, as hetero-gay families combine elements of both.

Children Raised in Hetero-Gay Families

One of the central questions addressed in child development research is how family structures influence child development. While this question has not yet been examined with respect to children raised in hetero-gay families, a review of the empirical literature on children without a live-in father figure suggests some possible implications of growing up in a hetero-gay family.

Research on the psychological consequences for children raised in father-absent families has focused primarily on children who had lived with their father during their early years and who had later on experienced parental separation or divorce (Golombok et al., 1997). Many studies that have examined the implications of parental divorce for children's scholastic achievement, psychological adjustment, self esteem, and social competence indicate that children from divorced families experience lower levels of well-being across these domains in comparison to children from two-parent families (e.g., Amato, 1999; Hetherington, 1989; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Other studies, however, did not find significant differences between children of single- and two-parent families (e.g., Acock & Demo, 1994; Demo & Acock, 1996). Conducting a meta-analysis based on 92 studies that compared the well-being of children living in divorced and two-parent families, Amato and Keith (1991) found a great deal of inconsistency exists in the literature regarding the adverse effects of divorce on children's adjustment. They concluded that the view that divorce has profound detrimental effects on children and negatively impacts their psychological well-being is not supported by empirical research. Controlling for family income reveals that differences between children of single-parent families and children of two-parent families tend to be small in magnitude, statistically insignificant, or disappear (Amato, 2000).

An array of explanations has been proposed to explain the impact of parental divorce on children (see, for example, Furstenberg & Kiernan, 2001). It has been found that conflict between parents rather than father absence is the strongest predictor of emotional distress among children of divorce (Amato, 1993) and that high conflict in the family produces negative effects on children whether or not the parents live together (Amato & Booth, 1997; Amato & Keith, 1991). Thus, it appears that the circumstances that pre-date divorce may be as important for children's well-being as the parents' separation. Further, it has been found that economic strain associated with father absence rather than father

absence *per se* negatively affects children (Crokett, Eggebeen, & Hawkins, 1993).

While having both resident and non-resident parents like divorced families, children raised in hetero-gay families differ from children of divorced families in key aspects. In contrast to most children of divorced families, children of hetero-gay families have been raised from infancy without a father in the household; they have not experienced a separation from a live-in father figure; nor have they experienced the distress following the dissolution of their parents' marriage. It is also conceivable that they have not been exposed to ongoing parental conflict. Furthermore, while in some post-divorce families the non-residential parent is involved with child-rearing, in most cases, the residential parent (usually the mother) is the sole care giver. This is not as likely to be the case with hetero-gay families in which the live-away father may share parental responsibilities. Finally, in contrast to children raised by divorced mothers who are often faced with economic distress (Bianchi, 1995; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994), children of hetero-gay families are likely to enjoy relative economic security as both parents are likely to be supporting the family. Anecdotal evidence from the organization we observed also suggests that in hetero-gay families the parents tend to be financially secure, educated, upper middle-class persons who have taken into account the economic implications prior to becoming parents.

In light of these distinctions, one could expect positive outcomes for children of hetero-gay families. It might well be that the development of children raised in hetero-gay families would be more like that of children raised in two-parent families than that of children raised in divorced families. These children experience a more stable and predictable family environment, and the non-residential father is likely to be more involved with their upbringing than the average non-residential father in divorced families. Further support for the potentially positive outcomes of growing up in hetero-gay families is derived from research showing that children of gay parents do not differ from children of heterosexual parents in their academic, social, and psychological functioning (Erera, 2002; Patterson, 1992, 2000). Care giving functions can be performed by parenting figures of either sex, and a wide variety of family structures can generate positive child outcomes as long as children are cared for by at least one responsible, care-giving adult (Acock & Demo; 1994; Silverstein & Auerbach, 1999). With the stresses of raising children, a family that includes more than one adult, as is true of hetero-gay families, is more likely to contribute to positive child outcomes.

Given the negative social attitudes towards non-traditional families, and particularly towards families headed by gay/lesbian parents, one could expect that children raised in hetero-gay families would face some challenges. These children, like children of divorced families, must cope with the negative stereotypes attached to father-absent families. In contrast to most children of divorced families, these children must also cope with the negative stereotypes that stem from the bias against homosexual parenting. Nevertheless, research on lesbian and gay families suggests that their children can learn to stand up to the challenges of social disapproval and develop a respect for diversity (Bigner, 1999; Laird, 1993; Patterson, 1996). They have an opportunity to experience flexible gender behaviors and the freedom to engage in egalitarian relationships (Allen, 1997; Bigner, 1999; Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Lewin, 1993; Patterson, 1996).

Research is needed on the implications for child development of growing up in a hetero-gay family and specifically on the implications of being raised by a residential heterosexual mother and a non-residential gay father. In studying hetero-gay families, as with other families, the focus should not be whether this family structure is better or worse than others. Different family styles may be suitable for people whose preferences and needs differ. Research is also needed on the context of the hetero-gay family. Hetero-gay parents may be likely to place a high value on the family institution yet they defy the division of labor, disparate power relationships, and patriarchy in traditional families. By separating marriage and intimate partnership from parenthood, they demonstrate that families can be constructed without the traditional male-female intimate relationship. Combining characteristics of both traditional and non-traditional families may enable hetero-gay families to avoid some of the shortcomings and enjoy the benefits of both of these family structures.

Hetero-gay families, like gay and lesbian families, may remain on the periphery of family research and public tolerance since they threaten the cultural image of what marriage and family life is supposed to be. Incorporating these families into our studies will advance the debate about the parameters of contemporary family life. As Smith (1999) has said, we need to study that with which we may be the least comfortable, as "studying alternative families can give us insights into our own families and the status quo" (p. 134). We believe that recognition of hetero-gay families and incorporating them into the growing body of knowledge on family diversity will provide us with such insights.

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