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To cite this article: Walter R. Schumm (2010) Comparative Relationship Stability of Lesbian Mother and Heterosexual Mother Families: A Review of Evidence, Marriage & Family Review, 46:8, 499-509, DOI: [10.1080/01494929.2010.543030](https://doi.org/10.1080/01494929.2010.543030)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01494929.2010.543030>



Published online: 22 Jan 2011.



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## **Comparative Relationship Stability of Lesbian Mother and Heterosexual Mother Families: A Review of Evidence**

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*It has been concluded from a review of the literature involving only one study that lesbian parents were more likely to have unstable relationships. Other scholars have struggled with considerable controversy over how much was or was not known about the stability of lesbian parent relationships as well as whether such relationships were more or less stable than heterosexual parent relationships. Arguments have been made on all sides of the issues. A careful review of the literature suggests that more is known about the stability of lesbian parent relationships than previously suspected and that, on average, such relationships tend to be less stable than those of married heterosexual parents. Less is understood about the factors that may influence relationship stability for gay or lesbian parents, creating a critical need for additional research, especially with different demographic subgroups of lesbian and gay parents.*

*KEYWORDS* *bisexual, development or outcomes, family structure, fathering, gay, gender, lesbian, parenting and parenthood*

Biblarz and Stacey desired “to revive conversation among scholars about research on gender differences in parenting and child development” (2010a, p. 4), and they reviewed considerable evidence on the effects of same-sex parenting on children. One of their conclusions was that lesbian parents had less stable relationships than heterosexual parents, a hypothesis

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supported by only one cited study (MacCallum & Golombok, 2004). Basing a conclusion on only one study would seem unwarranted in most situations (Schumm, 2010b); thus, Biblarz and Stacey's conclusion might seem doubtful. At the same time, delving into a controversial area of the literature may seem risky—witness the Internet furor over a recent article (Schumm, 2010a). However, an editor should lead by example; I have asked for controversial articles and for review articles, so it would be an issue for me to shy away from them myself. Comments on this review of the literature are, as always, welcomed!

## METHODS

Social science literature was reviewed to determine if there were additional studies that might have addressed the relative stability of lesbian versus heterosexual mother families. Searching the literature is challenging in some areas because controversial outcomes often do not find their way into article summaries or abstracts; in other words, something close to detective work is required to find much of the information. The convention of .20, .50, and .80 for, respectively, small, medium, and large effect sizes (ES) are used throughout the discussion in addition to levels of statistical significance (Cohen, 1988; Lippa, 2005). A small effect size does not mean that it is unimportant; even if its associated significance level is not significant, that may only reflect the use of a small sample size with low statistical power. As Cohen, Cohen, West, and Aiken (2003) observed, "Yet many research reports, at least implicitly, confuse the issues of effect size and level of statistical significance, using the latter as if it meant the former" (p. 5).

## RESULTS OF THE REVIEW

### Background Controversy

Many would agree with Kurdek's (2005) statement that "Perhaps the most important 'bottom-line' question asked about gay and lesbian couples is whether their relationships last" (p. 252). Recent research suggests that multiple structural changes in the family can impact children adversely, regardless of the family form (Strohschein, 2010), so the issue has important implications for the long-term welfare of children. However, controversy remains regarding (1) whether we know anything about such relationship stability and (2) about the direction of effects, if any. Goldberg (2010a) has noted that research on the stability of gay and lesbian relationships was "quite slim" (p. 114); Peplau and Fingerhut (2007) regretted that "we currently know little about the longevity of same-sex relationships" (p. 412).

Ball (2003, p. 726) reported being unaware of any study ever done on the relative stability of lesbian and heterosexual parents. Baetens and Brewaeys (2001) dismissed any idea that lesbian couples had greater instability than heterosexual couples as a myth. Redding (2008) in his major review of the literature on gay and lesbian parenting concluded “that lesbian families are just as stable for childrearing as heterosexual families” (p. 164). In contrast, however, Kurdek (2005) reviewed the literature and concluded that “The limited data available indicate that gay and lesbian couples may be less stable than married heterosexual couples” (p. 251). On the other hand, Goldberg (2010a, p. 26) suggested that relationships consisting of two women might have *enhanced* stability. Goldberg’s idea may find some support from Kurdek (2008), who found a lower instability rate ( $p < .02$ , two-sided Fisher’s exact test) for lesbians in civil unions (0.7%) than for gay men in civil unions (3.7%).

Some research has found that for both lesbian and heterosexual mothers, single parenthood is characterized, respectively, for lesbian *and* heterosexual mothers by lower parenting quality ( $ES = 0.39, 0.28$ ), more severe disputes ( $ES = 0.57, 0.28$ ), and less enjoyment of motherhood ( $ES = 0.48, 0.26$ ) (Golombok et al., 2003). Therefore, lower stability would have implications for children of both heterosexual and lesbian women. Consequently, it is not surprising that Tasker (2010) indicated that “Future work could investigate whether Biblarz and Stacey (2010a) are justified in saying that lesbian coparents are more at risk of separation” (p. 39). Unfortunately, there appear to have been no published articles yet that report separation rates for same-sex marriages or civil unions as a function of both gender and parental status (Balsam, Beauchaine, Rothblum, & Solomon, 2008; Kurdek, 2008).

However, do we really know so little about the stability of same-sex parents versus heterosexual parents? In fact, we *already* have numerous studies from English speaking countries showing evidence of (1) the stability of same-sex couples or parents without comparisons to heterosexual couples, (2) the stability of heterosexual couples or parents without comparisons to same-sex couples, and (3) the stability of same-sex parents *with* comparisons to heterosexual couples; information on stability in Scandinavian nations has been reported elsewhere (Andersson, Noack, Seierstad, & Weedon-Fekjaer, 2006; Kurdek, 2005; Noack, Seierstad, & Weedon-Fekjaer, 2005; Rothblum, 2009).

### Studies Without Heterosexual Parent Comparison Groups

Numerous studies have considered separation rates for same-sex parents without having a true comparison group of heterosexual parents. These reports are reviewed here in order of the duration of the study. Golombok, Tasker, and Murray (1997) appeared to indicate that 5 of 15 lesbian parents

(33%) had separated by the time their child was 6 years old. Vanfraussen, Ponjaert-Kristoffersen, and Brewaeys (2002) reported that 6 of 24 lesbian couples (25%) had separated between the time their child, conceived through donor insemination, was about 5 years old and then about 10 years old; it appears the comparison group of heterosexual couples had a similar separation rate (25%) that was by design, because the heterosexuals were selected as to create an equivalent comparison group.

In another study of lesbian parents with a child about 6 years old, Patterson (2001) reported that 4 of 30 couples (13%) had separated since the birth of the child. Stevens, Perry, Burston, Golombok, and Golding (2003), using the same sample from Golombok et al. (2003), reported that 4 of 10 lesbian couples (40%) who had conceived a child by donor insemination had separated by age 7 of the child and that 17 of 28 lesbian couples (61%) with non-donor inseminated children had separated within an average of 4 years. Kuvulanka and Goldberg (2009) interviewed 18 queer youth with bisexual or lesbian mothers; of the 17 mothers who appeared to have had partners at some point, it seems that 9 (53%) did not keep the same partner throughout the child's childhood and adolescence.

Tasker and Golombok (1997) in their longitudinal study in England indicated that "In the present study, the majority of lesbian mothers were no longer with the same partner they had been with at the time of the first investigation 14 years earlier" (p. 57). However, only 25% of the young adult children surveyed "recalled their mother having...one long-term monogamous cohabiting relationship" (p. 57), indicating an instability rate as high as or higher than 75% over 15 years. Without heterosexual comparison groups, it appears that instability rates for lesbian parents range from as low as 13% over 6 years to as high as 75% over 15 years, with an average of 42.9% breaking up over an average of 9.4 years.

### Studies Without Lesbian Parent Comparison Groups

Turning to research on heterosexual relationships, using data from the Fragile Families Study, designed to study relationships at especially high risk for separation, fewer than 6% of White married mothers had separated over a 3-year period (Osborne, Manning, & Smock, 2007). Kurdek (2006b) reported an instability rate for married heterosexual parents over 18 months of only 1.6% (2.7% for married heterosexual couples without children). Balsam et al. (2008) reported a 2.7% divorce rate and a 3.6% divorce or separation rate over 3 years for heterosexual married couples. Veroff, Douvan, and Hatchett (1995, p. 13) reported an 8% divorce rate over 4 years for White couples. Orbuch, Veroff, Hassan, and Horrocks (2002) reported divorce rates for White couples in their longitudinal study as 9%, 20%, and 29% at 3, 7, and 14 years, respectively. Manning, Smock, and Majumdar (2004) reported a 15% and 28% breakup rate for heterosexual parents over 5 and 10 years, respectively.

U.S. Census data appear to yield a 27% breakup rate for heterosexual married women in a first marriage by 10 years and a 36% breakup rate for heterosexual married women in a second marriage by 10 years (Kreider & Fields, 2002, p. 5). Furthermore, the cumulative percent of first marriages ending in divorce by 10 years appears to vary little between Blacks (~22%) and non-Hispanic Whites (~20%) (Kreider & Fields, 2002, p. 18). Bramlett and Mosher (2002, pp. 27 and 55), using data from the 1995 National Survey of Family Growth, found a 28% to 32% breakup rate over 10 years for first marriages of non-Hispanic Whites; for women who became mothers after their marriage, the rate was 26% over 10 years (p. 56).

Goodwin, Mosher, and Chandra (2010, p. 32) using data from the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth found divorce rates of 3% (1 year), 9% (3 years), 14% (5 years), and 22% (10 years) for women with at least a college education. Using data from the 1990 Current Population Survey, Raley and Bumpass (2003) found 30% of White marriages dissolved after 10 years and 20% of the marriages of college graduates or those who had married after age 29 dissolved after 10 years; however, they did not account for post-marital parenthood status. Martin (2006, p. 546) found that among women who completed college before marriage, only 14% dissolved their first marriage within 10 years. Kurdek (2004) reported a breakup rate of less than 15% (70/483) for married heterosexual couples with children over 11 to 12 years of first marriage. Kposowa (1998) estimated divorce rates of 12%, 17%, 24%, and 33% for White women in the United States at 10, 15, 20, and 25 years, respectively, whereas the rates for *mothers* of all races with young children were lower: 12%, 16%, 20%, and 31% at the corresponding times.

Owen and Golombok (2009) reported low breakup rates for heterosexual parents over 18 or more years, regardless of method of conception: natural (9/63, 14%), donor insemination (6/26, 23%), adoptive (1/38, 3%), or in vitro fertilization (2/26, 8%). It appears that none of the relationships had broken up between when the child was 12 years old and at 18 years of age (Golombok, MacCallum, Goodman, & Rutter, 2002). Thus, method of conception does not by itself appear to produce high rates of separation or divorce for heterosexual parents, even over periods as long as 18 or more years.

Schoen and Standish (2001) estimated that 40% to 44% of marriages in the United States would end in divorce. For heterosexual couples in general, separation rates appear to range between 4% to 9% at 3 years and 44% lifetime, with an average across studies of about 18.8% at about an average of 9.5 years. For heterosexual parents separation rates appear to range between 6% at 3 years and 31% at 25 years with an average across studies of about 15.5% at an average of about 13 years. Regardless of the exact estimates, it appears that higher education and maternity each promote relationship stability, suggesting that both factors should be considered when evaluating relationship stability across different groups.

## Studies With Lesbian and Heterosexual Parent Comparison Groups

With respect to research that compared the stability of lesbian with heterosexual parents, Biblarz and Stacey (2010a) cited one study (MacCallum & Golombok, 2004) in which 6 of 14 lesbian couples (43%) had broken up compared with 5 of 38 heterosexual couples (13%) (odds ratio [OR] = 4.95,  $p < .05$ ) between when the focal child was about 6 and about 12 years of age, raising the possibility that lesbian parents might provide children with less parental stability. Even so, Golombok and Badger (2010), using the same longitudinal data, did not report stability rates for the original 10 birth couples or the remaining 7 (one mother had died) couples from the child's age of 12 to when the child was in early adulthood (ages 18–20); they only reported that 11 of 20 mothers (55%) had a current cohabiting partner.

Other studies have been published. Fulcher, Chan, Raboy, and Patterson (2002) reported results from early data in the Contemporary Families Study involving 49 lesbian couples and 17 heterosexual couples as well as single parents. By the time the focal child was 7 years old, Chan, Brooks, Raboy, and Patterson (1998) indicated that 1 heterosexual couple (6%) and 19 lesbian couples (39%) had separated (OR = 10.1,  $p < .05$ ). Bos, Gartrell, Peyser, and van Balen (2008) compared relationship stability for lesbian parents with married heterosexual siblings; it appears that 34 of 71 lesbian parents (48%) broke up over 10 years compared with 22 of 74 married heterosexual couples (30%) (OR = 2.17,  $p < .05$ ). From the same set of subjects, Bos, Gartrell, van Balen, Peyser, and Sandfort (2008) reported a 44% breakup rate, but that was calculated by including seven lesbian mothers who had always been single parents in the denominator (34/78). However, Gartrell and Bos (2010) reported that after 17 years, 40 of 71 couples (56.3%) had separated. Gartrell and colleagues (2000) also reported that 31% of their lesbian couples had separated after 5 years.

Brewaeys, Ponjaert, Van Hall, and Golombok (1997) found that by age 5 of their child, 3 of 30 lesbian couples (10%) had separated compared with 3 of 68 heterosexual couples (4%) (OR = 3.26, not significant). Thus, in nearly every comparison of same-sex lesbian parents with same-sex heterosexual parents, outcomes have indicated greater stability for heterosexual parents, even without statistical controls for substantial and often statistically significant advantages in terms of education, income, and fewer children (i.e., greater per capita income per household) for lesbian parents who participated in these studies. If the results of the four studies are combined, 37.8% of lesbian couples (62/164) separated compared with 15.7% of heterosexual couples (31/197) (OR = 3.26,  $p < .001$ ) over an average of 8.4 years for each group. In other words, across these four studies over similar periods of time, it appears that the odds of lesbian couples breaking up are over three times greater than the odds of heterosexual couples breaking up. Regardless of methodology used, it appears that 15% to 20% of heterosexual parents are

likely to break up by 10 years compared with about 40% to 45% of lesbian parents.

Goldberg (2010b, p. 29) discussed interaction effects in the literature; one possibility is an interaction among several factors, including gender, parenthood, sexual orientation, and legal marital status, among others. As Strohschein (2010) concluded, "Indeed, the task of distinguishing between the effects of parental gender, sexual identity, marital status, biogenetic relationship to children, number of parents in the household, and family structure history has hardly begun" (p. 27).

## DISCUSSION

Lower rates of stability among some same-sex couples might be related to an interesting finding by Kurdek (2006a, p. 531). In a study of 66 gay male, 104 lesbian, and 144 heterosexual couples, he found that *none* of the 170 non-heterosexual participants scored other than *zero* on moral values as a deterrent for instability compared with that deterrent being important for many of the heterosexual participants. "None" is a pretty remarkable and rare occurrence in attitudinal research; usually, someone checks an infrequently checked box merely because of fatigue, confusion, or indifference. Family and children were also cited far more frequently by heterosexuals as deterrents. The most important deterrent for same-sex couples was intimacy (an attraction). Bigner and Jacobsen (1989) found that heterosexual fathers were more likely ( $p < .01$ ) to agree that having a child would reduce extradyadic sexual activity than were gay fathers, suggesting perhaps that traditional moral values were less likely to play a role in the latter's decisions. In other words, traditional social norms may constrain heterosexual parents more than lesbian or gay parents with respect to maintaining long-term relationship stability, if not other aspects of family life. Further research here would be very helpful.

## CONCLUSION

Biblarz and Stacey's (2010a) conclusion that lesbian parents may have less stable relationships appears to have been a valid conclusion, even though they overlooked much of the available evidence in the literature. These results are still sketchy because the higher separation rates for lesbian mothers could be related to being in a second or third relationship, which might be related to a variety of selection effects or associated stressors that might account for lower stability rates (Beals, Impett, & Peplau, 2002; Oswald, Goldberg, Kovalanka, & Clausell, 2008). Higher separation rates might reflect greater financial independence among lesbian parents, who might be better able to manage any financial consequences of a separation. The lesbian mother with a biological connection to a child might fear legal

issues over child custody less because the social comother might have less claim for custody rights than would a biological father in a heterosexual divorce process.

The greater availability of the institution of marriage itself might be part of what gives heterosexuals an apparent advantage in terms of stability. Social changes, such as a growing number of states providing for nonheterosexual marriages, might change the variables at play at the same time further research was ongoing. In other words, the research situation will probably remain fluid. Clearly, much more research is needed to identify factors that are related to instability for both lesbian and heterosexual parents, especially among different demographic groups of such parents (e.g., different socioeconomic levels, different racial/ethnic backgrounds, different religious affiliations, different per capita household income levels, different methods of conception, different levels of parental impulsivity or delayed gratification values). However controversial this review may prove to be, hopefully it will stimulate further such research from a wide range of diligent scholars, an outcome that most scholars can probably support (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010b).

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