



FocusFamilyINSIGHT

Ministry Strategy – Family Research

Glenn T. Stanton

Helping Families Thrive

Colorado Springs, CO 80995
FocusOnTheFamily.com
800-A-FAMILY
(232-6459)

March 2012

To: Students of the Family
Re: Examining the US National Longitudinal Lesbian Family Study

Dr. Nanette Gartrell is the principle investigator of the U.S. National Longitudinal Lesbian Family Study (NLLFS) following (originally) 84 lesbian families created via donor insemination to determine how these children fare in a number of developmental measures. The authors explain their study is “the largest, longest running, prospective, longitudinal study of same-sex-parented families.”¹ It is important that students of the family understand what’s under the hood of this study.

This study is not a sophisticated, dispassionate academic investigation, but rather an orchestrated persuasion piece conducted and funded by gay-rights activists. The study’s [website](#) features a photograph of a cute infant lounging in a crib, sporting a onesie which proclaims, “I was hatched by a couple of chicks.”

The study – publishing its findings in various stages over the last few years - has gotten a good bit of (uncritical) attention in the general press for dramatic conclusions, such as this article from [Time](#):

The authors found that children raised by lesbian mothers...scored very similarly to children raised by heterosexual parents on measures of development and social behavior. ...[H]owever, they were surprised to discover that children in lesbian homes *scored higher* than kids in straight families on some psychological measures of self-esteem and confidence, did better academically and were less likely to have behavioral problems, such as rule-breaking and aggression.² (emphasis added)

So kids with two moms do better than those being raised by their own mother and father? This seems to be exactly what the NLLFS claims in its 2010 study published in the respected journal, *Pediatrics*:

The NLLFS adolescents are well-adjusted, demonstrating more competencies and fewer behavioral problems than their peers in the normative American population.³

But there are a few things that must be recognized about the NLLFS before building substantive conclusions on such findings. We examine these here.

An Activist Study

The investigators of the NLLFS are not scholars in the field of child development. They are not scholars in the field of family formation. Their professional research has been solely in the field of lesbian research. Examine the bibliographies offered in each of their published studies to date. They offer the reader no survey of the vast literature on how various family forms impact child development and well-being in varying degrees. They consult - nearly exclusively - only published studies that examine gay or lesbian issues. When they do make a cursory reference to the larger, general body of research on how family form impacts children, they cite sociology text books rather than referring the reader to published studies, a practice unacceptable for beginning graduate students.

The study is also funded primarily by well-known and highly partisan groups such as [The Gill Foundation](#), the world’s largest and most influential funder of GLBT political and social causes, the Lesbian Health Fund of the

¹ Nanette Gartrell and Henny Bos, “US National Longitudinal Lesbian Family Study: Psychological Adjustment of 17-Year-Old Adolescents,” *Pediatrics* 126 (2010): 28-36.

² Alice Park, “Study: Children of Lesbians May Do Better Than Their Peers,” *Time*, June 7, 2010.

³ Gartrell and Bos, 2010, p. 34.



MEMO

Gay Lesbian Medical Association, the [Williams Institute](#) at the UCLA School of Law, The [Arcus](#) Foundation and the [Roy Scrivner](#) Fund.⁴

In and Outside Mainstream of GLBT Activism

Dr. Gartrell has a long and [award-winning](#) history in lesbian-research activism. In 2001, she published *Everyday Mutinies: Funding Lesbian Activism*, a [handbook](#) showing how to grow and fund lesbian activism.⁵

Gartrell is not only in the mainstream of lesbian activism, but practically beyond it as well. While [married](#) to award-winning lesbian-film maker Dee Mosbacher, Gartrell and Mosbacher are self-proclaimed polyamorists. Gartrell explains their “progressive” relational arrangement in an article published in the *Journal of Lesbian Studies* provocatively entitled, “If This Is Tuesday, It Must Be Dee... Confessions of a Closet Polyamorist.”⁶

To explain just how out of the mainstream of the lesbian community she has been, she admits, “And, as surprising as it may seem, I do not consider honesty, integrity, and commitment the guiding principle of my intimate life.” Rather her commitment is to “making each block of time I spend with each lover as glorious as it can be.”⁷ She assures her reader that loving multiple adults should raise no concern; after all, she “would never think to challenge a parent’s capacity to love...multiple children at the same time.”⁸ However, she spends most of her article talking about how both her and Dee had an uphill battle overcoming the strong jealousy that arose at the other’s “extra-relational” dalliances and the “overwhelming” guilt that issued from their own extra relationships. But such powerful jealousy and guilt is seldom part of parenting more than one child. She concludes her article by hoping that through polys “outing” themselves, “polyamorism will become just as passé’...as lesbianism is today.”⁹

But the facts that NLLFS is initiated and conducted by lesbian activists, funded by foundations backing GLBT activism and that the Principle Investigator is outside the mainstream of the lesbian community do not mean the study is not a reputable academic investigation. It only lets us know who’s behind it and their possible motivations.

What matters is the structure, execution and reporting of the study itself. This is what we examine now.

Serious Sample Problems/Highly Motivated Participants

The problems with the study’s sample are clear to even the casual reader. First, the data for the NLLFS was collected on a relatively small group: initially 84 lesbian families and (currently) 78 children (39 girls and 39 boys).

The authors explain how they gathered their subjects.

Lesbian couples - all in process of getting or currently pregnant through donor insemination - were collected through “informal networking and word of mouth referrals” but participation was also “solicited via announcements at lesbian events, in women’s bookstores, and at lesbian newspapers.” The couples were recruited – not from representative samples – but from three metropolitan areas: Boston, Washington and San Francisco.

These women were nearly all white (94%), middle- and upper-class (82%), and college educated (67%). Eighty-two percent held professional or managerial positions. The majority were in their mid-

⁴ Gartrell and Bos, 2011, p. 8; Nanette K. Gartrell, Henny M. W. Bos and Naomi G. Goldberg, “Adolescents of the U.S. National Longitudinal Lesbian Family Study: Sexual Orientation, Sexual Behavior, and Sexual Risk Exposure” *Archive of Sexual Behavior*, 40 (2011):1199-1209, p. 1207.

⁵ Nanette K. Gartrell, *Everyday Mutinies: Funding Lesbian Activism* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

⁶ Nanette K. Gartrell, “If This Is Tuesday, It Must Be Dee... Confessions of a Closet Polyamorist,” *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 3 (1999): 23-33. The essay was co-published simultaneously in Marcia Munson and Judith P. Stelbourn, eds. *The Lesbian Polyamory Reader: Open Relationships, Non-Mongamy, and Casual Sex*, (New York: The Hawthorne Press, 1999).

⁷ Gartrell, 1999, p. 24.

⁸ Gartrell, 1999, p. 32.

⁹ Gartrell, 1999, p. 32.

thirties at the beginning of the study. These are not run-of-the-mill lesbian or even general couples, but as the study proudly explains,

Participants were strongly lesbian-identified, 89% had come out to families of origin, 55% were open about their lesbian identity at work, 38% were active in a lesbian/gay organization at work, and 80% said they would *choose* to be a lesbian, if were a matter of a choice.¹⁰ (emphasis in original)

So these were well-educated, older mothers from more socially-supportive urban and suburban areas, actively participating in ideological lesbian-thought culture and deeply committed to being lesbian. The study further explains,

Prospective participants [solicited through known lesbian networks as explained above] were asked to contact the researchers by telephone. The study was discussed with each caller, and all interested callers became participants.¹¹

So these are highly motivated lesbian mothers, gathered through what researchers call snowball or convenience samples via the political lesbian culture, they are told the nature of the study – allowing each respondent to easily ascertain the social, political and academic importance of the effort – and *all* interested callers volunteered and were adopted into the study. It begs considering whether these realities have any impact on the fact that the study has maintained a remarkable 93% retention rate over its fifteen year history.

Considering this methodology, professor Mark Regnerus, a research sociologist at University of Texas at Austin, working from one of the top sociology of family schools in the nation, explains the qualitative weakness of gathering a research sample the way the NLLFS did:

The bottom line is that snowball samples are nice for undergrads to learn about data collection, but hardly high-quality when you're a professional sociologist working on a complex research question with significant public ramifications. It's not fair, not even close, to compare parenting and child outcomes from a national probability sample of hetero parents and a snowball sample of lesbian parents.¹²

W. Bradford Wilcox, a leading and broadly respected family sociologist at the University of Virginia and Director of the National Marriage Project, offers the same caution regarding the way studies of lesbian-headed homes have been conducted to date. "You just cannot draw strong conclusions one way or another from these studies, given their methodological limits."¹³

And what is more, the mothers were asked to self-report on their childrens' well-being and development. This can lead to a "social desirability bias" where respondents are inclined to give answers that align with their convictions, rather than their actual behavior or outcomes.

Very Curious Findings

This study – as well as other notable studies conducted by well-known lesbian activist scholars – have come to very curious conclusions that run strongly contrary to reason and the larger body of sociological and psychological literature on family form and child well-being.¹⁴ Let us look at two major findings.

¹⁰ Nanette Gartrell, *et al.*, "The National Lesbian Family Study: 1. Interviews With Prospective Mothers," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 66 (1996): 272-281, p. 274, 275.

¹¹ Gartrell, *et al.*, 1996, p. 274.

¹² Research interview with Dr. Mark Regnarus and the author, August 12, 2010.

¹³ W. Bradford Wilcox, "Are Fathers Really Fungible?" FamilyScholars blog June 14, 2010;

<http://familyscholars.org/2010/06/14/are-fathers-really-fungible/>

¹⁴ Timothy J. Biblarz and Judith Stacey, "How Does The Gender of Parents Matter?" *Journal of Marriage and Family* 72 (2010): 3-22.

- 1) *Two Moms Are Better*: Like we saw in the *Time* article quoted above, the NLLFS concludes that, The NLLFS adolescents demonstrated higher levels of social, school/academic, and total competence than gender-matched normative samples of American teenagers.¹⁵

This means that – according this study – adolescents with lesbian moms did *better* in important measures of well-being than children in the general population. This could very well be true, given the very favorable settings that mark the lesbian homes participating in this study. But it doesn't tell us anything about what the average lesbian-headed homes raising children from birth are likely to produce.

Another major analysis conducted by GLBT supportive researchers found largely the same thing. Conducted by Timothy Biblarz and Judith Stacey, published in the highly *respected Journal of Marriage and Family* (2010) – and plagued by similar methodological shortcomings as the NLLFS¹⁶ - this study claims,

In fact, based strictly on the social science, one could argue that two women parent better on average than a man and a woman, or at least a woman and man with a traditional division of labor. Lesbian coparents seem to outperform comparable married heterosexual biological parents on several measures even while being denied the substantial privileges of marriage.¹⁷

In other words, lesbian parents beat biological parents with one arm tied behind their back. It is an over-reaching conclusion. However, Biblarz and Stacey claim this superior value in lesbian families is because two mothers provide “a double dose of caretaking, communication, and intimacy.”¹⁸

One should conclude then, that having fathers tends to handicap children. However, this flies in the face of over four decades and hundreds of published studies indicating that fathers play an irreplaceable role in fostering healthy child-development in ways that mothers do not.¹⁹ And it has been demonstrated consistently that children who grow up apart from their fathers face serious difficulties and short-comings compared to children raised by their mother and father.²⁰ This data has been persuasive enough to compel the Clinton, Bush and Obama Administrations to institute federal programs to encourage strong fatherhood involvement in the lives of children.

- 2) *Greater Break-Up/No Harm*: The NLLSF found “significant difference” in family dissolution rates between the lesbian and mother/father headed families over the years of the study. The lesbian homes broke up at much higher rates compared with heterosexual families (56% vs. 36%).²¹

The Biblarz/Stacey review also reported a significantly higher divorce/dissolution rate among the lesbian headed households, citing one major comparative study where, in the 5-year period of the study, 6 of the 14 lesbian-headed homes had broken up compared to only 5 of the 38 mom/dad headed homes. This was because, they explained, the “comparatively high standards lesbians bring to their intimate unions correlate with higher dissolution rates.”²²

¹⁵ Gartrell and Bos, 2010, p. 6.

¹⁶ Wilcox, 2010.

¹⁷ Timothy J. Biblarz and Judith Stacey, “How Does The Gender of Parents Matter?” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 72 (2010): 3-22, p. 17.

¹⁸ Biblarz and Stacey, 2010, p. 17.

¹⁹ Ronald P. Rohner and Robert A. Veneziano, “The Importance of Father Love: History and Contemporary Evidence,” *Review of General Psychology* 5.4 (2001): 382-405.

²⁰ David Popenoe, *Life Without Father: Compelling New Evidence That Fatherhood and Marriage are Indispensable for the Good of Children and Society*, (New York: The Free Press, 1996).

²¹ Gartrell, Bos, and Goldberg, 2011, p. 1201.

²² Biblarz and Stacey, 2010, p. 12.

And a major study comparing Scandinavian same-sex and heterosexual union dissolution rates found that male/male unions break up at double the rate of male/female unions and lesbian unions break up at *double* the rate of the male/male unions.²³

This is of serious concern because numerous studies have long shown that family instability and divorce have substantial negative and long-term consequences for child well-being.²⁴

But here is the other remarkable finding from the NLLFS,

Within the lesbian family sample, no...differences were found among adolescent offspring...whose mothers were still together and offspring whose mothers had separated.²⁵

And “adolescents whose mothers had separated since [the studies beginning] fared as well in psychological adjustment as those whose mothers were still together”²⁶

Remarkable. However, the NLLFS fails to note how this finding is strongly at odds with the larger body of literature on family dissolution and child well-being. And this “no-effect” finding from the break-up of lesbian homes surely results more from the remarkably small sample size utilized than lack of true effect.

But it must be said. If the NLLFS and Biblarz/Stacey studies are to be believed, they seem to indicate that lesbian headed families are the new super-families because they show better results than mother/father headed homes and when they do break up, they show no harm.

Or...

We could question whether these particular lesbian mothers – drafted very selectively through their deep commitment to lesbian culture and causes, knowing they are participating in the important US National Longitudinal Lesbian Family Study and allowed to self-report how well their children did – can offer the kind of careful, objective data-reporting a study like this should be built upon.

There are enough serious questions about the nature and methodology of the NLLFS to require a more critical and sober look at the study’s conclusions than most professionals and journalists have given it.

A serious public policy topic like is drastically deserving of more careful, less partisan research, especially when it involves the lives of children.

Glenn T. Stanton is the director of family formation studies at Focus on the Family and the author of five books on various aspects of the family, his two most recent: Secure Daughters Confident Sons, How Parents Guide Their Children into Authentic Masculinity and Femininity (Waterbrook, 2011) and The Ring Makes All the Difference: The Hidden Consequences of Cohabitation and the Strong Benefits of Marriage, (Moody, 2011).

²³ Gunnar Andersson, *et al.*, “The Demographics of Same-Sex Marriages in Norway and Sweden,” *Demography* 43 (2006): 79-98, p. 93.

²⁴ Paula Fomby and Andrew J. Cherlin, “Family Instability and Child Well-Being,” *American Sociological Review*, 72 (2007): 181-204; Hyun Sik Kim, “Consequences of Parental Divorce for Child Development,” *American Sociological Review*, 76 (2011) 487-511.

²⁵ Gartrell and Bos, 2010, p. 1.

²⁶ Gartrell and Bos, 2010, p. 7.