

The Experiences of Stepfamilies Headed by Gays and Lesbians

Brad van Eeden-Moorefield, MSW, Ph.D., CFLE

Associate Professor, HDFS, Central Michigan University

Slide 1- Introduction

Hello, and thank you for listening to this module on the experiences of stepfamilies headed by gay and lesbian couples. My name is Brad van Eeden-Moorefield and I am an Associate Professor of Human Development and Family Studies at Central Michigan University. I also would like to thank Ms. Kendra Kain, who is an MFT student at Oakland University, for her assistance in gathering information for this presentation.

Slide 2- Objectives

Over the next 10 minutes I would like to share with you some of the research findings related to gay and lesbian-headed stepfamilies. My goal is that after listening to this module you will:

1. Gain both a historical and a current understanding of gay and lesbian-headed stepfamilies and contexts in which they live.
2. Learn about the *similarities* in experiences of gay, lesbian, and heterosexual stepfamilies.
3. Understand some of the unique experiences and how they affect family life for adults and children in stepfamilies headed by same-sex couples.
4. I also hope you will be able to identify some of the key family strengths among this important minority stepfamily group.

Slide 3- Historical views and prevalence of gay and lesbian-headed stepfamilies

Historically, stepfamilies were created through a second marriage following the death of a spouse. Stepfamilies formed this way now account for only a slight minority of all stepfamilies. In more recent decades, research concentrated more on stepfamilies created by divorce and a subsequent remarriage (Sweeney, 2010). These are considered legal stepfamilies. Today, we have broadened our view of who constitutes a stepfamily to include the increasing numbers of stepfamilies formed through cohabiting, and other non-marital unions (e.g., Berger, 2000; Crosbie-Burnett & Helmbrecht, 1993). Increasing recognition of the diversity among stepfamilies, and the many pathways by which they are created, has slowly begun to expand research to include gay and lesbian-headed stepfamilies.

Unfortunately, the study of gay and lesbian-headed families generally has taken the monolithic approach of defining these families solely by their sexual orientation rather than by their relationship and family histories (e.g., Kurdek, 2004, 2006). For this reason, the literature on gay and lesbian-headed families only recently has begun to focus on the diverse family forms within this community (c.f., Lewis, Derlega, Berndt, Morris, & Rose, 2001). Thus, the study of stepfamilies headed by gay and lesbian couples is quite new (e.g., Berger, 2000; Moore, 2008).

The first problem lies in even identifying and counting these families. National data sets have either not included gays and lesbians or have not asked questions about sexual orientation that would help identify gay and lesbian-headed families. For these reasons, we cannot accurately identify the prevalence, or numbers, of these families. What we can suggest is that the number of gay and lesbian repartnerings (i.e., by necessity in most states, non-legal remarriages) and stepfamilies within the gay and lesbian community probably mirrors the estimates among their heterosexual counterparts. Based on the numbers of lesbian mothers raising children compared to gay fathers (Patterson, 2000) it also is likely that the number of

lesbian-headed stepfamilies slightly outnumber gay male-headed stepfamilies (Black, Gates, Sanders, & Taylor, 2000). However, even these numbers are inaccurate as they may not count gay men who are part-time, nonresidential dads.

In addition to our inadequate knowledge about the prevalence of gay and lesbian-headed stepfamilies, the study of these families remains in its infancy. These limits to our knowledge severely impact our ability to provide appropriate educational, clinical, and advocacy services.

Slide 4- The context of gay and lesbian stepfamily life today

Since 2000 a number of legal advances have changed the landscape of gay and lesbian family life in profound ways, creating a unique historical context for these families in general, and for gay and lesbian-headed stepfamilies in particular (e.g., Appell, 2003; Patterson, 2009). The past decade has witnessed the establishment of registered partnerships, civil unions, and the legalization of same-sex marriage in several American states, and internationally. The latter changes of course also result in divorce and remarriage opportunities. Additionally, state laws banning or allowing adoptions by either one or two individuals (i.e., second parent adoptions) have been passed (Appell, 2003; Robson, 2001). Advances in reproductive technologies also have created new pathways to parenthood for gay couples (e.g., van Dam, 2004).

Unfortunately, however, legal precedent and policy continue to put these families at risk, especially for those gay and lesbian stepcouples living in states that lack such legal opportunities or protections (Hatzenbuehler, Keyes, & Hason, 2009). Although social acceptance, or at least tolerance, has increased in the past decades, families headed by same-sex couples continue to experience much stigma and discrimination. This experience is only compounded for those who also are a stepfamily (e.g., Berger, 2000)

Slide 5- Similarities of gay and lesbian-headed and heterosexual-headed stepfamilies

Decades of cross-sectional and longitudinal research comparing gay and lesbian couples and families to their heterosexual counterparts has found few differences between these couples in areas of relational and family functioning and outcomes (e.g., Kurdek, 2004; 2006). Research that specifically focuses on gay and lesbian-headed stepfamilies presents a similar portrait of family life. The next slide presents some of the areas of similarity between same-sex and heterosexual-headed stepfamilies. However, it is important to note that although research tends to focus on studies comparing these stepfamilies we do not intend to suggest that one of these families is better than the other. All families have strengths and weaknesses, and much to learn from each other.

Slide 6- Similarity in family processes

Research finds that stepfamilies headed by same-sex couples function similarly compared to stepfamilies headed by heterosexual couples (Lynch, 2000, 2005). For instance, studies suggest that, just as in stepfamilies headed by heterosexual couples, transitioning into a stepfamily can be most difficult in the earlier years of stepfamily development, especially surrounding negotiating stepparenting roles and family finances (Crosbie-Burnett & Helmbrecht, 1993; Lynch, 2005). Further, developing and adjusting parenting styles appears to be a key factor in the adjustment of both of these stepfamilies (Burston, Pery, Golding, Steele, & Golombok, 2004; Hequembourg, 2004; Lynch, 2004). In stepfamilies headed by lesbian couples, biological parents continue to carry more of the child-related activities and care than stepparents (Biblarz & Savci, 2010; Dempsey, 2005)- we have studied this less among gay male stepfamilies. Also, like their heterosexual counterparts, gay and lesbian stepcouples bring similar romantic expectations to their families, initially expecting them to operate more easily, and more similarly to a “first” family. In addition, transitions appear to be easiest for young children and most difficult for

adolescents (Ariel & McPherson, 2000). Further, positive relationships between the stepparent and stepchild, the ex-spouse, and actively including all family members in daily life and events can ease these transitions (Crosbie-Burnett & Helmbrecht, 1993; Lynch, 2005).

Research on family finances and division of household labor among gay and lesbian-headed stepfamilies remains limited. As with heterosexual stepfamilies, gay and lesbian-headed stepfamilies use a variety of financial strategies (Lynch, 2005; Moore, 2008). Generally, these families focus on maintaining an ethic of egalitarianism for both of these family processes. However, compared to white lesbian stepcouples, black lesbian stepcouples appear to focus more on self-sufficiency and are more likely to maintain separate bank accounts and to share responsibility for household labor. In same-sex couples, biological mothers tend to have slightly more power in decision making, especially financial and child care decisions (Moore, 2008).

Slide 7- Unique issues experienced by stepfamilies headed by gay and lesbian couples

One of the key areas of both similarity and difference is the legal ambiguity of the stepparent role for gay and lesbian stepparents. Generally, the stepparenting literature suggests stepparents often feel like invisible strangers, especially when interacting with legal and other institutions, leading to role and boundary ambiguity (Gately, Pike, & Murphy, 2006; Mason, 2001). Although all stepparents have few rights, but many expectations (e.g., financial, some level of shared child-care), the lack of social and legal recognition of all gay and lesbian relationships in most states means that gay and lesbian parents and stepparents experience an even greater level of ambiguity (Berger, 1998; Lynch, 2004).

We also know from longitudinal research that gays and lesbians living in states with fewer legal protections experience more distress (Hatzenbuehler, Keyes, & Hason, 2009). Indeed, several scholars note that gay and lesbian-headed stepfamilies experience triple social

stigmatization- they are stigmatized for being gay, for being in a stepfamily, and being a parent, (and for some being female- a fourth area of stigma), all of which can negatively influence stepfamily functioning (e.g., Berger, 1998, 2000; Crosbie-Burnett & Helmbrecht, 1993; Lynch, 2000;).

Slide 8- Unique issues experienced by gay and lesbian-headed stepfamilies

van Dam (2004) found that adults in lesbian-headed stepfamilies earned lower wages, were younger, and had less education- characteristics consistent with their heterosexual counterparts, and all of which we know affect well-being (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000). Gay and lesbian-headed stepfamilies also face unique issues surrounding when and to whom to come out (Hare, 1994). This complex decision includes the question of when and whether to come out to their children, who often learn of their parent's sexual orientation by overhearing a conversation between his/her biological parents during or following their divorce (Turner, Scaddeen, & Harris, 1990). But, the equally complex question of whether to come out to doctors, schools, friends, neighbors, etc. also face these families. Research suggests that compared to lesbian mothers who are not in stepfamilies, adults in lesbian-headed stepfamilies come out later and are less likely to be involved in gay and lesbian family organizations (Berger, 1998). These factors potentially prevent lesbian-headed stepfamilies from developing social support networks, thereby increasing their risk and vulnerability. Despite the added stress, the decision to limit the "outness" of the family also is an attempt to protect the child from any potential discrimination and stigma as much as possible. Still, research does show that jointly negotiating family outness strengthens family closeness and bonding (Lynch, 2005; Patterson, 2009).

Another important factor involves the multiple transitions that mark the pathway to becoming a stepfamily (e.g., divorce to single-parenthood, then single-parenthood to repartnering). It also is important to note that many gay and lesbian adults are creating stepfamilies at the same time that they also are negotiating another critically important transition—that from a heterosexual to gay identity (e.g., Lynch, 2000, 2005). For some gays and lesbians, realizing that one is gay and coming out precedes divorce from a heterosexual marriage. We know that multiple transitions create added stress that can negatively impact other areas of a person's life. This is an important unique and additional risk factor to consider for stepfamilies headed by gay and lesbian couples

Children living in gay and lesbian stepfamilies do report that they experience more stigmatization from having gay or lesbian parents than from being part of a stepfamily (Robitaille & Saint-Jacques, 2009). Further, most of these children internalize this stigma. This, in turn, creates ambiguity for the child concerning when, if, and how to disclose their family structure (Baptiste, 1995). In most cases children decided not to disclose. Interestingly, there is no research to suggest these risks translate into detrimental outcomes for these families. In fact, despite all of these burdens, research suggests that children in gay and lesbian-headed stepfamilies do well in a variety of developmental domains (e.g., psychological development, peer relations, socioemotional development; Biblarz & Savci, 2010; Burston, Oery, Golding, Steele, & Golombok, 2004). In fact, child outcomes in gay and lesbian-headed stepfamilies appear more similar to those in first married families than those in heterosexual stepfamilies. As such, much more research is needed that identifies family strengths that promote the resilience of gay and lesbian stepfamilies.

Slide 9- Family strengths

Research on gay and lesbian stepfamilies remains in its infancy, and often relies on qualitative or small scale quantitative studies. However, across multiple studies, it appears that these particular stepfamilies exude a level of resilience, and several key family strengths appear to be emerging from the literature. I would like to conclude by sharing these strengths with you. I believe that any educational, clinical, and advocacy work, as well as future research on gay and lesbian stepfamilies serves us all by identifying and focusing upon these family strengths.

1. The research shows that gay and lesbian stepcouples exhibit high levels of flexibility and adaptability (Lynch, 2000). For example, stepparents in Lynch's study reported an awareness of the need to step back from the parenting role rather than acting as an equal parent fairly early in developing their families. These processes likely aid gay and lesbian-headed stepfamilies in buffering the effects of discrimination and stigma.
2. It appears that in these stepfamilies, many decisions (e.g., how out the family will be) are made by the entire family (Lynch, 2005). Research indicates that this kind of inclusiveness promotes positive stepfamily adjustment (Crosbie-Burnett & Helmbrecht, 1993).
3. Although these families report less external social support, necessitating that gay and lesbian-headed stepfamilies turn inward to each other for support, this has promoted high levels of family cohesion and togetherness (Lynch, 2005).
4. Gay and lesbian stepfamilies tend to be more child-centered, putting the needs of children ahead of the adults' need. They are also more "intentional" meaning that they are more proactive than reactive (Lynch, 2000). These factors may account for the findings of healthy child development in these stepfamilies (Patterson, 2009).

5. Researchers consistently find that children and parents share the same perception about the quality of their relationship meaning the family is on the same page about the positivity or negativity about their relationships with each other. (Burston, Oery, Golding, Steele, & Golombok, 2004).

Resources (We can use this as a supplemental document)

1. Family Equality Council - <http://www.familyequality.org>

Family Equality Council is an online site for same-sex couples in the United States. The mission statement expresses a desire to “ensure equality for LGBT families by building community, changing hearts and minds, and advocating social justice for all families.” The organization is not geared directly toward stepfamilies, but could serve as a way for same-sex-headed stepfamilies to find each other. The web site can support same-sex stepcouples via starting a parent group, reading and publishing personal stories or attending events. Through the blog and resource center, same-sex couples can stay informed about national events affecting them as a family.

2. COLAGE - <http://www.colage.org/>

COLAGE is dedicated to bringing children of same-sex parents together for support, activism, and education related to having gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender parents. Although not specifically directed toward stepfamilies, this site may be a great resource for children whose parents are just coming out, helping children to find one another, and to stay connected. The site also offers tools and tips for LGBT individuals or couples who are thinking about parenting.

3. Proud Parent - Proudparent.org

This social networking site for LGBT parents includes news articles, advice columns, and a variety of parenting topics. Although not specific for stepfamilies, it offers a connection among LGBT-headed families to discuss issues and concerns as well as to celebrate and advocate together.

4. Families like mine - <http://familieslikemine.com/>

This website is aimed entirely at gay and lesbian-headed families offering a wide array of advice, services, and topics. A unique part of the site enables visitors to submit questions and to have their questions answered by a professional. Each question is archived and is open for discussion and encouragement from visitors who are in the same situation. This is a great resource for both parents and children

5. Family Education- <http://life.familyeducation.com/stepfamilies/sexuality/47611.html>

This website focuses on how to come out to children and children's possible reactions to the process. It also discusses the various roles a gay or lesbian stepparent can take in their new family, including tips on co-parenting.

6. Youth Adult Health

<http://www.cyh.com/HealthTopics/HealthTopicDetails.aspx?p=240&np=296&id=2038>

This site focuses on children and young adults with same-sex parents. The site offers information regarding the coming out process and discusses the different types of same-sex families. It provides information for children relating to sorting out their own sexuality from their parents' and addresses differences among families headed by same-sex couples and those headed by heterosexual couples.

7. Child and Family Web-Guide

<http://www.cfw.tufts.edu/?/category/family-parenting/2/topic/same-sex-parents/189/>

The majority of the articles on this site are aimed at parents, with helpful tips for parents in same-sex couples. The site focuses on helping the parent(s) to work with the children to build healthy parent-child relationships.

8. BBC: Parenting

http://www.bbc.co.uk/parenting/family_matters/step_gayparents.shtml

This website is all about parenting, with a great section about stepfamilies. It has advice on how to keep your relationship strong while merging two families together, information just for gay and lesbian stepfamilies, and tips on understanding your children's reactions to becoming a stepfamily.

9. <http://www.nolo.com/legal-encyclopedia/article-29790.html>

This article concerns gay and lesbian adoption and parenting. The website is more for parents than children, offering lots of helpful legal information that stepfamilies may not be aware of. This site does an excellent job of summarizing and clarifying confusing legal language.

10. Human Rights Campaign

<http://www.hrc.org/>

HRC provides a variety of information about various LGBT issues, including parenting and relationships. Importantly, this site maintains up-to-date policy and legal sections detailing laws and protections in each state.