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Scientific Consensus on Whether LGBTQ Parents Are More Likely (or Not) to Have LGBTQ Children: An Analysis of 72 Social Science Reviews of the Literature Published Between 2001 and 2017

By Walter Schumm¹ and Duane Crawford²

Abstract

Until the 1950's, it was widely assumed that homosexuality was a pathological condition. Even after leading social science organizations rejected that assumption in the early 1970's, many believed that LGBTQ parents would not be able to parent as well as heterosexual parents. Further social science research has generally rejected the latter assumption as well. Using a complex citation network method of assessing scientific consensus, Adams and Light (2015) concluded that consensus on same-sex or LGBTQ parenting had been achieved by the late 1990's and that the consensus formed was that children's outcomes were no different than for children of heterosexual parents. We have proposed a more direct and simple measure of scientific consensus, using social science literature reviews. We evaluated 72 social science reviews of the literature between 2001 and 2017, based on English language social science journal sources, in the area of same-sex or LGBTQ parenting, with a focus on whether the authors concluded if there was any apparent association between parental and child sexual orientations. Over 90% of the reviews assessed concluded that there was no association between parent and child sexual orientations, demonstrating a clear scientific consensus on the issue since at least 2001. The small minority of reviews that concluded otherwise often had issues that might lead many scholars to discredit the validity of their conclusions. Our results provide another approach for assessing scientific consensus in the social sciences and confirm the findings of Adams and Light (2015), despite our different methodologies, about the development of scientific consensus in the area of same-sex parenting, that it was probably achieved by the late 1990's. Future research might investigate the existence of similar consensus in medical or legal journals prior to 2001 or take the quality of literature reviews into account, including their consideration of intersectionality.

Keywords: LGBTQ parents, children of LGBTQ parents, literature reviews, same-sex parents

Introduction

Controversial questions in science are seldom settled by one or two research reports. Rather, individual scholars usually base their own conclusions on their assessment of a wide spectrum of research reports. Furthermore, groups of scholars may be expected to base their own collective conclusions on the assessments of a wide spectrum of literature reviews.

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Until the 1950's, it was widely assumed that homosexuality was a pathological condition. Even after leading social science organizations rejected that assumption in the early 1970's, many believed that LGBTQ parents would not be able to parent as well as heterosexual parents. Further social science research has generally rejected the latter assumption as well. As part of the spectrum of this area of research, Adams and Light (2015) tried to assess the development of scientific consensus about same-sex or LGBTQ parenting using network patterns of citations among social scientists; they concluded that a scientific consensus about same-sex parenting was reached by the late 1990's.

Furthermore, their assessment of key literature reviews found that the consensus that had been formed was that the outcomes of same-sex parenting were no different than those of different-gender parenting. Their research on scientific consensus, of course, came after decades of research on same-sex parenting in which one of the central questions had been whether children's outcomes were the same or different depending on the sexual orientation (or gender match) of their parents. That issue played at least some role in various court decisions leading up to the *Obergefell* case before the U.S. Supreme Court. Research concerning same-sex parenting, thus, was not of merely academic interest but had major policy and legal implications.

Objective

However, in this report, we have an objective of assessing scientific consensus with a different, less complex approach than that used by Adams and Light (2015). Our approach will focus directly on scientific literature reviews and their conclusions rather than citation networking. Literature reviews have been valued, in general, in science. As Milardo has stated, "we have paired publishing integrative reviews with new developments in theory because they are so intimately tied together in the generation and interpretation of knowledge about families" (2009, p. 1). Furthermore, as Milardo later noted, "Integrative and theoretically based literature reviews are critical to their respective areas of inquiry and important for a variety of constituencies, including those working in family policy or applied venues" (2014, p. 438). Bem (1995, p. 172) noted that reviews would often be used by "journalists, attorneys, congressional aides" as well as other non-social scientists.

If we accept the importance of literature reviews, would an analysis of such reviews be a possible way to assess scientific consensus in an area of social science? If 90% or more of a set of recent literature reviews came to the same conclusions about an issue, might we not be safe in concluding that a scientific consensus had developed or now existed with respect to that issue?

A Social Science Application

As an example of one area that has reviewed extensively in social science is the area of LGBTQ or same-sex parenting, as suggested by the focus of Adam and Light's (2015) analysis. Here one, of several, important questions has been whether LGBTQ parents are more likely to raise LGBTQ children. Many scholars have highlighted the importance of that question (e.g., Ball, 2016b; Schumm, 2018), but we will provide a few examples. Bailey and Dawood (1998) saw the issue as an important question – were the children of gay and lesbian parents "more likely to become gay or lesbian themselves?" (p. 12). Anderssen, Amlie, and Ytteroy (2002) noted that "Sexual preference is one of the outcomes of most concern in debates about children growing up with a lesbian mother or gay father" (p. 344). Goldberg (2010) agreed, stating that "The sexual orientation of children of lesbian and gay parents has also been a topic of great interest" (p. 132)

among scholars and the public (p. 134). More recently, Judith Stacey (2011) asked “How do children raised by lesbian or gay parents turn out? Are they more likely to be gay?” (p. 14). Goldberg, Downing, and Richardson (2012) stated that “A central controversy concerning children of gay and lesbian parents is whether being raised by gay and lesbian parents increases children’s likelihood of later identifying as gay or lesbian” (p. 1576; see also p. 1580). Other issues associated with LGBTQ parenting, though equally important, are beyond the scope of this paper (see Ball, 2016a and Schumm, 2018 for reviews of other areas), although Adam and Light’s (2015) conclusions applied to all areas of same-sex parenting.

Research Question

Here our primary research question was whether recent reviews of the social science literature would yield a definitive answer with respect to the narrow (compared to Adam and Light’s focus) question of whether LGBTQ parents were or were not more likely to raise LGBTQ children. We established a priori 90% as our criterion for whether consensus had been achieved among those literature reviews we assessed.

Method

We wanted to assess a diversity of literature reviews – having reviews done by both conservative, moderate, and progressive scholars, if possible, as well as having both narrative reviews and meta-analytic reviews included. Thus, we did not eliminate nor select reviews as a function of any apparent political orientation of their authors. We did restrict our set of reviews to those published since 2001, using Stacey and Biblarz’s (2001) review as a benchmark up to and through 2017. Since Adam and Light (2015) indicated that scientific consensus about same-sex parenting had been achieved by the late 1990’s, we expected that, if that consensus had continued to prevail, that literature reviews done since 2001 would most likely reach the same consensus, that same-sex parenting had no effect on children’s sexual orientations.

We did want to include reviews published in social science outlets, but we did not include reviews published in medical, legal, or philosophy journals because we questioned whether physicians, lawyers, or philosophers were as well trained as social scientists in assessing social science research (in the same way we would question our ability to review the literature on medical treatments for rare forms of cancer). In one instance we did not include a review because the author’s primary professional affiliation was medical rather than as a social scientist (Byrd, 2011). If the primary focus of a review seemed to be on legal issues and it was not published in a social science journal, we did not include it in our database. We did not include reports from organizations that had more of a legal purpose rather than a social science orientation. If the review focused on LGBTQ parenting or relationships but did not mention the issue of whether LGBTQ parents might be more likely to have LGBTQ children, then the review was omitted from our consideration. We did not include reviews that were primarily comments on another review (e.g., Tasker, 2010). We did not include reviews published in languages other than English (e.g., Juros, 2017), which limited authorship of the reviews primarily to the geographical areas of North America, Europe (mainly England and Scandinavia), and Australia/New Zealand. Scholars with interdisciplinary training in medicine, social science, and the law might wish to replicate our approach using a wider selection of sources to determine if the same consensus might be observed

across a wider range of sources than our more, narrow focus on social science journals publishing in English.

We did not feel it appropriate to include our own reviews of the same literature (e.g., Schumm, 2018; Schumm & Crawford, 2015) due to the possible presence of our own biases in evaluating our own work. Others might wish to replicate our analyses without some of the restrictions that we imposed. We did not restrict our selection of reviews on the basis of numbers of references or pages, which is one reason we did include encyclopedic reviews, despite their brevity, in our sample.

Sample Description

We identified 72 literature reviews that dealt with the issue of same-sex parents and their children's sexual orientations published between 2001 and 2017, an average of over four ($M = 4.24$) a year. While more of the reviews were published in scholarly journals (32, 44.4%), others were found in entire books (2, 2.8%), book chapters (27, 37.5%), encyclopedia entries (7, 9.7%), or in official reports from professional social science organizations (4, 5.6%). The reviews we identified are notated with an asterisk (*) in our reference section.

We did not try to determine if intersectionality in terms of parental race, class, or religion might have moderated the conclusions of the reviews. Most of the reviews, however, did not appear to take those factors into consideration, even though those variables can be very important. When most of the reviews, if not all, concluded there were no significant associations between parental and child sexual orientation, that meant that either they did not take into account factors like race, class, or religion or that they did not find any significant associations among such subgroups or within the larger populations studied. In other words, we did not find any of the 65 (no difference) literature reviews making a case that there were associations between parental and child sexual orientation(s) among certain (intersectional) combinations of demographic conditions but not others. However, Ball (2016b) noted that in one or two studies with lesbian mothers there might seem to have been an elevated rate of non-heterosexual sexual orientation among their older daughters. Lacking data from gay fathers on the issue makes it hard to argue for a gender effect for either parents or children, but it remains a possibility, more from lack of data than from anything else.

Results

Most of the 72 literature reviews ($n = 65$, 90.3%) found support for the “no differences” hypothesis with respect to LGBTQ parenting and LGBTQ children. There were seven reviews that seemed to us to indicate possible support for some degree of association between parental and child sexual orientations (Abbott, 2012; Biblarz & Savci, 2010; Biblarz & Stacey, 2010; Cameron, 2006; Diamond & Rosky, 2016; Schofield, 2016; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). It must be noted that many of the seven reports might be considered “problematic” by many scholars. Both Abbott (2012) and Schofield (2016) published in relatively unknown journals, which some scholars have found objectionable. For example, Patterson (2005) noted that an article published by Sarantakos [that had found lower educational achievement among children of same-sex parents] had been published in “a regional journal that is not widely known outside Australia. As such, it cannot be considered a source upon which one should rely for understanding the state of scientific knowledge...” (p. 7). Schofield (2016) in his meta-analysis combined gender role differences and

sexual orientation in the same set of variables, rather than differentiating them. As of December 2018, Cameron was on the list of anti-LGBT extremists at the website for the Southern Poverty Law Center. Stacey and Biblarz (2001) have received extensive academic criticism for their questioning of the “no difference” hypothesis (Ball, 2003, pp. 702-703; Golombok et al., 2003, p. 21; Hequembourg, 2007, p. 132; Herek, 2006, p. 613; Hicks, 2005, pp. 162-163). Diamond and Rosky (2016, p. 370) rejected the null hypothesis but did so apparently on the basis of the results of only one study (Gartrell, Bos, & Goldberg, 2011). Notably, all of the books, book chapters, encyclopedia entries, and reports by professional social science organizations found in favor of the “no difference” hypothesis. Among journal articles, over 78% (25/32) concluded in favor of the “no difference” hypothesis. Accordingly, it seems to us that any reasonable assessment of the literature with respect to LGBTQ parenting and children’s LGBTQ status based upon the vast majority of recent literature reviews would lead most readers to conclude that a scholarly consensus had been achieved in favor of the “no difference” hypothesis, in agreement with Adams and Light (2015). Thus, we believe that the consensus among most reviews of the literature in the social sciences is that LGBTQ parents are *not* more likely to raise LGBTQ children than heterosexual parents.

Discussion

Our assessment of the 72 reviews of the literature on LGBTQ parenting clearly indicates that scholarly consensus has been achieved with respect to whether LGBTQ parents are more likely to have LGBT children. However, consensus on this issue may have been achieved before 2001; Adams and Light (2015) suggested that it occurred by the late 1990’s. Patterson and Redding (1996) seemed to think there was a consensus by 1996, but so did Riley (1975), albeit in a law review. Our findings do not mean that one might not find an occasional study in which a high percentage of children of LGBTQ parents might report being LGBTQ (e.g., 39.3%, DiDennardo and Saguy, 2018). Schumm (2018) has reviewed a number of such studies but did not perform a meta-analysis of those studies.

Limitations

As we have noted, we did not include reviews of the literature published in non-social science outlets. Including medical or legal reviews would have increased our sample size and might have changed our results if issues of quality were different in those outlets. We also did not include reviews published prior to 2001; including such reviews would have increased our sample size and might have changed our results. Some might argue that a review should not be deemed “comprehensive” unless it contains a minimum number of references or pages; however, we did not impose any such restrictions on our selections. Imposing such restrictions would have reduced our sample size and perhaps yielded different results. Our results may not apply outside of English language research or outside of geographical areas where English is widely spoken.

More recently, many scholars (e.g., Carroll, 2018; Chan & Erby, 2018; Fish & Russell, 2018; van Eeden-Moorefield, 2018) have adopted an intersectional approach to LGBTQ issues in general and to LGBTQ parenting in particular. However, most of the reviews that we assessed did not take intersectionality into account with respect to the question of whether there was any association between parental and children’s sexual orientations. Schumm (2010) suggested that there might be an interaction of parent gender, child’s gender, and age of child upon the chance of a child identifying as LGBTQ. Specifically, he found some indications that female gender of

parent, female gender of child, and an older, post-puberty age of the child might be associated with a greater chance of a child identifying as LGBTQ. However, there is clearly much more research needed in this area, done from an intersectional perspective. To be fair to the reviews, many of the reviews were published before intersectionality had achieved its current level of prominence in the field of social science research.

Future Research

Since we did not include reviews published in medical or legal outlets (journal articles, books), future research might investigate whether the degree of scientific consensus reported here was also identifiable in those other outlets. Issues of scientific consensus might also be examined for other areas of family social science. For example, if one were to study work-family conflict or military family stability and wartime deployments, would one find enough reviews of the literature to determine if consensus had been achieved? Is it possible for apparent scientific consensus in some areas of research to be incorrect at certain times in history? Can scientific consensus change over time? How could one compare the relative quality of reviews of the literature in various areas of the social sciences? At this time, we do not have answers to such questions but would encourage others to think about them.

Conclusion

Adams and Light (2015) used a network-citation approach to determine that a scholarly consensus had been reached by the late 1990's on same-sex parenting, the consensus being that outcomes for children of same-sex parents were no different than outcomes for children of heterosexual parents. We have presented a different approach for determining consensus by evaluating 72 literature reviews published on same-sex parenting between 2001 and 2017 with a focus on the issue of whether LGBTQ parents are more likely (or not) to raise children who are LGBTQ. Our results, derived from English language social science journals, found that over 90% of the literature reviews agreed with a "no difference" conclusion. The few that disagreed with that consensus had major limitations. Thus, our findings agree with those of Adams and Light (2015), even though we used very different methodologies. Intersectionality, however, was not taken into account in most of the reviews, a major limitation. Future researchers might want to assess reviews published before 2001 to determine if there ever were any changes in the consensus that we found in reviews published since 2001; they should also take intersectionality into account when evaluating the quality of literature reviews. Future research might also compare the consensus we found in social science journals with that in medical or legal journals.

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- * Indicates part of the set of reviews included in analysis.
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