

Siblings and Sexual Orientation: Products of Alternative Families or the Ones Who Got Away?

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ABSTRACT. Lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals (LGBs) often have heterosexual siblings. The authors have conducted several research projects comparing siblings of different sexual orientations, given that siblings usually have the same ethnicity, race, parental socioeconomic status,

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This article was written while Esther D. Rothblum was on sabbatical at the Lesbian Health Research Center of the University of California at San Francisco, the Women's Leadership Institute at Mills College, and the Beatrice M. Bain Center for Research on Women at the University of California at Berkeley (E-mail: esther.rothblum@uvm.edu).

ally, it is possible to recruit participants from LGB community sources and just compare the results to published studies of the "general population," presumed heterosexual. This too has some weaknesses—the two samples were often collected in different ways or at different times. Also, LGBs are usually demographically different from general survey data, so the researchers have to control statistically for these differences.

One solution we had to this methodological dilemma was the idea of recruiting LGBs via community sources and then asking them to recruit their heterosexual siblings. That way, LGB and heterosexual participants would be surveyed via the same methods, the same time period, and the same measures. Our first study was designed to focus only on lesbians and their heterosexual sisters. We knew that we wanted to include lesbians who were not out to their heterosexual sisters so we made sure that the questionnaires did not state anywhere that ours was a study of sexual orientation. Among many demographic items and other subscales in the questionnaire were two items about sexual orientation versus, for example, three about religion). Our main interest was the feasibility of the study—for instance, would enough heterosexual sisters participate?

This first study (Rothblum & Factor, 1999) taught us a number of things. In many cases lesbians had multiple sisters and all of them wanted to participate. In hindsight, this had a major benefit: the response rate of the index participants (the original participants who contacted us) was much higher than those of their sisters. But, with multiple sisters, we ended up with nearly identical numbers of lesbians (314) and heterosexual women (315). Furthermore, some of the respondents (133) were bisexual so we could compare bisexual women with lesbians and heterosexual women. Finally, some index participants had sisters who were themselves lesbian or bisexual. This allowed us to compare index participants with siblings who were similar in sexual orientation to see if recruitment method (e.g., bisexual women who actively sought us out versus those dragged into the study by their sisters) made a difference (it didn't).

Our second study (Rothblum, Balsam & Mickey, in press) recruited lesbians, gay men, and bisexual women and men, and their siblings (whether heterosexual or LGB). Once again, we wanted to include LGBs who were not out to their siblings but we also wanted to survey LGBs about a number of issues specific to the coming out process. Consequently, we sent every participant a questionnaire printed on white paper, and sent LGB participants an additional questionnaire on lavender

paper with items about the LGB experience. Based on the self-rating of sexual orientation, there were 348 heterosexual women, 125 bisexual women, 332 lesbians, 185 heterosexual men, 38 bisexual men, and 226 gay men in this study.

The third study took advantage of the recent same-sex civil union legislation in the state of Vermont. We obtained copies of all civil union certificates from the first year of this legislation (July 1, 2000, to June 30, 2001) and wrote to all the couples. We also wanted to compare these civil union couples (two-thirds of whom were lesbians, ten percent people of color, and 80% from outside Vermont) to same-sex couples in their friendship circle who had not had civil unions, and also with heterosexual married siblings and their spouses. The analyses we will report on here are only those of civil union couples and heterosexual married couples recruited from their siblings (that is, we will not be discussing results of same-sex couples not in civil unions). This sample consisted of 212 lesbians in civil unions, 219 married heterosexual women, 123 gay men in civil unions, and 193 married heterosexual men.

This study (Solomon, Rothblum & Balsam, in press) differed from our first two studies in several ways. First, we had access to a whole population (rare in LGB research, where many participants are closeted or unknown to the research team), even though we had limited funding and thus only sent questionnaires to a subset of this sample. Furthermore, the civil union certificates also contained some information (year of birth of both partners, their race and ethnicity, educational level, where they lived, and whether they had been married heterosexually), which allowed us to compare characteristics of our sample with the whole population. This study was limited to couples in legal relationships (whether lesbian, gay, or heterosexual). Unlike the first two studies, we included only lesbian and gay male couples in civil unions who were out to their heterosexual married siblings.

The results of these studies point out many differences among lesbian, gay, bisexual, and heterosexual siblings (whenever we refer to *differences* we mean those that were statistically significant). A few words of caution are in order. Not all variables mentioned below were included in all three studies. We compared participants separately by gender. Thus, heterosexual men were compared with gay men (and in Study 2 to a very small sample of bisexual men). Heterosexual women were compared with lesbians and in Study 2 with bisexual women (Study 1 also included bisexual women in some analyses). We will present the results in three general areas: (1) education and moving away from the

Gay men have moved to large cities. Both convenience surveys and nationally representative studies have found a high proportion of gay men live in large urban areas (e.g., Laumann, Gagnon, Michael & Michaels, 1994). It is hard to know from those studies whether gay men have moved to large cities or whether those researchers were disproportionately targeting urban gay men (e.g., by using snowball sampling or distributing surveys at large gay events). Our research consistently shows that gay men live in large cities about twice as often as heterosexual men recruited from siblings who presumably grew up in the same place. Thus, it is likely that gay men gravitate from rural areas and smaller cities to the large, urban areas known for their gay communities.

Lesbians, too, have moved away from their family of origin. In Study 1, lesbians live further in miles from their mother and father than their heterosexual sisters. They have also moved to their current location from a greater distance than have their heterosexual sisters. In Study 2, lesbians had attended a college that was further from home than the one that heterosexual women attended.

There are different reasons why lesbian, bisexual and heterosexual men move to a new location. We asked participants how long they had lived in their current location, and the reason for moving there. Lesbians and bisexual women are more likely than heterosexual women to report that they had moved for their own education. Conversely, heterosexual women are more likely than lesbians or bisexual women to indicate that they had moved for their partner's job or their child's education. Heterosexual women have lived in their current location for more years than lesbians or bisexual women. These results point to the possibility that lesbians prioritize their own lives, whereas heterosexual men move for husbands or children. One could speculate that gender roles in heterosexual relationships do not allow women as much choice or geographic moves for their own career or education to the extent that men have. Gay, bisexual, and heterosexual men do not differ on these variables.

Lesbians perceive less support from family than do heterosexual men, and gay men perceive more support from friends than do heterosexual men. Study 3 asked couples about perceived social support from family and friends. Heterosexual married women perceive more support from family of origin than do lesbians in civil unions (gay men do not differ from heterosexual men on this measure). However, gay men perceive more support from friends than do heterosexual married men (lesbians do not differ from heterosexual women on this measure).

These results fit with the results described above that lesbians attended a college that was further away and also live further from their parents in adulthood. Thus, lesbians may leave home because there is less to lose or else lesbians may drift apart emotionally from their families of origin because they live further away. Gay men may also move to large cities to find friends, or else have more friends because they live in a large city. Traditional male gender roles may not allow heterosexual men to have close friendships, whereas male friendships are highly valued in gay male communities. These geographic moves may enable lesbians and gay men to be more out (for example, to friends and co-workers) without the knowledge of their family.

Heterosexual couples have more contact with family of origin than do same-sex couples. Study 3 asked a number of questions about contact with family of origin. Heterosexual married women have more contact with their mother than do lesbians in civil unions, and also initiate more contact with their partner's mother and father. Heterosexual married men initiate more contact with their partner's father, and also report that their father makes them feel "part of the family," compared with gay men in civil unions. These results mesh with the findings above that LGBs have moved further away from their parents. Parents may be less supportive of their LGB children so that LGBs have less reason to visit or contact their parents. LGBs may not be "out" to their parents and thus would not want to introduce their partner to their parents, or meet their partner's parents. Finally, LGBs may have less in common with their family of origin (e.g., values, politics, lifestyle, etc.) and thus spend less time with them.

Relationships, Children, and Division of Labor

Heterosexuals have been in relationships longer than LGBs. Studies 1 and 2 did not focus specifically on couples. In those studies, lesbians are no less likely than heterosexual women to be in a partnered relationship. When we looked only at women in partnered relationships, lesbians have been in their current relationship for a shorter duration (six to seven years on average) than heterosexual women (12 years on average). Bisexual women are less likely to be in a partnered relationship than either lesbian or heterosexual women, and have been in their relationship for a shorter duration (five years on average) than heterosexual women. For men, the results are somewhat different. Gay men are less likely to be in partnered relationships than are heterosexual or bisexual men. But when we looked only at men who were in partnered relation-

onventional sexual orientation may also result in questioning of conventional religious practices. In addition, most formal religions are not supportive of being LGB, resulting in many LGBs feeling alienated by their church or synagogue.

LGBs are more politically liberal than heterosexuals. Only Study 3 asked participants about their political views. One question asked how participants would describe their political outlook, from extremely liberal to extremely conservative. Another asked how sympathetic participants felt towards the feminist movement. LGBs are more liberal and pro-feminist than heterosexuals, who are closer to the mid-point on these items.

Which Siblings Become Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, or Heterosexual?

Who is more typical: George or Rebecca? Our studies do not show that LGBs typically come from non-traditional families (although this had been our guess before we began this research). Quite the contrary, there is strong evidence that LGBs are the outliers (no pun intended!) among their siblings. They are the ones who get away, both geographically and emotionally. Gay men end up in large cities and receive their social support from friends rather than family. Lesbians and bisexual women move for their own education, attend colleges that are further from home than those that heterosexual women attend, and are more highly educated than their sisters. In sum, although Rebecca in the anecdote at the beginning of this article is an extreme case (with many siblings and from an ultra-religious family), LGBs are more likely to come from traditional families like hers.

How do lesbians and gay men, reared in traditional families, become different and get away (or get away and then become different)? It will always be challenging to conduct longitudinal research on the coming out process for lesbians and gay men. Many LGBs report feeling different even at a young age though they may not have come out until adulthood. However, many heterosexuals report feeling different in adolescence as well. The number of LGBs in the general population (or at least those willing to identify as such to researchers) is very small (Lamann et al., 1994) so extremely large numbers of adolescent and young adult sibling groups would have to be followed over time for even small samples of LGBs to be identified eventually.

A host of demographic factors in our research studies differentiate LGBs and heterosexual siblings so it is hard to know the progression of these factors. Do LGBs go to liberal colleges or progressive cities and

then become less traditionally religious? Or do less religious siblings obtain higher education because there is less pressure for them to get married? Does lower support from families and less contact with these families precede or follow moving away? Or does being LGB result in less family support? Do liberal politics precede or follow coming out as LGB?

We do not want to ignore LGBs who come from alternative families. George, in the anecdote at the beginning of this article, comes from an unusual family but most of us know LGBs who have another LGB sibling or LGB parent or whose siblings are themselves quite non-traditional in other ways. For example, more children are being reared by LGB parents who are out about their own sexual orientation. Recently, Stacey and Biblarz (2001) reviewed the literature on children reared by lesbian mothers. Even though the sample sizes are small and the children were often still quite young when the research was conducted, there is evidence that, overall, the children of lesbians may be more non-traditional than those of heterosexuals.

We are also aware that traditional families are declining in frequency. U.S. Census data indicate that 5.5 million Americans were living together and not married in 2000, compared with 1.1 million in 1970, and nearly half of single mothers in 2000 had never been married (Eskridge, 2001). More than half of all marriages ultimately end in divorce. Thus, children who come from traditional families are becoming the exception rather than the norm.

Who becomes bisexual? Even in Study 2, where we made a concerted effort to recruit bisexuals, we ended up with fewer bisexual women than lesbians or heterosexual women and a very small sample of bisexual men. Nevertheless, even these small samples show many statistically significant effects illustrating the importance of not generalizing from lesbians and gay men to bisexuals.

Looking across the results above, bisexual women are more like lesbians than heterosexual women on many variables, including educational level, religion in adulthood, duration of their current relationship, children, years they have lived in their current location, and reasons for moving. Like lesbians, over 70% of bisexual women have never been married to men. However, bisexual men are more like heterosexual men than gay men, including educational level, currently being in a relationship, having children, and size of city or town. About half of bisexual men had ever been married compared with only 13% of gay men.

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