



On Whose Terms? Psychology and the Legitimation of Lesbian and Gay Parents

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Book Review: Fiona L. Tasker & Susan Golombok. (1997). *Growing Up in a Lesbian Family: Effects on Child Development*. New York: Guildford Press.

Introduction

This paper is partly a review of *Growing up in a lesbian family* by Fiona Tasker and Susan Golombok, and partly a commentary on research in the area of lesbian and gay parenting more generally. As someone who has been involved in the ongoing critique of heteronormative constructions of the family, and now as a foster parent in a same-sex relationship, I feel it important to speak out about the ways in which these issues are shaped through the discourses of psychology that are often employed within research on lesbian and gay families. In addition to this is a desire to do justice to the book itself, as it is widely considered to be a seminal text in the subject area.

As a result, within this review I will outline the key points that the book makes which are used to support a 'positive view' of lesbian and gay parenting, and I then offer a commentary on these points in order to demonstrate some of the limitations of assuming that psychological science is the appropriate arbiter of what counts as 'good parenting'. Indeed, I suggest that it is often the case that research on lesbian and gay parenting assumes an unnecessarily defensive posture as a result of its location within the realm of science (cf., Stacey & Biblarz, 2000). My intention, then, is that this review and commentary will present a range of views on the topic, and thus hopefully stimulate further consideration of how we may go about understanding the potentially radical

differences that exist within lesbian and gay families.

Refuting stereotypes: Who is setting the agenda?

Within their book, Tasker and Golombok outline some of the key stereotypes that have been used to 'prove' that lesbians and gay men are not fit parents. These include: the assumption that same-sex attracted parents will produce children that are same-sex attracted, and more specifically, that these attractions result from the children's 'inability' to develop 'gender appropriate' behaviours, which is suggested to result from a lack of opposite-sex role models. The suggestion, then, is that the long term effects of this 'lack' of 'gender appropriate behaviours' will be emotional disturbance and potential mental health problems for those children raised in lesbian and gay headed households. Finally, those against lesbian and gay parenting suggest that the children of these parents will suffer unnecessarily from harassment from their peers as a result of their parents' sexual orientation.

Tasker and Golombok use longitudinal data gathered initially in the late 1970's from both a group of lesbian mothers and a 'comparative group' of heterosexual mothers, and a subsequent follow up with the majority of these mothers and their children fourteen years later, to demonstrate the 'flaws' of the stereotypes outlined above. Their data suggest that contrary to stereotypical assumptions about children within lesbian headed families, the children when interviewed as young adults showed no more problems in regards to mental health or emotional disturbance than did their

counterparts from heterosexual headed families.

Whilst their data suggest that there was a greater likelihood of children from lesbian families exploring or considering same-sex relationships for themselves, Tasker and Golombok propose that this represents the outcome of an increased awareness of 'choice' surrounding compulsory heterosexuality, rather than being the result of the expectations of their mothers. Finally, their data would appear to contradict the assumption that children from lesbian headed families would automatically experience higher levels of harassment than those children from heterosexual headed families. Whilst they do report a trend towards the children (as young adults) reporting more experiences of peer harassment in regards to their own sexuality, they suggest that this could be a result of the 'salience of sexuality' for them, rather than being an indicator of any real difference in experiences of harassment. Together, these results present a very clear challenge to the stereotypes that often surround lesbian and gay headed households, and these findings have thus been employed to demonstrate the importance of allowing children to remain with their (lesbian) mothers following heterosexual divorce.

Whilst this is indeed a very important outcome of the book's findings, and one that demonstrates the inadequacies of the legal system more generally (i.e., its underlying heterosexism), it is dependent on the acceptance of an 'agenda of sexuality' set within the heterosexist assumptions that structure notions of 'family' (Riggs, in-press). In other words, by accepting as legitimate the concerns raised about children of lesbian and gay parents, we reify these concerns as being the normative way of thinking about gay men and lesbians. Thus the idea that children may 'turn out gay' is only of concern if 'being gay' is rendered inherently problematic. Likewise, the assumption that a 'lack' of opposite sex role models is a cause for concern only makes sense if we are to prioritise 'sex differences', and more specifically, the requirement to accept as central an understanding of the category 'family' as centering on a 'mother'

and 'father' (categories which are thus implicitly heterosexual). And finally, whilst it may well be the case that children of lesbian mothers experience harassment, surely the concern should be with the context of heterosexism through which our society is structured, rather than the family of origin.

What I am suggesting, then, is that whilst Tasker and Golombok clearly demonstrate the flaws underpinning stereotypes about lesbian and gay families, they do not go on to question (in any great detail) how these assumptions are rendered intelligible, and whose best interests they serve. Thus in accepting such stereotypes as the starting point of research into lesbian and gay families, they run the risk of recentering the heteronorm. I would suggest that such an outcome is largely the result of the acceptance of science as the appropriate site for determining the value of lesbian and gay families. As I will now go on to outline, there may be a number of unwanted consequences that arise from taking this approach to research.

Science and the construction of gay and lesbian subjectivities

One of the most important facets of the research presented by Tasker and Golombok is that it employed a longitudinal approach. As a result, their data represent a more wide reaching picture of their participants' lives, which enables a considerably more complex understanding of 'growing up in a lesbian family'. In addition to this, Tasker and Golombok were able to interview the children as young adults, the inclusion of which allows for a more nuanced reading of the data. Thus it is possible to see how the children experienced life in a lesbian headed family in a wide range of ways, many of which may not be captured by the use of quantitative data alone. The outcome of this is that lesbian headed families are shown to provide a rich and supportive environment in which to raise children, in addition to enabling children to challenge what they see as wrong about the practices of heterosexism. In this way, their research presents a welcome change to previous research that has attempted to

demonstrate the pathology of lesbians and gay men.¹

Having said that, it is important to point out just how such an approach to research constructs lesbians and gay men in very specific ways. Elsewhere, I have argued that employing discourses of science (and specifically, 'scientific objectivity') to legitimate or defend same-sex attraction only serves to accept the terms set by heteropatriarchy (Riggs, 2004a; see also Clarke, 2000). Thus in order to outline what counts as 'good science', Tasker and Golombok resort to demonstrating the 'pseudo-science' of those researchers who attempt to prove the 'pathology' of gay and lesbian families (cf., Kitzinger, 1990). For example, they suggest that:

There has been much speculation about the consequences for children of being raised by a lesbian mother, speculation that is often based on little more than stereotypes of lesbian mothers, which, like all stereotypes, bear little resemblance to reality, and on false assumptions about the psychological processes involved in children development (p. 1).

They also suggest that such anti-gay research is 'not supported by existing empirical evidence' (p. 7). Unintentionally, then, they demonstrate how 'good science' (i.e., research that *is* 'supported by existing empirical evidence') is constructed by pointing out the 'flaws' of 'pseudoscience' (i.e., those who conduct research 'based on little more than stereotypes'). In doing this, they construct the value of lesbian and gay parents as being decided within the realm of science – a site that has historically contributed (and indeed continues) to the oppression of same-sex attracted individuals. Why, then, would we want to use 'good science' to argue our case?

¹ It should be noted that such research continues to be conducted, and is used to deny parenting rights to lesbians and gay men.

In addition to arguments about what constitutes 'good scientific research' are a range of assumptions about what constitutes a 'good lesbian or gay parent'. In her work on the 'heteronormativity of citizenship', Carol Johnson (2003) suggests that such assumptions work to manage the limits of how far same-sex attracted individuals may challenge the hegemony of heterosexuality. Likewise, both Hicks (2000) and Malone & Cleary (2002) propose that much of the research on lesbian and gay families depicts a very 'nice' and 'safe' version of such families. The presumption underpinning this is that if our families are 'less threatening', then they will be more acceptable within the confines of heteropatriarchy.

Thus such research tends to suggest that 'sexuality is not an issue', which effectively removes 'same-sex desire' from the realm of 'same-sex parenting' (Malone & Cleary, 2002). Such sanitising of lesbian and gay families is intended to move the focus away from debates over sexuality, and instead to reinstate the importance of looking at the 'needs of the child', needs which (it is thus suggested) can be met within lesbian and gay families. What this ignores is that discourses of sexuality are most often constructed through heterosexuality (and indeed work to produce heterosexuality as normative), and that in ignoring the 'politics of sexuality' we effectively give up one site of critique. In the section that follows, I look at how this construction of 'nice families' works to depoliticise lesbian and gay parenting.

Locating the political in research on lesbian and gay families

In their conclusion, Tasker and Golombok outline some of the important differences that may shape the lives of children raised in lesbian headed families. They suggest that:

Findings indicate that a family environment in which a mother is more open about her relationships with other women and does not express a preference for her child to necessarily have heterosexual relationships enables

a young person to become involved in a homosexual relationship if the young person feels attracted to someone of the same sex (p. 151).

Their suggestion, then, is that children in lesbian headed families have the opportunity to challenge the heteronorm, and 'perceive greater choice for themselves' (p. 132) in their relationships. This is obviously a very important point in regards to lesbian and gay families, and highlights the previously mentioned 'politics of sexuality' that shape our experiences.

However, the particular account of this provided by Tasker and Golombok also works to normalise lesbian families, and thus to reinforce heterosexual headed families as the benchmark for what constitutes a 'good family environment'. Thus Tasker and Golombok report that they found only minor differences in their measurement of whether the children of either lesbian or heterosexual mothers displayed what may be termed 'gay or lesbian affirmative' or 'feminist' critiques of the social status quo. As a result, they affirm that lesbian mothers are no more likely than heterosexual mothers to produce 'militant children' – something that is of obvious concern to the heterosexual moral majority.

In so doing, Tasker and Golombok affirm the presumption that 'politics and families don't mix' – that it is not 'normal' for children to be encouraged to challenge systems of exclusion and oppression. In this way lesbian mothers who choose a separatist lifestyle, or who actively encourage their children to challenge heteropatriarchy are implicitly constructed as not being good parents. In regards to this, I would suggest that it is somewhat anomalous for Tasker and Golombok to spend time proving that 'young people from lesbian mother families are no more likely than their counterparts from heterosexual backgrounds to express support for women's rights' (p. 101) – surely 'women's rights' are of central importance to any mother who chooses to raise her children in a lesbian relationship within our society? I would suggest that an approach that minimises the importance of women's (as well as lesbian and gay) rights may ultimately serve to

reassert the public/private dichotomy that has long been deployed to manage the challenge that lesbian and gay families can present to heteropatriarchy.

In much the same way, the use of discourses of 'sameness' (i.e., that we are 'all human, regardless of sexuality') work to manage the (most often) non-politicality of heterosexuality in the face of heteropatriarchy (Riggs, 2003). In their work on heterosexuality, Celia Kitzinger and Sue Wilkinson (1993) question whether there *can* be a political position that chooses heterosexuality as a starting point. Their intention is not to dismiss the role that heterosexually orientated people may play in the dismantling of heteropatriarchy *per se*, but rather to point towards the incommensurability of experience that shapes the lives of lesbians and gay men in contrast to heterosexual women and men. Thus in seeking to equate these differences in research on lesbian headed families, Tasker and Golombok run the risk of silencing the 'politics of sexuality' that shape many of the experiences that we have as same-sex attracted individuals. As I will now discuss, these discourses of sameness are based upon a particular understanding of 'lesbian and gay rights'.

Frameworks of 'equality'

In regards to the politics of lesbian and gay parenting, Tasker and Golombok suggest that the limitations currently placed on our families require greater attention. They propose that their 'findings suggest that greater public and legal recognition should be given to the importance of child's (sic) relationship with the mother's female partner' (p. 148). This example, of encouraging the legal recognition of same-sex couples, is intimately related to the ongoing fight for access to marriage, and the privileges that accompany it (e.g., superannuation benefits, maternity/paternity leave etc.). Thus Tasker and Golombok point towards the need for research in the area of lesbian and gay families to continue to push for the rights of lesbians and gay men.

Yet, at the same time, it is important that we examine how we structure our call for rights –

do we simply want 'equality with' the heterosexual majority, or is it more useful to examine how systems of equality are used to prop up the institution of heteropatriarchy itself? Judith Butler (2002) suggests that in fighting for access to traditionally heterosexual institutions, such as marriage, we may indeed be rendering ourselves complicit with practices of normalisation (cf. Riggs & Riggs, forthcoming). As she states, 'to be legitimated by the state is to enter into the terms of the legitimation offered there' (p. 17). Whilst Butler recognises the importance of being validated in Western society, which is most often achieved through adherence to particular rules arbitrated by the state, we do need to be wary of the limitations of this approach to 'social justice'. For whilst on the one hand we need to be aware of the personal gains that have been made through recourse to state sanctioned 'practices of self' (e.g., the recognition that lesbians and gay men can be 'good parents'), we also need to be mindful of how such practices of self are themselves constitutive of particular (heteronormative) regimes of truth.

I would suggest, then, that a 'rights-based approach' to research on lesbian and gay headed families is limited as it fails to challenge how the concept of 'rights' itself is structured (cf., Rahman & Jackson, 1996; van Reyk, forthcoming). Such an approach is most often conducive of research that assumes a defensive position, and which seeks to 'prove' the normality of gay men and lesbians (Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). This often entails an approach (as outlined previously) that subsumes the radical differences of experiences that we may have as gay men and lesbians into a heteronormative model of families, relationships and parenting.² If we are

² Indeed, in a similar way, it works to subsume the vast differences of experience that exist within and between gay men and lesbians, through recourse to a 'unified understanding' of the category 'gay men and lesbians'. Likewise, my account of lesbian and gay parenting has focused on sexuality as the primary axis of difference, thus ignoring the differential effects of race, class and ethnicity (to name but a few). I would suggest that this reflects my own white race privilege, in that I am able to warrant spending time focusing on issues that relate to my sexuality, rather than looking at issues

to promote 'social justice' for lesbian and gay parents, then I would suggest that we need to focus on how the normative category 'family' is constructed, and what this means for the relationships that we share (cf., Budgeon & Roseneil, 2002; Riggs, in-press).

Conclusions

Throughout this paper I have attempted to demonstrate some of the ways in which research on lesbian and gay parenting is structured through a set of normative assumptions that underlie the category of 'family'. In doing this, I have sought to both recognise the importance of work that focuses on 'positive images' of lesbian and gay parents, whilst at the same time examining the foundations that such work rests upon. In this way I have not intended to dismiss research on lesbian and gay parenting as naive, but rather to look at the stages through which 'queer critique' continues to develop in regards to the deconstruction of heteronormativity. As a result, I have suggested that we need to be critical of always (or ever) assuming that science is the appropriate site for validating lesbian and gay parenting. Whilst it may provide us with the epistemic authority required to speak out about our experiences of oppression, it also holds the potential for co-opting us into the narratives of truth that underpin 'scientific objectivity' (cf., Clarke, 2000).

Having said that, it is important to understand that for many people it is an enormous achievement simply to be recognised as a parent within our social and political climate. There is a lot to be said for the ways in which lesbians and gay men as parents are continuing to receive support from a wide range of sectors within our communities. Yet, at the same time, I feel it is important to also acknowledge that whilst there are people who support gay and lesbian rights, there continue to be a majority of people who do not - people like the incumbent Prime Minister of Australia, John Howard. Thus, whilst it is

relating to my race. For more on such 'issues of privilege' see Riggs, 2004b; Riggs & Selby, 2003).

necessary to validate the 'experiences of family' that we have currently as lesbians and gay men, it is also worthwhile considering the limits of an 'equal rights' based approach to social justice, particularly as it is framed within the politics of the right.

Finally, Tasker and Golombok touch on (albeit often briefly) the need for us as gay and lesbian parents to speak out about the problems and difficulties that we face. I would go further in suggesting that this need not be limited to the oppressive practices that we experience living in a context of heterosexism – we need to also feel free to speak about the negative experiences we have *of parenting*, rather than perpetuating the notion that 'all is rosy' in our families (cf., Malone & Cleary, 2002). The production of such 'nice narratives' about lesbian and gay headed households effectively works to mask the problems that we face, and encourages us to present a vision of our families that is acceptable under heteropatriarchy.

This is not to suggest that we *don't* have 'good families', but rather, that we need not solely focus on the good, in order to 'prove' our worth as parents. We need only to look at the example of the church, or the heterosexual nuclear family, to understand the ways in which dangerous practices are perpetuated under the guise of 'normality and goodness'. Whilst it is true that we may often struggle against social stereotypes that construct our families as pathological, we need not accept this as the terms through which we describe our families. Instead we may speak out about the wide range of experiences that we have, as we negotiate alternate ways of 'doing family' (Stiles, 2002).

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