



Partnering, parenting, and policy: family issues affecting Black lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people

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Abstract

Employing a variety of available data and previous research, the authors examine issues related to Black lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people's parenting practices and experiences. Findings indicate that parenting may serve to more fully-integrate Black LGBT people into both White LGBT communities and Black heterosexual communities. Black LGBT parents may also be disproportionately harmed as a result of anti-gay parenting measures. In light of these findings, the authors discuss foster parenting and adoption, racial and economic justice, and the current same-sex marriage debate. In sum, although the intersection of race and sexuality creates circumstances unique to Black LGBT people that neither White LGBT people nor Black heterosexual people are required to confront, Black LGBT people's similarities with other groups should not be overlooked.

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1. Background

For several reasons, little is known about the family structures and parenting behaviors of Black lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people. First, most national surveys that could potentially gather such data fail to ask about sexual orientation or gender identity. Second, textbooks focusing on the Black family largely ignore the topic of

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Black LGBT family members (Bennett & Battle, 2001). Third, there is fear and reluctance on the part of many Blacks to participate in academic or scientific research: Black people's distrust of scientific research is understandable given the history of abuse by scientific researchers, such as during the infamous Tuskegee experiments in which Black men exposed to syphilis were purposefully not treated to see how the disease would progress.

First and foremost, then, this paper is an attempt to better understand the family structures and parenting behaviors of Black LGBT people. Instead of conflating Black homosexuals and Black heterosexuals, or Black homosexuals and White homosexuals, this paper accentuates, as opposed to overlooks, the particular experiences of Black LGBT families and parents. Therefore, this paper examines same-sex partnering and parenting patterns among Blacks, the importance of partner recognition among Black LGBT partners, and policy issues affecting Black LGBT parents. By re-examining and synthesizing previous work on Black LGBT families, this paper will bring Black LGBT people's familial experiences away from the margin and toward the center.

1.1. LGBT people of color: parenting, family structures, and networks

There is a limited body of research on the family structures and parenting behaviors of lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals who are people of color and/or members of ethnic minority groups (Fukayama & Ferguson, 2000; Greene, 1997; Mays, Chatters, Cochran, & Mackness, 1998). Past research on lesbian and gay Latino and Asian people has focused on such issues as identity formation (Alquijay, 1997; Marsiglia, 1998), workplace integration, and social work implications (Rodriguez, 1996). Despite these studies, the majority of research on LGBT families has focused primarily on White people and, as a result, little attention has been paid to the particular experiences of LGBT families of color. In addition, most non-LGBT family research – including research on families of color – marginalizes or ignores LGBT parents and children (Bennett & Battle, 2001). Consequently, Black LGBT people's parenting experiences are overlooked by research on both (White) homosexual families and (heterosexual) Black families.

Marginalizing Black LGBT parents prohibits a complete understanding of all possible forms of parenting. Although parenting is oftentimes traditionally understood as an adult's active caring and providing for his or her biological children, this definition is limited with respect to lesbian and gay parents. In contrast to the (White, middle-class) hetero-normative arrangement of two biological parents who preside over their children within close proximity, parenting by lesbians and gays oftentimes does not follow this model. Examples of parenting arrangements which are more likely to occur among lesbian and gay parents than among their straight counterparts include parenting a child who lives in another home, single parenting, parenting an adopted child, co-parenting, and foster care parenting (Allen & Demo, 1995). Parenting, then, for lesbians and gays more generally, and Black lesbian and gay parents more specifically, takes on multiple forms.

Past research on lesbian and gay family structures has usually focused on parents who raise children within their own home for an extended period of time (Allen & Demo, 1995; Stiers, 1999). Whether such studies examine identity formation (Hequembourg

& Farrell, 1999) or geographic location (Friedman, 1997), they tend to narrowly define parenting and divide the sample population in some other way (e.g., race, gender, geographic location, parent–child relationship, etc.). Lesbian and gay parenting is most frequently defined as the act of raising, as opposed to financially supporting or giving birth to children (Weston, 1991). Similarly, researchers will oftentimes discuss the various forms of parenting among lesbians and gay men, but then only focus their qualitative data on the day-to-day caretaking of children. These studies, although important in their own right, are not quantitatively based and cannot typically make statistical comparisons between different types of parenting or between lesbian and gay parents and non-parents.

Another area of research in which Black LGBT parents' experiences can elucidate the full range of parenting possibilities is with regard to networked family structures. Networked family structures are particularly common among families of color (Wilhelmus, 1998). Family responsibilities, including financial and emotional support, elder and child caretaking, and other household duties are frequently shared throughout support networks that may involve extended family and friends' participation in a variety of familial roles. Research on Black families has shown that kinship arrangements commonly include multi-generational family structures as well as other types of extended family households (Mays et al., 1998). Several researchers have found that immigrant families of color sustain complex networks that join households and communities – even across geographic borders – to provide assistance and support after immigration (Vidal de Haynes & Medina, 1999).

In addition to people of color's broad definition of what constitutes "family," LGBT people's experiences in a networked family structure or kinship may be unique in several respects. On top of their own biological, foster, or adopted children, lesbian and gay family members may also be expected to "parent" other children in their network by providing financial and emotional support to siblings, nieces and nephews, and grandchildren (Mays et al., 1998, p. 84). Consequently, extended family networks may simultaneously present an array of housing, health, and economic concerns, such as supervised care for elders and children, medical expenses (from prenatal and pediatric care to emergency treatment and geriatric care), educational costs, and career responsibilities (Meyers, Han, Waldfoget, & Garfinkel, 2001).

The issue of family networks becomes increasingly complex when considering the intersection of race and sexuality. For example, research on Black communities suggests that should a family be unwilling to accept the new identity disclosed by a lesbian or gay family member, both the family and the individual would suffer a loss of supportive networks and exchanges (Mays et al., 1998). For people of color, "coming out" does not merely involve confronting the homophobia of the dominant society, but can also entail enduring the hostility of their communities of origin. While homophobic attitudes are pervasive in many White communities, for LGBT people of color their communities of origin can be essential in maintaining ties to their cultural heritage and providing support against the racism of the wider society. Moreover, LGBT people of color may also be excluded from, marginalized, or exoticized by the White LGBT community. As a result, many LGBT Black people find themselves, at once, to be doubly isolated—from Black heterosexual communities and from the predominantly White LGBT community.

1.2. *Welfare policies and practices*

There are pervasive and longstanding racial disparities in many child welfare policies and practices that frame the context in which Black LGBT parenting and partnering patterns should be understood. In the arena of foster care, for example, many Black children face circumstances that children of other races generally do not have to confront. Black children, at 42%, are vastly over-represented in the nation's foster care system (Roberts, 2001). Moreover, poor parents and/or parents of color are far more likely to have their children removed and placed into foster care than are middle-class and/or White parents (Roberts, 2001).

In addition to these racial disparities, foster care issues can become increasingly complex for Black LGBT families as state policy oftentimes serves as a barrier to lesbian and gay families adopting or caring for foster children. These barriers usually take on one of two forms: (1) laws banning same-sex couples from adopting or serving as foster parents, or (2) policies requiring parents to be married (which is not currently available to same-sex couples in 49 of the 50 states in the United States) in order to be eligible for specific benefits. There is evidence that these barriers adversely affect Black LGBT parents. Black same-sex couples appear more likely than White same-sex couples to be raising children (Bradford, Barrett, & Honnold, 2002). Furthermore, four of the six states with anti-gay adoption and foster care policies – Arkansas, Mississippi, Oklahoma, and Florida – are in the South and have a higher proportion of Blacks than most of the US. There is also evidence that Mississippi has among the highest rates of parenting among lesbian couples in the United States, with 44% of lesbians parenting compared to 34% nationally (Simmons & O'Connell, 2003).

1.3. *Data on Black LGBT people*

In a study published in 1998, Mays et al. found that one in four Black lesbians lived with children for whom she had child-rearing responsibilities, while 2% of Black gay men reported children in the household. In addition, one in three Black lesbians and nearly 12% of Black gay men reported having children. Taken together, these results indicate that more Black lesbians and gay men “have” children than are actually raising children in their household (Mays et al., 1998).

Another source of data on lesbian and gay parenting is the US Census. Although the Census does not ask about sexual orientation, in 1990 and 2000 it allowed same-sex couples who live together to self-identify as “unmarried partners,” which provided a sample of 150,000 same-sex couples. According to the 1990 Census, 22% of women in same-sex relationships (coupled lesbians and bisexual women) and 5% of partnered gay/bisexual men had children in their household (Black, Gates, Sanders, & Taylor, 2000).

Black lesbian couples reporting on the 1990 Census were more likely than White lesbian couples to report having given birth to a child (Bradford et al., 2002). However, the Black lesbian sample was too small for this difference to be statistically significant. Despite indications that Black LGBT people may be having children at a greater rate than other LGBT people, further research is needed to determine if, in fact, Black lesbians

are more likely to have given birth than White lesbians and lesbians of other ethnic backgrounds¹.

There are other indications that parenting rates may be higher among Black same-sex couples than other racial groups. Parenting rates among same-sex couples on the 2000 Census are highest in the South, where 54% of Black Americans live according to the 2000 Current Population Survey (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000a: Current Population Survey). In Mississippi, 44% of female same-sex couples reported children in the home, as did 31% of male same-sex couples. Additionally, Alabama, South Carolina, and other southern states with significant Black populations had high parenting rates for same-sex couples.

The 2000 Census reported a dramatic leap in parenting among same-sex coupled households. While in 1990 about one in five same-sex female coupled households and one in 20 same-sex male coupled households reported children under 18 in the home, in 2000 more than one third of lesbian couples (34.3%) and over one-fifth of gay male couples (22.3%) reported children in the home. Thus, from 1990 to 2000, the rate of reported parenting among gay male couples increased fourfold, while the rate of reported parenting nearly doubled for lesbian partners (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003).

Despite the stereotype that lesbians and gay men are disproportionately White, 2000 Census data for same-sex households reflect the racial diversity of lesbian and gay people. The data show that in 2000, 72.4% of same-sex heads of household (“Person Number One” on the Census form) were White non-Hispanic, 10.5% were Black, 11.9% were Hispanic, 2.5% were Asian/Pacific Islander, 0.8% were American Indian, and 1.8% were multiracial.² This population breakdown between lesbian and gay heads of household roughly mirrors the general U.S. population’s racial diversity (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000a: Current Population Survey).

Beyond information garnered from the 2000 Census, what are the experiences and attitudes of Black LGBT parents as compared to non-parenting Black LGBT people? To address this question, we engaged in secondary analysis on a large dataset comprised of Black LGBT people from throughout the United States.

2. Methods

In order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the particular conditions affecting Black LGBT parents, we re-examined parenting data from one of the few studies that focused exclusively on Black LGBT people: the 2000 Black Pride Survey (BPS) (Battle, Cohen, Warren, Ferguson, & Audam, 2002). The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force joined with several Black lesbian, gay, bisexual, and heterosexual university researchers

¹ This Census analysis, first reported by Ettelbrik, Bradford, and Ellis at the 2001 National Lesbian Health Conference, relied on a 5% Public Use Micro Sample of the 1990 Census data, which included 5046 lesbians, only 362 of whom were Black, while 60% of the Black lesbians in this small sample reported having given birth, only 23% of White non-Hispanic lesbians reported having given birth.

² These data were gathered using Table PCT22 of the US Census’ American Factfinder, available at <http://factfinder.census.gov>. For information on how to access these data through the US Census, see Bradford et al. (2002).

and nine Black LGBT Pride organizations to develop a comprehensive survey examining demographics, experiences of discrimination, and policy priorities. From April to September 2000, researchers collected 2645 completed surveys from participants at Black Pride celebrations in nine cities across the US: Philadelphia, Houston, Washington, DC, Oakland, Chicago, Los Angeles, Detroit, New York and Atlanta (Battle et al., 2002).

A number of criteria were used in selecting sampling venues—(1) regional and geographical diversity among the Black Pride celebrations, (2) city size and percentage of Blacks in the city's population, and (3) prevalence of HIV/AIDS as indicated by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) data for Metropolitan Statistical Areas.

While the BPS sample is not representative of all Black LGBT people in the US, or of Blacks who have same-sex sexual relationships but do not necessarily identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, the BPS represents one of the first attempts to collect such a wide range of data on Black LGBT people on a national, multi-city scale. In the end, a convenience sample was used. Random sampling was unnecessary since the goal was to uncover and describe a range of attitudes and experiences, rather than to determine population parameters or make other statistical inferences.

In what follows, we have expanded upon previous research (Battle et al., 2002) by revisiting the Black Pride dataset and extensively analyzing the relationship between Black LGBT people's parenting practices, their demographic characteristics, and their attitudinal propensities. We have connected these findings to previous research and available data in an effort to better understand what scholarship on Black LGBT families has revealed and those areas of interest that require further study.

3. Results

3.1. Parenting among Black LGBT people: who is doing it and how is it being done?

The Black Pride Survey measured parenting in three separate ways: (1) whether one "has" children (and how many); (2) whether one is financially supporting children (and how many); and (3) whether one lives within the same home as children. In the Black Pride Survey there was a significant prevalence of parenting in many different forms. Some 677 respondents reported having a child (over 25% of the total sample). "Having" a child included respondents who gave birth to or fathered a child, who were co-parenting a child with a partner, who were raising a niece, nephew, grandchild, etc., or who once raised a child who is now an adult and/or no longer lives with the respondent.

We also examined parenting experiences. Of those who said they were parents, 68.8% were biological parents, 5.5% were adoptive parents, 2.1% were foster parents, while almost 12% were either step or co-parents. Among those who reported having children, the average number of children per family (mean = 1.98) was just under two children, a figure close to the national average (Table 1).

Due to space limitations, we did not include a table showing the gender breakdown; however, women were significantly more likely to report having children than were men and transgender people. More specifically, over 45% of the women surveyed said they have children, versus 21.8% of men and 19.4% of transgender people. Women were also

Table 1
Parenting experiences ($N=801$)

Type of parent	Percent
Biological parent	68.8
Adoptive parent	5.5
Foster parent	2.1
Co-parent/stepparent	11.9
Other	11.7
Total	100.0

significantly more likely to live with children (24.5%) than were men (4.3%) and transgender (2.5%) respondents.

While rates of having children may be lower among Black LGBT people than heterosexual couples, there is evidence that adoption rates may be higher. Slightly less than 3% of respondents from the Black Pride Survey were adoptive or foster parents. How does this compare to the prevalence of adoptive and foster parenting among Black people in general? While there are very few national data available on adoption, current evidence suggests higher rates among LGBT people. In a widely used statistic from a 1987 study conducted by the National Health Interview Survey (NHIS), 1.8% of never-married White women adopted children compared to 1.5% of never-married Black women. Adoptions of children related by family ties were more common among Black women, while unrelated adoptions were more common among White women (Bachrach, Adams, Sambrano, & London, 1989; Stolley, 1993). A 1983 study by the U.S. Administration for Children, Youth and Families (ACYF) found that Blacks adopted at a higher rate than Whites: seven adoptions per 10,000 Black families versus two adoptions per 10,000 White families. When age of parents, family income, and family structure are controlled for, the differential is even greater—18 adoptions per 10,000 Black families and four adoptions per 10,000 White families (Gershenson, 1984). Black sociologist Robert Hill (1977 and 1993) has documented the history of extended families and informal adoptions among the Black community, with individuals taking in the children of relatives and neighbors. However, in general, these numbers indicate that when heterosexual couples are included in the sample size, the adoption rates (less than 1%) tend to be smaller than when only LGBT people are included in the sample size (adoption rates are above 2% in the BPS). Consequently, even though Black heterosexuals tend to adopt at a higher rate than do White heterosexuals, Black LGBT people appear to adopt at higher rates than do Black heterosexual people.

3.2. *The impact of children*

Concerning relationship status, Black LGBT people with children are significantly more likely to be in some type of a relationship. More specifically, they are more likely to be in a committed relationship, married to a person of the same sex, and or married to a person of the opposite sex than are those respondents with no children. Similarly, Black LGBT people who are in a committed relationship or married have a significantly higher number of children than do those respondents who are not married or not in a committed relationship (Table 2).

Table 2
Black LGBT people's mean differences on the number of children the respondent has by relationship status

	Mean number of children
Single	0.69***
Not single	1.12
Committed relationship	1.08**
Not in a committed relationship	0.84
Married to a person of the same sex	1.60***
Not married to a person of the same sex	0.86
Married to a person of the opposite sex	2.32***
Not married to a person of the opposite sex	0.88

** $P < .01$.

*** $P < .001$.

Black LGBT respondents with children have significantly lower levels of education than do Black LGBT respondents with no children. Furthermore, Black LGBT parents are significantly less likely to see racism as a problem in the LGBT community and are also significantly less likely to see homophobia as a problem in the larger Black community. However, as compared to their counterparts with no children, they tend to be more politically conservative.

Of the variables we examined, when comparing Black LGBT individuals who live with children versus those who do not live with children, we found that those living with children have a significantly higher level of education (Table 3).

Similar to the relationship we found when comparing those with children and those without children, Black LGBT people who financially support children, as compared to those who do not, tend to be less educated, are less likely to see racism and homophobia as problems, and are more politically conservative.

Table 3
Black LGBT people's mean differences by parenting measurements

	Education ^a	Racism in LGBT community ^b	Homophobia in Black ^b	Political conservatism ^c
Has children	5.19***	4.54**	5.07**	3.41**
Does not have children	5.49	4.75	5.31	3.16
Lives with children	5.44***	4.51	5.08	3.31
Lives with no children	5.06	4.70	5.26	3.22
Financially supports children	5.16***	4.52**	5.08**	3.38**
Financially supports no children	5.50	4.76	5.33	3.16

^a This scale runs from 1 (8 years of school or less) to 8 (graduate/professional degree).

^b These scales run from 1 (strongly disagree that racism/homophobia is a problem) to 7 (strongly agree that racism/homophobia is a problem).

^c This scale runs from 1 (very liberal) to 7 (very conservative).

** $P < .01$.

*** $P < .001$.

At a minimum, Black LGBT people's parenting positively correlates with better experiences in the mainstream gay and Black communities. These findings tend to indicate that having or financially supporting children may serve to more fully integrate Black LGBT people into both White LGBT communities and Black heterosexual communities. This thesis is further supported by the fact that political activity is significantly correlated with all three parenting measurements. Indeed, Black LGBT respondents who have children, are supporting children, or live with children were all more likely, as compared to their counterparts, to have voted in the 1996 Presidential election (which was the most recent Presidential election from when the data were gathered). Thus, the data indicate a relationship in need of further study between political participation and Black LGBT people's parenting practices.

3.3. *Marriage/domestic partnership: a priority*

When respondents were asked to choose, in their opinion, the three most important issues facing the Black LGBT community, HIV/AIDS received the most responses, followed by "hate crime violence," and then marriage/domestic partnership. There were notable differences in policy priorities across gender lines. Women were significantly less likely than men and transgender people to consider HIV/AIDS the top priority for the Black community and Black LGBT people, and significantly more likely than men and transgender people to view marriage and domestic partnership as a key issue. This trend may reflect a greater need for the economic benefits and family security that accrue from marriage or domestic partnership, because women earn less, on average, than men and because Black lesbians are more likely than Black gay men or transgender people to be parents. It may also be a function of Black lesbians' greater likelihood to partner than Black gay men, a finding of Mays et al.'s research and of several other studies of lesbians and gay men dating back to the 1970s.³

4. Discussion

Given the lack of research on Black LGBT family patterns and practices, and the particular characteristics of these families, certain policy issues and problems deserve further discussion. One such issue is parenting rates. As was previously outlined, there is evidence that Black LGBT people may parent at greater rates than LGBT people of other racial groups. Why would a higher parenting rate among Black lesbians and gay men vis-à-vis other racial LGBT groups be important? First, even if Black LGBT people parent at the same rate as other LGBT people, this documented prevalence of parenting debunks attempts to construct "gay" and "family" as mutually exclusive, or lesbians and gay men as somehow a threat to the family. Such claims are frequently made by anti-gay groups (Cahill, 2004). Simply documenting the existence of Black lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender-led families with children is important in and of itself. Second, if parenting is somewhat more prevalent

³ Mays et al. (1998) found that 67% of 506 Black lesbians surveyed and 46% of a sample of 673 Black gay men were partnered. In Herdt et al.'s study of 160 older lesbians and gays in Chicago, 79% of the lesbians were partnered, while only 46% of the gay men were partnered.

among Black LGBT people than among White LGBT people and/or LGBT people in general, this difference means that anti-gay parenting policies may pose a particular and more serious threat to Black LGBT parents or would-be parents than it would for other LGBT families. Coupled with other factors, such as the overrepresentation of Black children in the foster care system, the greater prevalence of Black LGBT parents indicates that anti-gay parenting policies may threaten the Black community as a whole by significantly reducing the potential pool of foster and adoptive parents. As a result, restrictive adoption policies would serve to not only disproportionately harm Black LGBT people hoping to adopt, but it could reduce the number of homes available to Black adoptable or foster children.

4.1. Policy suggestions involving adoption and foster parenting

Most US states permit adoptions by single individuals, including lesbians and gay men. However, many states deny lesbian and gay couples the ability to jointly adopt a child, or for one same-sex parent to adopt a child that already has a legal bond to the other parent. In contrast, heterosexual married couples are free to pursue joint adoption; and stepparent adoption by a spouse tends to be a relatively simple process.

Some states legally limit the right of lesbians, gay men, or same-sex couples to adopt or foster parent.⁴ Even where lesbians and gay men are technically able to adopt as individuals, in many states judges sometimes intervene to prevent the placement of a child with a lesbian or gay parent. These efforts and policies will not only hurt current and prospective gay parents, but also children in need of loving homes. While at least 110,000 children are waiting to be adopted in the US (*Child Welfare League of America: Adoption Fact Sheet*), qualified adoptive parents were available for only 20,000 of them (Petit & Curtis, 1997). Moreover, approximately 588,000 children are currently in foster care (*Child Welfare League of America: Facts and Figures*).

Adoption laws were expanded in the 1950s and 1960s to allow for single parent adoptions (Kadushin, 1980). Such expansions were necessary because while young White children were readily adopted, other children often languished in foster care awaiting adoption: older children, children of color, children with siblings, and children with special needs. Such children are over-represented today among those awaiting adoption and foster care (Roberts, 2001).

Children who languish in foster care for much of their childhood are more likely to have emotional problems, delinquency, substance abuse, and academic problems. Some children in foster care live in 20 or more homes by the time they reach 18 (Eagle, 1994). Barring lesbians, gay men, and same-sex couples from adopting or foster parenting is not

⁴ For example, thanks in part to Anita Bryant's "Save Our Children" campaign that overthrew Miami-Dade County's sexual orientation non-discrimination law in 1977, Florida has explicitly banned adoptions by "homosexuals" for more than a quarter century. As of this writing, Utah prioritizes heterosexual married couples as adoptive and foster parents and prohibits cohabiting couples from adopting. Mississippi bans "same-sex couples" from adopting. While Arkansas does not prohibit lesbians and gay men from adopting, since 1999 its Child Welfare Agency Review Board has banned same-sex couples from foster parenting. In Spring 2003, North Dakota passed a law targeting gay adoption that allows agencies that receive state contracts and licenses to refuse to place children with prospective parents whom they object to on religious grounds. Oklahoma prohibits the recognition of an adoption by more than one individual of the same sex from any other state or foreign jurisdiction.

only discriminatory; it also decreases the number of potential homes for children awaiting a foster or adoptive parent.

Many in the Bush-Cheney Administration have written approvingly of attempts to ban lesbian and gay couples from adopting (Cahill & Jones, 2001). In addition to wanting to ban unmarried couples and single parents from adopting, several Bush Administration appointees have advocated offering certain welfare benefits only to married couples with children, and first offering limited supply benefits like Head Start slots, public housing units, and low-interest student loans to married-parent families with children (Cahill & Jones, 2001). Only if there is anything left over would the children of single parents and same-sex couples be allowed to access these benefits. Such policies and proposals clearly threaten lesbian and gay families, who are unable to marry. However, they also threaten many heterosexual-led Black and Latino families. While only 11% of White non-Hispanic families with children are headed by a single parent, 39% of Black families with children and 25% of Latino families with children are headed by single parents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000b: Table FG6). Policies which privilege married couple-led families over single-parent families or unmarried two-parent families pose a significant threat to the Black community, and especially to Black same-sex couples raising children.

Child advocates should prioritize the best interest of the child, and consider potential adoptive or foster parents on a case-by-case basis. Family structure barriers, such as marriage requirements or bans on lesbian and gay parents, should be removed to allow more families to adopt children. Also, states should enact laws and policies that support same-sex adoptions, including allowing second-parent adoption, which provides security for children being raised by a biological parent and that parent's same-sex partner. Furthermore, child welfare laws should be strengthened to include increased financial support to all families – regardless of sexual orientation – who wish to adopt children.

4.2. Racial and economic justice: the case for same-sex marriage

Marriage equality for same-sex couples is a racial and economic justice issue due to the high prevalence of parenting among LGBT people of color and the economic benefits and security that marriage equality would afford same-sex couple families. Because Black, Latino, and Native American people continue to experience higher rates of poverty and unemployment compared with White non-Hispanic Americans, the concrete rights and protections of marriage will disproportionately assist lesbian and gay people of color.

Marriage aims to promote healthy families, protecting the economic and emotional interdependence of family members and giving priority to their bonds. Legal protection of partner relationships can increase a couple's ability to care for each other by providing security, peace of mind, and a more secure environment for raising children.

Marriage provides a comprehensive package of economic and social protections to couples and their children. A 2004 report by the U.S. General Accounting Office listed 1138 ways in which marital relationships are given special treatment by the federal government (General Accounting Office, 2004). The federal protections afforded by marriage are important particularly in time of crisis, such as illness and death, and in old age. Broadly speaking, these benefits and responsibilities can be categorized into the following categories: (1) Social Security, workers' compensation, and public assistance; (2) employment

benefits, family, and medical leave; (3) federal civilian, military service, and veterans' benefits; (4) medical, health, and illness benefits (Medicare, Medicaid); (5) estate and taxation benefits; (6) immigration, naturalization, and aliens; (7) trade, commerce, and intellectual property rights; and (8) other legal protections (marital communication privilege, portability to other jurisdictions). There are also hundreds of rights, benefits, and responsibilities automatically conferred upon married couples that have implications at the local and state level, and in relation to employers and private entities.

4.3. *Same-sex marriage: where are we now?*

As this piece went to press, the debate over same-sex marriage was raging. On November 18, 2003, the Massachusetts' Supreme Judicial Court declared that marriage is a civil right and that lesbians and gays have a constitutional right, under the due process and equal protection provisions of the Massachusetts Constitution, to marry the person of their choice: "Limiting the protections, benefits, and obligations of civil marriage to opposite-sex couples violates the basic premises of individual liberty and equality under law protected by the Massachusetts Constitution" (*Goodridge v. Department of Public Health*, 2003).

"We construe civil marriage to mean the voluntary union of two persons as spouses, to the exclusion of all others," the majority wrote. "This reformulation redresses the plaintiffs' constitutional injury, and furthers the aim of marriage to promote stable, exclusive relationships." The court rejected claims by some opponents of same-sex marriage that allowing lesbian and gay couples to marry would undermine the institution of marriage: "Extending civil marriage to same-sex couples reinforces the importance of marriage to individuals and communities. That same-sex couples are willing to embrace marriage's solemn obligations of exclusivity, mutual support, and commitment to one another is a testament to the enduring place of marriage in our laws and in the human spirit" (*Goodridge v. Department of Public Health*, 2003).

In its decision, the court noted the critical distinction between civil and religious marriage, that "civil unions" for gay couples were a separate and unequal, unsatisfactory option, and that children as well as their lesbian or gay parents suffered from the inability to marry. In the wake of the Massachusetts high court ruling in late 2003, Massachusetts state legislators asked whether civil unions, which afford nearly all the benefits of marriage at the level of state policy (but none of the 1138 federal benefits), would suffice to meet the court's ruling. In February 2004 the court answered that civil unions would not suffice, as they would continue "to relegate same-sex couples to . . . second-class status." The court noted that "the history of our nation has demonstrated that separate is seldom, if ever, equal."⁵ This second ruling reaffirmed the right of same-sex couples to marry.

This research has provided a starting point for examining Black LGBT parenting and partnering patterns. It has revealed that parenting roles and practices take on multiple forms, and that how one defines what parenting is will impact subsequent research. In sum, a complete analysis of Black LGBT families recognizes the full complexity of family structures and policy issues that shape its family members' experiences.

⁵ Opinions of the Justices to the Senate (2004, February 3).

5. Conclusion

Research on parenting by lesbians, gay men, and same-sex couples (which, like opposite-sex couples, include bisexual and transgender people as well) can play a role in these policy debates by revealing common misconceptions and overall trends. Our research suggests that the intersection of race and sexuality, along with gender and class, creates circumstances unique to Black LGBT people that neither White LGBT people nor heterosexual Black people are required to confront. However, the differences between Black LGBT people and heterosexual Black people can be exaggerated, as was shown by the average number of children per family and the relationship between the average number of children per family and education. As a result, researchers need to stress the similarities between groups as well as the differences. Incorporating attitudinal as well as demographic characteristics is one way to accomplish this goal. Yet another way to account for similarity and difference between groups is to employ comparison groups, such as non-parents who are LGBT and non-parents who are heterosexual, so that more fruitful evaluations can be made.

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