CHILDREN OF HOMOSEXUALS AND TRANSSEXUALS MORE APT TO BE HOMOSEXUAL

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Summary. Do the sexual inclinations of parents influence those of their children? Of 77 adult children of homosexual parents who volunteered for three different investigations, at least 23 (30%) were currently homosexual: twelve (55%) of 22 daughters and three (21%) of fourteen sons of lesbians; five (29%) of seventeen daughters and three (17%) of eighteen sons of gays; none of six sons with both a gay and a lesbian parent. At least 25 (32%) were currently heterosexual. Of the ten with transsexual parents, one of nine daughters was currently lesbian, one was currently heterosexual, and one was transsexual. The son’s sexual preference was not reported. These findings suggest that parents’ sexual inclinations influence their children’s.

Introduction

‘Common sense’ holds that homosexuality is ‘contagious’ (Levitt & Klassen, 1974). Thus Rees & Ushill (1956) state ‘it is vain to blind oneself to the fact that the problem of male homosexuality is in essence the problem of the corruption of youth by itself and by its elders. It is the problem of the creation by means of such corruption of new addicts ready to corrupt a still further generation of young men and boys in the future’ (p. 29). It is also commonly believed that ‘children follow in their parents’ footsteps’. So as the religious are believed to be more apt to sire religious children or smokers smoking children, homosexual or gender-disturbed parents are expected to be more apt to have homosexual or gender-disturbed children (Cameron, 1999).

In 1978, Green countered common opinion by reporting that the sexual identity of nine older children of five transsexuals and four older children of two homosexuals was not ‘dramatically affected: all have developed a typical sexual identity, including heterosexual orientation’. Though warning that his sampling ‘was not systematic’ and his findings ‘preliminary’, his 1978 research has been frequently cited as demonstrating that the sexual interests of parents have no or little influence on the sexual desires of their children (Patterson & Redding, 1996). Indeed, many gay rights supporters – such as the American Psychological Association and National Association of Social Workers – regularly contend that homosexuality is no more prevalent among children.
with a homosexual parent than those without (Cameron & Cameron, 1997). If homosexual desires are distributed essentially randomly throughout the population, then not only would common sense be wrong, but those concerned about placing foster or adoptive children with homosexuals could not argue that the children would be more apt to emulate their parent(s) by engaging in homosexuality themselves.

Subsequent research has tended to focus on young children, so the effects of parental homosexuality on adult children – the time of life when sexual activity is more frequent – are largely unexplored. Controversy regarding whether homosexual and transsexual parents are more apt to have children who follow in their parents’ footsteps continues. Some (Cameron & Cameron, 1996, 1997; Stacy & Biblarz, 2001) believe the empirical literature supports common sense. Others (Patterson & Redding, 1996; Tasker & Golombek, 1997; Golombok, 2002; Perrin, 2002) contend that the literature indicates there is no correlation, while James (2004) is among those who believe the published findings are insufficient to draw a conclusion.

The number of adult children of homosexuals whose sexual preferences have been assessed is modest, and even smaller numbers of adult children of transsexuals have been studied. Three recent compilations of interviews with or essays by adult children of homosexuals and transsexuals were examined to determine whether a correlation between parental and children’s inclinations might exist.

Methods

To date, only one random sample that might pertain has been reported (Cameron & Cameron, 1996). There is no obvious way to design a random sample of adult children of homosexual parents. Such children are not enumerated by any census and how they might be contacted is obscure. No obvious sampling strategy presents itself, but a number of books touching upon gay parenting, all written from a celebratory stance, have recently appeared. While unknown biases may have led to the compilations they reported, taken together the number of adult children of homosexuals in these compilations is larger than the number studied for any other account. In the absence of a random sample, it seemed reasonable to at least examine the material available. Therefore, all books about adult children who had homosexual or transsexual parents that could be purchased on Amazon.com in April 2004 were examined. Amazon.com was employed because its selection of ‘works that pertain to the topic’ has no apparent bias regarding gay parenting, and those works that could be purchased were in print, assuring that the material was relatively ‘fresh’ to the issue. A tally of sexual preferences was made from the three that could be purchased: Garner’s (2004) interviews with ‘over 50’, Gottlieb’s (2003) interviews with eleven, and Howey & Samuels’ (2000) compilation of 20 essays by such children. All adult children mentioned in these books – the adult child, as well as any adult siblings detailed by him – were assembled. Garner’s father is gay and Howey’s father transgendered, and they speak as advocates of their father’s choices, so any bias in their samples and reporting would presumably be pro- rather than anti-gay rights. Andersson et al. (2004) have noted that ‘some aspects of gay and lesbian life styles seem to be of such a common nature that they appear regardless of the type of data
at hand’ (p. 18); that is, that a reasonably large sample of homosexuals, even if obtained non-randomly, seems fairly representative of gays and lesbians in general. If their belief is true, perhaps the sum of the accounts from the three books may bear upon adult outcomes of homosexuals’ children. The sexual preferences of the children were not the focus of these three works, so the preferences of almost half the children could not be determined.

Results
A compilation of the 77 children of homosexuals is summarized in Table 1. Of 77 adult children in the three studies who had homosexual parents, 23 (30%) were currently homosexual: twelve (55%) of 22 daughters and three (21%) of fourteen sons of lesbians; five (29%) of seventeen daughters and three (17%) of eighteen sons of gays. At least 25 (32%) were currently heterosexual: three (14%) daughters and six (43%) sons of lesbians; three (18%) daughters and eleven (61%) sons of gays. Of the ten with transsexual parents (nine born as men, one as a woman), one (whose mother stayed with her surgically modified father) of nine daughters was currently lesbian, one heterosexual, one transsexual (her father was apparently born a man; she was living as a male sans surgery with another transsexual whose sex was not reported), and seven daughters (one with a mother who underwent surgery) and the son (of a father with surgery) whose sexual preferences were not reported on.

Discussion
Independence of homosexuality forms the backbone of arguments that the sexual proclivities of parents have no influence on children’s development. If children’s sexual proclivities are independent, then it is unreasonable to bar foster parenting or adoption by homosexuals lest the fostered become homosexual as well (e.g. Golombok, 2002, citing her own longitudinal study in support). But if they are correlated, then parental sexual inclinations might be relevant to social policy. So the motivation of homosexuals to appear to have ‘an average rate’ of heterosexual children is strong – and sympathetic reporters may try to accommodate this. Thus, Garner noted that because ‘of the pressure to demonstrate that gay parents produce straight children, some LGBT [gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgendered] families who
initially agree to appear in media mysteriously fade out of the spotlight if, as their children mature, it appears that one of them might be queer. ... One journalist told me she was planning to profile a particular teenager with gay parents but doubted her choice after he told her he was gay, too’ (p. 172). This motivation contributes towards making a biased sample and possible underreporting of offspring who adopt homosexual inclinations more likely. Thus, regarding the only subsample Garner detailed: ‘Dad asked how many of the eleven people at the meeting were heterosexual. Three, I told him. He inhaled a quick, audible breath and then whispered intensely into the phone, as if spies might overhear: ‘What does that say about the statistics?!’ My dad’s reaction is a fairly common one. LGBT parents fear that evidence of queer kids will not fare well under the scrutiny of anti-gay policy-makers, and although such children exist, they should be acknowledged only within LGBT communities – and even then, only in whispers’ (pp. 169–170). Another influence that might work towards reduced representation of non-homosexual children is suggested by Howey & Samuels (2000): ‘sadly ... a number of our contributors are either estranged from or angry with their gay parents’ (p. xx). Children who refused to contribute to these three books would seem even more apt to be estranged or angry – and be non-homosexual.

In Golombok’s longitudinal effort, parental pressures towards adopting a homosexual proclivity were straightforward: when asked what they thought their mother’s desires regarding their sexual preference were, nine (56%) of lesbians’ daughters and one (14%) of their sons said that they believed their mother wanted them to become homosexual. None of the children of (divorced) heterosexual mothers in the comparison group made such a claim (Tasker & Golombok, 1997, p. 124). As well, three (19%) lesbians’ daughters and two (29%) of their sons were uncertain about what lifestyle their mother wanted them to follow vs two (22%) of the daughters and four (40%) of the sons of heterosexuals. Finally, only four (25%) of the lesbians’ daughters and four (57%) of their sons said that they believed their mother wanted them to become heterosexual vs seven (78%) of the daughters and six (60%) of the sons of heterosexual mothers.

Knowing that a parent desires a particular outcome hardly assures that a child will follow it: children often rebel or ‘learn from parental mistakes’. But most children tend to accommodate parental desires, and adult children of homosexuals have sexual proclivities that are plausibly influenced by parental influence. In addition to being the recipients of parental pressure, these children often are immersed in the ‘gay culture’ with effects that could contribute to sexual preference. Thus, Ry, a daughter of a lesbian, reported being ‘repulsed’ by heterosexuality because she was ‘so immersed in gay culture and unfamiliar with what it is to have a healthy straight relationship’ (Garner, 2004, p. 215) and Jennifer, currently lesbian, reported ‘I spent way too many years trying to prove to myself that I was straight. It made me stay in a bad heterosexual relationship way too long’ (Garner, 2004, p. 184). A heterosexual son of a lesbian rejected marriage out of ‘the feeling that I would betray my mom and Judy if I were to get married’ (Garner, 2004, p. 217). Similarly, Greta, currently lesbian, reported ‘I was always reading books with gay characters and listening to music by gay artists. I knew the lingo before ... even thinking about my own sexuality’ (Garner, 2004, p. 183). A more direct mechanism was reported by Paul, currently gay,
whose father had sex with him starting when he was 6 years old and continuing until he was 18 (Gottlieb, 2003, p. 99). Another effect of this immersion is suggested by a number of these children accepting the task of being apologists for the gay lifestyle: at least four of the five children that Garner detailed as having made media appearances were homosexual, and each either dissembled or explicitly lied when asked about his or her sexual desires (pp. 171–175).

As with Green’s, the dataset reviewed for this article, being made up of volunteers, is of unknown representativeness. But the 77 children with at least one homosexual parent were all aged 18 years or older and came from 75 families (Green’s homosexuals had no children aged 18 or older). Likewise, the ten children with at least one transsexual parent were aged 18 years or older and came from ten families, while Green reported on two adult children of transsexuals from two families. To the degree that larger numbers of older subjects assembled by different investigators, applying different methodologies, and in different locations more closely approximates ‘the underlying reality’, this three-book dataset would appear more representative.

The extent of parental influence on sexual preferences cannot be confidently estimated from this or previously reported datasets. As with all but one of the other reports, the adult children were not randomly obtained, nor – since their parents made known their homosexual preference at different ages of the children – did the children experience the same ‘dose’ of homosexual or transsexual parental influence. Most of the children were born into a man–woman family, then as one parent decided otherwise, spent the rest of their lives having a homosexual or transsexual parent (though not necessarily living full-time with that parent).

In what appears to be the only random sample broaching parental sexual interests (Cameron & Cameron, 1996), seventeen adults (0.37% of 4640 urban respondents) reported a homosexual parent: six said their sexual desires included homosexuality (and if the two who said their desires were ‘mainly heterosexual’ – which includes a component of being sexually attracted to the same sex – are included, then eight (47%) had homosexual desires). Were both samples random (which is not the case), the six (35%) of seventeen is not statistically significantly different from the 28 (55%) of 51 ($\chi^2=1.1; df=1; ns$) whose sexual preferences were reported in the three books examined, but is significantly ($\chi^2=29.0; df=1; p<0.001$) higher than the 41 (17%) homosexual of 235 older children with at least one homosexual parent in the comparative empirical literature through 1999 (Cameron, 1999). Until better samples emerge, the 35–47% figure (from the random sample) of homosexuals’ children who adopt homosexuality appears plausible.

All in all, the correlation between parental and children’s sexual inclinations is similar enough to the influences that adult children of the religious report about parental influence on their religious sensibilities or between smokers and smoking by their children that positing additional biological mechanisms for it seem unnecessary. And the mechanisms by which children reported arriving at homosexual interests are plausible. At a time when notions of acquiring rather than ‘discovering’ one’s sexual preferences have fallen into disfavour, these findings may be as startling as Green’s in 1978. Instead of appearing to be independent of parental sexual interests and activities, which Green’s write-up implied and those who cite him often claim to be
the case (e.g. Patterson & Redding, 1996), a rather solid correlation appears to exist between parental and their adult children’s sexual proclivities.

Transsexualism is rare and little is known about the effects of transsexualism upon children (Chiland, 2003). The only child who is reported as transsexual in this dataset had a transsexual father, which plausibly underscores parental influence on the decision by his daughter to become a transsexual.

References


