"The New Family Structures Study: Introduction and Initial Results"

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The New Family Structures Study (NFSS) is a new social-science data-collection project whose survey gathered data from a large and random sample of American young adults (ages 18–39) who were raised in different types of family arrangements (including cohabiting parents, adoptive, step, same-sex parents, and single parents). The data include 2,500 cases (so far), with oversamples of young adults who report having been adopted and those who report at least one parent in a same-sex romantic relationship. The NFSS should help enable scholars to compare how young adults from—and currently living in—different family structures fare on a variety of social, emotional, and relational outcomes. Outcomes of particular interest in the NFSS include social behaviors (like educational attainment and performance, work history, risk-taking, and religiosity), health behaviors (like substance abuse, depression, anger, and stress), and relationships (like the quality and stability of romantic relationships, marital history, fertility, sexual orientation, and family connectedness). In particular, the NFSS aims to collect new data in order to evaluate whether biological relatedness and the gender of young adults' parents are associated with important social, emotional, and relational outcomes.

Background

Up until recently, the extant research on family structure indicated that children are most likely to thrive in an intact, biological married home (Amato 2005; McLanahan and Sandefur 1994; Moore, Jekielek, and Emig 2002). On average, children from single-parent homes, stepfamilies, and adoptive homes tended to fare less well than children in families headed by married, biological parents. The advantage that biological, married parents generally have exhibited over other family types has been thought to be related to a variety of factors, including genetic relatedness, the gender of the parents, the relative stability of their relationship, and the social and economic resources and support afforded them. To date, forms of parenting with a diminished context of kin altruism (e.g., adoption, step-parenting, nonmarital childbirth, etc.) have exhibited comparatively higher risk settings, on average, for raising children when compared with married, biological parenting.

Recent research on children of same-sex parents, however, suggests that children from same-sex families fare more comparably to children from intact, biological (heterosexual) families, posing a challenge to the literature on the latter family type (Gartrell and Bos 2010; Goldberg 2009; Rosenfeld 2010). The gender of the parent(s), their marital status, and the nature in which the child(ren) were introduced to the family of origin may not matter as much as some scholars have asserted. Such findings provide an intellectual challenge to research on children from intact, heterosexual families, since same-sex parents (1) are not both biologically related to a child, and (2) typically bring only one sex to the parenting enterprise. In some locales, they also enjoy fewer social resources and less social support than married, biological parents. In other words, the "no differences" paradigm suggests that children from intact, married families exhibit fewer advantages than many have asserted.

On the other hand, large-scale studies of adopted children in heterosexual households have often noted important and wide-ranging differences between adopted and non-adopted children, such that adoption experts now emphasize that "acknowledgement of difference" is important for parents and clinicians who work with them (Miller et al. 2000). Others note the same for other contexts of diminished kin altruism (e.g., step-parents), suggesting wide "no difference" assessments of outcomes from children of same-sex parents would be unique, and might instead

result from sampling strategies, sample sizes, or particular outcomes of study. It is also possible that any distinctions from alternative family structures may manifest themselves at different times, including later in adolescence or young adulthood. Since most studies of children of same-sex parents have focused on younger children, these may overlook longer-term impacts of different family structures on adolescents and young adults, making studies of lagged effects particularly timely and important. All of the above concerns, nevertheless, are empirical questions that can be addressed.

While numerous studies of same-sex parenting have had much to offer and are illuminating, a variety of methodological concerns continue to hamper many comparative studies of parenting. As Rosenfeld (2010) notes, selectivity effects are often pronounced. For example, contemporary same-sex couples don't experience unintended pregnancies. Instead, they adopt, pursue donor insemination, or surrogate parenting. Same-sex parents who elect to become parents through donor insemination are unusual for their elevated socioeconomic status, given the expensive costs often incurred. In his study of Census data, Rosenfeld (2010) also noted that same-sex couples are more apt to be working-class and nonwhite than studies based on snowball samples have implied.

Longitudinal studies— like the National Longitudinal Lesbian Family Study (NLLFS)—have considerable value. Indeed, developmental studies are ideal here, tracking children of same-sex parents from birth, adoption, or relatively early in childhood over time. Yet these too can suffer from sampling concerns; in the NLLFS only 78 adolescents—93 percent of whom are white—are used to compare outcomes with a sample of heterosexual parents that is considerably more diverse in race/ethnicity, region of residence, etc. (Gartrell and Bos 2010). Indeed, many studies of same-sex parents suffer from small and/or nonrandom samples, problems which can serve to undermine confidence in their conclusions (e.g., Bos et al. 2007, Brewaeys et al. 1997, Chan et al. 1998, Fulcher et al. 2008, Gartrell et al. 2005, Golombok et al. 1997, MacCallum and Golombok 2004, Wainwright and Patterson 2006, 2008). Seldom if ever have comparisons been made using large and/or random samples of same-sex parents. This is one goal the NFSS seeks to accomplish.

There have been encouraging signs of progress, however, in generating large and/or random samples for comparison. Rosenfeld's (2010) novel use of U.S. Census data provides a study of one outcome—adequate progress in schools—employing a large sample of children from same-sex households. He, too, notes no significant differences among most types of families, once family SES is controlled.

Research Design

The New Family Structure Study fielded a survey to a total of approximately 2,500 persons (as of Sept 20, 2011) from a variety of types of family structure backgrounds (e.g., adoptive, intact, two-parent households, stepfamilies, same-sex, etc.). All data collection for the NFSS was conducted by Knowledge Networks (KN), a leading public policy, non-profit and academic research firm based in Palo Alto, California. They were contracted for their sampling capacities, reputation, and survey administration skills. Knowledge Networks is a nonpartisan research organization with a strong and widely acknowledged commitment to scientific integrity.

In Phase 1, which commenced in July 2011, all of Knowledge Networks' KnowledgePanel® members between the ages of 18-39 were screened with a brief set of questions about their family background, with particular attention paid to KnowledgePanel® members who were either adopted, who reported a parent had a romantic relationship with someone of the same sex, or who said a parent cohabited with a member of the opposite sex. Every Panel member who identified as such was asked to complete the long interview. A sample of over 1,500 other Panel members were also given the long interview.

Phase 2 consisted of an address-based sampling approach (ABS), which began in August 2011. The ABS sample consisted of a straight random sample of US households from the U.S. Postal Service's Delivery Sequence File excluding vacant and seasonal addresses. ABS sampling methodology is an emerging standard for conducting scientific surveys of the population, as an alternative to Random Digit Dialing (RDD) telephone methodology. The random sample of residential addresses received invitation letters and followup postcards. Additionally, there was a telephone followup to households that could be matched to phone numbers (approximately 65 percent) to encourage cooperation in the screening process. Approximately 25,000 households were contacted using this method in Phase 1. (Response rates were unavailable as of September 20, 2011.) For the ABS samples, the study required the respondent to visit a study website set up for this survey project, and access the online survey by key entering a PIN provided by Knowledge Networks to the respondent. The PIN is unique to each sample unit. Only those ABS respondents who identify on the online survey screener that they were adopted or who reported a parent had a romantic relationship with someone of the same sex—a total of under four percent of all respondents in the KnowledgePanel®—were actually invited to complete the entire interview. The second part of Phase 2 of the NFSS was an expanded version of this ABS sampling method, in order to further boost the random number of respondents who spent time growing up in adoptive and/or same-sex households. During this phase, approximately 100,000 households were randomly contacted and asked to complete the online survey screener. The exact number of households contacted was determined by the success rate of the initial ABS effort of contacting 25,000 households.

The NFSS is, of course, not a developmental study involving numerous waves. The young adult children from whom data are collected are likely to be among the "first generation" of those raised (in part, at least) by gay or lesbian parents. It is very possible that the dynamics that shaped their family experiences—typically the dissolution of a heterosexual union—may be different from those that shape the children of GLBTQ parents today. Given their age, claims about the effects of family structure must be weighed alongside the variety of other dynamics that affect young adults over time. In other words, the NFSS project is aware that it's not a longitudinal study following children into adulthood.

Outcomes of Interest

The NFSS seeks to evaluate a diverse set of outcomes during young adulthood, including the following types:

- Social: educational attainment and performance, work history and idleness in young adulthood, delinquency and criminal activity, past and present experience of stigma and bullying, risk-taking, patterns of civic and community engagement, and religion and religiosity.

- Emotional and physical health: depression, self-esteem, loneliness, optimism/pessimism, anger, response to stress, self-reported physical health, medication use, eating habits, alcohol and drug usage habits, and sexually transmitted infection history.

- Relational: self-reported stability of family of origin, number of current close confidants, diversity of friendships, strength of family and kinship ties, the quality and stability of one's own romantic/marital relationships, the quality of relationships between young adults and their parents, timing of first sex, lifetime number of sexual partners, sexual risk-taking,

sexual orientation (including same-sex ideation, attraction, and behavior), fertility, expectations about enduring relationships, and marital history.

A copy of the survey instrument will be made available online prior to the PAA annual meeting. The PAA presentation will highlight the NFSS research design and strategy and introductory findings.

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