

## Study of gay parents yields interesting results

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During the past decade there has been intense interest in the phenomena of homosexuality by those in the helping professions. Professional research has been published in the journals of the disciplines of medicine, psychology, psychiatry, social work and education, etc. This research has helped professional associations to redefine their attitudes toward homosexuality. Most professional organizations in the helping professions now view homosexuality as a normal sexual variant and accept homosexuality as a valid minority life-style.

Although there has been a great deal of research and study of homosexuality, there has been little attention paid to homosexual parents and homosexual families with children. The popular media abounds with articles on the subject of homosexuality and there has been a flurry of books regarding gay life-styles; the broadcast media have produced a number of documentaries. The orientation of most of this work assumes that homosexuals do not produce children. A study presented by Portland State University in March, 1984 challenges those assumptions. The report, "Lesbian and Gay Spouses and Parents: Homosexuality in the Family," is the result of a nearly year-long study undertaken by the graduate students and faculty of the School of Social Work at PSU.

The PSU report first reviews the previous empirical research and summarizes those efforts as follows: In 1969 H. Laurence Ross investigated the marital behavior of ten gay men and one lesbian. He concluded that there was much conflict between the gays and their spouses and that the marital adjustment was poor.

Brian Miller published his study of 30 gay men who were or had been married in 1978. He found that the men could be categorized into four groups: 1. 'Trade husbands' — those who participated in anonymous sexual encounters and endeavor to remain closeted, 2. 'Homosexual husbands' — those who are less closeted and may participate in an extra-marital sexual relationship with the knowledge of their wife, but who are not publicly out, 3. 'Gay husbands' — those who are out and in contact with the homosexual community, generally separated from wife and children, and 4. 'Faggot husbands' — those who are openly gay, publicly out, and often the custodial parent of their children.

Miller later studied a sample of 40 married gay men and focused on the role demands of homosexual fathers. He concluded that being gay is compatible with fatherhood and that gay fathers who are able to be open about their sexuality perceive less discrimination from family, friends and co-workers than do gay fathers who are closeted or who deny their sexuality.

Fredrick Bozett studied a sample of 18 gay fathers from the San Francisco area in 1980-81. He found that the act of gay fathers coming out to their children had a positive effect on the children's adjustment as well as a positive effect on the father-child relationship, and that the reverse is true when fathers remain closeted.

Brenda Maddox studied forty-seven gay mothers and fathers in the United States and

England. Her results, which were published in the February 1982 issue of the magazine *Psychology Today*, indicated that the gay parents were not significantly different from other parents and that they faced the same family and child-rearing issues as heterosexual parents.

In their 1978 book, *Homosexualities: A Study of Diversity Among Men and Women*, Alan Bell and Martin Weinberg reported on their investigation of a large sample — 979 — of lesbians and gay men in San Francisco. This group of black and white women and men ran the gamut of personal and social diversity. The researchers found that 20% of the white men and 13% of the black men had been married at least once; half of those marriages had a duration of three years or longer. 35% of the white women and 47% of the black women had also married at least once. Half of all the marriages produced children.

A conservative estimate of the gay population of the United States places it at 20-30 million. If national statistics follow those of the San Francisco sample, it is likely that a third, or about 7-10 million adult homosexuals have been married at least once, and that about 3-5 million are parents.

The United States Census Bureau routinely collects data on age, race, sex, marital status, income and many other aspects of the citizenry. This information is then used by public and private agencies to develop a profile of the population and to project societal trends which are likely to influence the shape of the society and the determination of public social policy.

The Census Bureau does not collect information about the homosexual members of society, as Bureau protocols do not identify the gay community or its characteristics. The gay community, therefore, is not represented in the national statistical profile. Given that homosexuals comprise an estimated 8-10% of the population the failure to include the characteristics of this sub-group of the population is a serious omission.

1980 Census Bureau data places the population of the Portland Standard Metropolitan Area at 1.3 million. Applying the same ratios as the Bell/Weinberg San Francisco sample, there are between 17 thousand and 22 thousand gay parents in metropolitan Portland.

The Portland State University study was undertaken with the purposes of: 1. shedding light on the marital and parenting behavior of homosexuals — both lesbian wives and mothers as well as gay husbands and fathers, and 2. analysis and dissemination of the findings to the helping professional community in order to influence the provision of social services to currently or previously married lesbian and gay parents. The study was announced in the Portland gay press. Outreach efforts were made to leaders in the gay community and the recruitment effort continued for six months. The study sample included sixty-six parents; seven of the participants responded as a result of the announcements in the press; eleven responded as a result of the recruitment effort, 35 became participants after learning of the study from friends and the remaining 13 learned of the study through word of mouth and other informal means.

Face-to-face interviews of the participants were conducted by a team of seven graduate social work students, four of whom were lesbian. The typical interview lasted for an hour. The results of the study, which consist of 47 pages of narrative and an additional 21 pages comprised of 68 statistical tables, will be highlighted in a future column.

Anyone who wishes additional information about the previous studies of the gay community may feel free to contact me through the National Association of Social Workers at 232-6003 or at my private practice, 239-2836, or by leaving word at **Just Out**, 223-9652.

Editor's note: There are two support groups

for gay parents in Portland. One is *Gay Fathers*, which meets the first and third Wednesday of each month. Call David 284-4275 or Bob 642-9323 for meeting place and time. The other is the *Lesbian Mother Support Group*. For information call Donna, 775-1875.

