

H E L P O U T

Lesbian and gay spouses and parents: Homosexuality in the family

The Portland State University study
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A conservative estimate of the gay population of the United States places it at 20-30 million. If national statistics follow previous research on the homosexual community, 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 protect societal trends which are likely to influence the shape of society and the determination of public social policy. The Census Bureau does not collect information about the homosexual members of society per se; 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 per cent of the population the failure to include the characteristics of the homosexual 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. If the Portland Metropolitan Area reflects the national population, there are between 17 and 22 thousand gay parents in the Metropolitan Area.

In 1983 a study of Lesbian and Gay spouses and parents was undertaken by the Portland State University School of Social Work. The study was conducted with the goals of shedding light on the marital and parental behavior of lesbians and gay men and to analyze and disseminate the findings to the helping professional community. The study was announced in the Portland gay press and outreach efforts were made to leaders in the gay community; the recruitment effort lasted for a six month period. The final study sample consisted of 66 parents. Face-to-face interviews were conducted by a team of seven graduate social work students. The typical interview lasted for about an hour. One of the most important findings of the Portland study was the difference between

the two sub-samples; the lesbian mothers and the gay fathers.

The Findings

Personal Characteristics. Thirty-four of the participants were women; thirty-two were men. The most striking discrepancy between women and men was income. Women were definitely economically disadvantaged, as they are in society in general. More of the men than women had been born in the western United States. 81% of the men had more than 16 years schooling while only 56% of the women were in that category. The average age of women respondents was 37.5, the average age of men respondents was 40.1. 78% of the men reported earnings of more than \$18,000 however only 24% of the women were in that salary range. 9% of the women and 31% of the men reported that they practiced religious worship regularly.

Marital History. All of the respondents had been married or in committed relationships with non-gay partners. Most were divorced, some were separated; none planned to return to their spouses. The majority of the women had been married only once. The average length of marriage was 8.6 years with a range of one to 17 years. The majority of men had also been married only once. The average length of their marriages was 11 years with a range of three to 22 years. The lesbian wives had a variety of reasons for marrying. The most common reason cited was the personal/social expectation with love of prospective spouse being second. The gay fathers reported love of prospective spouse as the most common reason for marriage followed by personal/social expectations. A significant number of the men felt that marriage would rid them of their homosexuality.

Marital Quality. Less than a third of the lesbian wives considered their marriages to be satisfying. Nearly half felt that basic incompatibility was a factor. More than half of the gay fathers felt satisfied with their marriages; they cited their homosexuality as the basic problem in the marriage, rather than incompatibility. Lesbian wives were relatively unaware of their homosexuality at the time of their marriages while the majority of gay husbands were aware of or suspected their sexual orientation.

Parenting Issues. Far more lesbian mothers were custodial parents than were gay fathers. 22 of them others and only three of the fathers had court-ordered custody. About a third of the mothers were in living situations with lesbian partners while nearly half of the fathers lived with male lovers. Most of the women were satisfied with the child custody arrangements, however nearly a third of the men were dissatisfied. Gay fathers had more

difficulty in being open about their sexual orientation with their children than did lesbian mothers. More than half of the lesbian mothers and half of the gay fathers reported that their children's knowledge of their sexual orientation had an enhancing effect on the parent-child relationship. More than half of the children of lesbian mothers were reported to have had problems in social relationships with others because of their mothers' lesbianism. Most of the gay fathers reported that their children had no problems, however as a group, the fathers were far less open with their children.

Coming Out. The majority of the gay fathers experienced difficulty in self-acknowledgment that they were gay. Only half of the lesbian mothers reported difficulty in the coming out process. Both men and women felt that having children complicated the coming out process; the women feared that they would lose custody while the men felt that their children would be damaged as a result. The majority of the parents were out to friends, neighbors or other family members. Few of the women and many of the men sought professional help in coming out. Nearly half of the parents felt that they had been discriminated against because of their sexual orientation; discrimination included job loss or setback, social ostracism, name

calling, loss of housing, and subtle negativism. Many reported that the effects of discrimination were long-term and substantial.

Implications

Social service providers are generally not equipped to deal with the existence of homosexuality in the family. Both lack of knowledge and lack of understanding of homosexuality in the family contribute to the dearth of services for lesbian and gay parents and spouses.

Although specialized services for lesbian and gay clients have been developed recently, they may not be aware of the special needs of lesbian and gay parents and their families. A significant number of homosexual men and women do marry and produce children. An assumption that gay persons do not produce children seems to exist in most standard social service agencies as well as in agencies which are oriented to lesbian and gay issues.

Support groups for both Lesbian Mothers and Gay Fathers are active in Portland; meeting announcements are listed in the Out About Town section of this paper. For further information about the Portland study (above) contact the School of Social Work, Portland State University, P.O. Box 751, Portland, OR 97207.

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(Katharine English available for consultation)			
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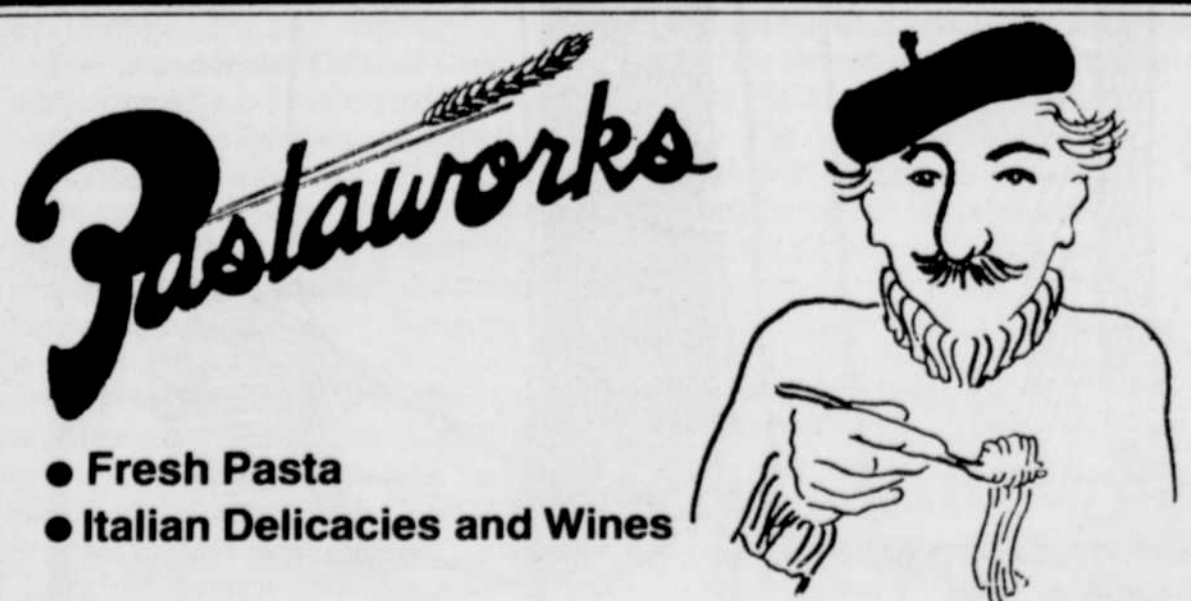
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