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Theory in Highly Cited Studies of Sexual Minority Parent Families: Variations and Implications

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ABSTRACT

This article includes a systematic review and citation analysis of the literature regarding sexual minority parent families, particularly attending to what theories have been used, and how. We consider the importance of theoretical frameworks for future research and implications for policy, practice, and law related to sexual minority parent families. Our review targets 30 highly cited studies located through Google Scholar (as an interdisciplinary search engine) and published within a specific time-frame (2005–2010). We highlight the dominant theoretical models employed across disciplines studying sexual minority parent families. Although the majority of studies reviewed referred to theoretical models or perspectives, explicit theoretical grounding was frequently lacking. Instead, the empirical work reviewed appeared to have a predominantly applied focus in addressing public debates on sexual minority parent families. We provide recommendations for how theory might be more fully integrated into the social science literature on sexual minority parents and their children.

KEYWORDS

Children; families; Google Scholar; LGB; parents; sexual minority; theory

Families headed by lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) parents have become more visible in many places around the world (particularly in the United States, Europe, and Australia). Alongside this increasing visibility, population data suggest that their numbers are increasing (Patterson & Riskind, 2010). For instance, in the United States, the numbers of lesbian and gay (LG) parents who have adopted children have doubled in the last decade (Gates, 2011), and families outside of the “traditional” married heterosexual parents with biological children have become increasingly common (Patterson, Farr, & Hastings, 2015).

Due to the growing presence of LGB parent families across the world, research attention on this population has increased over the last several decades. Alongside changes in societal views toward LGB parent families—including legal and attitudinal changes—the types of theoretical perspectives that are used to ground the research on this population have also shifted over time. As

theories shape the research questions asked, the methods used, and the interpretation of results (Becker, 1981; Morgan, 1999; Patterson et al., 2015), a consideration of what theories have been applied—and in what ways—is essential to our growing understanding about families parented by LGB adults. Thus as the diversity of families with sexual minority parents increases and is recognized in many places around the world, the time is ripe for a critical review of what and how theoretical frameworks have been applied to studies of LGB parent families as well as recommendations for future research.

Therefore, what and how theories are used in studies regarding LGB parent families are the focus of this article (note that we also use the term *sexual minority* to refer to non-heterosexual individuals). Our systematic review of highly cited articles in the literature about LGB parent families indicates that research in this area spans from studies lacking a strong or well-integrated theoretical framework, to those that use theories framed by or that challenge heteronormative cultural values (e.g., assumptions that children need a mother and a father for optimal development), and, finally, to research grounded in a clear theoretical foundation within a given discipline (e.g., psychology, sociology, economics). First we provide discussion of why theoretical frameworks can be advantageous to research design and execution. Next we give a general overview about historical trends regarding the theories that have framed research on LGB parent families since studies were first published in this area in the 1970s. Then we provide a detailed discussion of the theoretical models and perspectives involved in highly cited empirical studies about LGB parent families and consider how thoroughly theory has been incorporated into reports of empirical work in the field. Finally, based on this systematic review and citation analysis, we offer recommendations and implications for future research in the field of sexual orientation and gender diversity.

Why is theory important?

As the amount, visibility, and influence of research on LGB parent families increases, it is imperative that scholarly journals promote high standards of methodological rigor—which evolve and expand as needed—that allow for confident conclusions about the lives and outcomes of children and parents in these families. Yet many scholars in the social behavioral sciences have argued that empirical work lacking theoretical grounding is limited in influencing practice (e.g., Burns, 2011; Hughes, 2000). Rather, for research findings to have a lasting impact, the theoretical framework guiding the research should be convincing (Burns, 2011; Ellis, 2005).

So what is theory, and why is it so important? Kerlinger (1973, p. 9) defined theory as “a set of set of interrelated constructs (concepts), definitions, and propositions that present a systematic view of phenomena

specifying relations among variables, with the purpose of explaining and predicting the phenomena.” Theories can be used to describe phenomena as well as to prune alternative perspectives. Engaging with new theories in designing, conducting, and evaluating research can serve to broaden and deepen our understanding as scholars about world phenomena (Volpe & Suldo, 2014). On the importance of theory in psychology, Burns (2011) contended that data interpretation is not appropriate without theory. Conceptual frameworks allow scholars to give meaning to data while also providing methods to guide future research and vehicles for considering broader implications of results (Burns, 2011; Hughes, 2000).

Lindblom (1979) argued that without theory to guide research results, findings may be disjointed and fragmented, and the field of study may be relegated to ongoing cycles of trial and error. Another problem associated with not using a theoretical framework is the risk of bias in describing phenomena or interpreting findings. Without guiding theories or concepts, a researcher’s preconceived notions may act as an implicit framework that influences the explanation of results. Therefore, it is useful to employ theoretical frameworks in conducting research, allowing for purposeful and critical evaluation of any theories considered, as well as the possible expansion beyond original theoretical frameworks into new perspectives.

As a body of literature, research on LGB parent families has varied in the extent to which theoretical implications have been considered. For instance, Erich, Leung, and Kindle (2005) observed that conceptual frameworks of family functioning have rarely been used in studies of lesbian and gay parents and their children. Using theories to guide empirical study of LGB parent families, however, has the potential to facilitate the growth and maturation of the field of LGB parent family studies. Indeed, Burns (2011) argued that although methodological rigor bolsters the validity of findings, it is advances in theory that move fields forward.

The purpose of our article is to use a systematic review and citation analysis to discuss how theoretical and applied orientations have influenced the field of LGB parent families in the past, to evaluate how theory has been used in highly cited research about LGB parent families more recently, to consider theoretical orientations that may advance our science, and to suggest possible implications of theory for research, policy, law, and practice. As we stand at a precipice in the history of LGB parent family research, we have an opportunity to move the field forward by heeding the call and strengthening our attention to theory in our work, especially as it applies to practice and policy with this increasingly visible group of families in the United States and around the world. We seek to inform interdisciplinary dialogue about theory and research related to sexual orientation and parenting. In the next section, we briefly describe historical trends in theories that have framed studies of sexual minority parent families.

Historical trends in theories framing studies of LGB parent families

Research on non-heterosexual parents was first published in the psychological literature in the late 1970s. In this first “wave” of studies up through the 1990s, research questions focused on the experiences of lesbian and gay (LG) parents (particularly lesbian women) after coming out, often in the context of heterosexual marriages, and the impact on children who were born within these heterosexual relationships. These early studies were prompted, in part, by court cases of custody battles involving mothers who had come out as lesbian or bisexual and were divorcing their husbands (see Tasker, 2013). During this era of research, such studies were often explicitly or implicitly grounded in “deficit” models that assumed negative outcomes for LG parents and their children (i.e., “differences = deficits”); likewise, “normative” comparisons with heterosexual parent families (who were treated as the “gold standard”) were common.

Similarly, clinical theories were also commonly used to frame studies of LG parents and their children. Psychoanalytic perspectives emphasize the unique and distinct importance of the “mother” and “father” roles and suggest that the absence of either role (e.g., in same-sex parenting) disrupts typical personality development. Psychoanalytic notions have informed a number of studies, particularly early research, on LG parent families. In her influential review of the field, Patterson (1992) contended that any difficulties children with sexual minority parents experience might be connected to prejudice, not parental sexual orientation. Barrett and Tasker (2001) considered traditional predictions rooted in psychoanalytic and social learning theories that children with gay or bisexual fathers might experience more problems than those with heterosexual parents and concluded that their data did not support either traditional theoretical predictions nor reveal the negative effects of prejudice; children were reported to experience few difficulties, as well as some benefits, from growing up with a sexual minority father.

Over time, influential clinical theories have moved away from psychoanalytic perspectives to placing an emphasis on understanding the implications of sexual minority stress and experiences of discrimination on health. Part of the explanation for this change lies in the demedicalization of homosexuality, which had been listed as a mental and psychological disorder in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (DSM) until 1973. Up through the 1970s, researchers generally used psychoanalytic theories and “medical models” to frame their work, which can be understood in the context of the fact that, at the time, non-heterosexuality was considered to be dysfunctional and deviant (Conrad & Angell, 2004). Over the last several decades, with increasing understanding that “normal” sexual orientation is on a continuum, professionals in medical and clinical fields have moved toward understanding the ways in which different environmental contexts influence the experiences

of sexual minority individuals (rather than assuming that they have negative health outcomes on the basis of sexual orientation alone).

In the past two decades, reviews of research on sexual minority parenting have indicated that research attention has shifted focus to “planned LG parent families,” or those in which children were born or adopted by same-sex parents and/or “out” sexual minority parents. Such studies have begun to capture LG parents’ diverse pathways to family formation—for example, through adoption and foster care and through assisted reproductive technologies (Goldberg & Gartrell, 2014; Goldberg & Scheib, 2015; Golombok, 2015). Additionally, studies over the past decade have increasingly examined gay fathers, in contrast to the almost exclusive focus on lesbian mothers in earlier research (Baiocco et al., 2015; Bergman, Rubio, Green, & Padrón, 2010; Goldberg, 2012; Golombok & Tasker, 2010). Studies of LG parents and their children have increasingly involved consideration of family processes (parent–child interactions, parents’ relationship quality, and parents’ division of labor; e.g., Farr & Patterson, 2013) as well as external influences (e.g., the role of peer stigma; Bos, Gartrell, van Balen, Peyser, & Sandfort, 2008), as opposed to focusing exclusively or largely on the role of family structure (i.e., parents’ sexual orientation) in affecting family and child outcomes. The literature characterizing LG parent families today also more commonly involves strengths-based approaches (e.g., family resiliency), acknowledgment of the unique experiences and dynamics affecting these family systems, and shifts away from the earlier deficit models, “gold standard” comparisons to heterosexual parent families, and challenges to heteronormative ideals of the family (see Negy & McKinney, 2006; Patterson, 2000). Finally, there has been increasing attention to the spectrum of parents (and their children) who are gender and sexual minorities (e.g., bisexual, queer, transgender), not only those who are LG (see Goldberg & Allen, 2013).

The current study

To our knowledge, there has been no systematic review of theories used in highly cited studies about LGB parent families. Available reviews (e.g., Biblarz & Stacey, 2010; Moore & Stambolis-Ruhstorfer, 2013) have generally summarized or interpreted the body of research findings on LGB parent families or have conducted a meta-analysis (e.g., Fedewa, Black, & Ahn, 2015). However, as many research findings regarding LGB parent families have been widely cited in subsequent studies, policy briefs, legal proceedings, and in the media, it would be valuable to have a clearer understanding of the particular theoretical underpinnings (and related interpretations of results) that have guided the influential studies about LGB parent families.

It is important to assess common theories within a highly cited area of research, such as studies of LGB parent families, for several reasons. An

analysis of the dominant modes of how LGB parent family life is assessed and interpreted can inform understanding in the field at the current historical moment. An evaluation of commonly used theories can also be beneficial in identifying gaps in the literature (i.e., are there theories that have not been used but could be meaningfully applied?). Finally, by observing how theories are integrated in studies of LGB parent families, we can determine their utility and value in continuing to be used as guiding frameworks. Thus using a systematic review and citation analysis using Google Scholar, we sought to understand what theories have been dominantly employed in highly cited empirical papers about LGB parent families, and how they are used and toward what end.

Citation analysis is a useful strategy for directly and objectively assessing influence in a particular area of research; by using raw citation counts, the influence of scholarly work has been evaluated across many scientific disciplines (Garfield, 1955; Kinshuk, Sampson, & Chen, 2013; Shih, Feng, & Tsai, 2008; Smith, 1981). Papers that are highly cited offer key ideas to direct future study and tend to have greater recognition by scholars across related fields (Aksnes, 2003; Shih et al., 2008). To conduct a citation analysis, scholars across a variety of fields have often selected the top 20 or 30 highly cited articles in a given research area or those articles with more than 15 citations (or some other designated count; Jacobs, 2009; Kinshuk et al., 2013; Tomcho et al., 2015). For additional information about citation analysis, including with Google Scholar, please see Durden and Ellis (1993) and Harzing and van der Wal (2008). We used this model as a framework for this study, focusing on the top 30 highly cited empirical research articles on LGB parent families across a recent timespan. Our goal was to assess studies about sexual minority parent families that are likely to be among the most read by scholars and, in turn, the most influential in guiding work in academic and professional realms.

Given the wide array of fields represented in LGB parent family research (e.g., psychology, social work, sociology, education, law and policy, health, nursing, communications, demography, philosophy), and given that it is outside the scope of this article to comprehensively review the extant body of research on LGB parent families, we narrowed our scope to articles published across a recent, 5-year period (i.e., 2005–2010). Our use of Google Scholar to access citation rates permitted us to conduct a thorough literature search across academic disciplines during this time period, as well as to allow time (i.e., 2010 to the present) for articles in this area to accrue citations. Another advantage of using Google Scholar is its high citation yield—some researchers have found that it generates a greater citation count than other major search engines and databases (e.g., Jacobs, 2009), as Google Scholar considers a broad range of sources such as books, articles, theses, court opinions, professional societies, and so forth (Google Scholar, n.d.).

Guiding our work for this article were the following questions:

- (1) What are the characteristics (e.g., what discipline, nature of sample, methods) of the most highly cited (i.e., influential) papers about LGB parent families?
- (2) To what extent are theoretical frameworks explicitly employed in these highly cited papers? To what extent are they driven by questions of public debate?
- (3) What theories were most commonly cited in the research, how were these theories incorporated, and to what effect?

Our purpose in addressing these questions was to assess recent developments and current trends regarding theories that have shaped influential (i.e., highly cited) research about sexual minority parent families in the social and behavioral sciences.

Method

Search for studies and inclusion criteria

Studies of LGB parent families were identified through a systematic search of the database Google Scholar. Google Scholar was selected for its utility to search across disciplines and in casting a wider net for citations than does any individual database (such as PsycINFO, MEDLINE, and others in EBSCO and ERIC information services).

To be included in the systematic review, a study had to (1) be published between 2005 and 2010; (2) be written in English; (3) represent original, empirical research (no single case studies, editorials, dissertations, meta-analyses, institute reports, books or book chapters, or reviews were included); (4) include findings about sexual minority parents and/or their children (no studies about others' attitudes, such as those of child welfare professionals or teachers, nor about sexual minority children with heterosexual parents, were included); and (5) have been cited at least once in Google Scholar since publication. In short, empirical articles that focused on issues of parenting and child development in families with non-heterosexual parents were selected.

Search terms were as follows: (gay OR lesbian OR sexual minority OR sexual orientation OR same-sex OR same-gender OR LGB* OR queer) AND (parent OR family OR families). Although original searches identified over 1,009,000 results on Google Scholar, only 181 articles met all the search criteria specified above. We give a more in-depth discussion and assessment of theoretical frameworks of the top 30 highly cited articles in the Results section.

Coding procedures

To ensure agreement, the authors consulted extensively as to whether respective papers met our inclusion criteria, in deciding on broad themes of the types of theories reflected in the research, and in coding the presence or absence of explicit theories involved. Any specific theory or theoretical constructs mentioned were grouped under a theoretical model or perspectives used category (yes/no). If a theoretical perspective was explicitly given in the Introduction (often as a subheading) and clearly incorporated into the methods and interpretation of results, this was coded as the “presence” of “explicit theory.” If a specific theory or theoretical constructs were mentioned only once or twice, we coded this as “no explicit theory given.” Through discussion, the authors agreed on themes to group theoretical models or perspectives, particularly around disciplinary frameworks, such as “developmental psychology perspectives” or “sociological perspectives.” The authors each individually examined the 30 articles for the presence or absence of explicit theories and separately coded articles for “other perspectives framing study.” Consensus was approximately 100% for all coding decisions.

Results

Research Question 1: What are the characteristics (e.g., what discipline, nature of sample, methods) of the most highly cited (i.e., influential) papers about LGB parent families?

A summary table of the top 30 highly cited empirical articles in LGB parent family research from 2005 to 2010 is provided in [Table 1](#). These studies represent a wide array of disciplines, from psychology to social work to medicine to public health to sociology to economics, among others. The first authors’ disciplines (determined by area of training for highest degree or home department) are listed in [Table 1](#). Of the 30 papers, disciplines included were 14 (47%) from psychology, six (20%) from sociology (including a joint women’s studies program), four (13%) from education, three (10%) from psychiatry, two (7%) from social work, and one (3%) from economics. Due to the range of disciplines represented, the research papers included involve a variety of sample sizes, recruitment methods, and journal outlets. In terms of methodology, six (20%) of the 30 used mixed methods of quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques, 14 (47%) used quantitative techniques, and 10 (33%) used qualitative data collection strategies. Of the 30 empirical studies, 20 (67%) focused on lesbian mother samples (with or without a heterosexual parent comparison group), whereas four (13%) included exclusively gay fathers. The remaining six (20%) studies (of

Table 1. Theoretical frameworks in the top 30 highly cited empirical papers of LGB parent family research (by citation counts in total, as of May 11, 2015, using Google Scholar) during 2005–2010 and arranged in descending order of citation counts.

Rank & Authors	Cited by	Year Published	Journal	Article Title	Field/Discipline of 1st Author	Method; Sample	Theoretical Framework(s) Named
1. Gartrell, Deck, Rodas, Peyser, & Banks	177	2005	<i>American Journal of Orthopsychiatry</i>	The National Lesbian Family Study: 4. Interviews with the 10-year-old children	Psychiatry	Mixed; Lesbian mothers via donor insemination (DI)	RQ2. Theory explicitly incorporated? NO RQ3. Theoretical perspectives used: Developmental psychological perspectives (overall adjustment) Social psychological perspectives (stigma) Nontheoretical perspectives used: Challenges to heteronormativity
2. Gartrell & Bos	134	2010	<i>Pediatrics</i>	U.S. National Longitudinal Lesbian Family Study: Psychological adjustment of 17-year-old adolescents	Psychiatry	Mixed; Lesbian mothers via DI	RQ2. Theory explicitly incorporated? NO RQ3. Theoretical perspectives used: Developmental psychological perspectives (overall adjustment) Nontheoretical perspectives used: Challenges to heteronormativity Public controversy/relation to policy

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Rank & Authors	Cited by	Year Published	Journal	Article Title	Field/Discipline of 1st Author	Method; Sample	Theoretical Framework(s) Named
3. Wainright & Patterson	133	2006	<i>Journal of Family Psychology</i>	Delinquency, victimization, and substance use among adolescents with female same-sex parents	Psychology	Quantitative; Female same-sex parent couples	RQ2. Theory explicitly incorporated? NO RQ3. Theoretical perspectives used: Developmental psychological perspectives (overall adjustment) Nontheoretical perspectives used: Challenges to heteronormativity Public controversy/relation to policy
4. Black, Sanders, & Taylor	126	2007	<i>Journal of Economic Perspectives</i>	The economics of lesbian and gay families	Economics	Quantitative; Same-sex couples	RQ2. Theory explicitly incorporated? YES RQ3. Theoretical perspectives used: Economic theories about the family Nontheoretical perspectives used: Public controversy/relation to policy

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Rank & Authors	Cited by	Year Published	Journal	Article Title	Field/Discipline of 1st Author	Method; Sample	Theoretical Framework(s) Named
5. Bos, van Balen, & van den Boom	116	2007	<i>American Journal of Orthopsychiatry</i>	Child adjustment and parenting in planned lesbian-parent families	Education	Quantitative; Lesbian parent couples via DI	RQ2. Theory explicitly incorporated? NO RQ3. Theoretical perspectives used: Developmental psychological perspectives (overall adjustment, parenting capacities) Nontheoretical perspectives used: Challenges to heteronormativity Public controversy/relation to policy
6. Berkowitz & Marsiglio	114	2007	<i>Journal of Marriage & Family</i>	Gay men: Negotiating procreative, father, and family identities	Sociology	Qualitative; Gay fathers via adoption and surrogacy	RQ2. Theory explicitly incorporated? YES RQ3. Theoretical perspectives used: Egalitarian, Feminist, and Gender Theory (sociology/psychology) Procreative identity framework Symbolic interactionism Sociological perspectives on family formation Nontheoretical perspectives used: Challenges to heteronormativity Public controversy/relation to policy

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Rank & Authors	Cited by	Year Published	Journal	Article Title	Field/Discipline of 1st Author	Method; Sample	Theoretical Framework(s) Named
7. Wainright & Patterson	102	2008	<i>Journal of Family Psychology</i>	Peer relations among adolescents with female same-sex parents	Psychology	Quantitative; Female same-sex couples	RQ2. Theory explicitly incorporated? NO RQ3. Theoretical perspectives used: Developmental psychological perspectives (overall adjustment) Nontheoretical perspectives used: Challenges to heteronormativity Public controversy/relation to policy
8. Stacey	90	2006	<i>Sexualities</i>	Gay parenthood and the decline of paternity as we knew it	Sociology	Qualitative; Gay fathers via multiple paths	RQ2. Theory explicitly incorporated? NO RQ3. Theoretical perspectives used: Sociological perspectives on family formation Nontheoretical perspectives used: Challenges to heteronormativity Public controversy/relation to policy
9. Moore	83	2008	<i>American Sociological Review</i>	Gendered power relations among women: A study of household decision making in black, lesbian stepfamilies	Sociology	Mixed; Lesbian step-parent families	RQ2. Theory explicitly incorporated? YES RQ3. Theoretical perspectives used: Egalitarian, Feminist, and Gender Theory (sociology/psychology) Nontheoretical perspectives used: Challenges to heteronormativity

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Rank & Authors		Year Published	Journal	Article Title	Field/Discipline of 1st Author	Method; Sample	Theoretical Framework(s) Named
10. Farr, Patterson, & Forssell	81	2010	<i>Applied Developmental Science</i>	Parenting and child development in adoptive families: Does parental sexual orientation matter?	Psychology	Quantitative; LG parents via adoption	RQ2. Theory explicitly incorporated? NO RQ3. Theoretical perspectives used: Developmental psychological perspectives (gender development, overall adjustment, parenting capacities) Family systems theory Nontheoretical perspectives used: Challenges to heteronormativity Public controversy/relation to policy
11. Fulcher, Sutfin, & Patterson	74	2008	<i>Sex Roles</i>	Individual differences in gender development: Associations with parental sexual orientation, attitudes, and division of labor	Psychology	Quantitative; Lesbian parent couples via adoption and DI	RQ2. Theory explicitly incorporated? NO RQ3. Theoretical perspectives used: Developmental psychological perspectives (gender development) Egalitarian, Feminist, and Gender Theory (sociology/psychology) Nontheoretical perspectives used: Challenges to heteronormativity Public controversy/relation to policy

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Rank & Authors	Cited by	Year Published	Journal	Article Title	Field/Discipline of 1st Author	Method; Sample	Theoretical Framework(s) Named
12. Goldberg & Perry-Jenkins	73	2007	<i>Journal of Social and Personal Relationships</i>	The division of labor and perceptions of parental roles: Lesbian couples across the transition to parenthood	Psychology	Mixed: Lesbian parent couples via DI	RQ2. Theory explicitly incorporated? YES RQ3. Theoretical perspectives used: Economic theories about family Egalitarian, Feminist, and Gender Theory (sociology/psychology) RQ2. Theory explicitly incorporated? NO RQ3. Theoretical perspectives used: Developmental psychological perspectives (overall adjustment, parenting capacities) Family systems theory Nontheoretical perspectives used: Challenges to heteronormativity Public controversy/relation to policy
13. Golombok & Badger	72	2010	<i>Human Reproduction</i>	Children raised in mother-headed families from infancy: A follow-up of children of lesbian and single heterosexual mothers, at early adulthood	Psychology	Quantitative; Lesbian mothers via DI	RQ2. Theory explicitly incorporated? NO RQ3. Theoretical perspectives used: Developmental psychological perspectives (overall adjustment, parenting capacities) Family systems theory Nontheoretical perspectives used: Challenges to heteronormativity Public controversy/relation to policy
14. Gabb	72	2005	<i>Sociology</i>	Lesbian motherhood: Strategies of familial-linguistic management in lesbian parent families	Sociology/ Women's Studies	Qualitative; Lesbian mothers via DI and hetero-sexual relations	RQ2. Theory explicitly incorporated? NO RQ3. Theoretical perspectives used: Egalitarian, Feminist, and Gender Theory (sociology/psychology) Queer theory Sociological perspectives on family formation Nontheoretical perspectives used: Challenges to heteronormativity

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Rank & Authors	Cited by	Year Published	Journal	Article Title	Field/Discipline of 1st Author	Method; Sample	Theoretical Framework(s) Named
15. Lindsay, Perlesz, Brown, McNair, DeVaus, & Pitts	66	2006	<i>Sociology</i>	Stigma or respect: Lesbian-parented families negotiating school settings	Sociology	Qualitative; Lesbian mothers via DI and hetero-sexual relations	RQ2. Theory explicitly incorporated? NO RQ3. Theoretical perspectives used: Ecological theory Sociological perspectives on family formation Nontheoretical perspectives used: Challenges to heteronormativity Public controversy/relation to policy
16. Bos & van Balen	65	2008	<i>Culture, Health, & Sexuality</i>	Children in planned lesbian families: Stigmatization, psychological adjustment and protective factors	Education	Quantitative; Lesbian parent couples via DI	RQ2. Theory explicitly incorporated? NO RQ3. Theoretical perspectives used: Developmental psychological perspectives (overall adjustment) Social psychological perspectives (stigma) Nontheoretical perspectives used: Challenges to heteronormativity
17. Goldberg & Sayer	61	2006	<i>Journal of Marriage & Family</i>	Lesbian couples' relationship quality across the transition to parenthood	Psychology	Quantitative; Lesbian parent couples via DI	RQ2. Theory explicitly incorporated? NO RQ3. Theoretical perspectives used: Ecological theory Family systems theory

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Rank & Authors	Cited by	Year Published	Journal	Article Title	Field/Discipline of 1st Author	Method; Sample	Theoretical Framework(s) Named
18. Perlesz, Brown, Lindsay, McNair, DeVaus, & Pitts	59	2006	<i>Journal of Family Therapy</i>	Family in transition: Parents, children and grandparents in lesbian families give meaning to "doing family"	Psychology	Qualitative; Lesbian mothers via DI and heterosexual relations	RQ2. Theory explicitly incorporated? NO RQ3. Theoretical perspectives used: Family systems theory Sociological perspectives on family formation Nontheoretical perspectives used: Challenges to heteronormativity Public controversy/relation to policy
19. Schacher, Auerbach, & Silverstein	59	2005	<i>Journal of GLBT Family Studies</i>	Gay fathers expanding the possibilities for us all	Psychology	Qualitative; Gay fathers via several paths	RQ2. Theory explicitly incorporated? NO RQ3. Theoretical perspectives used: Egalitarian, Feminist, and Gender Theory (sociology/psychology) Nontheoretical perspectives used: Challenges to heteronormativity

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Rank & Authors	Cited by	Year Published	Journal	Article Title	Field/Discipline of 1st Author	Method; Sample	Theoretical Framework(s) Named
20. Rivers, Poteat, & Noret	57	2008	<i>Developmental Psychology</i>	Victimization, social support, and psychosocial functioning among children of same-sex and opposite-sex couples in the United Kingdom	Psychology	Quantitative; Female same-sex couples	RQ2. Theory explicitly incorporated? NO RQ3. Theoretical perspectives used: Developmental psychological perspectives (overall adjustment) Social psychological perspectives (stigma) Nontheoretical perspectives used: Public controversy/relation to policy
21. Gartrell, Rodas, Deck, Peyser, & Banks	56	2006	<i>Feminism & Psychology</i>	The USA National Lesbian Family Study: Interviews with mothers of 10-year-olds	Psychiatry	Mixed; Lesbian mothers via DI	RQ2. Theory explicitly incorporated? NO RQ3. Theoretical perspectives used: Egalitarian, Feminist, and Gender Theory (sociology/psychology) Social psychological perspectives (stigma) Nontheoretical perspectives used: Challenges to heteronormativity Public controversy/relation to policy
22. Goldberg	55	2007	<i>American Journal of Orthopsychiatry</i>	(How) does it make a difference? Perspectives of adults with lesbian, gay, and bisexual parents	Psychology	Qualitative; LGB parents via several paths	RQ2. Theory explicitly incorporated? YES RQ3. Theoretical perspectives used: Queer theory Social constructionism

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Rank & Authors	Cited by	Year Published	Journal	Article Title	Field/Discipline of 1st Author	Method; Sample	Theoretical Framework(s) Named
23. Bergman, Rubio, & Green, & Padrón	53	2010	<i>Journal of GLBT Family Studies</i>	Gay men who become fathers via surrogacy: The transition to parenthood	Psychology	Mixed; Gay fathers via surrogacy	RQ2. Theory explicitly incorporated? NO RQ3. Theoretical perspectives used: Egalitarian, Feminist, and Gender Theory (sociology/psychology) Family systems Nontheoretical perspectives used: Challenges to heteronormativity Public controversy/relation to policy
24. Short	53	2007	<i>Feminism & Psychology</i>	Lesbian mothers living well in the context of heterosexism and discrimination: Resources, strategies and legislative change	Psychology	Qualitative; Lesbian mothers via DI	RQ2. Theory explicitly incorporated? NO RQ3. Theoretical perspectives used: Egalitarian, Feminist, and Gender Theory (sociology/psychology) Nontheoretical perspectives used: Challenges to heteronormativity Public controversy/relation to policy

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Rank & Authors	Cited by	Year Published	Journal	Article Title	Field/Discipline of 1st Author	Method; Sample	Theoretical Framework(s) Named
25. Bos, Gartrell, Balen, Peyser, & Sandfort	52	2008	<i>American Journal of Orthopsychiatry</i>	Children in planned lesbian families: A cross-cultural comparison between the United States and the Netherlands	Education	Quantitative; Lesbian mothers via DI	RQ2. Theory explicitly incorporated? NO RQ3. Theoretical perspectives used: Developmental psychological perspectives (overall adjustment) Social psychological perspectives (disclosure, stigma) Nontheoretical perspectives used: Challenges to heteronormativity Public controversy/relation to policy
26. Leung, Erich, & Kanenberg	52	2005	<i>Children and Youth Services Review</i>	A comparison of family functioning in gay/lesbian, heterosexual and special needs adoptions	Social work	Quantitative; LG parents via adoption	RQ2. Theory explicitly incorporated? YES RQ3. Theoretical perspectives used: Family systems theory (Process Model of Family Functioning) Nontheoretical perspectives used: Public controversy/relation to policy
27. Goldberg	50	2007	<i>Journal of Family Issues</i>	Talking about family disclosure practices of adults raised by lesbian, gay, and bisexual parents	Psychology	Qualitative; LGB parents via several paths	RQ2. Theory explicitly incorporated? YES RQ3. Theoretical perspectives used: Life course perspective Queer theory Social psychological perspectives (coming out, disclosure) Symbolic interactionism

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Rank & Authors		Cited by	Year Published	Journal	Article Title	Field/Discipline of 1st Author	Method; Sample	Theoretical Framework(s) Named	
28. Erich, Leung, & Kindle	49		2005	<i>Journal of GLBT Family Studies</i>	A comparative analysis of adoptive family functioning with gay, lesbian, and heterosexual parents and their children	Social work	Quantitative; LG parents via adoption	RQ2. Theory explicitly incorporated? YES RQ3. Theoretical perspectives used: Family systems theory (Process Model of Family Functioning) Nontheoretical perspectives used: Public controversy/relation to policy	
29. Ryan-Flood	49		2005	<i>Sexualities</i>	Contested heteronormativities: Discourses of fatherhood among lesbian parents in Sweden and Ireland	Sociology	Qualitative; Lesbian mothers via DI	RQ2. Theory explicitly incorporated? NO RQ3. Theoretical perspectives used: Egalitarian, Feminist, and Gender Theory (sociology/psychology) Queer theory Sociological perspectives on family formation Nontheoretical perspectives used: Challenges to heteronormativity	
30. Bos & Sandfort	47		2010	<i>Sex Roles</i>	Children's gender identity in lesbian and heterosexual two-parent families	Education	Quantitative; Lesbian parent couples via DI	RQ2. Theory explicitly incorporated? NO RQ3. Theoretical perspectives used: Developmental psychological perspectives (gender development) Nontheoretical perspectives used: Public controversy/relation to policy	

the 30) involved samples of both lesbian and gay parents (with or without a heterosexual parent comparison group)—two of these six studies involved bisexual parents (and were the only two (7%) of the 30 to do so). None of these 30 studies involved transgender parents.

Research Question 2: To what extent are theoretical frameworks explicitly employed in these highly cited papers? To what extent are they driven by questions of public debate?

Table 2 provides a summary of how many of the 30 highly cited papers in LGB parent family research from 2005 to 2010 included a clear theoretical model or perspective (yes/no), as well as how many were guided by non-theoretical frameworks such as questions raised in public controversy (e.g., debates about same-sex marriage equality or the suitability of non-heterosexual adults as adoptive parents) or those related to relevant public policies. Our systematic review revealed that although all the studies referred to a theoretical model or perspective, fewer than one third (27%, $n = 8$) of these articles included explicit grounding in specific guiding theories that informed the research design, questions, hypotheses, and interpretations of results. Only four (13%) papers that made explicit reference to theory employed multiple theories. Thus it was more common overall (73%, $n = 22$) for influential papers about sexual minority parents and their children to lack an explicit theoretical framework, at least during 2005–2010. Furthermore, highly cited papers in this area were focused on applied concerns and

Table 2. Summary of theoretical frameworks used in highly cited LGB parent family research papers published 2005–2010, arranged in descending order of frequency.

	Yes	No
Explicit theoretical grounding provided throughout paper	8	22
Nontheoretical perspectives framing study:		
Challenges to Heteronormativity	20	10
Public Controversy/Relation to Policy	20	10
Other disciplinary perspectives framing study:		
Developmental Psychological Perspectives (gender development, overall adjustment, and/or parenting capacities)	12	19
Social Psychological Perspectives (coming out, disclosure, and/or stigma)	6	24
Sociological Perspectives on Family Formation	6	24
Specific theory given:		
Egalitarian, Feminist, or Gender Theory (sociology/psychology)	10	20
Family Systems Theory (Process Model of Family Functioning)	7	13
Queer Theory	4	26
Ecological Theory	2	28
Economic Theory (of family)	2	28
Symbolic Interactionism	2	28
Life Course Perspective	1	29
Procreative Identity Framework	1	29
Social Constructionism	1	29

frequently were framed around questions raised in public controversies, legal debates, or policy questions about sexual minority parenting and children's development in LGB parent family homes; a majority of these 30 studies referred to "nontheoretical perspectives framing study" (67%, $n = 20$).

Research Question 3: What theories were most commonly cited in the research, how were these theories incorporated, and to what effect?

Across the 30 studies, some reference to a theoretical model or perspective was generally made, despite the fact that only eight (27%) included an explicit theoretical framework. The theoretical themes represented and summarized in [Tables 1](#) and [2](#) were usually explicitly mentioned, or were decided on by the authors as categories to describe the implicit conceptual themes or perspectives framing the research. We describe each of these categories next.

The theoretical models or perspectives used to frame the 30 highly cited papers on LGB parent families fall into one of the following broad themes (listed alphabetically): ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2001), economic theories (i.e., of families and family dynamics; Becker, 1981), egalitarian, feminist, or gender theory (from a psychological or sociological standpoint; Connell, 1987; Ferree, 1990), family systems theory (including the process model of family functioning, cited by Erich et al., 2005; Leung, Erich, & Kanenberg, 2005), a life course perspective (Bengston & Allen, 1993; Elder, 1998), queer theory (i.e., challenging commonly accepted notions about gender and sexuality; Butler, 1990; Oswald, Blume, & Marks, 2005), procreative identity framework (Marsiglio, Hutchinson, & Cohan, 2001), social constructionist theory (Gergen, 1985), and symbolic interactionism (Goffman, 1959). Papers during this time period also referred to academic debates within their subject discipline: developmental psychological perspectives (i.e., about children's gender development, overall adjustment, or parenting capacities), social psychological perspectives (i.e., about stigma, victimization, disclosure, and coming-out processes faced by LGB persons), and sociological perspectives on family formation (e.g., discussion of the transition to parenthood or discourses about parenthood in sociology).

Other perspectives used to frame studies outside of a specific theoretical framework and included in [Tables 1](#) and [2](#) as "nontheoretical perspectives framing study," are: challenges to heteronormativity (e.g., literature review discussed in terms of comparisons to the "norm" of heterosexual parents and their children) and public debate and policy relevance (i.e., discussion of controversy and related policies, laws, and practices surrounding LGB parenting or children raised by LGB parents). Studies that we noted as being framed by the perspective of "challenges to heteronormativity" involved implicit theories and assumptions that parental sexual orientation impacts

child development in detrimental ways and that LGB people are fundamentally different, specifically as parents, from heterosexual people. Many of the studies combined a theoretical perspective and a nontheoretical framework; these studies often had an applied focus and were aimed at exploring whether the child and family outcomes of LGB parent families are similar to or different from those of heterosexual parent families.

The most common guiding frameworks across these 30 influential studies in LGB parent family research published from 2005 to 2010 were nontheoretical perspectives, namely challenges to heteronormativity and public debate and policy relevance (tied for 67% or $n = 20$ of the 30 papers). The next most frequent themes were developmental psychological perspectives (40%, $n = 12$), egalitarian, feminist, and gender theory (33%, $n = 10$), and family systems theory (23%, $n = 7$). Tied for fourth most common themes were social psychological perspectives and sociological perspectives (tied for 20% or $n = 6$ of the 30 papers). Queer theory was used in 13% ($n = 4$) of the 30 papers. The remaining theories were used in only 1–2 of the total 30 papers. These data are summarized in [Table 2](#). As evidenced by the most highly cited articles in this area from 2005–2010, none had used a psychoanalytic or clinical framework, which seems to suggest that the field has moved into new territory compared with earlier decades—at least among the most highly cited papers about LGB parent families.

Next, we more fully address the third research question about how these theoretical or nontheoretical perspectives were (or were not) incorporated—and to what effect—in the top 30 highly cited papers about LGB parent family research from 2005 to 2010. We provide our reflections on what theories were used in each paper and the degree to which authors explicitly integrated the theories named throughout their article (i.e., identifying whether the theoretical framework was evident or discussed throughout their paper).

Public debate and challenges to heteronormativity

From our citation analysis, it is clear that questions of public debate and assumptions about heteronormativity have often been used as a framework for research on LGB parent families. Oswald and colleagues (2005) described heteronormativity as comprising an array of cultural beliefs, privileges, rewards, rules, and sanctions that societally reinforce heterosexuality and marginalize those who are not heterosexual. Traditionally, common questions in research studies focused on whether LGB parents and their children were “different” from heterosexual parents and their children in terms of parenting capabilities and child outcomes, respectively. Debates also centered on whether LGB adults should be allowed to parent at all. As such, literature about LGB parent families has frequently addressed questions about whether

children need both a mother and father and about what contributions parental gender makes to child development, since observers have speculated about whether LGB parents can be appropriate role models and agents of socialization for their children (see Biblarz & Stacey, 2010; Lamb, 2012).

Two thirds of the studies among the top 30 highly cited papers about LGB parents and their children from 2005 to 2010 used a discussion of public controversy or a challenge to heteronormativity to frame the research, and although many may also have mentioned a theoretical perspective, few drew explicitly on an overt theoretical framework. Among the top seven papers (those with over 100 citations in Google Scholar), only two of these explicitly referred to theory: Black, Sanders, and Taylor (2007) testing economic theories and Berkowitz and Marsiglio (2007) using multiple theoretical perspectives to pose research questions, frame methodology, and assist in making analytic interpretations. Yet all seven papers refer to challenges to heteronormativity faced by LGB parent families and/or relate to public controversy or policy debates. Clearly the presentation of research, even in academic peer-reviewed papers, has been framed by cultural assumptions of heteronormativity and related questions of public debate.

One route through which this framing through public debate and challenges to heteronormativity might occur is via publications that emphasize applied issues—the pragmatics of empirical research pushing the field forward—rather than, or sometimes in conjunction with, theory-driven research. The top two cited papers in the field from 2005 to 2010 according to Google Scholar are both from the National Longitudinal Lesbian Family Study and are both published in health-related journals (the *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* and *Pediatrics*), which likely focus on the dissemination of findings compared with theoretical concerns. For example, the *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* promotes its parent association's purpose regarding implementation of policies and practices related to health (American Psychological Association, 2016a). The third most cited paper, again using a dataset focused on health and wellbeing within the field of psychology (the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health) was published as a brief report in the *Journal of Family Psychology* (Wainright & Patterson, 2006). Given that this journal requires evidence of translation of research into practice in all accepted articles (American Psychological Association, 2016b), this consideration could be prioritized more so than the presentation of theory when submitting a brief report.

Developmental and family systems theories

Developmental and family systems frameworks have also been applied frequently in studies aimed at examining the outcomes and experiences of LGB parent families. Nineteen (63%) of the top 30 studies in Table 1 included

mention of developmental perspectives or family systems theories. Developmental and family systems perspectives emphasize the factors that influence patterns of individual growth and change over time, as well as the importance of considering individual development in the context of family relationships, respectively. These frameworks have shifted from emphasizing “no or few differences among LGB parent families” (as compared with heterosexual parent families) to appreciating more nuanced dynamics of family interactions and unique family processes at work in LGB parent families (such as relationships with donors, parenting within families in which parents have different biological relationships, openness arrangements with birth family members among adoptive LG parent families, and navigating experiences of sexual minority stress as a result of stigma and discrimination). In contrast to earlier research on this topic, the theme that “differences do *not* equal deficits” for children and parents in LGB parent families has been increasingly supported by more recent research evidence.

As an example of how developmental and family systems theories have been applied, even without a specific “Theoretical Framework” section within a publication, Farr, Forsell, and Patterson (2010) investigated child gender-typed behavior and parenting behaviors in a sample of 106 preschool-aged children adopted in infancy by 27 lesbian, 29 gay, and 50 heterosexual couples. Their hypotheses that child outcomes and parenting would not differ by parental sexual orientation but that individual differences would be found in associations between relationship variables and child adjustment were grounded in family systems theories (though not explicitly so); they contrasted these hypotheses with competing predictions made from older developmental deficit theories (e.g., Baumrind, 1995). In their discussion, Farr and colleagues related their results about child, parent, and couple adjustment back to ideas about developmental theories introduced earlier in the article to conclude in favor of family systems processes being fundamental in affecting children’s outcomes regardless of family structure.

Also studying the role of family processes among adoptive lesbian, gay, and heterosexual parent families, Erich and colleagues (2005) examined how family support and preadoptive circumstances related to child and family functioning among 72 parents with 111 children. Erich et al.’s findings indicated that although parental sexual orientation was not significantly associated with adoptive family functioning, child behavior, or family support, several variables were associated with higher levels of family functioning across the sample (e.g., fewer previous placements, previous foster parenting experience, older children, and children without significant mental health diagnoses or learning disorders). These two studies, one from psychology (Farr et al., 2010) and one from social work (Erich et al., 2005), respectively, offer examples of highly cited applied studies in the field of LGB parent families that do incorporate the use of theoretical perspectives even

without a clear theoretical framework. Moreover, the findings provide support for the growing trend in research about families led by sexual minority parents to emphasize the role of family processes as more important to child outcomes than is family structure.

Gender, egalitarian, feminist, and queer theories

Many studies of LGB parents and their children, particularly those with qualitative designs, have a grounded approach in gender, egalitarian, feminist, or queer theory (Connell, 1987; Stiles, 2002). These perspectives emphasize the significance of gender and sexual identity to family life (e.g., to parenting behaviors and couple relationship dynamics). Fourteen (47%) of the top 30 studies in Table 1 included reference to egalitarian, feminist, gender, or queer theory. Goldberg and Perry-Jenkins (2007) used a mixed-methods approach to explore the transition to parenthood among 29 lesbian couples who conceived using donor insemination. The authors made clear statements of how different predictions derived from gender theory (and neoclassical economic theory) were tested and how theory-driven sampling was used to recruit couples. Goldberg and Perry-Jenkins discussed the greater support for gender theory (compared with neoclassical economic theory) in a thorough interpretation of their findings. That is, couples were more likely to divide up housework and child care based on egalitarian ideologies rather than financial or other practical considerations. Using a mixed-methods design, Moore (2008) also employed a gender relations perspective to examine gendered power relations among Black women who were partners in lesbian parent stepfamilies, but in contrast to Goldberg and Perry-Jenkins, Moore concluded that, in her sample, it was biological mothers who traded off greater chore responsibility for increased household authority. Thus the use of a similar theoretical perspective (i.e., gender relations) in investigating different types of lesbian parenthood resulted in distinct findings.

Goldberg (2007a) conducted a foundational qualitative study of 46 young adults from LGB parent families informed by queer theory. Goldberg clearly explicated queer theory and social constructionism, and the results were carefully connected back to these theories. For instance, some participants reported childhood and adolescent experiences of bullying, which Goldberg interpreted within the theoretical context of societal heterosexism. Adult children of LGB parents often felt more open-minded or tolerant as a result of their family structure and had more flexible ideas about sexuality and gender. These findings were interpreted in terms of “queering” and social constructionist frameworks, whereby adult children of LGB parents exhibit behaviors and attitudes that reflect their social context (i.e., their parents’ gender and sexual nonconformity) and may, in turn, serve to “queer,” or challenge, outsiders’ ideas about gender and sexuality.

Environmental contexts and social constructionist theories

Last, a recent trend in studies of LGB parent families is to use frameworks involving external or environmental contexts—for example, Bronfenbrenner’s (2001) ecological theory— that influence outcomes and experiences of LG parents and children. Recent studies have increasingly included attention to these theories, often through language of the individual’s perceptions of their experience and the meaning they attached to those experiences. These theories include those based on social constructionist perspectives (e.g., Goldberg, 2007a). Broadly, social constructionist theory refers to the idea that by interacting within specific social groups, individuals construct knowledge for one another and collaboratively create a subculture with shared artifacts and meanings; poststructural theory refers to conceptualizing common constructions (such as “family”) as a lived experience, not as a set form (Morgan, 1999; Stiles, 2002). Perlesz et al. (2006) used a qualitative design rooted in grounded theory methodology to interview 20 members of three-generational lesbian parent families in Australia, investigating how family members “do” family—that is, how they present themselves as part of a family to others. Perlesz and colleagues created clear linkages with theory in discussing results about the various ways in which participants enacted “family” in contrast with dominant social discourses on the family. Although only three (10%) of the 30 highly cited articles from 2005 to 2010 specifically referred to ecological or social constructionist theory, there were also six (20%) that incorporated social psychological perspectives about stigma, victimization, coming out, and disclosure.

In recent years, environmental theories specific to sexual minority populations have been applied to the field in studies of the impact of societal and institutional discrimination and have been increasingly investigated in studies on LG parent families (e.g., studies using social psychological perspectives such as minority stress theory; Meyer, 2003). Within our citation search time period (2005–2010), only one relatively uncited qualitative study with lesbian and queer-identified adoptive parents by Ross et al. (2008) used the lens of minority stress theory to contextualize institutional heterosexism observed in adoption policy that was evident in their findings. Nevertheless, although not as explicit as Ross et al. in addressing theory, the top cited article from 2005 to 2010 by Gartrell, Deck, Rodas, Peyser, and Banks (2005) highlighted the roles of social and cultural stigmatization in the NLLFS study of 78 lesbian-headed families formed through donor insemination.

Discussion

In our examination of highly cited studies published from 2005 to 2010 on LGB parents and their children, it became clear that many well-executed, useful, and influential studies were characterized by a general lack of an

explicit theoretical framework, and rather were based on applied concerns or more implicit theoretical influences (e.g., Bos, van Balen, & van den Boom, 2007; Gartrell et al., 2005; Stacey, 2006; Wainright & Patterson, 2006). It appeared to be common for authors of these and other studies to incorporate other guiding frameworks, such as the role of public controversies, or to include only a brief mention of a specific theory or theoretical perspective rather than a well-integrated and established theoretical framework. Several studies involved discussion of different theories in influencing the research questions or interpretation of findings but did not appear to systematically use a unified theoretical framework throughout the article. Further, the application of specific theory integration also appeared to vary widely by discipline. Our observations are intended to represent reflections about trends regarding theories used in this area of research rather than stand as a criticism of this body of work. Indeed, these studies have proved invaluable to our growing understanding of sexual minority parent families and have effected legal and policy change benefiting sexual minority parents and their children, perhaps for the very reason that they have been framed by applied, rather than theoretical, concerns.

Evaluating the use of theory in sexual minority parent family research: Future directions and recommendations for research

Our first and primary recommendation for future research is to encourage authors to consider more systematic use of theory as the context for constructing and applying models from which testable predictions can be made. One complexity surrounding the use of theory with LGB parent family research is the lack of agreement about using theories versus theoretical perspectives or models to inform research designs (e.g., at what point does a model become a theory?). For instance, Gartrell and Bos (2010) reviewed a risk and protective factors model in the introduction to their article. In general, models are characterized as being more descriptive than theories, and, in contrast, theories are accepted as more well-established explanations of phenomena from which predictions can be generated (Lefrançois, 1999). The use of “perspectives,” “models,” and “theories” often appear somewhat interchangeably in the literature that we reviewed. Thus clarification of these concepts (and their appropriate application) is an important direction for future research efforts.

Our second recommendation for future research is to encourage researchers to continue moving beyond the heteronormative paradigm of “no differences” research. Research about LGB parent families has often been limited by a heteronormative paradigm, commonly using comparisons to the “gold standard” or “norm” of families with heterosexual parents. More recently, studies of LGB populations have been conducted through a greater variety of

theoretical lenses not constrained by mainstream cultural models of what is considered normative. For example, conceptualizations of sexual orientation have expanded, moving from a binary construction between same-sex and other-sex attractions and behaviors to a more fluid continuum (Epstein, McKinney, Fox, & Garcia, 2012).

Our third recommendation for future research is for scholars to consider conducting theory-driven research using mixed-method designs, drawing on the advantages of both quantitative and qualitative designs. We observed that studies based on qualitative traditions (e.g., Berkowitz & Marsiglio, 2007; Moore, 2008) were far more likely to have a strong theoretical base that was carried out consistently than were the studies based on quantitative methodology. Indeed, Goldberg and Allen (2015) described how the qualitative research process is inherently driven by theory, including providing the study rationale, propelling the research questions, and guiding the methodology, data interpretation, and writing. In contrast, we found it difficult to assess whether theories were “carried through” in presentations of the findings in quantitatively based papers—perhaps this limitation of theory integration is simply less relevant or at least more difficult to objectively ascertain in quantitative compared with qualitative studies. Thus researchers using quantitatively focused methods might consider more explicitly stating their theoretical framework and ensuring its execution throughout any published studies; alternatively or additionally, qualitative methods could be effectively used.

Our fourth recommendation is for researchers to broaden the variety of theoretical frameworks applied to studies of LGB parent families—in that theory helps shape hypotheses tested, methods used, and interpretations of results. We recognize the challenges of conducting research grounded in theory. For instance, for theory to be useful, it must be practical and applicable, laying out testable predictions (Boss, 2015); yet practical constraints (e.g., funding) often preclude a full examination of a conceptual model in its entirety (Lamb, 2015). Lerner, Johnson, and Buckingham (2015) noted a “poorness of fit” that often exists between theory and empirical work to test both macro- and micro-level dynamics, but emerging statistical and qualitative methodological tools have allowed for advances in this regard.

Moreover, particular theories employed often depend on the specific discipline and training of the scientist; different fields lend themselves to different commonly used theoretical frameworks and perspectives, as well as methods (e.g., qualitative vs. quantitative data collection; conducting within-group or between-group comparisons). Researchers might also give more explicit and focused consideration to factors that may uniquely affect sexual minority parent families and also might demonstrate greater appreciation for the effects of intersecting identities (e.g., race, gender, socioeconomic status, cultural background), since the lack of inclusion of such

variables may make comparisons to heterosexual parent families incomplete or irrelevant. Finally, theoretical frameworks can be applied in a variety of ways, depending on the level of knowledge at which the research is being conducted—for instance, theory could differentially guide research when used as exploratory, descriptive, or explanatory. The application of more expansive theoretical frameworks across disciplines could, in effect, yield new understanding and insight about the strengths, challenges, and related family processes and outcomes observed among sexual minority parents and their children—thereby contributing to the interdisciplinary fields of family science and the psychology of sexual orientation and gender diversity.

Strengths and limitations of this systematic review and citation analysis

Our review and assessment of the literature was necessarily limited in several key ways. We selected original, empirical, and peer-reviewed studies from a 5-year period rather than comprehensively reviewing the entire existing research base on LG parent families. To allow papers to become established in the field, we deliberately selected 2005–2010 as the time period within which we assessed citation rates. However, in doing this we may have neglected the advent of theories that have more recently become established in the field of sexual minority parenting research, as well as publications that have begun to address the invisibility of bisexual and transgender parenthood in research (e.g., Downing, 2013; Ross & Dobinson, 2013; Tasker & Delvoye, 2015). Obviously, there is a time lag between theory and research that would delay the impact of theory-driven research. For example, Meyer's (2003) minority stress theory was not cited as such in any of the top 30 Google Scholar papers. Nevertheless, minority stress theory was beginning to influence the field at this time; for example, as we noted previously, it was used to frame a relatively uncited study on the transition to adoptive parenting (Ross et al., 2008). Further, we acknowledge that empirical work may also influence the level of interest in particular theories. For example, the use of Meyer's (2003) minority stress theory in later work may have been primed by highly cited papers published within our time period that used a general social-psychological perspective to highlight the negative role of social and cultural stigmatization in their findings (e.g., Gartrell et al., 2005).

No reviews, meta-analyses, book chapters, or dissertations were included in our list of the top 30 papers of 2005–2010, as we intended to focus on original, empirical research. Many important research results, however, about sexual minority family systems were available in these and other outlets. For example, several reviews have been influential in inspiring the field, encouraging researchers to think beyond heteronormative comparisons and to consider the diversity of contexts experienced by sexual minority parent families

(e.g., Biblarz & Stacey, 2010; Patterson, 1992; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). We also focused our review on studies written in English, but it is clear that research on LG parents and their children has been published in other languages (e.g., Lavoie, Julien, and Fortier's (2006) research, published in French, about the role of parents' sexual minority identity in affecting the experiences of children with LG parents).

Finally, some of the limitations of citation analysis should be mentioned. Even within this more limited time period, we did not extensively assess all studies. Rather, using citation analysis, we let citation counts from Google Scholar determine the studies we considered most influential and assessed these in terms of the theories employed. It is highly plausible that the ease of availability of papers on Google Scholar influenced their citation count; this was a phenomenon that we did not systematically evaluate in our citation analysis but particularly noted when considering papers with fewer than 30 citations. A related potential limitation is that we did not examine or control for citations that may have been self-citations. Further, we note that the Google Scholar database searched the wide range of documents that were publicly available on Google to count citations, including sources that were not themselves peer-reviewed. Thus the sources of the Google Scholar citations themselves may be of varying quality. Depending on how sources are cited, it is possible that counting the number of citations for any given paper does not always provide an accurate barometer for its impact on the field, and our analysis is limited in that we did not assess how our 30 highly cited papers were generally used by other sources. Perhaps a future analysis might build on our study to evaluate the quality and rigor of the highly cited papers on sexual minority parenting in Google Scholar.

Google Scholar retrieves varied material from full-text searching of various sources, such as conference proceedings and institutional repositories, which are not accessible to other databases using structured searching such as PsycINFO or MEDLINE/PubMed. Google Scholar, therefore, has an apparent advantage in accessing the "gray" literature (Shultz, 2007). Nevertheless, and clearly not unrelated to Google Scholar's considerable search power, a number of disadvantages of Google Scholar have been noted. For example, the ever-changing content and structure of Google Scholar's database and the absence of defined search algorithms make Google Scholar prone to identifying "false positives," including "off-topic" papers (e.g., Giustini & Boulos, 2013; Shultz, 2007). We therefore exercised due caution in searching with Google Scholar and evaluated only the top 30 empirical papers identified in our search.

Conclusion

We conclude our condensed systematic review and citation analysis of theories that have guided recent influential LGB parent family research by

noting several strengths of the extant literature and several important implications of theoretical integration in this research for policy, law, and practice. More recently in studies of LGB parents and their children, there has been clear movement toward the conceptualization and understanding of potential differences in outcomes and experiences for LGB parent families (compared with those of heterosexual parent families) from the context of environmental influences. This shift in focus, away from the earlier “no differences” paradigm (Stacey & Biblarz, 2001), has included studies that have more closely examined the impact of stigma and discrimination, both interpersonal and institutional, on individual mental, emotional, and physical health outcomes. These more recent studies contribute information about the importance of interventions that target reducing discrimination toward minority groups and promoting positive adjustment. With strong theoretical frameworks, based on theories such as Bronfenbrenner’s (2001) ecological systems theory or Meyer’s (2003) minority stress theory, commonalities in mechanisms of change across different interventions can be more effectively identified and cultivated (Kazdin, 2000).

Similarly, research on LGB parents and their children, particularly studies that have been quantitative in nature and have included larger samples or comparison groups, have been used to good effect in advocating and supporting legal and policy changes relevant to LG parent families (e.g., in custody hearings, adoption proceedings, and even Supreme Court decisions related to same-sex marriage rights). Greater attention to theoretical integration and greater consideration of the diversity of experiences of sexual and gender minority parents and their children, and the inclusion of underrepresented sexual and gender minorities in this literature (e.g., transgender, intersex, bisexual, and queer populations) will likely not only strengthen the intersections of research with policy, law, and practice in the future but also will more accurately reflect the reality of the growing diversity of parents and children in the United States and around the world. Thus we challenge scholars to continue to push the field forward by incorporating clear theoretical frameworks in their research, particularly those that are strengths-based and that acknowledge the unique experiences of sexual and gender minority parent families.

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