

The “no difference” theory is dead

A US study finds that opposite-sex parents are better than same-sex parents. Wait for the fireworks.
Michael Cook | 9 February 2015

82 



Fresh research has just tossed a grenade into the incendiary issue of same-sex parenting. Writing in the [British Journal of Education, Society & Behavioural Science](#), a peer-reviewed journal, American sociologist Paul Sullins concludes that children's “Emotional problems [are] over twice as prevalent for children with same-sex parents than for children with opposite-sex parents”.

He says confidently: “it is no longer accurate to claim that no study has found children in same-sex families to be disadvantaged relative to those in opposite-sex families.”

This defiant rebuttal of the “no difference” hypothesis is sure to stir up a hornet's nest as the Supreme Court prepares to trawl through arguments for and against same-sex marriage. It will be impossible for critics to ignore it, as it is based on more data than any previous study -- 512 children with same-sex parents drawn from the US National Health Interview Survey. The emotional problems included misbehaviour, worrying, depression, poor relationships with peers

and inability to concentrate.

After crunching the numbers, Sullins found opposite-sex parents provided a better environment. “Biological parentage uniquely and powerfully distinguishes child outcomes between children with opposite-sex parents and those with same-sex parents,” he writes.

As he points out, this has immense implications for public policy. The Elton John/David Furnish model of lavishing love and licorice on the offspring of surrogate mothers won't do. Throwing down the gauntlet before supporters of same-sex marriage, Sullins contends that “the primary benefit of marriage for children, therefore, may not be that it tends to present them with improved parents (more stable, financially affluent, etc, although it does this), but that it presents them with their own parents.”

The Ultima Thule of same-sex marriage, legal and social recognition of gay and lesbian partnerships, will not reduce the risk of emotional problems. “The two family forms will continue to have fundamentally different, even contrasting effects on the biological component of child well-being, to the relative detriment of children in same-sex families.”

Past research

Until recently nearly all studies of same-sex parenting were very small. In a survey of 49 studies in 2010, one researcher found that their mean sample size was only 39 children. Only four of these were random samples; the others had been selected by contacting gay and lesbian groups. An ambitious 2012 study by Mark Regnerus, of the University of Texas at Austin, identified only 39 young adults who had lived with a same-sex couple for more than three years out of 2,988 cases.

For researchers, it's a conundrum. The number of children being raised by same-sex couples is so small – 0.005 percent of American households with children -- that capturing them in a random sample is like finding a needle in a haystack. So the figure of 512 children, while still relatively small, makes Sullins's study a major contribution.

Sullins examines whether other factors could explain the difference in emotional welfare. According to his analysis, none of them does.

One factor could be instability. Children do not flourish in unstable environments. Gay and lesbian parents tend to rent rather than to own their own houses, which involves the trauma of pulling up stakes and resettling. This may also indicate parents are less settled in their relationship. Parental psychological distress is also associated with children's increased risk of emotional problems. Neither of these explained the differences.

The most widely-accepted explanation of poor emotional and behavioural results amongst children in same-sex households is homophobia. Supporters of same-sex parenting attribute poor emotional well-being to stigmatization. These kids are damaged, it is said, because they have been singled out, teased and bullied. If their peers were less homophobic, things would be different.

But Sullins dismisses this. “Contrary to the assumption underlying this hypothesis, children with opposite-sex parents are picked on and bullied more than those with same-sex parents.”

This sounds surprising, but in another paper, published last year in the [British Journal of Medicine and Medical Research](#) and based on the same data, Sullins found that children of same-sex parents are more at risk of ADHD. And if they had ADHD, they were over seven times more likely to suffer stigmatization because of their impaired interpersonal coping skills. In other words, if kids from homes with same-sex parents are bullied more, it’s because they lack interpersonal skills, not because their parents are gay or lesbian.

Bullying is toxic, but it’s important to find out whether kids are being bullied because they’re different or because their parents are different.

What comes next?

What is the implication of Sullin’s study?

It is not that all children in same-sex homes will be emotionally damaged. Sullins is quite emphatic about this. “Most children in most families achieve a level of psychosocial function that is not characterized by serious emotional problems.” However, even if most kids are all right, more of them are all right in intact marriages with their biological parents.

Sullins’s concluding suggestions for further research are eye-openers. In the media and in the courts, fine-grained studies have been few and far between. What about studies of girls who have no fathers and boys who have no mothers? Does same-sex parenting affect younger children differently than teenagers? Do adopted children fare as well as children from IVF or surrogate mothers?

These are obvious questions; who will be brave enough to ask them?

Paul Sullins must be a gutsy guy. When Mark Regnerus attacked the “no difference” hypothesis, his career was almost destroyed by trolls who trashed his data, his competence and his integrity. As [a professor at Catholic University of America](#), and a married Catholic priest with three children (he used to be an Episcopalian), Sullins has to be ready to go all 15 rounds.

- See more at:

http://www.mercatornet.com/articles/view/the_no_difference_theory_is_dead#sthash.uQXzSMx5.zD0t9CHX.dpuf