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## Adult Children of Same-Sex and Heterosexual Couples: Demographic “Thriving”

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### ABSTRACT

Prior research comparing children of same-sex and heterosexual couples is limited by methodological issues such as not including male same-sex couples and not using appropriate comparison groups of heterosexual parents. The current study addresses these limitations by examining differences in demographic characteristics between adult children of female same-sex couples, male same-sex couples, and heterosexual couples (recruited from siblings), using data reported by adult children’s parents drawn from a matched longitudinal cohort. Demographic variables include employment, education, religion, and familial status. Results reveal few differences between adult children of same-sex couples and those of heterosexual couples, and no differences between children of female-female couples and male-male couples.

### KEYWORDS

Adult children of same-sex couples; adult children of lesbians; adult children of gay men

## Introduction

When Kurdek conducted his groundbreaking longitudinal research on same-sex couples beginning in the 1980s (Kurdek, 1988), he focused on same-sex couples without children and consequently selected heterosexual couples who were childless as a comparison group. As Kurdek stated, “I defend the selection of childless gay and lesbian couples on the basis of reports that the majority of gay and lesbian couples do *not* [emphasis in original] live with children” (2004, p. 881). However, over the past three decades, families headed by lesbian and gay parents have become increasingly more prevalent and visible. For example, in the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth, one in three self-identified lesbians and one in six self-identified gay men reported having children (Gates, Badgett, Macomb, & Chambers, 2007). Similarly, the 2008 General Social Survey found that 49% of lesbians and bisexual women and 19% of gay and bisexual men have children (Gates, 2011).

When researchers first began studying same-sex couples, they noted that households with children are formed in a number of ways (c.f. Patterson, 1992, for an early review). Gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB) parents sometimes have children in a heterosexual relationship, may or may not be sharing custody with a former heterosexual spouse, and may have children living with them full-time or part-time. Same-sex partners of GLB parents may or may not consider themselves parents or stepparents, or be viewed as parents or stepparents by children. Additionally, GLB individuals may have children via adoption or foster care as single parents or in a same-sex relationship. Lesbians and bisexual women may have children via donor insemination with known or unknown donors, and the donors may or may not be involved in the children's lives. Gay men may have children via female egg donors or surrogates. Consequently, same-sex parenting is a diverse phenomenon.

In response to sociopolitical controversies over same-sex parenting and its effect on children, researchers have focused on the relative well-being of offspring of same-sex parents. Perhaps because of relatively greater visibility of lesbian and bisexual women as parents compared with gay and bisexual men, a large body of literature has focused on the well-being and psychological adjustment of children reared by women in same-sex relationships, generally comparing them with children of heterosexual mothers (Gartrell, Rodas, Deck, Peyser, & Banks, 2006; Patterson, Sutfin, & Fulcher, 2004). Much of this research, especially early on, assumed that mothers in same-sex relationships were "lesbian women," leaving the experience of bisexual women invisible. There is less research on children whose parents are men in same-sex relationships, often with smaller sample sizes (c.f. Tasker, 2005, for a review).

An early study in this area, conducted by Golombok and colleagues (Golombok, Spencer, & Rutter, 1983), was a longitudinal assessment focused on children in the UK who were raised in divorced lesbian or divorced heterosexual families. When they interviewed 46 adult children, ages 17 to 35 years (Tasker & Golombok, 1997), those with a lesbian parent did not differ from those with heterosexual parents on measures of close friendships, peer group hostility, depression, or anxiety. Beginning in 1986, when donor insemination became available to unmarried women, Gartrell and colleagues followed 84 lesbian mothers (70 coupled, 14 single) who had a child via donor insemination in the United States, first when the mothers were pregnant and continuing to the present day, with a 93% retention rate. In the most recent assessment, when children were 17 years old, mothers' reports on the Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1991) were compared to an age-matched sample in Achenbach's database (Gartrell & Bos, 2010). Lesbian mothers reported that their sons and daughters had higher social, academic, and general competence, and their children scored lower on social problems, aggression, rule breaking, and externalizing behaviors than the matched general sample. A meta-analysis by Allen and Burrell (1996) found no differences between GLB and heterosexual parents' ratings of children's adjustment, or in

children's ratings of their own adjustment. These studies demonstrate that in contrast to some societal stereotypes, adjustment of children of GLB parents is either similar to that of children of heterosexual parents, or children of GLB parents are doing slightly better on measures of psychosocial adjustment.

Given these results, when an article appeared by Regnerus (2012) indicating that young adult children of parents in same-sex relationships exhibit worse mental health outcomes than their peers, it caused considerable surprise and consternation among the scientific community who conduct GLB research. That article reported survey results of adults, ages 18 to 39 years, who were raised in various family types, including "intact biological families" (participants had a mother and father who stayed married from the time the participant was born until the present), "lesbian mothers" (participants' mother had a same-sex relationship at some point), and "gay fathers" (participants' father had a same-sex relationship at some point). The article received wide media coverage but was disparaged by researchers for methodological limitations. For example, adult children of "lesbian mothers" and "gay fathers" were more likely to have experienced a parental divorce than those of "intact biological families," largely due to the fact that the children were born into prior heterosexual marriages. The American Sociological Association disavowed the findings in writings for the 2013 Supreme Court cases related to same-sex marriage (*Hollingsworth v. Perry*, 2013; *United States v. Windsor*, 2013).

### **The current study**

To date, there has been no research on adult children of GLB parents using population-based data. Early studies of GLB parents used convenience sampling, so it is possible that parents who volunteered to be surveyed or interviewed were those whose children were thriving. In the current study, we use data from the third wave (12-year) follow-up of the Civil Union Participants Project Longitudinal Enhanced Study (CUPPLES) project—a prospective, national, population-based study of same-sex couples who had civil unions in Vermont during the first year of that legislation in 2000–2001, same-sex couples in their friendship circles without civil unions, and heterosexual married siblings. Some couples in all three groups had children. In some cases these children were over age 18 years and thus adults.

In response to the Regnerus (2012) article, women and men in same-sex and heterosexual couples were asked about their offspring. Instead of asking parents about adult children's mental health (an indirect measure at best), questions focused on demographic "thriving," such as adult children's educational level, income, and employment—variables that are more objective and thus might more accurately be reported by a third party. Given that the majority of past studies show similar characteristics for children of same-sex and heterosexual couples (Allen & Burrell, 1996; Patterson, 1992; Tasker & Golombok, 1997) or more favorable outcomes for children of same-sex

couples (Gartrell & Bos, 2010), we wanted to compare groups of adult children on indicators of demographic “thriving” related to employment, education, religion, and family status. We also sought to make comparisons within groups of children of same-sex parents, examining differences and similarities between adult children with lesbian/bisexual mothers and those with gay/bisexual fathers on these same demographic measures.

## Method

### *Participants and procedure*

#### *Recruitment procedure*

The CUPPLES Study includes three types of couples. The first group consists of male and female same-sex couples who came from all over the United States and other nations to obtain a civil union in Vermont during the first year of this legislation in 2000–2001. This was before any other U.S. state or province of Canada legalized civil unions or domestic partnerships, and before any nation in the world had same-sex marriage. For the second group, civil union couples were asked to provide contact information for a same-sex couple in their friendship circle who did not have a civil union. For the third group, civil union couples were asked to provide contact information for a heterosexual married sibling and his or her spouse (Solomon, Rothblum, & Balsam, 2004, 2005). These three types of couples were surveyed again in 2005 (Balsam, Rothblum, Beauchaine, & Solomon, 2008). The present analyses are from the third assessment in 2013.

At Time 3, all couples were contacted if at least one member of the couple sent back a completed questionnaire at Time 1 or Time 2.<sup>1</sup> Participants were asked about current contact information (if applicable) for their partner, the couple in their friendship circle, and their sibling and his or her spouse. Former participants were excluded who were deceased or incapable of participating, who indicated at Time 1 or Time 2 that they did not want to be contacted, and a few participants known personally by a research team member.

Among civil union couples, 674 individuals were “eligible” to take the survey at Time 3, meaning that they or their partner had completed a survey at Time 1 or Time 2. Among these, 111 (16%) could not be contacted via current e-mail or mailing addresses. For the remaining 563 individuals, there was no guarantee that they actually received an e-mail or letter. Among same-sex couples not in civil unions, 458 individuals were eligible to take the survey at Time 3. Among these, 101 (22%) could not be contacted via current e-mail or mailing addresses, leaving a total of 357 individuals who potentially received an e-mail or letter. Among heterosexual married couples, 418 were eligible to take the survey at Time 3. Of these, 59 (14%) could not be contacted via current e-mail or mailing addresses, leaving a total of 359 individuals who potentially received an e-mail or letter.

### ***Current sample***

For purposes of the present analyses, the two groups of same-sex couples were combined. We then compared same-sex female couples, same-sex male couples, and heterosexual couples who had at least one child age 18 years or older. Data included parent reports on 306 adult children (134 from same-sex female couples, 25 from same-sex male couples, and 147 from heterosexual couples).

Our goal was to include as many adult children as possible. We counted each adult child only once, and thus included parent reports on that child from only one adult. In order to obtain the most accurate data possible, when two parents reported on the same adult child, we always included the parent report from the original parent (in the case of children from previous relationships) or, when the adult child was from the current relationship, the parent who had arbitrarily been assigned as Partner A within the dyad by the research team. When someone had multiple adult children, we examined data for all the adult children in that family.

The mean age of adult children was 33 years in each of the three groups. Regarding sex of adult children, 45.5% of female same-sex couples with adult children had girls compared with 48.0% of male same-sex couples and 54.4% of heterosexual couples.

### ***Measures***

Participants were asked the following questions for each adult child who was over the age of 18:

#### ***Age***

Parents were asked, “How old is the child?” Parents could respond “Prefer not to answer.” This was treated as a ratio variable.

#### ***Sex***

Parents were asked, “What sex is the child?” Response choices included “Male,” “Female,” “Other,” and “Prefer not to answer.”

#### ***Parent’s annual salary***

Parents were asked, “What is your individual annual income from all sources including salary, alimony, child support, pension, etc.?”

#### ***Educational level***

Parents were asked, “What is the highest degree or level of educational attainment [your child] has completed? Response choices included “Nursery school,” “Kindergarten,” “Grades 1 through 11,” “12th grade—no diploma,” “Regular high school diploma,” “GED or alternative credential,” “Some college credit, but less than 1 year of college credit,” “1 or more years of college credit, no degree,” “Associate’s degree,” “Bachelor’s degree,” “Master’s degree,” “Professional degree,” “Doctorate

degree,” “I don’t know,” and “Prefer not to answer.” This variable was treated as an ordinal variable with all “I don’t know” responses excluded.

### ***Current employment status***

Parents were asked, “What is [child name]’s current employment and/or student status? (Check all that apply.)” Response choices included “Employed full-time,” “Employed part-time,” “Self-employed,” “Looking for work; unemployed,” “Temporarily laid off,” “Retired,” “Homemaker,” “Stay-at-home parent,” “Student,” “Maternity/paternity leave,” “Illness/sick leave,” “Disabled,” “Other,” “I don’t know,” and “Prefer not to answer.” Comparisons were made between all adult children who were reported at least as either “Employed full-time” or “Employed part-time” and all adult children who were not listed as at least one of those two options.

### ***Importance of religious beliefs***

Parents were asked, “How important are [child name]’s religious or spiritual beliefs to him/her?” Response choices included “Not at all important,” “Somewhat important,” “Moderately important,” “Very important,” “Extremely Important,” “I don’t know,” and “Prefer not to answer.” This variable was treated as an ordinal variable with “I don’t know” and “Prefer not to answer” responses excluded.

### ***Same religion as parents***

Parents were asked, “What is your spiritual or religious affiliation?” and “What is [child name’s] spiritual or religious affiliation?” Response choices included “Catholic,” “Muslim,” “Jewish,” “Protestant,” “Buddhist,” “None,” “Spiritual beliefs do not fit a formal religion,” “Other,” “Don’t know,” and “Prefer not to answer.” A variable was created comparing whether the parents’ religions matched their reports of their children’s religions.

### ***Endorsing formal religion or spiritual beliefs***

Two comparisons were made. The first comparison was between adult children who were described as endorsing formal religions (i.e., “Catholic,” “Muslim,” “Jewish,” “Protestant,” “Buddhist”) and all those who were described as not endorsing formal religions. The second comparison was between those who were described as endorsing formal religions and those who were described as endorsing “Spiritual beliefs that do not fit a formal religion.”

### ***Dating or married to same-sex partner***

Parents were asked “What is [child name’s] current relationship status? (Check all that apply.)” Response choices included “Married/domestic partner with same-sex partner,” “Married/domestic partner with opposite-sex partner,” “Dating same-sex partner(s) only,” “Dating opposite-sex partner(s) only,” “Dating both same- and opposite-sex partners,” “Single (not currently dating),” “Other,” “I don’t know,” and “Prefer not to answer.” This variable was dichotomized into exclusively

opposite-sex relationships (i.e., “Married/domestic partner with opposite-sex/partner,” “Dating opposite-sex partner(s) only”) vs. those who were in at least some same-sex relationships (i.e., “Married/domestic partner with same sex partner,” “Dating same sex partner(s) only,” “Dating both same and opposite sex partners”). Those listed as “Single,” “I don’t know,” or “Prefer not to answer” were excluded from analysis.

### ***Having children***

Parents were asked “Does [child name] have children? Response choices included “Yes,” “No,” “I don’t know,” and “Prefer not to answer.”

### ***Being conceived by sex with the child’s other parent***

Parents were asked to “Please indicate how you became a parent of this child.” Response choices included “Sex with the child’s other parent,” “Adoption,” “Donor insemination,” “Second-parent adoption of the partner’s biological child,” “Surrogacy,” “Egg donor,” “Stepparent,” “Foster parent,” “Child of a relative,” and “Other.” We dichotomously compared whether children were conceived by “Sex with the child’s other parent” versus any of the other categories.

### ***Frequency of contact with parents***

Parents were asked, “How often are you in contact with [child name]?” Response choices included “This child lives with me,” “Every day,” “Once a week,” “Once a month,” “Several times a year,” “Once a year,” “Less than once a year,” and “Never.” This variable was treated as an ordinal variable with higher values indicating less frequent contact.

## **Results**

Descriptive statistics for all variables appear in Table 1. Because adult child participants were nested within parents, who were nested within couples, all data were analyzed by constructing multilevel models (MLMs) in HLM 7.01 (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002; Raudenbush, Bryk, & Congdon, 2013; Raudenbush, Bryk, Du Toit, Cheong, & Congdon, 2011). For each outcome measure, three-level random intercepts models were created. Individual variation in all outcome measures was modeled at Level 1. Sex effects were represented by creating a dummy coded vector that distinguished between men and women. This vector was entered as a Level 1 predictor of all outcomes. Age was also entered as a continuous Level 1 covariate to control for its effects on each dependent measure.

At Levels 2 and 3, we were interested in examining parent and couple effects, respectively, on Level 1 intercepts. To compare dependent variables across parent couple types, we constructed weighted orthogonal contrast codes that compared (a) children of heterosexual married couples with

**Table 1.** Sample descriptive statistics by parent couple type.

	Adult children of same-sex female couples (n = 134)		Adult children of same-sex male couples (n = 25)		Adult children of heterosexual couples (n = 147)	
Continuous variables	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Age	33.40	8.69	33.72	7.65	32.01	9.69
Parent's annual salary (\$, in thousands)	73.89	72.75	96.55	92.81	83.19	145.13
Frequency of contact (1 = lives with me to 8 = never)	3.34	1.38	3.68	1.87	2.78	0.85
Education (1 = nursery school to 13 = doctoral degree)	8.57	2.52	8.92	2.50	9.02	1.98
Importance of child's religious beliefs (1 = not to 5 = extremely)	2.26	1.03	2.83	1.20	2.58	1.38
Categorical variables	%		%		%	
Female	45.5		48.0		54.4	
Employed	77.9		83.3		79.5	
Parent and child religion match	46.0		33.3		55.4	
Did not endorse formal religion	55.0		35.3		36.2	
Spiritual beliefs vs. formal religion	43.8		31.2		10.8	
Dates/married same-sex partner	8.8		5.3		12.0	
With children	45.4		52.0		38.4	
Sex with other parent vs. different conception method	65.6		72.0		92.5	

children of all same-sex couples, and then (b) children of female-female dyads with children of male-male dyads. Orthogonal contrasts are advantageous because they are statistically independent and control for familywise inflation of Type I error (see Pedhazur, 1997). Because salary data were missing for 20% of couples, we did not include it as a Level 3 covariate. There were 306 children nested within 159 parents, nested within 142 couples. When missing data were encountered, cases were excluded from analysis. The generic conditional model was as follows:

$$\text{Level 1 (individual): } Y = \pi_0 + \pi_1(\text{age}) + \pi_2(\text{sex}) + e$$

$$\text{Level 2 (parent): } \pi_0 = \beta_{00} + \beta_{01}(\text{contrast 1}) + \beta_{02}(\text{contrast 2}) + r_0$$

$$\pi_1 = \beta_{10}$$

$$\pi_2 = \beta_{20}$$

**Table 2.** Multilevel modeling analyses assessing individual, parent, and couple effects on outcome variables for orthogonal contrasts.

Variable	Level 3 Variance component (couple)												
	Level 2 parent effects						Level 3 Variance component (couple)						
	Level 1 individual effects			Heterosexual vs. same-sex contrast			Female-female vs. male-male contrast						
	Age Coef.	SE t	Sex Coef. SE t	Coef. SE t	Coef. SE t	Coef. SE t	Coef. SE t	Coef. SE t	Coef. SE t	Coef.	SE	$\chi^2$	
Frequency of contact	0.025 0.009	0.008 0.009	2.97 1.02	-0.176 0.070	0.123 0.125	-1.44 0.56	<b>0.194</b> -0.011	<b>0.064</b> 0.075	<b>3.03**</b> -0.150	0.102 0.185	0.234 0.176	0.45	<b>0.311</b> 0.094
Importance of child's religious beliefs	<b>0.075</b> -0.002	<b>0.015</b> 0.004	<b>4.98*</b> -0.50	0.295 -0.023	0.240 0.046	1.23 -0.77	-0.154 -0.034	0.112 0.044	-1.37 -0.004	0.103 0.019	0.262 0.046	0.40	<b>0.527</b> 0.000
Education level	<b>0.012</b> 0.000	<b>0.003</b> 0.004	<b>4.71***</b> -1.66	-0.034 -0.051	0.044 0.044	-0.77 -1.16	-0.004 -0.047	0.019 0.029	-0.18 -1.60	0.024 0.052	0.046 0.068	0.52	<b>0.014</b> 0.127
Employed vs. unemployed	<b>0.012</b> -0.006	<b>0.003</b> 0.004	<b>4.71***</b> -1.66	-0.034 -0.051	0.044 0.044	-0.77 -1.16	-0.004 -0.047	0.019 0.029	-0.18 -1.60	0.024 0.052	0.046 0.068	0.52	<b>0.014</b> 0.127
Parent and child religion match	-0.006 -0.002	0.004 0.004	-1.66 -0.50	-0.051 -0.023	0.044 0.046	-1.16 -0.51	-0.047 0.039	0.029 0.033	-0.18 1.201	-0.052 -0.023	0.068 0.076	-0.77 -0.30	<b>0.000</b> <b>0.058</b>
Did not endorse formal religion	0.000 0.000	0.004 0.004	0.043 1.15	-0.009 0.006	0.049 0.034	-0.18 0.16	<b>0.097</b> -0.011	<b>0.030</b> 0.019	<b>3.23**</b> -0.013	-0.007 -0.013	0.069 0.046	-0.10 -0.29	<b>0.009</b> <b>0.039</b>
Spiritual beliefs vs. formal religion	0.003 0.030	0.002 0.003	1.15 <b>10.22***</b>	0.006 -0.092	0.034 0.046	0.16 -1.98	-0.011 -0.023	0.019 0.021	-0.56 -1.09	-0.013 -0.031	0.046 0.052	-0.29 -0.59	<b>0.009</b> <b>0.039</b>
Dates/married same-sex partner	<b>0.030</b> 0.003	<b>0.003</b> -0.008	<b>10.22***</b> 0.003	-0.292 0.003	0.030 0.030	0.11 0.11	<b>0.100</b> -0.092	<b>0.023</b> 0.023	<b>4.314***</b> -0.052	0.008 0.151	0.052 0.151	0.151	<b>0.025</b> <b>18.27*</b>
Has children													
Had sex vs. other conception method													

Note: Boldface text indicates significant p-values. \* $p \leq .05$ . \*\* $p \leq .01$ . \*\*\* $p \leq .001$ .

**Table 3.** How respondent became parent of the child.

	Children of same-sex female couples ( <i>n</i> = 134)	Children of same-sex male couples ( <i>n</i> = 25)	Children of heterosexual couples ( <i>n</i> = 147)
Sex with child's other parent	88	18	136
Adoption	9	1	4
Donor insemination	6	2	0
Second-parent adoption of partner's biological child	6	0	0
Stepparent	8	1	4
Foster parent	0	1	0
Child of a relative	1	0	0
Other	16	2	3

$$\text{Level 3 (couple): } \gamma_{00} = \gamma_{000} + u_{00}$$

$$\beta_{20} = \gamma_{200}$$

Results from the MLMs are reported in [Table 2](#). At Level 1 (individuals), several age effects were found. Adult children who were older were more educated, more likely to be employed, and more likely to have children themselves. At Level 2 (parents), children of parents in same-sex relationships had less frequent contact with their parents, were more likely to endorse spiritual beliefs over formal religion, and more likely to be born via conception methods other than sex with a partner. No contrasts between children of men in same-sex relationships and children of women in same-sex relationships were significant, likely due in part to limited power given the small sample size of the former group. Significant variance was observed at the couple level in frequency of contact, education level, employment, whether participants endorsed a formal religion, whether participants date/married same-sex partners, whether participants had children, and conception method.

**Table 4.** Where the child is from.

	Children of same-sex female couples ( <i>n</i> = 134)	Children of same-sex male couples ( <i>n</i> = 25)	Children of heterosexual couples ( <i>n</i> = 147)
Respondent's current relationship	16	1	98
Respondent's prior relationship	89	17	36
Respondent's partner's past relationship	11	1	5
Other	18	6	8

## **Discussion**

This is the first study to examine the lives of adult children of same-sex parents using data from a national, longitudinal, population-based sample. It is also the first to compare adult children of male and female same-sex couples and heterosexual couples recruited from siblings. This unique method controls for some demographic factors that might confound other types of comparison studies, since siblings usually have the same race and ethnicity, are similar in age, and grow up with the same religion and socioeconomic status. Furthermore, the design allowed us to include adult children of both male and female parents in same-sex and heterosexual couples. Thus, we were able to address some of the controversies and limitations of prior research and add to the growing knowledge base on same-sex parenting in the 21st century.

### ***Similarities between the children of same-sex and heterosexual couples***

Overall, our findings indicate that adult children of same-sex and heterosexual parents are more similar than different. As reported by their parents, adult children in our study were “thriving,” regardless of the sexual orientation and sex of their parents. These similarities are notable in light of the family structure of the participants in the study. Whereas two thirds of heterosexual couples had children within the context of their current relationship, such was true for only 12% of women in same-sex couples and less than 1% of men in same-sex couples. Instead, the majority of same-sex couples had children from a prior relationship. Thus, a greater proportion of adult children from same-sex couples grew up in contexts of parental divorce and/or blended families. A large body of research indicates that divorce, though relatively common, often affects the psychological health of children adversely (c.f. Hetherington, 1999; Hetherington & Kelly, 2003; Kitson, 1992). Although our study did not assess psychological health directly, indicators such as employment and education level are related to well-being. Given differential backgrounds with respect to parental divorce, the lack of difference in thriving may, in this case, point to the resilience of children of same-sex parents.

### ***Differences between the children of same-sex and heterosexual couples***

#### ***Religion***

One area in which differences were found was in religious affiliation. Previous research suggests that GLB individuals are less likely than their heterosexual siblings to practice the religion within which they were raised (Rothblum, Balsam, & Mickey, 2004; Rothblum & Factor, 2001), in part due to historically negative attitudes toward homosexuality among many traditional religions. Instead, GLB individuals tend to have spiritual beliefs that do not conform to traditional religions. This study extends these findings by showing that adult children of same-sex couples may follow in the footsteps of their parents and also engage in nontraditional

spiritual practices. Interestingly, there were no differences between adult children of same-sex versus heterosexual couples on the importance of religion, or on the match between their religion and that of their parents. Thus, although religion and spirituality may be equally important to them, adult children of same-sex couples were raised outside of “mainstream” religions, and may continue in these traditions even when their own sexual orientation does not discourage membership in more traditional religious groups.

### ***Contact between parents and children***

GLB parents reported less frequent contact with their adult children than heterosexual parents. Further research is needed to explore this finding more closely and to understand whether it is due to the nature of the parenting relationship, the degree of mutual support, or other factors yet to be explored. One possible explanation for this lack of contact is that the children of same-sex couples from this generation are often from past relationships rather than from the current relationship. Children from past relationships may have to split time between more family members, resulting in less contact with each family member. It is also possible that some of these children may also have had a negative reaction to their parents no longer being a part of their past relationships, although these questions were not asked about in the current study.

This result is largely in line with past research indicating that GLB individuals report less contact with and support from their family of origin. Kurdek’s longitudinal study found that male and female same-sex couples perceived more support from friends, and less from their families of origin, than heterosexual couples (Kurdek, 2004; Kurdek & Schmidt, 1987). At Time 1 of the CUPPLES Study (Solomon et al., 2004), heterosexual married women perceived more support from family of origin than did female same-sex couples, and men in same-sex couples perceived more support from friends than did heterosexual married men.

Even though many adult children of same-sex parents came from prior heterosexual unions, a significantly greater number of them were born from methods other than sex with the other parent, which in and of itself requires more planful intention than traditional methods of conception. This preliminary finding regarding degree of contact between adult children and their GLB parents indicates that more research should be conducted on “thriving” of same-sex families as a whole.

### ***Limitations and directions for future research***

Although innovative, our study does have limitations that should be considered and that point to next steps in future research. First, although the sample of same-sex and heterosexual parents was population based, this population was drawn from a national sample of same-sex couples who obtained civil unions in Vermont. Thus, participants were overwhelmingly White and relatively affluent and therefore do not represent all same-sex families. It is likely that adult children of same-sex parents with multiple

minority identities face additional challenges, which may affect the extent to which the sexual orientation of their parents influences their ability to “thrive.” In addition, we did not examine differences between the children of same-sex couples in which one or both parents identified as bisexual as opposed to gay or lesbian. Future research should include targeted efforts to examine more diverse samples of GLB families and their heterosexual counterparts. Another limitation is the self-report nature of the study, which is inherent to certain biases. Additionally, data on adult children were obtained from parents rather than from the children themselves. Such methods can lead to inaccuracies based on parental perceptions of their children. Our focus on more objective demographic variables was intended to address this limitation, but further research is needed to directly assess the experiences of the adult children. Since the CUPPLES Study is longitudinal, adult children will be contacted in future waves and interviewed about their experiences of growing up with GLB parents. Findings will be used to develop questions for a future quantitative study with larger samples of adult children.

Finally, it is important to note that same-sex parenting is a phenomenon that is rapidly evolving as laws, policies, and public attitudes regarding GLB families change. Adult children in our study were on average 33 years old and were therefore born around 1980, when the social context for same-sex families was dramatically more hostile and restrictive than today. This makes their “thriving” all the more notable. At the same time, it is important to continue to examine experiences of subsequent generations of children who are born to same-sex parents in order to fully understand the role of parental sexual orientation in the lives of young adults in the 21st century.

## Notes

1. Two individuals from one couple who did not complete questionnaires at Time 1 or Time 2 were erroneously recruited at Time 3 and were included at Time 3.

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