

## DO FAMILIES HAVE A SEXUAL ORIENTATION?

INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR JUDITH STACEY

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*In your article “(How) Does the Sexual Orientation of Parents Matter?” from 2001, you and your colleague Tim Biblarz point out that findings from the studies on same-sex families are often used and abused in political debates. Furthermore some researchers claim that there isn’t even any point in comparing same-sex families with heterosexual families as that would be like comparing apples with oranges: both are fruits but cannot be compared. What is your opinion about that?*

I think you could compare an apple with an orange if you knew what it was you wanted to compare about them. You could make comparative statements about how much juice you could get from either one (*laughs*). In my view, the whole notion of a gay or a lesbian family is kind of ridiculous: it implies that a family has a sexual orientation, which is not the case. I think that if you want to compare same-sex parents with different-sex parents who are relatively similar in other aspects, that is a reasonable enough comparison, and there are reasons to want to do that at this stage of history. I think the goal should be eventually to not to need to do that. I don’t think the emphasis ultimately should be on which of these two types of families is best for children because that is where you get beyond apples and oranges into an area where you really cannot make any kinds of judgements that make a lot of sense. That is like asking

whether it is better for children to have black parents or white parents. Obviously in a racist society where blacks are subordinate, children will gain many social privileges from having white parents, but that does not mean that white folks perform a better kind of parenting.

I belong to the school of social scientists who believe that there is no such thing as purely objective social science research. In this view, all social science research inescapably employs perspectives and values. The very concepts we use contain ideas and ideologies embedded in them. A social scientist has a responsibility to become as aware of her values and presumptions as possible and to make these transparent to readers. I think that a topic like same-sex marriage or gay and lesbian parenting, which in many societies, certainly in mine, is very controversial, is not more subjective than others, but it raises more difficult challenges for how to formulate the research questions and later for how to present findings and analysis ...

*... and it is exactly this political context, the fear of results being abused for political goals, which "forced" some researchers of same-sex families to tone down any differences they might have found in their comparison between the families formed by different-sex and same-sex partners.*

Well, that cuts both ways. Some researchers exaggerate the differences because they are hostile to gay and lesbian parenting, and they assume that a difference is a disadvantage. Those who are sympathetic to gay and lesbian parenting often tend to minimize the differences and to bury findings of difference in their reporting. Too often, I think, they tried to insist that the children are exactly the same.

*The problem is therefore in the automatic interpretation of "difference" as "deficit"?*

Exactly. What my co-author Tim Biblarz and I set out to do was to not presume that a difference is a disadvantage or a deficit and to look at what differences were reported and how you might be able to understand them, and in some cases just see them as benign or insignificant. As Freud famously said, sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.

*Which are these differences and how can they be evaluated?*

There are no huge differences reported between gay and straight parents or their children. We wanted to caution against the idea that every-

thing has to be identical, but the most important thing to say is that there are far more similarities than differences. The differences reported include such things as children in homosexual-parent families tend to be more tolerant of differences than children in heterosexual-parent families. There are pretty obvious reasons for that. It is not due to the sexuality of their parents, but to the way that the children develop sensitivity to discrimination and stigma, and how they become more aware of difference as a result. In addition, I do think that there is some evidence, and expect that future research will find more, that children with gay and lesbian parents will be more comfortable with whatever sexual attractions they experience rather than feeling a need to conform to heterosexuality if that is not what they desire. I think too that research hints that they are more accepting of certain levels of gender variation than is generally true of children with heterosexual parents, and again that indicates their greater tolerance of social diversity overall. But these findings of differences are pretty small. There are not any huge differences in research findings about child outcomes.

There are also some research findings of differences in the parenting. It seems that on average two women who have chosen to parent together are likely to want to share the economic and childcare responsibilities more equally than heterosexual married couples do. They are more likely to both cut back on work hours and less likely to have just one parent staying at home full-time with the children. It looks as if gay male parents are more likely to have one parent choose to stay at home with the children than among lesbian couples but we don't have a lot of data on that yet.

Furthermore several studies showed that lesbian couples are less likely to use corporal punishment than heterosexual married couples do. (We don't have much data yet about gay male couples, but one study suggests this finding too.) Again we don't know if this difference would hold up in wide-scale studies but if so, I think it may be explained partly by the gender difference of two women parenting, but also by the fact that planned lesbian couple families tend to have a higher level of education, and they are older parents. And of course, these are all intentional parents: you don't have any unwanted children in planned lesbian or gay parent families and that gives a certain advantage to their parenting skills and behaviours. I think we actually see slightly better levels of parenting among lesbian couples and gay male couples on average than with heterosexual married-couple parents, because there are many more accidental pregnancies, more youthful parenting and less planning among the latter.

*Your meta-research on how sexual orientation of parents matters from 2001 has been quoted a lot. Has it also been abused?*

It has been used and abused, and I imagine that our newer article on how the gender of parents matters published in 2010 will be used and abused in similar ways. Ironically, the way the study came to be used constructively is in part a product of the way it was abused. The article was published during the climactic period when the same-sex marriage cases in Canada and in Massachusetts were before the highest courts. Many opponents of same-sex marriage cited our study in their legal briefs and in their media releases. They misrepresented our study as if it offered evidence that supported an argument against giving equal rights to same-sex couples or to gay and lesbian parents. They drew on some of our careful discussion of what the problems were with some of the prior research in order to argue that the research was not strong enough to support the claims that gay and lesbian parenting was safe enough for children. They used our critique of prior research to suggest that we were saying that the research was worthless, which was not the case. They also selected a couple of interpretations we made that from their point of view represented deficits that were dangerous. One was about our conclusion that there was not enough evidence yet to say that children with gay and lesbian parents were no more likely than children with heterosexual parents to turn out to be gay or lesbian. We said that there were very little data – and surprisingly, there still are very little data – on that question. However, we also said that a couple of studies did report slim data on this, and we thought that all logic and all plausible theories about the development of sexual orientation would point in the direction of at least a small difference here. A larger minority of children who have gay and lesbian parents should not turn out to be exclusively heterosexual. However, this should not be regarded as a problem or a deficit. Although we didn't have much evidence yet, we thought it was a mistake for sympathetic researchers to claim that there were no differences in the area of the way children's ultimate sexual identity or sexual behaviour would develop.

And you can imagine that people opposed to gay and lesbian parenting seized on that as an example of how having a gay parent would make a child turn out to be gay ... But we were just trying to say that we simply don't know if more of them will turn out to be gay or lesbian, and we still don't know. The research is very thin on this subject, and it is not easy research to conduct, but I have a strong hunch that this will turn out to

be true. We don't understand very much about how sexual orientations develop, but our reasoning was that at least a higher percentage of children with gay and lesbian parents would feel freer than other children to express homoerotic desires if they experienced them. Opponents misconstrued this to claim that gay parents would intentionally socialize their children to become gay.

*Does this imply that when children raised in heterosexual-couple families face homosexual desires and feelings, they just tend to push these feelings away because of their heteronormative environment?*

Exactly, depending obviously on the attitudes of their parents. But one would assume that a young person with straight parents and homoerotic desires would find it harder to come out or to acknowledge and explore those feelings than children with gay or lesbian parents. Our presumption was, and some research supports this, that gay and lesbian parents are more apt to be tolerant and supportive of their children's sexual identity and orientation no matter what these are.

*You mentioned that we still don't have enough research on same-sex families. This is the very argument which is often used by the opponents of same-sex families who claim that such families are a very new social phenomenon and thus we cannot really tell whether same-sex families provide safe environments for children or not.*

That is not what I said. We do now have enough research to say that these families form a perfectly safe environment for children to grow up in. What we don't have is much data on how children's sexuality will turn out as adults. But I do not believe that this qualifies as an issue of child safety or well-being. There are now about three decades' worth of studies in different nations, and some of them of very high quality, that make it very clear that children with same-sex parents turn out to be just as healthy, emotionally developed, socially and cognitively successful as comparable children with heterosexual parents. At least we know that about children with lesbian parents. We don't have that data for gay male parents yet, because the research hasn't been done. But the evidence is uniform that there is no reason to have any concerns about same-sex parent-families being safe places for children other than those issues stemming from the way society treats these parents and their children. There are issues around social stigma and bullying, but denying

equal rights to gay parents simply reinforces the existing problems rather than improving the circumstances for their children. That would be like saying that in an anti-Semitic society Jewish parents shouldn't have children, or in a racist society, black parents shouldn't have children, because their children are going to suffer stigma and discrimination.

*Following this line of argument, why would one allow joint adoptions by same-sex couples knowing that the children might be more likely to suffer stigma and discrimination than others?*

I have two answers to that question, and the US Supreme Court perhaps answered it best. First, denying same-sex couples the right to adopt children reinforces the very social problem of stigma and discrimination that it pretends to protect children from experiencing. Because this is a social problem, rather than one caused by attributes of the parents, that is exactly the wrong way to address the issue. The second thing I would say is that there is a debate among researchers about whether children who have gay and lesbian parents actually do experience more teasing and social hostility than children with heterosexual parents. Certainly they do face homophobic teasing about their parents, but social scientists still debate whether they are teased more than children from other families, or whether this is just the issue that they are teased about. I think it depends a lot on where they are growing up. If they are growing up in a progressive community, then the odds are that they are not suffering very much from this. Of course, in certain areas of our country, and I am sure yours too, the teasing and the discrimination can be intense and impose a serious burden on the children. But usually same-sex adoptive parents choose not to live in such hostile communities.

Although the hazard of homophobic harassment is a real concern, the notion of the best interest of the child has to be placed within a broader social frame. Personally, I don't consider it to be in the interest of any child to reinforce the level of homophobia and social stigma and inequality in any society. It isn't very healthy for the children doing the teasing not to learn how to live peacefully with social differences. Finally, research finds that children who learn to cope with social hostility often develop resilience and strength. While it is not enjoyable or desirable, it is not necessarily harmful to them either. As someone who grew up Jewish in a moderately anti-Semitic, primarily non-Jewish small town in the 1950s I can testify from personal experience, that it was not always fun to feel different and "other," but it also taught me a great deal and probably

had something to do with my becoming a sociologist. I developed my interest in social differences from an early stage (*laughs*).

But, as I said, the US Supreme Court gave the best answer to your question in the famous *Palmore versus Sidotti* ruling in 1984. This was an interracial child custody case. After a white couple divorced, the mother had custody of the children for several years, without any contest from the father. However, after she married a black man, her former husband sued to take custody away from her on the grounds that it was unfair to subject their children to living with the prejudice against an inter-racial marriage household. The case went all the way to the US Supreme Court which ruled in favour of the mother. The Court said that in a democratic society, the proper object of the law is to combat discrimination and stigma rather than to reinforce the undemocratic aspects of society by capitulating to them. In the long run, you want to build a society that grants equal respect and rights without insisting that everyone has to be the same or be kept apart.

*Isn't it logical that gay and lesbian parents, who have probably experienced homophobia themselves, are well-equipped to discuss these issues with their children, or as Susan Golombok suggests, to prepare their children for the homophobic society?*

Yes, on average that is true. Obviously there are some lousy gay and lesbian parents just as there are lousy heterosexual parents. We should not romanticize same-sex parenting. However, on average, I think that gay and lesbian parents are prepared to deal with this issue; they think about it a lot, there are many support groups and community resources and advice, and most do their best to prepare their children for social prejudice. And, on average, their kids seem to cope pretty well with homophobia. This is the same kind of an argument that comes up about trans-racial adoption in the US, which also provokes a lot of controversy. Will it be good for a black child to be adopted by a white parent? And what about international adoptions which remove children from their cultural origins? These are real issues. However, the idea that you would bar an entire category of capable, sincere, loving and eager potential parents from taking on children to whom they would be dedicated, is not a child-friendly policy, and certainly not a democratic policy.

*Nearly ten years after publishing the very influential article on whether the sexual orientation of parents matters, you published a similar article*

*in 2010. Except that this time Tim Biblarz and you wondered whether the gender of parents matters; does it?*

Well, the 2010 article is similar to our original study of parental sexual orientation, but it was a more ambitious project. Over the past decade, opponents of lesbian and gay parenting generally replaced the argument that the problem was the homosexual orientation of parents with the claim that children need both a mother and a father, and that it was unfair to children to deprive them of one of those two genders. Not only do politicians from both main political parties in the US make this argument, but they claim that research overwhelmingly supports this very popular view. For example, this argument was written into the preamble of the 1996 Welfare Reform Bill in the United States, and it has been cited in many court decisions around issues like same-sex marriage and child custody. Consequently, Tim and I decided to investigate whether there were really studies that spoke to this question. We quickly discovered that the research that was being cited to support the idea that children do best if they have a mother and a father was not research that ever looked at this issue at all. The research cited compared children with a married mother and father to children whose mothers had never married or whose parents had divorced. In other words, most of the research compared two-parent families with single-parent families or with joint-custody, divorced parent-families, or step families, and those clearly are not legitimate comparisons nor ones that can tell anything about whether children do best if they grow up with both a mother and a father.

Consequently, Tim and I decided to look at studies that could come closer to being able to answer this question. We identified two bodies of research that we thought could shed some light on this issue. One compares two women parenting versus a man and a woman parenting together. This time we were looking at the newer research since 2001, which mainly compares planned lesbian co-parenting through donor insemination or adoption with heterosexual parenting, sometimes also through donor insemination due to infertility. The second body of research we examined compares single (presumptively straight) fathers with single mothers who are raising children.

The results were interesting. When you look at the lesbian co-parents and the heterosexual co-parents the findings were very similar to what we concluded in 2001, only now we have a much stronger body of research. However, when it came to the single heterosexual dads versus the single heterosexual moms, there were some surprises. This is not an ide-



al body of research, because it is not typical for men to be the primary parent in the case of a divorce. Therefore, we can presume that unusual circumstances lead to this family pattern. That makes the comparison difficult to interpret, and perhaps unfair to the fathers. Keeping this in mind, we did find some interesting differences, again relatively small. It turned out that the single mothers were a bit better at setting controls, and they were more aware and involved in their children's lives than the single fathers were. Studies also reported that children of single mothers were somewhat less likely to abuse substances, drop out of schools, etc. than children with single fathers. That was surprising because of stereotypes about how the dad is a better disciplinarian and things of that sort. In general we concluded that the gender of the parents is a trivial factor compared to the quality of the parent. It appears that on average two parents who get along and are decent parents are better than one, but that it is the quality of the parenting not the gender of the parents or even the number of the parents that is the most important factor.

*So can we say that it is not important after all that children are "exposed" to "female roles" and "male roles", to femininity and masculinity, repeating again the arguments of those who oppose same-sex families?*

I wouldn't put it that way, because all children are exposed to various versions of femininity and masculinity, no matter what sort of family they experience. The important point is that children do not have to have one male and one female parent to develop a comfortable gender identity. First of all, it is virtually impossible to bring up children hermetically in their individual families. Secondly, the gender identity of children seems to have no relationship at all to the gender of their parents, whether they have male or female parents. Gender identity is established very early irrespective of the gender mix or wishes of the parents. Few transgender people would develop if this were not the case.

Western cultures tend to have very simplistic ideas about what constitutes male and female parenting. It is a mistake to suppose that there are two mutually exclusive categories of parents - one male and the other female. There are average differences between the way women parent and men parent, just as there are average differences in height between men and women. Lots and lots of women are a lot taller than a lot of men, and the same is true for all the kinds of differences you find in parenting. There are so many different traits in parenting that do not reduce to feminine or masculine. Some parental traits that we tend to identify as

more masculine or feminine can be performed by men or by women, and usually in complicated packages. In the lesbian co-parent families that I know, or in the gay male co-parent families, I would say that, yes on average, one of the two tends to parent in a slightly more stereotypically “feminine,” and the other one a little more “masculine” way in areas like discipline, communication, and play. But these are very small differences, and there is more overlap than difference. You cannot confidently predict which of the two parents will do what, not by their gender, not by who is the biological parent, or by other simple factors. In some cases the person who is the breadwinner is also the more permissive parent; in other cases the person who stays home full-time with the child is more permissive, and sometimes more of a disciplinarian. You really cannot predict which.

We also know that when heterosexual married couples parent together, they often tend to be more like each other in their attitudes and values and styles of parenting than the mother is like all other women or the father is like all other men. There are significant class differences and educational differences, and regional and religious differences in parenting, and so it’s really simplistic to assume that there is a masculine way to parent and a feminine way to parent, that children just need one of each, and that the only way they can get it is by having one male and one female parent in their homes.

*In your 2010 article on How Does the Gender of Parents Matter? ‘transgender’ is listed among the keywords, however, there is hardly any information provided on transgender parents or parenting. Does this reflect the general social invisibility of transgender issues or that there is not enough research yet focussing on this field (on how children can be affected by their parents’ gender re-assignment, for example)? In general, how do you see the social relevance of these issues (related to trans-parenting)?*

That is an accurate observation, a fair criticism of our article, and an insightful analysis of the state of research on trans-parenting. To the best of my knowledge, there are no studies yet that address the question of the impact of a parent’s gender reassignment on their children. There are personal accounts by such parents and some of their adult children, a good documentary film, and some sensitive treatments in popular culture, but we do not yet have social science research findings on this aspect of gender and parenting. In fact, we are only beginning to get re-

search findings on the impact of gay male parents on their children. Tey Meadow, a former doctoral student of mine, recently completed a trail-blazing dissertation that illuminates some of the reverse issue – the impact of transgender children on their gender normative parents. It’s a fascinating, important study. When we do begin to have studies of transgender parents, I predict they will reinforce the conclusions Tim Biblarz and I reached in our 2010 article – that the gender of parents does not have much, if any influence, on the gender identity of children or their well-being. Once again, the central factors will be the quality of parenting and the social context.

*You argue elsewhere that according to previous findings lesbian sexual orientation per se has no negative effect on parenting, or on children’s healthy psychological development and social adjustment. However, can you say the same about gay men?*

As I mentioned earlier, we do not yet have much research on gay male parents that examines their children’s development, but the early studies, as well as the implications from all of the other research on family structure, leads strongly toward this conclusion. There simply is no evidence that a parent’s sexual orientation or identity has an independent negative (or positive) impact on their children’s well-being. My own ethnographic research on gay male parents led me to believe that gay men are likely to be among the most successful parents. This is not because they desire men, but due to “selection effects”. It is so much more difficult for gay men to become parents outside of heterosexuality, that only those who are deeply motivated are likely to do so.

*According to your findings lesbian partnerships, despite the fact that they are more egalitarian compared to heterosexual partnerships, tend not to last as long and break up earlier than heterosexual or gay relationships. How can you explain that?*

I want to say again that we don’t know yet that this is true. There are very little data on this, and the data that are available are not strong, but there are some data that lead to this view. We don’t know if such findings will be replicated over time, nor whether this would still be true if lesbians had full and equal rights as well as equal family and social support. However, I personally think that there are some reasons to imagine that married lesbian co-mothers might have a higher divorce rate than

heterosexual married couples or than married gay male co-parents. In fact, I think that gay male co-parents may turn out to have the lowest rate of divorce, but we have no data on that yet.

What seems to be the case for lesbian co-parents is that, on the one hand they tend to have higher standards for their relationships than heterosexual couples do. Precisely because they want more equal and reciprocal relationships, they are more disappointed when relationships do not meet their high standards. And lesbian co-parenting situations make it a lot harder to achieve equality than it is for gay male co-parenting couples. In the U.S., at least, because lesbian couples are having their children primarily through donor sperm, only one of the mothers is the biological mother. In a typical case, one of the women gets pregnant and breast-feeds, and in many states she has the advantage of being the legal mother too. These asymmetries make it very hard to achieve equality. One of the paradoxes is that lesbian co-parents are more likely to fail at their own goals for the relationship than heterosexual couples or gay male couples. They don't have equal rights with heterosexual parents, and they don't have equal rights or relationships to the children, and this can exacerbate tensions in the relationships as well. However, at least part of the difficulty derives from social and legal discrimination. Co-parents need to have full and equal rights to their children from the very start so that one person doesn't immediately feel vulnerable and left out of the parenting situation.

*There seems to be a difference in social acknowledgement of families. For example, if you are a heterosexual family with a small child, people on the streets tend to approve your family by smiling at you and this is some kind of a support you get from strangers, while if you are two men raising a small child, then you constantly have to come out of the closet, you have to explain and defend your family situation and so forth. There seems to be less social support for same-sex families in everyday life. On the basis of your own research into gay families, would you agree with this observation?*

I don't entirely agree with that. That's true for gay men, but it's much less true for lesbian couples, because gender stereotypes lead most people to presume that a woman is the primary parent. When men are out with children, especially in societies that have become very sensitive and anxious around issues of sexual abuse and paedophilia, they often encounter this anxiety and concern. Single straight men experience this as

well. Heterosexual stay-at-home dads complain a lot about public reactions when they take their children to the playground, for example. This is a real gender issue. Lesbian co-parent families have to cope with the invisibility of the second parent. All kinds of institutional factors come into play, and lesbian and gay parents constantly have to become educators about their families, whether it's in a doctor's office or a school or traveling with their children, or whatever. Certainly gay and lesbian parents face many issues that heterosexual parents usually don't have to face.

Personally, however, I also think that same-sex parent families often enjoy certain advantages as well. There is much more organised support by gay and lesbian communities for parenting. There are great organizations for their children, like COLAGE (Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere) and for their straight relatives, like PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays). In Los Angeles, where I did research, there is a wonderful group called the Pop Luck Club, which is specifically for gay fathers and "wannabe" gay dads; they hold monthly orientations and picnics and weekly playgroup meetings, and they have established contingents to support single gay dads, stay-at-home dads, etc.. This is something most heterosexual single parents don't have. I think this is a terrific way to respond to discrimination.

*Nowadays when most European countries are characterized by low or even "lowest low"<sup>1</sup> fertility rates it should fit a rational demographic policy at a national level to encourage willing same-sex partners to have children, too - and thus let them contribute to the reproduction of the work force, which is often referred to as a sort of "national duty", especially by conservative politicians, certainly in my country (Hungary). How do you see same-sex couples fitting into this policy environment? Which arguments could be used to support this?*

Under low fertility conditions, it might be considered a rational demographic policy to encourage lesbians to have children with donor sperm, but the same logic would not apply to gay men. Most gay men who become parents do so through adoption, and this does not increase fertility rates. From a political perspective, I would not employ a "national duty" argument to support lesbian or gay parent rights. I do not believe that parenting should be considered an obligation, nor that arguments for human rights and social justice should rest on instrumental, strategic

<sup>1</sup> McDonald, P. 2008. Very low fertility: Consequences, causes and policy approaches. *The Japanese Journal of Population* 6(1): 19-23.

arguments. Hardly anyone chooses to be a parent in order to help reproduce the national workforce, nor do I want to live in a world where that was a principal motive for parenthood. Instead, in addition to human rights, I would stress the social benefits society gains from expanding the population of dedicated, responsible parents and from promoting an inclusive society.

*Can you also see the trend of the increasing feminization of same-sex marriages in the US? This trend was observed in Scandinavian countries and elsewhere in Europe. Can this be connected, in your view, to the fact that it is easier to “get” children within a female same-sex couple than in a male one?*

I am not up-to-date on the international rates of same-sex marriage by gender, but it is true that in the U.S., lesbians have been marrying at higher rates than gay men in the states where it is legal. I thought it had been somewhat different in the Netherlands after it became the first nation to legalize same-sex marriage. I would expect women to marry at a greater rate than men for two major reasons. Perhaps, most important, a higher percentage of lesbians than gay men are in long-term couple relationships to begin with. In the U.S., there was a popular joke about this gender difference: Question: What does a lesbian bring on a second date? Answer: A U-Haul Truck (a rented truck to move all of her furniture and belongings into her new lover’s home).

The second factor for this feminization trend is the one you point out. Women are more likely than men to want children and, of course, they can become parents much more easily than two men. Shared parenthood presents many reasons to encourage marriage, particularly in a country like the U.S. where married couples and their children receive far more benefits, security and status than unmarried people do.

*In a 2010 European report<sup>2</sup> on family structures and family forms “Rainbow families” were listed under the heading of “new and rare types of families”. Do you also see Rainbow families this way, as being new and rare? Also in this report it is pointed out that the research on rainbow families can have a “high potential for scientifically understanding families in general because all sex or gender related characteristics of both spouses are initially symmetrical in these families”. Do you agree with this view?*

<sup>2</sup> See: <<http://www.familyplatform.eu/en/1-major-trends>> (15 September 2011).

It depends on one's definition of a "rainbow family." If this means self-identified lesbian or gay couples who openly choose to have children together, I guess it would be accurate to describe this family form as a historically recent phenomenon. In the U.S., pioneer lesbian-parent families like this emerged in the 1970s in the wake of feminism. Their numbers have grown exponentially ever since, and this is increasingly a global phenomenon. To call it "rare" also depends on the metric you employ. Because gays and lesbians represent a small minority of the overall population, that could be a fair statement. However, among that minority, this form of family is no longer rare. In fact, it is becoming close to normative in many societies.

However I would define "rainbow family" much more broadly to encompass a broader array of family forms that do not centre on heterosexuality or marriage. That's the approach I take in *Unhitched*. Ironically, as same-sex marriage becomes normative, the broader definition of rainbow family may be eroding.

I do agree with the first part of the claim that studying rainbow families provides a rich laboratory for understanding family life in general. However, as my earlier answers about gender complexity indicate, I do not share the view that two women or two men automatically display symmetrical gender or sexual attributes.

*In your book In The Name Of The Family you discuss family values in the post-modern age. What should these values be and can we really share the same value system about families considering the protests that are taking place right now against same-sex families?*

No, we are never going to share the same family values, but I think we have to learn to live in a pluralist society. I think that if one takes seriously the ideas of freedom of religion, freedom of conscience, and equal rights for all citizens, then we have to arrive at a set of social values that will provide a framework for valuing diverse families. In my view, family ethics should promote responsibility, integrity and consent. The goal of society should be to set up the structural conditions that give equal rights and opportunities to individuals and their relationships irrespective of gender, sexual orientation, race or ethnicity, religion, and so on, but not to impose the family forms, the gender norms or the sexual norms that you have to practice. Now, obviously that is utopian, but then democracy is a utopian idea.