

Danish and American students' attitudes towards gay and lesbian parenting

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ABSTRACT

This study examined student attitudes towards same-sex parenting in two studies. The first study was a cross-cultural study comparing students in Copenhagen, Denmark to students in La Crosse, USA. Two hundred and seventeen respondents were surveyed, 30 from Copenhagen and 187 from La Crosse. They completed a three part survey: morality, attitudes towards homosexuals, and attitudes towards homosexual parenting. In order to measure attitudes toward homosexual parenting, participants responded to a vignette with two fathers and a male child. In the second study, USA participants were randomly assigned to receive one of four vignettes. One quarter of the participants received the male parents/male child vignette. The other vignettes manipulated the gender of the parents (two males or two females) and the gender of the child (male or female). The hypothesis for the cross-cultural study that students in Copenhagen would have more positive attitudes towards same-sex parenting was not supported. The hypothesis for the second study that students would have more positive attitudes towards same-sex parents with a child of the same sex, with lesbian parents receiving the most positive attitudes was also not supported. In line with previous research findings, our data did indicate that males have more negative attitudes toward homosexuality than females. Given that young people tend to be less homophobic, similar research in the future would be best served by assessing older populations.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of what constitutes a family has been changing rapidly in Western Industrialized countries. Traditional views of families involved an employed father, a stay-at-home mother and at least two children. Today, the definition of family is evolving to include more non-traditional forms such as single parents, mixed families due to divorce and remarriage and interracial families. Gay and lesbian individuals constitute another growing form of nontraditional families. In America 16.4% of family households are single parents (United States Census 2000). In Denmark 4.3% of the population are singles with children and another 4.1% of the population are other couples with children (non-married) (Torpe & Laksikon, n.d.). This article presents two studies. The first study focuses on a comparison between Danish and U.S. students regarding gay parenting; whereas, the second study focuses on a comparison of attitudes toward gay and lesbian parents in the U.S.

A comparison of Denmark and the U.S.

Although Denmark and America are both Western Industrialized countries, there are many differences between them. The United States population is 298,444,215 and Denmark's population is 5,450,661. America is made up of many different religions: Protestant 52%, Roman Catholic 24%, Mormon 2%, Jewish 1%, Muslim 1% other 10%, none 10%. Denmark has 95% Evangelical Lutheran, 3% other Protestant and Roman Catholic and 2% Muslim. The GDP of America is \$12.41 trillion with a GDP per capita of \$42,000. Denmark's GDP is \$181.6 billion with a GDP per capita of \$33,400 (The World Factbook, 2006). On Hofstede's analysis America scored a 40 on power distance, a 91 on individualism, a 46 on uncertainty avoidance and a 62 on masculinity. Denmark scored an 18 on power distance, a 74 on individualism, a 23 on uncertainty avoidance and a 16 on masculinity. According to Hofstede's definitions this means that Denmark "de-emphasizes the differences between citizen's power and wealth and that equality and opportunity for everyone is stressed. There is a low level of differentiation and discrimination between genders. Females are treated equally to males in all aspects of society. There is less concern about ambiguity and uncertainty and there is more tolerance for a variety of opinions. Denmark is less rule-oriented, more readily accepts change, and takes more and greater risks (www.cyborlink.com).

Attitudes toward homosexuality

Homosexual marriage and parenting are currently in the spotlight as states pass constitutional amendments that ban same sex marriage. At the same time, there are more homosexual characters on television shows and in movies that are engaged in relationships and deal with the issues of marriage and parenting (Poniewozik, & McDowell, 1999). Attitudes towards homosexuality and homosexuals have changed dramatically. Before the Stonewall Riots, there was little public expression of gays and lesbians and their lives. The Stonewall riots started the gay and lesbian movement (www.columbia.edu). Until 1974 homosexuality was defined as a mental disorder by the American Psychiatric Association and the American Psychology Association (Battle, 2004). Many sodomy laws in regard to homosexual sex have been removed from the books in recent years. In the 2004 election, 11 states passed constitutional amendments that defined marriage as a union between a man and a woman, making same sex marriage illegal (Brunken & Curry 2004). Despite the increasing acceptance of homosexuality in our society, there are still many negative attitudes concerning homosexuality. President Bush has also been trying to pass a national constitutional amendment that would define marriage as a union between a man and a woman but would allow same sex civil unions (Brunken & Curry, 2004). Partners in a civil union do not have the same rights and protections as partners in a marriage. These negative attitudes are especially prevalent regarding homosexual parenting and families. Since the stigmas attached to homosexual families affect many laws and policies regarding adoption and child custody by homosexual couples, this is an important area of research concerning the family institution.

In an analysis of the relationship between political attitudes and homophobia, Hill, Moulton and Burdette (2004) explored conservative Protestantism and attitudes toward homosexuality, and how political orientation mediates the relationship in the U.S. Conservative Protestants typically attend church more often than others and are therefore exposed to sermons and church activities that promote and reinforce conservative religious beliefs (Hill et al. 2004). The frequency of church attendance is a factor in the acceptance of homosexuality. Previous research in the area has found that those who believe the bible is the actual word of God are less accepting of homosexuality than those who believe otherwise (Hill et al. 2004).

Other countries around the world are also dealing with the same issues regarding homosexual marriage and parenting. Some countries have granted same sex couples the same rights as heterosexual couples; while others have granted them some of the rights and in others there is no recognition of same sex couples. In 2000, Holland became the first country to allow same sex marriages. In 1989, Denmark became the first country to grant same sex couples the same rights as married couples, although same sex couples can not have church weddings (news.bbc.co.uk). In both the state of Wisconsin in the U.S. and Denmark it is legal for openly gay individuals to adopt children.

Homosexuality and parenting

Government policy about same sex marriage and parenting represents a chicken and an egg discussion. Government policy influences the population and the population influences government policy. Discussion of government policy can bring topics that are closeted into the open. Government policy can also create opportunities for individuals to interact that may not have had the opportunity to interact before. One example in American history is the desegregation of public facilities. Another example is mixed race marriages, which at one time were illegal. Psychological measures indicate that repeated exposure to unfamiliar material or personal interactions with individuals from "out groups" help to reduce negative feelings and stereotypes (Bowen, & Bourgeois, 2001; Lance, 2002).

Investigations into gay and lesbian parenting represent a new field with research beginning in the 1970s. Much of the research that has been conducted looks at lesbian mothers who became mothers in a heterosexual relationship. There are a number of reasons why much of the previous research examined lesbian mothers. One of the reasons why previous research used only lesbian mothers is due to convenience. Another reason lesbian mothers have been studied is because of the positive stereotypes associated with lesbian mothers and the negative stereotypes associated with gay fathers.

Past research has found two main themes that explain why people are opposed to homosexual couples raising children; "negative assumptions about the qualitative nature of gay relationships and negative conjectures about the possible ramifications for the adopted child" (Crawford & Solliday, 1996). There is a general lack of knowledge about the commitment level and love in homosexual couples that leads to the arguments against homosexual couple adopting children. Mistaken beliefs by the general public about the relationships of homosexual parents with their children such as the idea that homosexual parents are more likely to molest their children and that homosexual parents will raise homosexual children (Crawford & Solliday, 1996).

However, there has been research to discredit all of these arguments. Research found that pedophilia involving a homosexual parent is essentially nonexistent (Crawford and Solliday 1996). Thus, there is no link between

homosexual parenting and child molestation (Brodzinsky 2003). Other research indicated the sexual orientation of the parents is not an important factor on the sexual orientation of a child and there is no significant difference in the social abilities of children with homosexual parents compared to the children of heterosexual parents (Crawford and Solliday 1996; Brodzinsky 2003). In addition, Crawford and Solliday (1996) sought to expand the understanding of factors associated with derogatory attitudes toward homosexual parenting in order to understand how the public's negative responses prevent homosexual couples from adopting children. A survey of adoption agencies concerning adoption and homosexual couples supports the relationship between attitudes toward homosexual couples, adoption and religion. A survey of adoption policies, practices and attitudes found a significant difference in the acceptance of adoption applications from homosexuals as a function of the agency's religious affiliation (Brodzinsky 2003).

The current study examines the attitudes of Danish and American students towards gay and lesbian parenting. This study uses college students because they are the youth of today and will be the future of tomorrow, so their attitudes will have a profound impact on future policies made concerning homosexual marriage and parenting. College students tend to be more liberal than the general population and this will show the opposite extreme as the mainstream media portrays. Also, since college students will have higher education, they will potentially be in positions to have more influence on future policies.

STUDY 1 – METHODS

Participants

There were 45 American participants, 7 males and 38 females, with an average age of 20. There were 30 Danish participants, 15 males and 15 females, with an average age of 22. The American participants were students in a developmental psychology class. Participants in Denmark were given the survey in three different classes. The survey was translated into Danish and then back translated into English to ensure the surveys were the same. In Denmark we made sure all the participants were Danish, to eliminate the compounding variable of other nationalities. Participants in Denmark were able to choose which they felt more comfortable with: the survey in English or the survey in Danish.

Materials

Participants were given a written survey. The survey consisted of four sections: demographics, attitudes towards homosexuals, the morally debatable behaviors scale created by Harding and Phillips and a vignette with questions. The vignette in this study had a gay couple seeking to adopt a male child.

STUDY 1 – RESULTS

Although there were some differences between the responses for Danish and American participants, none of the differences were statistically significant. The means for the homophobic scales were different for men and women from Denmark and America with a higher score meaning more negative views towards homosexuality, see table 1. American woman score significantly higher than Danish woman on the attitude scale $F(1, 49) = 8.71, p = .005$. American woman also score significantly higher than Danish woman on the homophobe scale $F(1, 49) = 4.18, p = .04$.

Table 1.
A Comparison of Danish and U.S. Homophobia Scores by Gender

Country	Homophobia Total Score
Denmark	18.12
• Males	21.60
• Female	14.63
U.S.	21.21
• Males	22.71
• Females	19.71

STUDY 2 – METHODS

Participants

There were 187 participants (43 males and 144 females) from a developmental psychology class. The mean age was 20. The participants' religious affiliation were 38.5 percent Christian, 31 percent Catholic, 1.1 percent Protestant, 14.4 for non and 13.4 for other.

Materials

Participants were given a written survey. The survey consisted of four sections: demographics, attitudes towards homosexuals, Harding and Phillips' morally debatable behavior scale and a vignette with questions. The vignette in this study had a gay couple seeking to adopt a male child.

STUDY 2 – RESULTS

Contrary to the hypothesis there was no interaction between the sex of the parents and the sex of the child, see Table 2. There were no significant differences between how students viewed the gay and lesbian couples wanting to adopt a child.

Table 2. Scores for American Respondents by Sex of Parent and Child

Sex of Parent and Sex of Child	Female Respondents (n = 141)	Male Respondents (n = 43)
Male Parents and Male Child	18.57	21.95
Male Parents and Female Child	19.11	24.15
Females Parents and Female Child	18.83	23.45
Female Parents and Male Child	18.98	26.25

DISCUSSION

The hypothesis of Danish having more liberal attitudes towards same sex parenting was not supported. The hypotheses of Americans being more accepting of lesbians couples raising children was also not supported. American women did score significantly higher on the morality and attitudes scales than Danish women. Women also tended to have more liberal responses, so the biggest factor concerning attitudes towards same-sex families was the respondent's sex. The data from this study cannot help us determine if the attitudes expressed were representative of college students in the U.S. or Denmark, nor can they help us determine if the attitudes reflect a larger cultural liberalization of attitudes toward homosexuality.

One of the main problems with this study was that we were not able to obtain a large Danish sample. With more Danish participants there might have been more of a difference between the responses of Danish and American participants. Another problem with this study was that the questions were very straight forward, so participants could have been responding in socially acceptable ways instead of expressing their own attitudes. A sample more balanced on sex ratio would also have been a benefit and the gender differences within and between cultures is worthy of additional attention. Future research should examine a more diverse population. It would also be important to examine the attitudes of individuals of differing age groups since college students tend to be more liberal in their attitudes.

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