Parental same-sex relationships, family instability, and subsequent life outcomes for adult children: Answering critics of the new family structures study with additional analyses

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ABSTRACT

The July 2012 publication of my study on the outcomes of young adults who report parental same-sex relationship behavior raised a variety of questions about the New Family Structures Study and my analyses and interpretations of it. This follow-up article seeks to address a variety of the more common criticisms that have been raised, to offer new commentary and analyses, and to pose questions for future analysts of the NFSS and other datasets that are poised to consider how household dynamics are associated with youth and young-adult outcomes. The new analyses I present here still reveal numerous differences between adult children who report maternal same-sex behavior (and residence with her partner) and those with still-married (heterosexual) biological parents. Far fewer differences appear between the former and several other groups, most notably never-married single mothers.

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1. Introduction

The July 2012 publication in this journal of my study on the young-adult children of parents who have had a same-sex relationship created more criticism and scrutiny than have most sociological studies. The intensity of the response can be attributed largely to the fact that the results of this study—based on a large population-based sample—differed markedly from earlier research based largely on small, nonrandom samples of same-sex families. Others would no doubt disagree. Apart from criticisms about measurement or sampling issues, concern has been expressed about all manner of minutiae, as well as details about the publication process, the funding agencies, and even the data collection firm.[1] Some perceive it as a tool for this or that political project, a role it was never designed to fill. It cannot answer political or legal questions, and is by definition a retrospective look at household composition and dynamics. The controversy surrounding its publication and reception has also aptly generated concern about freedom of inquiry in general. But in this manuscript I wish to get back to the basic task at hand—addressing concerns, describing the data in greater detail, and pursuing additional analyses of them.

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[1] The audit of the publication process of the original study—a rather uncommon and disturbing experience in social science research—appears elsewhere in this issue. While its author has long harbored negative sentiment about me, the audit nevertheless ought to dispel suspicions of malfeasance in the review process. It concluded that an ideologically-balanced pool of reviewers recommended publication. Concern has been also raised about the relationship of the author to the pair of funding agencies. As noted in the study, I have always operated without strings from either organization. No funding agency representatives were consulted about research design, survey contents, analyses, or conclusions. Any allegations that the funders might have improperly influenced me are simply false. Finally, Knowledge Networks is a premier online research organization, and their data collection efforts are featured in hundreds of published articles in the social sciences, public opinion, health, and other journals—including the August 2012 issue of the *American Sociological Review* (see Rosenfeld and Thomas, 2012)—and are utilized by the American National Election Studies. Simply put, the KnowledgePanel® is a high-quality data source.

While sample size issues—as well as concerns about representativeness—have long hampered the general line of inquiry into same-sex parents and child outcomes, prior to the NFSS most suppositions about possible problems with studies based on nonrandom samples were intellectual rather than data-based. That is, it was easy for scholars to admit the limitations of their study samples. What was more difficult, however, was to grasp just how nonrandom they were and how that might affect their results (Marks, 2012). Even while family scholars have long acknowledged the likelihood of demographic diversity among same-sex households, most have been unable to document the extent of this diversity in a statistically-meaningful way. National probability surveys have typically been constrained by the relatively small number of same-sex households in the general population, resulting in small sample sizes and limited statistical power to detect between-group differences. Most research has instead relied on snowball and convenience samples, which often minimize genuine racial, socioeconomic, and geographic heterogeneity (Tasker, 2005). Others have turned to the Census and the American Community Survey for more representative demographic characteristics of same-sex couples with children (Rosenfeld, 2010; Gates and Ost, 2004). However, these population-based resources are not able to tell us about gay or lesbian single parents or non-residential parents. In addition, Census data provide very little detail about the diversity of family structures experienced by children of same-sex parents over time.

Thus the original NFSS study, while subject to its own documented limitations, suggested the possibility that previous nonrandom studies were painting a rosier picture of child outcomes than would be the case were a more random sample to be employed or if the outcomes were based on the reports of young adults themselves rather than relying on parental self-reports. In other words, the original study muddied what had largely been, up to that time, a relatively consistent, positive portrait of child outcomes in gay and lesbian households (however defined).

In this article, I address six areas of concern with the original study, including an extended discussion of the challenges of dealing with household and relational instability in analyses, before briefly reporting the results of alternative approaches to presenting overview data. Throughout the article I make greater use of the NFSS's detailed family history calendar data to look at the variety of family structure experiences in the households in which young adults reported maternal same-sex relationship behavior.

2. Responses to criticisms

2.1. What constitutes an LM or GF respondent?

Concern about the use of the acronyms LM (lesbian mother) and GF (gay father) in the original study is arguably the most reasonable criticism. In hindsight, I wish I would have labeled LMs and GFs as MLRs and FGRs, that is, respondents who report a maternal (or mother's) lesbian relationship, and respondents who report a paternal (or father's) gay relationship. While in the original study's description of the LM and GF categories I carefully and accurately detailed what respondents fit the LM and GF categories, I recognize that the acronyms LM and GF are prone to conflate sexual orientation, which the NFSS did not measure, with same-sex relationship behavior, which it did measure. The original study, indeed the entire data collection effort, was always focused on the respondents' awareness of parental same-sex relationship behavior rather than their own assessment of parental sexual orientation, which may have differed from how their parent would describe it. Therefore, I will use the (albeit awkward) dual acronyms of LM/MLR and GF/FGR to provide orienting reference to the original study's acronym while capitalizing on the more appropriate acronym, which I begin using exclusively in the section on new analyses.

Some critics have correctly noted that the LM/MLR measure includes respondents who appear to have lived both with their mother and her romantic partner for many years, as well as respondents who never lived with their mother's romantic partner. The relationship(s) may or may not have been brief—the NFSS survey did not directly inquire about their number or duration. While it is possible that a one-night stand might have sufficed as a definition here, it stretches the imagination to hold that many respondents would have (a) been aware of such solitary experiences, (b) classify it/them as a "romantic relationship", and (c) list it when queried. In my own studies of heterosexual behavior, romantic relationships are typically perceived as enduring for far longer than an evening. In Wave III of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, less than three percent of all young adults' sexual relationships that were identified by respondents as "romantic" in content (rather than nonromantic) lasted for only a day (Regnerus and Uecker, 2011). However, it is a fair request to assess those LM/MLR respondents who lived with their mother and her romantic partner separately from those that did not. I do so below.

2.2. Comparing apples to oranges?

The most consistent criticism is that the original study's analyses "compare apples to oranges". That is, the primary comparison is between LM/MLRs, GF/FGRs, and intact biological families (IBFs), and that given prevalent instability in the NFSS sample of the former pair's households, that to compare them to IBFs is to cause the former pair to look poorly. However, if stability is a key asset for households with children, then it is sensible to use intact biological families in any comparative assessment. But this has rarely been the approach employed in past research: Rosenfeld (2010: 757) notes that of the 45

studies listed in Tasker's (2005) review article, only two included "a more traditional family control group built into the study".

Moreover, it is inaccurate to imply that the original study did not evaluate distinctions between LM/MLRs and other categories that displayed some degree of instability. Tables 2–4 in the original study (not shown) displayed indicators of statistically-significant differences between LM/MLRs and all other groups, and I briefly describe on page 13 (Section 3.2) of the original study text the number of (and percent of possible) statistically-significant differences both before and after controls between both LM/MLR and GF/FGR categories and all non-IBF groups.

The primary concern here, I presume, is that the LM/MLR and GF/FGR categories are comprised of households that have experienced *varying* degrees of instability, and that similar experiences of instability in the one ought to be compared with similar experiences in the other. In an ideal data world, that makes sense. But this is not as simple as it might seem, since there is likewise varying degrees of instability in the groups denoted as "stepfamily" and "single parent" in the original study. The household rosters, assessed over the course of 18 years, reveal quite diverse degrees of instability in stepfamilies and single-parent households. For example, some respondents in the "single parent" category certainly witnessed their never-married mother enter and exit multiple relationships, and yet I combined them with respondents whose mother never entered another relationship after divorcing the respondent's father. Some respondents entered a stepfamily as young children, while others later in adolescence. Thus the "apples versus oranges" criticism is, upon closer inspection, not a very realistic one in social reality. Americans' households, traced over the course of respondents' first 18 years of life, reveal considerable family diversity that requires challenging—and subjective—measurement decisions from researchers, as I noted in the original text.

Many critics have focused on the small number of stably-coupled lesbian families in the NFSS data, and some have taken this as a sign of a suspect dataset. It could be an undercount, but it may not be. A closer look at the respondents who stated that their mother had a same-sex romantic relationship and that they lived with both her and her partner at some point further reveals the short-term nature of many of the relationships. Of the 85 respondents who claimed such, 31 reported living with their mother's partner for up to 1 year only.[2] An additional 20 reported this relationship for up to 2 years, five for 3 years, and eight for 4 years.

2.2.1. Relationship Instability: Control variable or pathway in analyses of child outcomes?

What should social scientists do about household (and by inference, parental relationship) instability that is nearly coterminous with a key independent variable, in this case the LM/MLR and GF/FGR categories? It is not a simple decision. Control for instability?[3] But what does it mean to "control for" instability in this scenario? It is quite possible that household instability—via parental romantic-relationship fragility—was a key pathway or mechanism linking the LM/MLRs with the comparatively higher emotional and social challenges they report. This tendency to overlook pathways in favor of control variables more broadly reflects a typical misguided tendency in social science research to always search for "independent" effects of variables, often missing the pathways explaining how social phenomena actually operate. In this case, parental same-sex relationships, family instability, and more problematic young-adult life outcomes are quite possibly linked. In assessing young-adult outcomes, controlling for the effect of a parent's same-sex relationship with a "family instability" variable and concluding—presumably—that there is no association could well be the wrong thing to do. This is "controlling for the pathways", a model that is unhelpful for understanding social reality. If, for example, most men smoked, but very few women ever did so, it is entirely unhelpful to declare that—controlling for smoking—there is no effect of gender on lung cancer. In that case, men's predilection for smoking would merit close scrutiny and concern. Indeed, a key purpose of social science is "to identify and understand the various underlying causal mechanisms that produce identifiable outcomes and events of interest" (Smith, 2010: 293).

2.2.2. Gay and lesbian relationship instability: An artifact of the past?

Since the NFSS did not select by design a group of unstable gay or lesbian parents, a key issue is whether or not the LM/MLR and GF/FGR households are more unstable than those of heterosexual couples. If stability was comparatively rarer in the lives of MLRs and FGRs growing up some decades ago when stigma was more pronounced and social support for lesbian and gay parents far more modest than today, is it a safe assumption that the NFSS study is a "dated" one by definition and that if the study could be replicated in the future that the associations here would very likely disappear? Perhaps, but hardly certain: assumptions about comparative relationship stability among gay and lesbian couples—including parents—can and have been empirically tested using other data on current relationships.

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[2] As I note below in greater detail, I have included in the LM/MLR group the 12 cases in which the respondent indicated that both parents had had a same-sex relationship. In the previous study, I analyzed them only as GF/FGRs, given sample-size concerns.

[3] One option is to utilize the NFSS calendars and create a measure of the number of household transitions rather than the experience of one or more transitions (Potter, 2012). But the household calendars could well miss the exact number of transitions, since the NFSS only asked respondents to denote when someone else lived with them for at least 4 months. This also overlooks parental romantic relationships which were either brief or else not residential (yet potentially still influential). And in cases of excessive household instability, respondents may experience survey fatigue and may underreport transitions when filling out what amounts to be for them a rather complicated household calendar. Moreover, to suggest that all romantic partner dissolution creates problems for respondents is short-sighted. Indeed, some dissolutions solve problems (Amato, 2000). Such is the messy business of documenting and assessing household histories.

A study of Norwegian and Swedish same-sex marriages notes that divorce risk is higher in same-sex marriages and that the "risk of divorce for female partnerships actually is more than twice that for male unions" (Andersson et al., 2006: 89). Moreover, early same-sex marriages—those occurring shortly after a shift in marriage law—exhibited a similar risk of divorce as did more recent marriages, suggesting no notable variation in instability over time as a function of new law or pent-up demand among more stable, longstanding relationships. The study authors estimate that in Sweden, 30% of female marriages are likely to end in divorce within 6 years of formation, compared with 20% for male marriages and 13% for heterosexual ones. Moreover, they found lesbian couples to be more "sociodemographically homogamous" than other couples, and speculate that "this situation may be conducive to a high level of dynamism in the relationship, but perhaps not to the kind of inertia that is related to marital stability" (Andersson et al., 2006: 96). Biblarz and Stacey (2010: 17) similarly note this phenomenon in their review of research on lesbian parents, asserting that they face a "somewhat greater risk of splitting up", due in part, they suggest, to their "their high standards of equality". A follow-up assessment of more recent Norwegian statistics, presented at the 2012 annual meeting of the Population Association of America (PAA), found no evidence that the gender gap in same-sex divorce has closed (Noack et al., 2012).

Michael Rosenfeld detects the same pattern in a study of nationally-representative data on American relationships presented at the 2012 annual meeting of the American Sociological Association. He finds that lesbian couples report higher relationship satisfaction *alongside* higher break-up rates. The highest stability rates appear among heterosexual married couples, while notably better stability is located among married gay and lesbian couples than among those in civil unions (as would be expected). Yet his analysis too detects greater instability among lesbian couples in general, a finding that persists even after a lengthy series of control variables are included. While lesbian couples in the study are more apt to be raising children, the presence of children does not appear to be a factor in the diminished relationship stability evident among them.

That few LM/MLR respondents reported stability in their mother and her partner's relationship (in the domicile in which the respondent lived) ought not be simply chalked up to greater stigma or insufficient social support as factors that account for the entirety of the association. In light of evidence of the same pattern among current lesbian couples in the US and Scandinavia, it remains an open question.

While the cited study authors tend to find the difference in divorce behavior between lesbians and gay men intriguing, this "lesbian effect" is anticipated in a sexual economics approach to romantic relationships (e.g., Baumeister, 2010). This perspective places no blame for instability on sexual orientation per se, but rather on stable gender differences and preferences in relationships (e.g., for women, a significantly higher bar for the relationship's quality and emotional satisfaction). Gay men's relationships thus appear predictably more stable than lesbian relationships, but are less likely to be sexually monogamous when compared with lesbian or heterosexual relationships (Hoff and Beougher, 2010). Here again, this is believed to be due not to sexual orientation but stable gender differences in relationship preferences and sex drive (Baumeister and Vohs, 2004). While the effect of relationship stability on child health and development is well-documented and apparent in the original NFSS study's findings—as well as this follow-up exploration—the effect on children of parental nonmonogamy is not well understood.

2.3. Is the NFSS a representative sample?

As an extension of the second concern, many critics have focused on the small number of stably-coupled lesbian families in the NFSS data. Indeed, only two cases of LM/MLRs reported living with their mother and her partner uninterrupted from age 1 to 18. Of the 85 cases (out of 175 total LM/MLRs) wherein the respondent indicated living in residence for a time with both their mother and her female partner, only 19 spent at least five consecutive years together, and six cases spent 10 or more consecutive years together. Some have taken this as a sign of a suspect and non-representative dataset. It could be an undercount, but it may well not be. Rather, readers would do well to keep in mind anachronistic expectations concerning an era in which enduring same-sex relationships *with children* were simply less common, and those that existed certainly subject to greater social scrutiny and stigma. And, as noted above, there may be stability distinctions that foster unreasonable expectations, especially following upon decades of research conclusions based on nonrandom samples.

Moreover, such expectations also tend to reveal a class bias that may hamper studies in this domain, given that families wherein same-sex couples pursue the complicated—and potentially quite expensive—process of deciding just how and when they will have a child tend to be more educated, wealthy, and white than the families of many NFSS LM/MLRs. Rosenfeld (2010: 757) notes:

> . . .the literature on same-sex couple parenting has tended to feature studies of the kind of women who can afford ART: white, upper-middle-class women. Nationally representative data tend to paint a different picture: in the US census, same-sex couple parents tend to be more working class and are much more likely to be nonwhite compared with heterosexual married couples.

The children of such a selective group—those who conceive by ART, or assisted reproductive technology—would be expected to witness greater stability and to fare better, enjoying advantages that tend to benefit children regardless of their parents' race, age, or sexual orientation. While this selective group is hardly the only face of same-sex parents in America, they are the ones who receive the majority of popular and scholarly attention.

In his assessment of group differences in academic progress, moreover, Rosenfeld (2010) restricted his Census-based sample to the children of same-sex couples "who had been living with both parents for at least 5 years", thus raising the like-
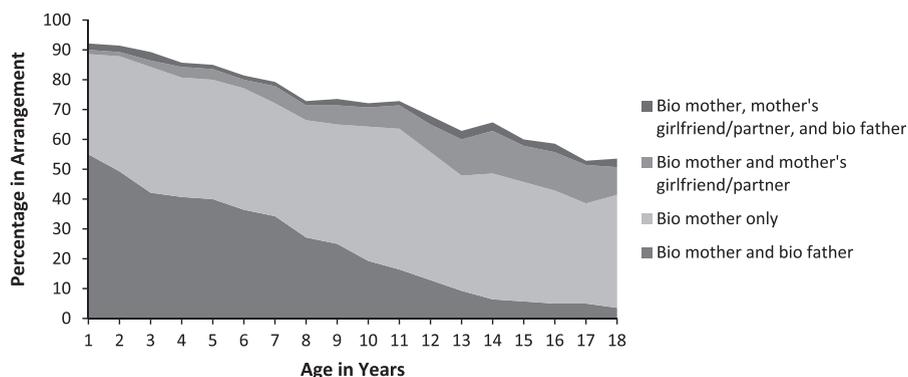
Fig. 1. Frequency of four living arrangements of young adults who reported maternal same-sex romantic relationship behavior, by age, NFSS (unweighted).

lihood that his sample was more residentially and relationally stable than a sample that included the children of same-sex couples who had not met this threshold of inclusion. I did not restrict my sample in the same manner, though such a measurement decision is potentially quite influential on respondents' outcomes. His "no differences" conclusion may be a result of dropping more unstable households from his analytic sample.

2.3.1. Differences and similarities between the NFSS and the census

While no sampling strategy can compete with a genuine census in scope, it is important to note that the Census does *not* ask respondents about their sexual orientation or any sort of sexual behavior. It can only identify couples of the same sex who are co-residing at the time of the survey. Gay or lesbian parents who are raising children as single parents or who do not live with their children are not enumerated as such in the Census.

The NFSS, which relied on asking respondents about their parents' same-sex relationship activity, includes numerous single-parent households among its LM/MLR and GF/FGR categories, as Fig. 1 details. Given greater instability among lesbian couples, failing to account for lesbian single-parent households seems a notable limitation. The original NFSS study's sample may actually be more representative than Rosenfeld's *Demography* article, since I did not impose stability limitations and could measure single-parent gay- and lesbian-headed households.

The Census also only takes a snapshot of a household, meaning it offers few insights into the family-structure dynamics of same-sex households. Thus the Census and the NFSS may reveal quite different household arrangements. The Census has an unparalleled ability to measure the fraction of households with children that are headed by same-sex couples.[4] The NFSS, looking retrospectively, can document parental same-sex relationships as reported by young adults who did not spend their entire childhood living with their biological parents, and can describe the stability of household arrangements over time. What results are simply different strengths and weaknesses. And yet both exhibit comparable race and class diversity. Rosenfeld's (2010) analysis of ACS data reported that 37% and 42% of children from female and male same-sex households are Black and Hispanic, respectively. He also noted that same-sex couples with children have, on average, less education and lower household incomes than both heterosexual couples with children and same-sex couples without children.

2.4. Mixed-orientation marriages?

There seems to be no scholarly consensus—as may well be the case in social reality—about what exactly makes a mother a *lesbian* mother, and what makes a father a *gay* father. Some critics seem to have largely presumed that the NFSS's LM/MLR or GF/FGR parent is in fact lesbian or gay, respectively, in their sexual orientation, despite my caution against doing so in the original study. (Others appear to question whether any of them are gay or lesbian.) Some speculate that what I have largely captured in the original study's findings are the challenges facing "mixed-orientation marriages" wherein a respondent's parent elects "against their orientation" to marry someone of the opposite sex, only to witness the subsequent dissolution of their union followed by the commencement of a same-sex relationship. As I noted in the original study text, there appear to be plenty of failed heterosexual unions in the data. Fig. 1 displays the unweighted frequencies of four of the most common living arrangements among LM/MLR respondents beginning at age 1 up through age 18.[5] As already noted, a slight majority spend their early years with their biological mother and father, a figure that diminishes to about 5% by age 18.[6] A consistently large segment of LM/MLRs (~35%) reports living exclusively with their biological mother, while a much smaller segment reports

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[4] This ability is tempered, as is the case in many data collection efforts, by other challenges. In the case of the Census, the prevalence of gender miscoding may create notable over-counts of the number of same-sex households in the US (Black et al., 2007).

[5] Tables 1–3, however, employ weighted estimates, in consonance with the original study.

[6] An unknown (though likely sizable) number of the respondents who report living with both their "biological mother and father" do not share the same residence with them, but rather spend time in each one's household.

Table 1
Mean scores on select dichotomous outcome variables, NFSS (can read as percentage: as in, 0.43 = 43%).

	1-IBF	2-MLR no partner	3-MLR + partner	4-FGR	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
Currently married	0.43	0.31	0.38	0.38	0.36*	0.49	0.37	0.41	**0.27**	**0.21***	**0.17***	0.47	0.63	0.41	0.45
Currently cohabiting	0.09	0.18	0.27*	0.23	0.31*	0.11	0.20*	0.10	0.25*	0.18*	0.31*	0.22*	0.28*	0.07^	0.32*
Family received welfare growing up	0.17	**0.72***	**0.70***	0.51*	0.47*	0.41*^	0.49*	0.37^	**0.70***	**0.75***	0.56	**0.58***	0.13^	0.12^	**0.47***
Currently on public assistance	0.10	**0.32**	**0.49***	0.14^	0.31*	0.21^	0.22*^	0.27*	**0.52***	**0.44***	**0.49***	**0.28**	0.11^	**0.27***	0.25
Currently employed full-time	0.49	0.36	**0.17***	0.36	0.42*^	0.48^	0.44^	0.55^	**0.42***	**0.31**	**0.09***	0.52^	**0.75**^	0.41^	0.42^
Currently unemployed	0.08	0.10^	**0.40***	0.23	0.15^	0.13^	0.15^	0.06^	0.18	**0.19**	**0.34***	0.03^	**0.00**^	0.22	0.12^
Voted in last presidential election	0.57	0.46	0.43	0.71*^	0.63	0.53	0.58	0.52	0.58	**0.43**	0.37	**0.70*^**	0.44	0.58	0.59
Thought recently about suicide	0.05	**0.23***	0.09	0.17	0.08	0.10	0.06	0.02	0.11	0.09	0.03	0.04	0.01	0.07	0.11
Recently or currently in therapy	0.08	**0.30***	0.17	0.10	0.12	**0.17***	**0.20***	0.11	**0.24***	0.13	0.09	0.13	**0.01*^**	**0.22***	0.09
Identifies as entirely heterosexual	0.90	**0.45***	**0.68***	0.80*	0.83	0.82*	0.82*	0.89^	0.80	**0.77***	0.83	0.91^	0.96^	0.82	0.72*
Is in a same-sex romantic relationship	0.04	0.12	0.02	0.14	0.05	0.15*	0.01	**0.00***	0.05	0.01	0.04	0.13*	-	0.23	0.21
Had an affair while married/cohabiting	0.13	**0.42***	**0.38***	0.26	0.12^	**0.28***	0.17	**0.09***	**0.48***	0.23	0.18	0.23	0.18	0.20	0.30
Has ever had an STI	0.08	0.21	0.26*	0.18*	0.12	0.12	**0.17***	**0.06***	**0.25***	**0.19***	0.26*	0.17	0.08	0.16	0.12
Ever touched sexually by an adult	0.02	**0.16***	**0.26***	0.07	**0.10***	**0.09***	**0.10***	**0.10***	**0.20***	**0.15***	0.11	0.05^	0.02^	0.03^	0.09
Ever forced to have sex against will	0.08	**0.42***	**0.27***	0.17*	**0.24***	**0.18***	**0.20***	0.13	0.17	0.17	**0.17**	0.11	0.12	**0.23***	0.17

*1 = Lived with both bio mother and father from 0 to 18 or until left home ($N = 919$).
*2 = MLR, but never lived with mother's same-sex romantic partner ($N = 90$).
*3 = MLR, spent time in residence with mother's same-sex romantic partner ($N = 85$).
*4 = FGR ($N = 61$).
*5 = Lived with both bio mom and dad until 18, but subsequently they've gotten a divorce ($N = 116$).
*6 = Parents were married, but got a divorce, R lived with mother, and R reported subsequent relationship(s) and remarriage ($N = 223$).
*7 = Parents were married, but got a divorce, R lived with mother, and R reported subsequent relationship(s) but no remarriage ($N = 278$).
*8 = Parents were married, but got a divorce, R lived with mother, and R reported NO subsequent relationship before 18 ($N = 108$).
*9 = Parents never married, R lived with mother, and R reported subsequent relationship(s) and marriage ($N = 104$).
*10 = Parents never married, R lived with mother, and R reported subsequent relationship(s) but no marriage ($N = 221$).
*11 = Parents never married, R lived with mother, and R reported NO subsequent relationship ($N = 48$).
*12 = Parents were married, but one parent died, and R reported subsequent relationship(s), possibly including remarriage ($N = 117$).
*13 = Parents were married, but one parent died, and R reported NO subsequent relationship ($N = 28$).
*14 = Adopted by strangers at birth or 1 year (at some point, either one or two adopted parents) ($N = 101$).
*15 = Parents were married, but got a divorce, R lived with father (84% of the time, R said father had another relationship) ($N = 95$).
Bold indicates the mean scores displayed are statistically-significantly different from IBFs (currently intact, bio mother/father household, column 1), without additional controls.
An asterisk (*) next to the estimate indicates a statistically-significant difference ($p < 0.05$) between the group's coefficient and that of IBF's, controlling for respondent's age, gender, race/ethnicity, level of mother's education, perceived household income while growing up, experience being bullied as a youth, and state's legislative gay-friendliness, derived from logistic regression models (not shown).
A caret (^) next to the estimate indicates a statistically-significant difference ($p < 0.05$) between the group's mean and the mean of Group 3 (MLR + partner), without additional controls.

Table 2
Mean scores on select continuous outcome variables, NFSS.

	1-IBF	2-MLR no partner	3-MLR + partner	4-FGR	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
Educational attainment	3.19	**2.34***	**2.41***	2.70	**2.88***^	**2.72***	**2.82***^	3.06^	**2.41***	**2.18***	**2.01***	2.78	2.92	**3.21**^	**2.79***
Family-of-origin safety/security	4.13	**3.23***	**2.97***	**3.35***	**3.52***^	**3.70***^	**3.45***^	**3.71***^	**3.35***	**3.44***^	**3.59***^	**3.63***^	4.02^	**3.77***^	**3.12***
Family-of-origin negative impact	2.30	**3.30***	**2.97***	**2.89***	**2.96***	**2.67***	**2.97***	2.55	**3.04***	**2.74***	**3.02***	**2.72***	2.62	**2.83***	**2.67**
Closeness to biological mother	4.17	4.07	4.03	**3.71***	3.95	4.26*	**3.88**	3.90	3.63	**3.50***	4.20	3.87	4.17	3.58	**3.79**
Closeness to biological father	3.87	3.16	3.18	3.44	**3.29***	3.53	3.29	**2.77***	–	**1.57***^	**3.01**	3.28	3.27	–	3.89
Self-reported physical health	3.75	3.50	**3.24**	3.67	**3.46**	**3.51**	3.58^	**3.42**	**3.40**	**3.28***	**3.09***	3.54	3.66	3.53	3.54
Self-reported overall happiness	4.16	3.63	4.04	3.79	4.02	3.94	3.93	3.83	3.88	**3.70**	**3.64**	4.03	**4.58***^	3.92	3.80
CES-D depression index	1.83	**2.37***	**2.12**	**2.07**	2.01	1.88	1.92	1.84	**2.02**	2.08	1.99	1.76^	**1.48***^	1.95	1.90
Attachment scale (depend)	2.82	**3.63***	**3.27**	3.10	**3.08**	3.00	**3.12***	2.84	**3.26**	**3.22***	**3.40***	**3.16**	2.52^	**3.12***	3.10
Attachment scale (anxiety)	2.46	2.77	2.63	2.60	2.71	2.47	2.54	2.41	2.66	**2.65**	2.77	2.51	2.03	**2.66***	2.49
Impulsivity scale	1.90	2.03	2.06	1.95	1.94	1.79^	1.93	1.84^	1.98	1.79^	1.81	1.86	**1.66***^	1.85	1.76^
Level of household income	8.27	**6.45***	**5.96**	7.08	7.42	**7.46***	7.67^	7.34	**5.72***	**5.38***	**3.67***^	7.68^	**9.03***^	7.93^	7.73^
Current relationship quality index	4.11	3.80	**3.76**	**3.73***	3.95	3.88	3.94	3.92	**3.65**	**3.66***	3.92	3.77	4.36^	3.79	4.02
Current relationship is in trouble	2.04	**2.60***	2.21	**2.47**	**2.43**	2.15	**2.32***	2.19	**2.77***^	**2.45***	2.60	2.31	1.85	2.35	2.31

Bold indicates the mean scores displayed are statistically-significantly different from IBFs (currently intact, bio mother/father household, column 1), without additional controls.

An asterisk (*) next to the estimate indicates a statistically-significant difference ($p < 0.05$) between the group's coefficient and that of IBF's, controlling for respondent's age, gender, race/ethnicity, level of mother's education, perceived household income while growing up, experience being bullied as a youth, and state's legislative gay-friendliness, derived from OLS regression models (not shown).

A caret (^) next to the estimate indicates a statistically-significant difference ($p < 0.05$) between the group's mean and the mean of Group 3 (MLR + partner), without additional controls.

Table 3
Mean scores on select event-count outcome variables, NFSS.

	1-IBF	2-MLR no partner	3-MLR + partner	4-FGR	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
Frequency of marijuana use	1.32	1.78	1.85*	1.62	**2.00***	1.32	**1.71***	1.61	1.86*	**1.99***	1.70	1.50	1.62	1.33	1.50
Frequency of alcohol use	2.70	2.58	2.41	2.42	2.55	**2.35**	2.64	2.87	2.84*	2.63	**1.89**	2.55	2.59	2.74	2.84
Frequency of drinking to get drunk	1.68	1.89	1.88	1.89	1.90	1.58	1.75	1.91	1.96*	1.78	1.37	1.73	**1.32**	1.73	1.68
Frequency of smoking	1.79	**2.95***	**2.84***	2.22	2.44	**2.25***	2.03	2.31	2.38	**2.27**	2.14	1.90	2.59	2.34*	2.44
Frequency of watching TV	3.01	**4.21***	3.46	3.17	3.33	3.21	3.24	3.47	**3.98***	**3.50**	3.51	3.37	**2.27**^	3.31	2.77
Frequency of having been arrested	1.18	**1.82***	**1.76***	1.52	1.38	**1.39***^	**1.37***^	1.17^	1.34^	**1.43***	1.47*	1.27^	1.37	1.31^	**1.53***
Freq pled guilty to non-minor offense	1.10	**1.43***	**1.35***	1.36	1.30	1.20	1.21*	1.10^	1.22	1.15	1.18	1.20	1.23	1.19	1.24
N of female sex partners (among women)	0.22	**1.66***^	**0.70***	**0.74***	**0.96***	**0.52***	0.41	0.14^	0.51	**0.64***	0.94	0.52	0.36	0.47	0.47*
N of female sex partners (among men)	2.70	2.37^	3.97	4.16	3.66	3.79	3.30	2.03*	3.91*	**4.38***	2.06	**4.52***	3.43	3.24	3.60
N of male sex partners (among women)	2.79	**5.73***^	2.98	**4.51***	**3.97***	**4.55***^	**4.05***^	3.70	**4.90***^	**4.42***^	4.13	3.38	3.36	3.49	**4.53***^
N of male sex partners (among men)	0.20	2.13*	1.18*	1.47*	0.98	0.37	0.10^	0.72	0.20	0.35*	0.62*	0.21	0.47*	0.27	1.76

Bold indicates the mean scores displayed are statistically-significantly different from IBFs (currently intact, bio mother/father household, column 1), without additional controls.

An asterisk (*) next to the estimate indicates a statistically-significant difference ($p < 0.05$) between the group's coefficient and that of IBF's, controlling for respondent's age, gender, race/ethnicity, level of mother's education, perceived household income while growing up, experience being bullied as a youth, and state's legislative gay-friendliness, derived from Poisson or negative binomial regression models (not shown).

A caret (^) next to the estimate indicates a statistically-significant difference ($p < 0.05$) between the group's mean and the mean of Group 3 (MLR + partner), without additional controls.

their early years were spent with both their biological mother and her same-sex partner. The household presence of a same-sex partner begins emerging slowly but steadily through the course of childhood. In numerous cases LM/MLR respondents indicated first living with their mother's girlfriend/partner at a comparatively older age (for example, 54 began at or after age 10, 40 at or after age 13, and 18 at or after age 16).

Whether these were in fact mixed-orientation marriages or relationships is of course impossible to discern with confidence, since the study did not ask the respondents to identify their parents' sexual orientation, a decision I remain comfortable with given the era the data are describing. Many LM/MLR and GF/FGR respondents may well have witnessed their parents' mixed-orientation marriage. On the other hand, given the documented fluidity of women's sexuality, I would hesitate to assert that a same-sex relationship—especially if relatively brief—is indicative of a fixed sexual orientation (Diamond, 2008).

While the etiology of homosexuality is not under study here, the matter seems tacitly embedded in criticisms about classification. As such, the original study should be understood in the manner in which it is explicitly titled—about the adult children of parents who have same-sex relationships. If for whatever reason that is an unsatisfying anchor—parental sexual behavior rather than orientation—it is beyond the scope of an academic study to be something it is not. Nevertheless, it suggests the importance of consistently employing the acronyms MLR and FGR.

2.5. Bisexuality in the NFSS?

As an extension of this, a few critics have raised the possibility that plenty of the NFSS LM/MLRs and GF/FGRs may in reality be bisexual in orientation. In an unpublished study of the most recent two series of data from the National Survey of Family Growth—presented at the 2012 PAA conference—Danielle Wondra reports that self-identified bisexual men and women are notably more likely to desire a (or another) child than self-identified gay or lesbian respondents. Suffice it to say that more research needs to be conducted on bisexual parents outside of a simplistic "mixed-orientation" rubric that may not reflect the reality of many couples' history of sexual experiences or preferences. Moreover, claims about "mixed orientation marriages" unnecessarily problematize bisexuality by prioritizing a dualistic (either/or) essentialism about sexual orientation that may not fit social reality (Diamond, 2008).

If the complex calendar histories are any clue, bisexuality is probable among some NFSS respondents' parents. Such frequencies of opposite-sex relationship behavior or opposite-sex attraction are not out of step with other studies of same-sex partnerships (Andersson et al., 2006; Potter, 2012; Rosenfeld, 2012). Nevertheless, only four LM/MLRs reported an opposite-sex parent figure—a stepfather—living in the household *after* having reported a same-sex parent figure (i.e., a mother's girlfriend/partner). In sum, the B in LGBT parenting deserves more attention than it has been given, and may constitute a more significant share of such households-with-children than has often been recognized.

2.6. Foster care experiences

A few critics have raised the suggestion that in the era represented by the NFSS respondents, gay and lesbian parents were more apt to either adopt foster children, or—at the other extreme—faced the forcible placement of their own children in foster care. Either scenario raises concern about the original study's claim that LM/MLR respondents were the most apt to report experience with the foster care system. This concern prompted a detailed exploration of the calendar data for the 21 LM/MLR respondents who reported such an experience, in order to discern the timing of their foster system experience. As with the original study's discussion about the timing of sexual victimization, here too the story is muddied. Three of the 21 LM/MLRs who spent time in foster care did so immediately prior to reporting living in a household with their mother and her female partner—one of the two scenarios anticipated by critics. Four of the 21 spent some time in foster care following their report of living in a household with their mother and her partner—the other scenario that concerned critics. Whether any of these seven cases actually match those scenarios in reality is impossible to know from the data. The remaining 14 cases display calendar data less apt to suggest either of these two scenarios as a likely fit. Just under half of the 21 respondents reported their foster care experience beginning before age 10.

3. Alternative analyses

Tables 1–3 display results in a manner similar to Tables 2–4 in the original study (not shown), with several changes made in response to criticisms:

1. I split the LM/MLRs (hereafter, MLRs) between those who never lived with their mother's same-sex romantic partner and those that have.

Why this particular division? Of the 85 cases wherein the respondent indicated living in residence with both their mother and her female partner, only 19 spent five consecutive years together, and six cases spent 10 consecutive years together. While this is not quite the comparison some critics seek, the statistical power is simply not present for a direct comparison

of the most stable MLRs, given uncommon relationship longevity in their households-of-origin. It is true, though, that greater longevity of such in residence relationships tended to reveal better outcomes at face value.

2. I shifted the 12 cases wherein a respondent reported that both parents had had a same-sex relationship from FGR to MLR.

As noted in the original study, analyses of the household calendar data for these 12 cases revealed comparable exposure to both their mother and father. As a result, there are now 90 MLR cases who never reported living with their mother's partner/girlfriend, 85 MLRs who did, and 63 FGRs. As reported in the original study, the latter group very infrequently reported living with their father and his partner/boyfriend, so this group remains unaltered in its structure.

3. I expanded the total number of groups to 15 in order to better reflect the different experiences of stability and partnering in American households. I did not include an "others" catch-all group in this set of analyses. As a result, the final tables reflect just under 400 fewer cases than in the original study.

Given the outcome measures are the same as employed in the original study, I do not describe their operationalization here. That can be located in the original study's text and its Appendix B. The analytic strategy—an overview featuring both simple between-group means tests as well as an indicator of statistical significance after controlling for several independent variables via outcome-appropriate forms of regression analyses—remains the same as well, for comparability.

As was the case in the original analyses, Tables 1–3 reveal that those adult children who report a maternal same-sex relationship—regardless of whether their mother ever resided with her same-sex partner—look far more similar to adult children of other types of households than they do to those from stably-intact biological families. There are 20 simple statistically-significant differences between group 2 (MLRs who never lived with their mother's same-sex partner) and IBFs, and an identical number between group 3 (MLRs who did live with their mother's same-sex partner for a time) and IBFs. After controls—via regression analysis—there are 21 and 19 statistically-significant differences between groups 2 and 3, respectively, and IBFs. These numbers are a dip from those reported in the original study.

Most of the distinctions between IBFs and groups 2 and 3 are consistent with those reported in the original study. On 16 different outcomes, *both* groups 2 and 3 appear statistically different from IBFs prior to controls (i.e., regression models); the same is true of 13 outcomes after controls. There are nine simple differences between FGRs and IBFs prior to controls, and 12 after them. As in the original study, distinctions between the two MLR groups and IBFs appear in the domains of sexuality, sexual behavior, sexual victimization, household economics and work, educational attainment, smoking, arrests, and retrospective sentiment about family life while growing up.[7]

Carets denote a simple statistically-significant difference between group 3 (MLRs who spent time living with their mother's partner) and all non-IBF groups. Of the 517 possible between-group differences, 89% (or 17%) appear significant at the bivariate level, a decline from the 24% figure when assessing all MLRs together in the original study. Several groups compare similarly to group 3 in terms of very few simple differences:

- Group 4 (FGRs): two differences.
- Group 11 (never-married single mothers with no subsequent relationships): two differences.
- Group 9 (single mothers who subsequently remarried): four differences.
- Group 10 (never-married single mothers with relationships but no marriage): four differences.
- Group 2 (MLRs who did not live with their same-sex partner): four differences.

Group 10 displays by far the most pre- and post-regression statistically-significant differences with IBFs (31 and 23, respectively), and tends to fare consistently poorly across most outcomes which are agreeably suboptimal. Group 3 (MLRs who lived with their mother's partner) compare less favorably with:

- Group 8 (divorced, lived with mother, no subsequent relationships): 12 differences.
- Group 13 (parents married until one died, no subsequent relationships): 15 differences.

In general, groups 8 and 13 fared rather well on many outcomes, shedding light on the likely importance of avoiding further household transitions. Where outcomes are clearly discernible as optimal or suboptimal—for example, educational attainment or STI, respectively—group 8 fares better than groups 6–7, whose only distinction is subsequent maternal romantic relationships and, in group 6's case, remarriage. Additional parental romantic partners, even remarriages, seem to make a (negative) difference. As in the original study, there is much that these analyses cannot document, including causation as well as any effects of sexual orientation. Selectivity is very likely at work on multiple outcomes.

Analyses comparing younger versus older NFSS respondents may prove a fertile avenue of exploration. Initial ancillary analyses suggest that older young adult MLRs seem to have struggled more than younger ones. Whether this is a function

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[7] As noted in the original study text, the NFSS data is insufficiently capable of discerning much information about the context surrounding respondents' sexual victimization. No simplistic conclusions about it ought to be discerned from the analyses.

of time exposure, or more pronounced social stigma further in the past than among the "newest" young adult MLRs, is difficult to say, given the interpretive limitations of this data. Alternately, some challenges may cumulate over time; it may be that the older respondents have simply had more time to experience particular outcomes.

4. Conclusion

This follow-up study has sought to address six common criticisms that have arisen following the July 2012 publication in this journal of the original study entitled, "How different are the adult children of parents who have same-sex relationships?" One in particular, about comparing stable heterosexual couples to stable same-sex couples, is particularly challenging to accomplish with all but the very largest datasets (which, in turn, tend to have fewer interesting outcome measures). It also raises important conceptual and analytic questions about how to navigate persistent instability in the NFSS's MLR and FGR cases. This is complicated by contemporary evidence in the US and Scandinavia suggesting that lesbian relationships in particular—including legally married couples—continue to exhibit instability in excess of heterosexual relationships and even gay male relationships.

Perhaps in social reality there really are two "gold standards" of family stability and context for children's flourishing—a heterosexual stably-coupled household and the same among gay/lesbian households—but no population-based sample analyses is yet able to *consistently confirm wide evidence* of the latter. Moreover, a stronger burden of proof than has been employed to date ought to characterize studies which conclude "no differences", especially in light of longstanding reliance on nonrandom samples of unknown bias and the high risk of making Type II errors in small-sample studies (Marks, 2012; Nock, 2001). In other words, the science here remains young. Until much larger random samples can be drawn and evaluated, the probability-based evidence that exists—including additional NFSS analyses herein—suggests that the biologically-intact two-parent household remains an optimal setting for the long-term flourishing of children.

Of course the flourishing of children involves many other factors besides parental relationship structure and decision-making, as analyses of the NFSS and numerous other datasets confirm. Indeed, most young-adult respondents in the NFSS report ample success and largely avoid problematic physical and emotional difficulties, regardless of their parents' experiences, decisions, and actions.

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