

Attitudes about parenting styles of heterosexual vs. homosexual couples

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BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES

Although countless studies have experimented with different parenting styles of heterosexual parents and their different effects on children, there is insufficient information on the effects of parenting styles within families headed by homosexual parents. The aim of the current study is to obtain a deeper understanding of the perceptions people have about gay and lesbian parenting.

Stephenson, Quick, Atkinson, and Tschida (2005) surveyed parents of junior high school adolescents about several aspects of parenting and drug prevention, and they found that the authoritative parenting style was positively associated with drug-prevention practices.

Brooks and Goldberg (2001) interviewed 10 staff members from a social services agency and 11 focus group participants and found that participants think child welfare services presume homosexuals unfit to raise children, and homosexuals suffer greater problems trying to adopt than heterosexual parents.

It was hypothesized that the permissive gay and lesbian parent ratings would be significantly lower than the permissive heterosexual parent ratings. It was also hypothesized that students would give the highest ratings to the heterosexual authoritative parents. Finally, it was hypothesized that authoritative parenting would be rated higher than permissive parenting within all conditions.



METHOD

Participants

The study involved 91 undergraduates at Stephen F. Austin State University with median age 19. Sixty females and 31 males were recruited mainly of Caucasian decent.

Design

The study was a 2 (parenting style: authoritative, permissive) x 3 (sexuality: gay males, lesbians, heterosexuals) between factorial design experiment. The dependent variable was college students' attitudes about the parents in the scenario. Students' attitudes were measured using the average score for three questions discussed in the materials.

Materials and Procedure

Participants were first given a take-home consent form and then asked to read a short scenario. Six scenarios were used; three depicting an authoritative family, three depicting a permissive family, with both types including a gay male couple, a lesbian couple, or a heterosexual couple. An example from the authoritative scenario is "They are responsive to their children's feelings and needs, and they encourage their children to talk about their problems." An example from the permissive scenario is "They don't set aside time to discuss family rules."

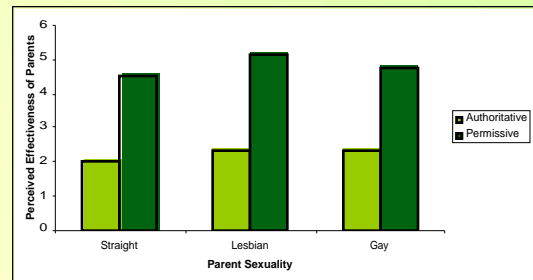
Below each scenario, participants' perceptions of the parents' effectiveness was measured using three questions on a Likert scale with responses ranging from 1 being "very effective" and 6 being "very ineffective." Across the three permissive and three authoritative scenarios, only the names and sexuality of parents changed.

Following the scenarios, participants completed a brief general questionnaire and demographics form including questions about participants' age, ethnicity, and gender, as well as their opinion about homosexuality as a lifestyle and their own parents' parenting style. The scenarios and questionnaires were handed out to participants as they arrived using systematic randomization.

RESULTS

A Cronbach's Alpha was performed and indicated that all three questions were highly related, Cronbach's Alpha = .92. Therefore, for the perceived effectiveness of the parents, an average of the three questions was used in the following analysis.

A 2 (parenting style: authoritative, permissive) x 3 (sexuality: heterosexual, lesbian, gay) between-factor ANCOVA was performed using how acceptable participants believe homosexuality is as a lifestyle as a covariate. There was no significant effect for sexuality, but there was a significant main effect for parenting style, $F(1, 2) = 146.83$, $p < .001$. Parents using the authoritative style ($M = 2.32$) were rated significantly more effective at parenting than parents using the permissive style ($M = 4.87$). There was no significant interaction between variables.



Although the main effect for sexuality of parents wasn't significant, after acceptability of homosexuality was added as a covariate, a slight trend was observed, $p = .19$. Straight parents were rated as the most effective parents ($M = 3.36$), while lesbian parents were rated as the least effective ($M = 3.84$), and gay parents were rated slightly more effective than lesbian parents but still less effective than straight parents ($M = 3.61$).

DISCUSSION

Unexpectedly, most of the participants did not rate lesbian or gay parenting significantly lower than heterosexual parenting, although there was a slight trend. This could also be explained using Galasso's (2006) findings that although progressive and traditional perceivers both viewed the typical woman as being "good and respectable," they differed in what they included as the "typical woman." Progressive perceivers included lesbians as a typical woman, whereas the traditional perceivers did not. Most of SFA's students are from Dallas, Houston, or rural areas and it's possible that because of SFA's diverse population, slightly more progressive perceivers were encountered than in the samples of the previous studies.

Overall, these findings provide an idea of how the younger generation, many of whom have not yet experienced raising children, feel about different types of parenting and homosexual parenting. It also provides some hopeful results for those who strive for more tolerant and accepting views of homosexuals and their quest to adopt and raise their own children.



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