The fundamental conviction that children need both a mother and a father in the home dominates bipartisan family discourse and influences weighty social policy in the United States. What’s more, proponents of this view, including some social scientists, assert social science legitimacy for this claim. The preamble to the 1996 Welfare Reform Act (Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, Pub. L. No. 104 – 193, 110 Stat. 2105, 1996) asserts just that. The Federal Marriage Initiative that diverts money from welfare to promoting heterosexual marriage rests on this premise. On these grounds, the New York Court of Appeals rejected a suit for same-sex marriage (Hernandez v. Robles, 2006), proponents of Proposition 8 convinced California voters to overturn their state supreme court’s ruling in favor of same-sex marriage (McKinley & Goodstein, 2008), and the state of Florida successfully defended its ban on gay adoption rights (Lofton v. Kearney, 2005). Some family court judges still deny child custody to divorced lesbian parents on these grounds. Although such family values are generally identified with the Republican Party and the Bush administration, former President Clinton signed the welfare bill and the Defense of Marriage Act, and President Obama has repeated similar claims and statistics about children’s needs for fathers and has continued many Bush-era marriage promotion policies.

The social science research that is routinely cited, however, does not actually speak to the question of whether or not children need both a mother and a father at home. Instead, proponents generally cite research that compares such families with single parents, thus conflating the number with the gender of parents. At the same time, recurrent claims about the risks of fatherlessness routinely ignore research on same-gender parents that actually can speak directly to the issue. This state of affairs was the launch pad for our article. Much more than hoping to revive an academic debate about the significance of fathers for their children’s welfare, as commentator Strohschein believes, or deciding to conduct another review of research on the effects of lesbian parenthood, as Tasker seems to have construed our project, we set out to ask, “What is the best that social science research can do with the question posed in the public domain, rather than as a nuanced social scientist might wish to frame it, of whether or not the mother-and-father family is best for children?” As one of us has discussed elsewhere (Stacey, 1997, 2004b), and although we certainly wish it were otherwise, courts and policymakers overwhelmingly consider only positivist, quantitative research evidence to qualify as true social science. And so we set out to determine how close existing family research of that sort can come to addressing whether children need both a mother and father in the home. Although we largely agree with Goldberg that gender and sexual orientation are ultimately inextricable, we attempted to review all of the studies we could locate.
that mitigated the widespread error of conflating family structure variables that are extricable. Unlike prior reviews of the research on lesbian and gay parenthood (e.g., Patterson, 2000; Stacey & Biblarz 2001; Tasker, 2005) or the vast literature that discusses the effects of marriage, divorce, and single parenthood on children (e.g., McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Waite & Gallagher, 2000), we examined two distinct bodies of research that hold the number of parents constant—one that compares gay and straight coparenting couples, the other that compares female and male single parents.

Limiting our project in this way allowed us to identify only a few provocative findings that go beyond the stereotype that women, on average, are more involved with children than men, but nothing to support the predominant view that the ideal gender mix of parents is a man and a woman. In the end, we concluded (like two of our commentators) that massive selection effects, unequal access to legal marriage, and the ultimate inextricability of our five core parental variables (gender, sexuality, number, and biogenetic and marital status) make the task of isolating the unique effect of parental gender on children near insurmountable. Put otherwise, social science research does not and cannot support the claim that children need both a mother and a father parenting together.

We would like to thank the commentators for their careful, detailed feedback on our article. Although none of them addressed the central purpose of our methodological strategy, we agree with many of the individual points raised. Both Tasker and Goldberg, for example, call for more research on diversity within gay- and lesbian-parent families. We concur wholeheartedly. Elsewhere, for example, Stacey (e.g., 2006) has unpacked the diversity of pathways to (and away from) parenthood among a diverse sample of gay men in Los Angeles and has documented the astonishing complexity and creativity of varied families they formed (sometimes evolving out of the practice of cruising; Stacey 2004a, 2005, 2006). Goldberg seems to be calling for just this kind of research. Likewise, how could we disagree with Goldberg that we might have attained richer insights had we reviewed much more of the qualitative research. In fact, Biblarz and Savci (in press) identified new qualitative research on diversity among lesbian comother families (e.g., Hequembourg & Farrell, 1999; Moore, 2008) as among the more significant advances in LGBT studies in the past decade and suggested ways in which queer theory could fruitfully inform empirical research.

Similarly, we are well aware (in part from our own past research) that, as Goldberg points out, “fatherless” families, whether comother or single-mother families, often include active male parents, such as noncustodial divorced fathers, committed sperm donors and their partners, grandfathers, uncles, fictive kin, and so on. We also take as a given that gender is never fixed but shaped by social context (e.g., note our discussion of gay fathers who self-identify as mothers and of Risman’s 1987 study of single men who mother). We wish public discourse were at the stage where such academic insights were widely understood, or even at the stage where all family researchers embraced them. Unfortunately, this is far from the reality. In short, the quantitative bias in our article is not ours but the bias of the political, policy, and legal arenas we set out to address.

Unsurprisingly, we do not agree with all of the criticisms raised by the commentators. Our greatest differences are with Strohschein. She claims, for example, that our article focuses on family structure (in her terms, “social address”) variables while ignoring family process variables. Family process variables (concerning couple relationships, divisions of family labor, parental control, support, attachment, involvement, values, activities with children, and so on) dominate our tables and our entire narrative, however. In fact, we composed our tables to feature precisely the links between structure and process that Stohschein claimed that we missed. She also faults us for presuming that all of the heterosexual two-parent couples in the studies we review were legally married even when their marital statuses were not reported. Although this is technically accurate, data on marital status of parents in most of the studies reviewed are available. For example, counts from Census Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) or National Survey of America’s Families (NSAF) applied to the representative sample of the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) suggest that over 90% of the children who lived
with both of their biological (or adoptive) parents in Yeung, Sandberg, Davis-Kean, and Hofferth’s (2005) study were in fact living with married parents (e.g., Fields, 2001). Moreover, Strohschein’s emphasis on the distinction between married and cohabiting statuses stresses precisely the kind of “social address” variables that her critique claimed to challenge. More troubling, she surveys the cohabitation “address” through a heterosexist lens and delivers the (stereo) typical dysfunctional family message. We wonder whether Strohschein realizes that most of the coparenting couples in the research we reviewed are cohabiting couples, and their family processes seem to be functioning pretty well. They just happen to be lesbian couples.

We have smaller differences with our other two interlocutors. Perhaps the most important issue concerns our decision not to conduct a statistical meta-analysis of the studies we reviewed. Tasker faults us for this decision and devotes much of her attention to favorable discussion of two meta-analyses of research on lesbian parenting (Allen & Burrell, 2002; Crowl, Ahn, & Baker, 2008). We have reservations about these analyses. It concerns us that neither study considered the shift from unplanned to planned lesbian parenthood nor explored whether outcomes varied by path to parenthood. Further, Allen and Burrell do not address the crucial question of whether effect sizes varied by study characteristics (moderator analyses are half the reason for conducting a meta-analysis). Crowl et al.’s study is a very careful, useful meta-analysis, but its power is limited by the need to pool effect sizes derived from very different measurements and to restrict its analysis to only 19 studies. This inflates rather than minimizes bias. Because the samples in this literature tend to skew to particular demographics, Crowl et al. might have considered relaxing their criteria to include as many studies as possible that feature diverse samples. We concluded, however, that meta-analysis demands a level of aggregating that would obfuscate rather than illuminate the handful of preliminary research findings that we found most intriguing and potentially important for future research, such as dissolution rates in comother families. We chose to broadly summarize findings rather than conduct a meta-analysis because we believe that there are not yet enough studies targeted to the same outcome for a meta-analysis to provide much added value.

In the end, however, our goal was not to persuade all social scientists of the wisdom of any of our particular methodological choices or our interpretations of particular studies. Rather, our article attempted to persuade more researchers, policymakers, and citizens that, as our concluding lines put it, “to ascertain whether any particular form of family is ideal would demand sorting a formidable array of often inextricable family and social variables. We predict that even ‘ideal’ research designs will find instead that ideal parenting comes in many different genres and genders.”

REFERENCES


