

# Siblings and Sexual Orientation: Products of Alternative Families or the Ones Who Got Away?

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**ABSTRACT.** Lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals (LGBs) often have heterosexual siblings. The authors have conducted several research projects comparing siblings of different sexual orientations, given that siblings usually have the same ethnicity, race, parental socioeconomic status,

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and religious background. This review article presents research on LGBs and heterosexuals, all recruited via siblings. In general, heterosexual siblings are more mainstream in terms of being in long-term relationships, having children, belonging to a formal religion, and having more contact with their family of origin. LGB siblings are more politically liberal, more highly educated, and have moved away from their families of origin. The article speculates about how siblings who grow up in the same families could be so demographically different in adulthood. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2005 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

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Consider the following two anecdotes:

George is a 32-year-old gay man from a large, Irish-Catholic family of six siblings. Three of his brothers are gay and one of his two sisters is bisexual. When George was in first grade, his mother became romantically involved with a woman (George's first grade teacher—a nun!) and has lived with her ever since.

When she was 17, Rebecca escaped from an arranged marriage in an ultra-religious Hasidic Jewish community. She took a bus to San Francisco, where she is currently in law school and in a relationship with another woman. Her five brothers and two sisters have all married and remained in the Hasidic community. Rebecca has little contact with them.

George and Rebecca are real people (though their names and some identifying information have been changed). Both are unusual—few families in the United States have that many children, very few people are Hasidic, and it is very rare to have so many people in one family identify as LGB. Yet George and Rebecca represent the extremes of what this article will focus on: do LGB individuals come from families that are also non-traditional, or are they the ones who got away from conventional fami-

lies? Our research projects find that one of these extremes is much more common than the other, and this will be described below.

How much do most LGBs know about their friends' and lovers' siblings? Probably not too much given that LGBs tend to socialize more with friends than with family of origin (Kurdek & Schmidt, 1987). LGBs who are closeted may never have introduced their lover or LGB friends to their siblings so that the only information we have about those siblings is via anecdotes and photographs. In the LGB communities, we spend a lot of time discussing our parents (e.g., should we come out to them; will they accept our lover as a member of the family), but otherwise probably spend more time describing our ex-lovers, therapists, and pets than our relatives, including our siblings.

Yet there is something fascinating about LGBs and their siblings. Most people are the same general age as their siblings and also the same race and ethnicity. They were raised in the same religious tradition. Despite the increasing divorce rate and concomitant blended families, most siblings grew up in the same household and attended the same schools at least for a while. The parent(s) or other adults who took care of them had a particular income, educational level, and occupation, so that siblings, especially if close in age, came from similar socioeconomic backgrounds. But now, in adulthood, one of those siblings identifies as LGB and one as heterosexual. How did this come about? What other factors are different (or similar) among siblings who differ in sexual orientation?

### *SIBLINGS AS A COMPARISON GROUP FOR LGBs*

We did not set out to conduct a profile of LGB and heterosexual siblings. Instead, we were looking for a good way to find heterosexuals who could serve as a comparison group for LGBs. Researchers who study LGBs and want to compare them with heterosexuals face a number of methodological obstacles. One way to find large numbers of LGBs is to distribute questionnaires at LGB community events (such as gay pride marches) or organizations (such as lesbian bars) or place advertisements asking for participants in LGB newsletters or magazines. The problem is that such sources do not yield too many heterosexual participants. Conversely, if researchers use general sources (e.g., random telephone calls, ads in city newspapers), only a tiny fraction (1 to 2%) of participants will identify as LGB. This necessitates contacting thousands of participants to obtain even a small sample of LGBs. Fi-

nally, it is possible to recruit participants from LGB community sources and just compare the results to published studies of the "general population," presumed heterosexual. This too has some weaknesses—the two samples were often collected in different ways or at different times. Also, LGBs are usually demographically different from general survey data, so the researchers have to control statistically for these differences.

One solution we had to this methodological dilemma was the idea of recruiting LGBs via community sources and then asking them to recruit their heterosexual siblings. That way, LGB and heterosexual participants would be surveyed via the same methods, the same time period, and the same measures. Our first study was designed to focus only on lesbians and their heterosexual sisters. We knew that we wanted to include lesbians who were not out to their heterosexual sisters so we made sure that the questionnaires did not state anywhere that ours was a study of sexual orientation. Among many demographic items and other subscales in the questionnaire were two items about sexual orientation (versus, for example, three about religion). Our main interest was the feasibility of the study—for instance, would enough heterosexual sisters participate?

This first study (Rothblum & Factor, 1999) taught us a number of things. In many cases lesbians had multiple sisters and all of them wanted to participate. In hindsight, this had a major benefit: the response rate of the index participants (the original participants who contacted us) was much higher than those of their sisters. But, with multiple sisters, we ended up with nearly identical numbers of lesbians (314) and heterosexual women (315). Furthermore, some of the respondents (133) were bisexual so we could compare bisexual women with lesbians and heterosexual women. Finally, some index participants had sisters who were themselves lesbian or bisexual. This allowed us to compare index participants with siblings who were similar in sexual orientation to see if recruitment method (e.g., bisexual women who actively sought us out versus those dragged into the study by their sisters) made a difference (it didn't).

Our second study (Rothblum, Balsam & Mickey, in press) recruited lesbians, gay men, and bisexual women and men, and their siblings (whether heterosexual or LGB). Once again, we wanted to include LGBs who were not out to their siblings but we also wanted to survey LGBs about a number of issues specific to the coming out process. Consequently, we sent every participant a questionnaire printed on white paper, and sent LGB participants an additional questionnaire on laven-

der paper with items about the LGB experience. Based on the self-rating of sexual orientation, there were 348 heterosexual women, 125 bisexual women, 332 lesbians, 185 heterosexual men, 38 bisexual men, and 226 gay men in this study.

The third study took advantage of the recent same-sex civil union legislation in the state of Vermont. We obtained copies of all civil union certificates from the first year of this legislation (July 1, 2000, to June 30, 2001) and wrote to all the couples. We also wanted to compare these civil union couples (two-thirds of whom were lesbians, ten percent people of color, and 80% from outside Vermont) to same-sex couples in their friendship circle who had not had civil unions, and also with heterosexual married siblings and their spouses. The analyses we will report on here are only those of civil union couples and heterosexual married couples recruited from their siblings (that is, we will not be discussing results of same-sex couples not in civil unions). This sample consisted of 212 lesbians in civil unions, 219 married heterosexual women, 123 gay men in civil unions, and 193 married heterosexual men.

This study (Solomon, Rothblum & Balsam, in press) differed from our first two studies in several ways. First, we had access to a whole population (rare in LGB research, where many participants are closeted or unknown to the research team), even though we had limited funding and thus only sent questionnaires to a subset of this sample. Furthermore, the civil union certificates also contained some information (year of birth of both partners, their race and ethnicity, educational level, where they lived, and whether they had been married heterosexually), which allowed us to compare characteristics of our sample with the whole population. This study was limited to couples in legal relationships (whether lesbian, gay, or heterosexual). Unlike the first two studies, we included only lesbian and gay male couples in civil unions who were out to their heterosexual married siblings.

The results of these studies point out many differences among lesbian, gay, bisexual, and heterosexual siblings (whenever we refer to *differences* we mean those that were statistically significant). A few words of caution are in order. Not all variables mentioned below were included in all three studies. We compared participants separately by gender. Thus, heterosexual men were compared with gay men (and in Study 2 to a very small sample of bisexual men). Heterosexual women were compared with lesbians and in Study 2 with bisexual women (Study 1 also included bisexual women in some analyses). We will present the results in three general areas: (1) education and moving away from the



family of origin; (2) relationships, children, and division of labor; and (3) religion and politics.

## FINDINGS

### *Education and Moving Away from the Family of Origin*

*Lesbians and bisexual women have higher levels of education than do heterosexual women; the effect is weaker for gay men.* Prior convenience studies have found lesbians to be highly educated (e.g., Bradford, Ryan & Rothblum, 1994; Morris & Rothblum, 1999). This fact was often interpreted as the result of convenience sampling; for example, it was assumed that educated individuals would be more likely to subscribe to LGB periodicals and thus see ads about research. But our research shows this effect even when lesbians are compared with their heterosexual sisters. In all three studies, lesbians have higher educational levels than heterosexual women. In the two studies that included bisexual women, they too surpass the educational levels of heterosexual women. On average, lesbians and bisexual women have a college degree or some graduate training whereas heterosexual women have some years of college but not a degree.

Our studies were not longitudinal, so we cannot identify which came first—coming out as lesbian or bisexual versus obtaining higher education. For example, heterosexual women may have married or had children at a young age (more about these variables later). Thus, heterosexual women may have dropped out of college or started college at a later age. Furthermore, universities in most countries are located in major cities but in the United States these can also be in rural or isolated locations including prestigious colleges (e.g., Cornell) and land grant universities (e.g., University of Illinois) that have graduate departments. There are many variables involved in attending a particular college such as identifying a college that offers what you want, being accepted by that college, and being able to afford attending that college. Women with husbands and children might be less likely to uproot their families in search of higher education.

Lesbians may particularly seek out education because they are aware that they will not marry a man with a higher salary to support them or supplement what they earn. Thus, they need to think seriously of their education preparing them for a job or career (see Dunne, 1997; 1998 for lesbians' career preparations and choices).

These possibilities assume that higher education follows coming out as lesbian or bisexual. The converse may be true as well. Faderman (1991) has argued that colleges expose women to feminism and lesbianism. In that case, the sibling who attended college is the one more likely to come out as a sexual minority. Are there ways in which the daughter who moves away to attend college or who seeks a higher level of education than her siblings or parents is already predisposed to be more independent or to seek out novel experiences? Either way, a lesbian or bisexual sexual orientation is associated with higher education.

Education was not as strongly associated with sexual orientation among men. Gay men have higher levels of education in one study but not the other. Bisexual men have similar levels of education to heterosexual men (and thus lower levels than gay men). It is likely that for heterosexual men, marriage and children are not barriers to higher education the way they are for heterosexual women. Furthermore, the possibility that colleges may be a way that students learn about LGB issues may be less salient for men, because gay men reach developmental milestones in the sexual identity process at earlier ages than do women (Garnets & Kimmel, 2003).

*LGBs are underpaid relative to their educational level.* Despite higher educational levels, we found no significant differences in income between LGB and heterosexual siblings. In the general population, income and educational levels are correlated (people with more education, on average, earn more money). This means that LGBs are underpaid for their educational level. It is possible that LGBs face discrimination in the workplace or in hiring practices so that their income is not commensurate with their abilities (Badgett, 2001). It is also possible that LGBs prioritize workplace factors other than income such as choosing to work for a company with gay-affirmative practices or one that is in a liberal location. Or, LGBs may select jobs that have a social justice component rather than those aimed at advancement or high incomes. Whatever the cause, it is important to point out that the comparable income between LGBs and heterosexual siblings counters the stereotype in the media that LGBs (especially gay men) are financially very well off.

*Heterosexual women are more likely to be homemakers.* The role of homemaker is reserved almost exclusively for women who are heterosexually married. In all three studies, about one-fifth to one-quarter of heterosexual women are homemakers which is not a role that has high status in our society. For men and also for women who are not married, very few identify with the role of homemaker.

*Gay men have moved to large cities.* Both convenience surveys and nationally representative studies have found a high proportion of gay men live in large urban areas (e.g., Laumann, Gagnon, Michael & Michaels, 1994). It is hard to know from those studies whether gay men have moved to large cities or whether those researchers were disproportionately targeting urban gay men (e.g., by using snowball sampling or distributing surveys at large gay events). Our research consistently shows that gay men live in large cities about twice as often as do heterosexual men recruited from siblings who presumably grew up in the same place. Thus, it is likely that gay men gravitate from rural areas and smaller cities to the large, urban areas known for their gay communities.

*Lesbians, too, have moved away from their family of origin.* In Study 1, lesbians live further in miles from their mother and father than their heterosexual sisters. They have also moved to their current location from a greater distance than have their heterosexual sisters. In Study 2, lesbians had attended a college that was further from home than the one that heterosexual women attended.

*There are different reasons why lesbian, bisexual and heterosexual women move to a new location.* We asked participants how long they had lived in their current location, and the reason for moving there. Lesbians and bisexual women are more likely than heterosexual women to report that they had moved for their own education. Conversely, heterosexual women are more likely than lesbians or bisexual women to indicate that they had moved for their partner's job or their child's education. Heterosexual women have lived in their current location for more years than lesbians or bisexual women. These results point to ways that lesbians prioritize their own lives, whereas heterosexual women move for husbands or children. One could speculate that gender roles in heterosexual relationships do not allow women as much choice over geographic moves for their own career or education to the extent that men have. Gay, bisexual, and heterosexual men do not differ on these variables.

*Lesbians perceive less support from family than do heterosexual women, and gay men perceive more support from friends than do heterosexual men.* Study 3 asked couples about perceived social support from family and friends. Heterosexual married women perceive more support from family of origin than do lesbians in civil unions (gay men do not differ from heterosexual men on this measure). However, gay men perceive more support from friends than do heterosexual married men (lesbians do not differ from heterosexual women on this measure).

These results fit with the results described above that lesbians attended a college that was further away and also live further from their parents in adulthood. Thus, lesbians may leave home because there is less to lose or else lesbians may drift apart emotionally from their families of origin because they live further away. Gay men may also move to large cities to find friends, or else have more friends because they live in a large city. Traditional male gender roles may not allow heterosexual men to have close friendships, whereas male friendships are highly valued in gay male communities. These geographic moves may enable lesbians and gay men to be more out (for example, to friends and co-workers) without the knowledge of their family.

*Heterosexual couples have more contact with family of origin than do same-sex couples.* Study 3 asked a number of questions about contact with family of origin. Heterosexual married women have more contact with their mother than do lesbians in civil unions, and also initiate more contact with their partner's mother and father. Heterosexual married men initiate more contact with their partner's father, and also report that their father makes them feel "part of the family," compared with gay men in civil unions. These results mesh with the findings above that LGBs have moved further away from their parents. Parents may be less supportive of their LGB children so that LGBs have less reason to visit or contact their parents. LGBs may not be "out" to their parents and thus would not want to introduce their partner to their parents, or meet their partner's parents. Finally, LGBs may have less in common with their family of origin (e.g., values, politics, lifestyle, etc.) and thus spend less time with them.

### *Relationships, Children, and Division of Labor*

*Heterosexuals have been in relationships longer than LGBs.* Studies 1 and 2 did not focus specifically on couples. In those studies, lesbians are no less likely than heterosexual women to be in a partnered relationship. When we looked only at women in partnered relationships, lesbians have been in their current relationship for a shorter duration (six to seven years on average) than heterosexual women (12 years on average). Bisexual women are less likely to be in a partnered relationship than either lesbian or heterosexual women, and have been in their relationship for a shorter duration (five years on average) than heterosexual women. For men, the results are somewhat different. Gay men are less likely to be in partnered relationships than are heterosexual or bisexual men. But when we looked only at men who were in partnered relation-



ships, the difference in length of relationship among gay (nine years), bisexual (seven years), or heterosexual (10 years) men was not significant. In Study 3, which focused only on couples in legalized relationships, couples were asked when they first met, when they began dating, and when they moved in together. On all these measures, heterosexual married couples report more years than do lesbian or gay male couples in civil unions. For example, heterosexual married couples have lived together for 15 years on average, compared with nine years for lesbians and 12 years for gay men in civil unions.

A number of factors may influence relationship longevity. For heterosexuals, marriage is not only personally desirable, but something that family and friends encourage and support. LGBs may not have the support of their family to enter into same-sex relationships, and in fact family members may even be relieved when the same-sex relationship breaks up (for example, hoping that the next partner will be heterosexual). Whereas heterosexual marriage is a federal, legal institution, this is not the case for same-sex marriage. Thus, same-sex couples can break up without a legal divorce (even for same-sex couples in civil unions in Vermont, 80% are from out of state where the legality of the relationship is not recognized).

*Gay men are less monogamous than heterosexuals or lesbians.* Study 3 asked couples whether they had had sex outside their relationship and also whether they had an agreement that non-monogamy was permitted under certain circumstances. Relatively few lesbians in civil unions or heterosexual married women or men report this. However, 40% of gay men in civil unions have an agreement that non-monogamy is permitted and over half have had sex outside their current relationship. Prior research has also found that non-monogamy is an accepted part of gay male culture (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Peplau et al., in press), and that gay male couples had a specific agreement about sex outside their relationship (Hickson, Davies, Hunt, Weatherburn, McManus & Coxon, 1992).

*LGBs are less likely to have children than heterosexuals.* Despite the media focus on lesbian and gay parents, LGBs are less likely to have children than heterosexual siblings. In Study 2, over half of heterosexual women and men have children, compared with 34% of bisexual men, 19% of lesbians, 14% of bisexual women, and 9% of gay men. Among couples in Study 3, 80% of married heterosexuals have children, compared with 34% of lesbians and 18% of gay men in civil unions. The fact that heterosexuals are more likely to have children may also explain why they remain in relationships for a longer duration—per-

haps even staying in unhappy relationships for the sake of the children. However, there are increasingly more options for LGBs wanting to become parents and there is more societal support (both emotional and tangible, such as laws allowing adoption by two same-sex parents). Thus, this difference may be minimized in the future.

*Same-sex couples share housework, childcare, and finances more than heterosexual couples.* Study 3 included subscales of housework and finances (whose income pays for specific items such as rent or groceries). We also asked participants with children what proportion of the childcare they do. Not surprisingly, given prior research (Peplau & Spalding, 2000), lesbian and gay male couples share these activities equally, whereas heterosexual married couples are more polarized, with women doing most of the childcare and housework and men paying for more items. These results are particularly interesting because all heterosexuals in that study had a lesbian or gay sibling or in-law so they were benefiting from a couple in their immediate family who could serve as a model for equality. Thus, it seems that male/female gender roles and scripts are hard for heterosexual married couples to escape. In contrast, lesbians and gay men are less traditional because there are no scripts for male-male or female-female couples.

### *Religion and Politics*

*LGBs are less religious than heterosexuals.* We asked participants to indicate their religion while growing up, their current religion, the importance of religion, and how often they attend religious services. Not surprisingly, LGB and heterosexual siblings do not differ in childhood religion—over three-quarters were raised in a formal religion, usually Catholic or Protestant. In adulthood, heterosexuals are generally still practicing the religion in which they were raised. However, LGBs are more likely to report that their spiritual beliefs in adulthood do not fit a formal religion, or that they have no religion. LGBs raised Jewish (about 10%) still identify as Jewish in adulthood possibly because being Jewish is viewed as a cultural and ethnic identity as well as a religious one.

Lesbians and bisexual women also report a lower frequency of attending religious services than heterosexual women. We did not find this difference for men, although gay male couples rate religion as less important to them compared with heterosexual married men. It is not surprising that LGBs have moved away from traditional religions in adulthood. The same factors that permit some individuals to question a

conventional sexual orientation may also result in questioning of conventional religious practices. In addition, most formal religions are not supportive of being LGB, resulting in many LGBs feeling alienated by their church or synagogue.

*LGBs are more politically liberal than heterosexuals.* Only Study 3 asked participants about their political views. One question asked how participants would describe their political outlook, from extremely liberal to extremely conservative. Another asked how sympathetic participants felt towards the feminist movement. LGBs are more liberal and pro-feminist than heterosexuals, who are closer to the mid-point on these items.

### *Which Siblings Become Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, or Heterosexual?*

*Who is more typical: George or Rebecca?* Our studies do not show that LGBs typically come from non-traditional families (although this had been our guess before we began this research). Quite the contrary, there is strong evidence that LGBs are the outliers (no pun intended!) among their siblings. They are the ones who get away, both geographically and emotionally. Gay men end up in large cities and receive their social support from friends rather than family. Lesbians and bisexual women move for their own education, attend colleges that are further from home than those that heterosexual women attend, and are more highly educated than their sisters. In sum, although Rebecca in the anecdote at the beginning of this article is an extreme case (with many siblings and from an ultra-religious family), LGBs are more likely to come from traditional families like hers.

How do lesbians and gay men, reared in traditional families, become different and get away (or get away and then become different)? It will always be challenging to conduct longitudinal research on the coming out process for lesbians and gay men. Many LGBs report feeling different even at a young age though they may not have come out until adulthood. However, many heterosexuals report feeling different in adolescence as well. The number of LGBs in the general population (or at least those willing to identify as such to researchers) is very small (Laumann et al., 1994) so extremely large numbers of adolescent and young adult sibling groups would have to be followed over time for even small samples of LGBs to be identified eventually.

A host of demographic factors in our research studies differentiate LGBs and heterosexual siblings so it is hard to know the progression of these factors. Do LGBs go to liberal colleges or progressive cities and

then become less traditionally religious? Or do less religious siblings obtain higher education because there is less pressure for them to get married? Does lower support from families and less contact with these families precede or follow moving away? Or does being LGB result in less family support? Do liberal politics precede or follow coming out as LGB?

We do not want to ignore LGBs who come from alternative families. George, in the anecdote at the beginning of this article, comes from an unusual family but most of us know LGBs who have another LGB sibling or LGB parent or whose siblings are themselves quite non-traditional in other ways. For example, more children are being reared by LGB parents who are out about their own sexual orientation. Recently, Stacey and Biblarz (2001) reviewed the literature on children reared by lesbian mothers. Even though the sample sizes are small and the children were often still quite young when the research was conducted, there is evidence that, overall, the children of lesbians may be more non-traditional than those of heterosexuals.

We are also aware that traditional families are declining in frequency. U.S. Census data indicate that 5.5 million Americans were living together and not married in 2000, compared with 1.1 million in 1970, and nearly half of single mothers in 2000 had never been married (Eskridge, 2001). More than half of all marriages ultimately end in divorce. Thus, children who come from traditional families are becoming the exception rather than the norm.

*Who becomes bisexual?* Even in Study 2, where we made a concerted effort to recruit bisexuals, we ended up with fewer bisexual women than lesbians or heterosexual women and a very small sample of bisexual men. Nevertheless, even these small samples show many statistically significant effects illustrating the importance of not generalizing from lesbians and gay men to bisexuals.

Looking across the results above, bisexual women are more like lesbians than heterosexual women on many variables, including educational level, religion in adulthood, duration of their current relationship, children, years they have lived in their current location, and reasons for moving. Like lesbians, over 70% of bisexual women have never been married to men. However, bisexual men are more like heterosexual men than gay men, including educational level, currently being in a relationship, having children, and size of city or town. About half of bisexual men had ever been married compared with only 13% of gay men.

What could explain these differences between bisexual women and men? Possibly, bisexual women are more connected with lesbian organizations, events, and communities so that bisexual women are (or become) more demographically similar to lesbians (for example, by knowing more women in their communities who are highly educated or not religious). Maybe more women than men identify as bisexual (accounting for the larger number of bisexual women in our sample). It is possible that there are more organizations for bisexual women than men, or that women are more likely to join these groups. Or, there may be more bias against bisexual men than bisexual women in the dominant society.

*Who becomes heterosexual?* Our research consistently finds that LGBs have heterosexual siblings who are, on the whole, quite traditional. Thus, LGBs have siblings who are married, have children, and live closer to where they grew up. These heterosexual siblings belong to formal religions and attend religious services. Their educational level is more in line with U.S. Census data. They are emotionally closer to their family of origin. The women do housework and childcare, and the men take care of the finances.

Although it may not seem surprising that heterosexuals come from traditional families, our research raises the question of how heterosexuals remain traditional even when they have an LGB sibling. Why are these heterosexual siblings not tempted to move further away from home, or attend graduate school? Are they out to their local community about having an LGB sibling? Or is there extra pressure by parents on siblings to remain faithful to family values when one child has come out as LGB?

Other researchers have shown that siblings may experience the same family environment quite differently. Feinberg and Hetherington (2001) argue that parents treat children in different ways on variables such as warmth and negativity so that parenting should be viewed as a within-family variable. Additionally, siblings may emphasize characteristics that highlight their own uniqueness in order to de-identify with one another (e.g., Schachter, 1985).

A recent book entitled *The pecking order: Which siblings succeed and why* (Conley, 2004) focuses on how siblings within the same family can have such different life paths. Using large databases, the author found that birth order is less important in predicting success than family size, attention and quality time from parents, and how much of the family's economic resources are devoted to the sibling. Based on interviews, Conley speculates that sexual orientation interacts with family

income to influence siblings. Those siblings who are LGB and from wealthy families will be downwardly economically mobile (e.g., less likely to inherit the family business) whereas those from poor families will be upwardly mobile (leaving home to find the middle-class LGB communities). Rebecca's father was on welfare when she was growing up. She has had more formal secular education than her siblings or parents so her story fits in with Conley's theory. However, regardless of how society defines success, Rebecca's Hasidic family would consider her a failure since she has not married a man or had children, and she is no longer religious. Also, in many traditional families, being married, having children, being religious, living close to the family of origin, engaging in strict gender roles, and following the politics of the religious leader are the norm. Thus, it could be argued that Rebecca's siblings may be non-traditional in other ways that were not the focus of the present studies.

These studies also are not representative of people of color since the overwhelming majority (about 90%) of respondents in each study were European American. Consequently, people who are African American, Latina/o, Asian American, Pacific East Islander, Native American, or of non-American origin are underrepresented. In Study 3, where we have data about everyone who had a civil union in Vermont, the percentage of respondents of color in our sample who had had civil unions was the same as people of color in the whole civil union population. Perhaps fewer lesbians and gay male couples of color who desired to be joined in civil unions were willing to travel to Vermont, a state that is known to be particularly (i.e., 95.5%) white. Also, gays and lesbians of color may not have the same financial resources as their European American cohorts. This would inhibit their ability to pay for the travel and lodging costs of a trip to Vermont. Similarly, in Studies 1 and 2, fewer participants of color may have been able to afford subscriptions to LGB magazines (where we placed our ads about the study) or gone to LGB bars or bookstores (where our study announcements were posted).

Our research just scratches the surface of all the ways in which sexual orientation of siblings may affect their lives. We have focused mainly on demographic factors, and we suspect that there are a host of developmental, psychological, sociopolitical, and economic factors as well. We don't know which factors precede others, nor do we know which ones precede or follow coming out as LGB versus heterosexual. But we do know that siblings are a rich source of data, as well as a methodological innovation for comparing LGBs with heterosexual who grew up in similar environments yet are different in adulthood.



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