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The Families of Lesbians and Gay men: A New Frontier in Family Research

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Abstract:

To examine the extent to which the family relations of lesbians and gay men are integrated into the family literature, we reviewed over 8,000 articles published between 1980 and 1993 in nine journals that publish family research. Our review shows that research on lesbian and gay families is quite limited, and that, where these families have been studied, they have been problematized and their diversity has been overlooked. We describe and define lesbian and gay families, illustrating their diversity and challenging the neglect of this population in family studies. We direct researchers' attention toward a social ecologies model that incorporates the dynamics of family relationships. We discuss theoretical implications of studying lesbian and gay families, and propose research directions to improve our knowledge of these families and families in general.

Key Words:

gay men, heterosexism, homosexuality, lesbian and gay families, lesbians, sexual orientation.

Article:

A paradigm shift is occurring in family studies, from viewing the family as a monolithic entity to recognizing family pluralism (Cheal, 1991; Scanzoni, Polonko, Teachman, & Thompson, 1989; Sprey, 1990; Thomas & Wilcox, 1987). Recent works have cited the elaboration of existing family structures (Acock & Demo, 1994) and the emergence of new family forms (Baber & Allen, 1992). Recognition of diversity by race, class, and gender are at the heart of this shift (Thompson, 1992; Walker, 1993). Feminist scholars have made impressive progress in deconstructing assumptions about women's locations in families (Ferree, 1990; Glenn, 1987; Thompson & Walker, 1989; Thorne, 1982), but sexual orientation has been virtually ignored. Assessing the state of family theory and research, Doherty, Boss, LaRossa, Schumm, and Steinmetz (1993) cited lesbian and gay family research as one of the "major streams of family scholarship that have not yet influenced mainstream family science" (p. 16).

Families that include lesbian and gay individuals are part of the increasingly diverse family landscape. Lesbians and gay men are involved in family relationships as sons and daughters, as partners, as parents and stepparents, and as extended and chosen kin. In a comprehensive review of research on lesbian and gay families, Laird (1993) observed that only a small core of studies have been conducted on this population, providing brief glimpses of the everyday lives of these families. Three areas comprise the core of our knowledge base to date: (a) same-sex partnerships and romantic relationships (e.g., Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Kurdek, in press; Peplau, 1991); (b) lesbian mothers (e.g., Lewin, 1993) and, to a lesser degree, gay fathers (e.g., Bozett, 1987b); and (c) the psychological development and social adjustment of children of lesbian and gay parents (e.g., Bozett, 1987a; Patterson, 1992, 1994a). These studies reflect a needed shift in the research literature and public discourse from a deficit stance about "homosexuals as individuals" to a focus on the familial and social contexts in which lesbians and gay men live (Laird, 1993). Although this body of work forms an important base for beginning to conceptualize how sexual orientation impacts family experiences (Patterson, 1994b), much more

work needs to be done in order to integrate the family relations of lesbians and gay men into mainstream family studies.

Sexist and heterosexist assumptions continue to underlie most of the research on families by focusing analysis on heterosexual partnerships and parenthood. Lesbians and gay men are thought of as individuals, but not as family members. This reflects the society-wide belief that "gayness" and family are mutually exclusive concepts, a belief that prevails because "the same-sex family, more than any other form, challenges fundamental patriarchal notions of family and gender relationships" (Laird, 1993, p. 295). Experience that does not fit the narrow definitions of family and kinship fails to be named or included in research investigations (Laird, 1993). The inclusion of lesbian and gay family experiences into representative studies of the population has yet to occur. By ignoring the diverse structures, processes, and outcomes of lesbian and gay families in main-stream family research, family scholars have failed to capitalize on opportunities to contribute to new theoretical understandings of families.

Perhaps some of the invisibility and silence surrounding these families is due to the lack of a clear agenda defining what researchers need to do. Given the limited information about family structure and process related to the households of lesbians and gay men, we argue that researchers must move beyond the assumption of gay and lesbian households as a social address. A social address, as Bronfenbrenner and Crouter (1983) explained, is an "environmental label--with no attention to what the environment is like, what people are living there, what they are doing, or how the activities taking place could affect the child" (pp. 361-362). We argue that, in addition to examining family structure, researchers must focus attention on family processes such as attitudes and beliefs about childrearing, decision-making and conflict resolution strategies, and parental support and discipline. A more adequate conceptualization than an exclusive focus on structure examines the person in relation to various family processes and within multiple interdependent and overlapping contexts (e.g., employment and family).

In this article, we will report on our examination of nine journals that publish family research and document the limited attention given to lesbian and gay families. We will describe and define the families of lesbians and gay men to illustrate their diversity and to highlight why the neglect of this population is no longer tenable. Our goal is to direct researchers' attention away from a social address model and toward a social ecologies model that incorporates the dynamics of family relationships (e.g., parent-child, stepparent-stepchild, grandparent-grandchild, aunt/uncle-child, couple, siblings, peers, etc.) and the multiple contexts in which sexual orientation is relevant. We will discuss theoretical implications for family studies from the study of lesbian and gay families. Finally, we will propose a research agenda to stimulate and guide future investigations that integrate lesbian and gay family experience. Our work is informed by three theoretical orientations prominent in family studies: ecological, feminist, and life course.

DEFINING THE FAMILIES OF LESBIANS AND GAY MEN

Diversity

There are millions of lesbians and gay men in the United States and throughout the world about whose family lives we know very little. A preliminary step in the recognition and investigation of such families is attention to issues of identification and definition. There are many types of families that include lesbians and gay men, requiring family researchers to adopt a broad or inclusionary definition, especially in the early stages of inquiry. Yet we must be careful in labeling families. Family researchers have grappled with the limitations imposed by defining families as intact, broken, remarried, dysfunctional, military, or alcoholic. We maintain that it is equally problematic to define families that include lesbians or gay men as heterosexual families, or to define them as lesbian or gay families if some members of the family are heterosexual. In our view, levels of analysis must be distinguished clearly, and it should be explicit that individuals, not families, have sexual orientations. At the same time, in relationships where individuals share a sexual orientation, it is reasonable to define such relationships as lesbian or gay partnerships.

Defining families becomes more complex when family members have different sexual orientations (e.g., family of origin relationships) and when there are dependent children (e.g., parent-child relationships). The proper term for families in which there is at least one lesbian or gay member is a point of controversy. Paradoxically, labels--which are necessary to define a population for study and to provide common ground for accumulating data about a subject matter--can reduce the complexity of the phenomenon to a monolithic entity. Patterson (1994b) observed that many issues in families are the same, regardless of sexual orientation, but, in other ways, the issues lesbian and gay members face are quite different. Because of the importance of those differences and the necessity of drawing attention to the unique circumstances they face, such as coming out and prejudice, Patterson (1994b) has supported the label "lesbian and gay families" for defining families that include at least one gay or lesbian member. There are advantages and disadvantages of using the terms "lesbian and gay families" and "same-sex families," and Laird (1993) concludes that any attempt to define families is fraught with political and ideological implications. In the strictest sense, families in which members have different sexual orientations require "some new terminology such as 'mixed gay/straight' or 'dual-orientation' families" (Laird, 1993, p. 282). Thus, a gay adult from a heterosexual family of origin lives in a dual-orientation family, but he and his partner maintain a gay household. Further, although the terminology has not been widely used, a gay partnership, with or without the presence of children or stepchildren, constitutes a gay family. Limitations of the term lesbian and gay families notwithstanding, families and households containing lesbian and gay individuals have been systematically excluded from family research, requiring us to define the types of families that need to be identified and studied.

Toward this end, and recognizing the tremendous diversity characterizing the families in which lesbians and gay men live (Demo & Allen, 1994), we suggest that lesbian and gay families are defined by the presence of two or more people who share a same-sex orientation (e.g., a couple), or by the presence of at least one lesbian or gay adult rearing a child. Of course, many other families more properly would be termed dual-orientation families, and we argue that all families involving one or more lesbian or gay member(s)--whether child, adolescent, one or more parents, grandparents, or other kin--represent families that are influenced in various ways by issues and dynamics associated with homosexuality. Lesbian, gay, or bisexual individuals need not reside in the household to influence family relationships (parent-child, sibling, couple, or extended kin relations). For many reasons, residential and coresidential status are likely to vary in the case of gay male and lesbian parents, with this variation impacting on family relations (see Crosbie-Burnett & Helmbrecht, 1993; Koepke, Hare, & Moran, 1992); that is, lesbians are far more likely than gay men to have custody or to reside with their children (Laird, 1993).

To illustrate some of the family issues associated with homosexuality, consider the multiple life course trajectories and complex family dynamics of a common three-member family structure: a child living with her heterosexual mother and having a nonresidential relationship with her gay father. The identification and study of such families requires a sensitivity to, and broad definition of, lesbian and gay families. Until now, family researchers have ignored these populations, assumed their heterosexuality, studied them as single-parent families, and thus neglected a critical element in the formation, composition, and daily interaction of these families. Using the same illustration and viewing the family from the child's point of view, the daughter's family also may comprise her father's live-in male partner (or her gay stepfather) and his kin. Although research on these relationships is sparse, it is clear that many lesbians and gay men who are partnered or were formerly partnered live in step family structures, and it is likely that such families are as diverse in their dynamics as stepfamilies in which all members are heterosexual.

A further advantage of a broad definition is it enables us to better understand the rich diversity characterizing lesbian and gay families. As with heterosexual families, we lack even a rudimentary taxonomy for describing family diversity. Yet countless variations of lesbian and gay families exist, including families that "are formed from lovers, friends, biological and adopted children, blood relatives, stepchildren, and even ex-lovers, families that do not necessarily share a common household" (Laird, 1993, p. 294). Among these are families that are diverse with respect to the number and sexual orientation of adults heading the household. For example, there may be one adult lesbian, one adult gay male, two adults (both gay males), two adults (both lesbians), two

adults (one lesbian and one heterosexual or bisexual partner), two adults (one gay male and one heterosexual or bisexual partner), or some combination of more than two lesbian, gay, and/or heterosexual partners. A second dimension of diversity within lesbian and gay families is signified by the presence of lesbian or gay children, adolescents, or adult children in families headed by one or more gay adults--that is, families in which there are at least two members with a lesbian or gay identity. A third dimension is characterized by the presence of a lesbian or gay child, adolescent, or adult child living with one or more heterosexual parents. Fourth, there are lesbian or gay families consisting of stepparent-stepchild and/or stepsibling relations involving at least one lesbian or gay family member, again requiring careful distinctions between families and households (Rapp, 1982), and between stepfamilies and step-households (Coleman & Ganong, 1990). A fifth dimension of family interaction influenced by homosexuality involves relations with a lesbian or gay grandparent, aunt, uncle, or other kin, whether affinal or consanguineal. All of these variations exist in addition to the variation that characterizes other, presumably heterosexual, families, including variation by race, age, income, education, number of children, children's gender, and duration of couple relationship. Unfortunately, what little we know about lesbian and gay families to date is based on small samples of predominantly white, urban, middle-class, highly educated respondents (Laird, 1993; Patterson, 1992). One final and important consideration regarding diversity is that the intersections of gender and sexual orientation have implications for varying structures and dynamics in the families of lesbians compared with the families of gay men (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Harry, 1983; Kurdek, in press; Peplau & Cochran, 1990).

Demographics

It is impossible to know precisely how many lesbian and gay individuals live in this country or how many children under the age of 18 have lesbian or gay parents. PFLAG, the Federation of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, states that one out of every four families has a gay member (Goodman, 1991). However, three problems in identifying accurate demographics are: (a) varying definitions of sexual orientation, (b) the ongoing exclusion of lesbian and gay people from research investigations, and (c) the further exclusion of bisexuality. Harry (1983) concluded that sampling biases will continue until questions on sexual orientation are included in general probability surveys. Further, it is important to note that in the climate of heterosexism and homophobia in the wider society, many people who identify as lesbian or gay do not disclose their orientation because of fear of the reactions of others.

Many researchers cite the estimates provided by Kinsey and associates (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948; Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, & Gebhard, 1953) that approximately 10% of the population in the United States defines itself as predominantly lesbian or gay. Voeller (1990) clarified how the Kinsey Institute data led to the widely cited 10% figure:

37% of males had a postpubertal homosexual experience, as had 20% of women. . . . For those who had predominantly homosexual experience (4s, 5s, and 6s on the Kinsey scale), the percentages were about 7% for women and 13% for men (depending on just which data you used). As there are about equal numbers of each gender, an average of 10% of the population could be designated as gay, that is, to the homosexual side of the midpoint 3 on the scale, a percentage Gebhard (1977), at the Kinsey Institute, recalculated and confirmed. (p. 33)

However, the Kinsey et al. figures are questionable because: (a) the prevalence of same-sex sexual orientations and experiences may be much different now from when the original data were collected between 1938 and 1948, and/or may be different now from when the follow-up data were collected, ending in 1963, and (b) the Kinsey sample was not a probability sample and has been criticized on methodological grounds (Fay, Turner, Klassen, & Gagnon, 1989; Terman, 1948). Analyzing national probability survey data collected in 1970 and 1988, Fay et al. (1989) estimated that roughly one-fifth of adult American males have had at least one homosexual experience, and that between 3% and 6% of the adult population is exclusively homosexual. They speculated that many individuals with regular or frequent homosexual activity are currently married or were previously married, indicating bisexual orientations and changes in sexual orientations over time. Although they did not provide comparable data for lesbians, they argued that because of societal intolerance, the observed percentages probably represent lower bounds of the true incidence of same-sex behavior.

Clearly, there is good reason to suspect that the net bias in self-reports of homosexual experiences is negative. . . . Societal intolerance of same-gender sex may diminish survey respondents' willingness to provide complete and accurate reports of behaviors that are classified as crimes in many states. (Fay et al., 1989, p. 346)

Adopting a broad definition of lesbian and gay families also means that the numbers or percentages pertaining to lesbian or gay adults are probably very conservative estimates of the number of households including lesbians and gay men, not to mention families including lesbians and gay men. Harry (1983) summarized the demographics of seven studies of gay men and found that an average of 20% of gay men have been heterosexually married, with a range of 14% to 25% across the seven investigations. Bell and Weinberg (1978) found that about half (52%) of these former marriages resulted in at least one biological child (Harry, 1983). Bozett (1987a) estimated that between 1 and 3 million gay men are natural fathers. However, this is a conservative estimate of gay fathers because it does not include gay men with adopted, foster, or stepchildren, or those who become fathers through other means such as sperm donation (Bozett, 1987b).

Harry's (1983) summary of four studies of lesbians revealed that about one-third have been heterosexually married. About half of these marriages resulted in children (Bell & Weinberg, 1978). Estimates of lesbian mothers vary. Falk (1989) cited a range of 1.5 to 5 million lesbians who reside with their children. It is unknown how many women become mothers through donor in-semination, but clinicians and researchers agree that it is substantial and increasing (Gottman, 1990; Patterson, 1994a). In spite of the problems of determining exact estimates of the number of children living with lesbian or gay parents, most researchers accept Schulenberg's (1985) estimate that at least 6 million children under age 18 have gay or lesbian parents. The Editors of the Harvard Law Review (1990) reported that "approximately three million gay men and lesbians in the United States are parents, and between eight and ten million children are raised in gay or lesbian households" (p. 119). In short, the sheer demographic prevalence of lesbian and gay individuals provides ample justification for family researchers to acknowledge and investigate the diverse families in which lesbians and gay men live.

EXCLUDING THE FAMILIES OF LESBIANS AND GAY MEN IN FAMILY RESEARCH

Very little research has been published or presented in family studies that identifies or examines gay men, lesbian women, and their family relations. Some theories and research traditions explicitly exclude consideration of lesbian and gay families. For example, pro-marriage and pro-nuclear family biases are evident in family development theory, which defines the family "as a social group regulated by the norms of the institution of marriage and the family" (Rodgers & White, 1993, p. 236). The 1990 *Journal of Marriage and the Family* Decade in Review mentions the term "homosexual couples" in only one article (Noller & Fitzpatrick, 1990), thus offering even less than the two columns of print in the 1980s review, in which Macklin (1980) included a brief summary of literature on same-sex intimate relationships.

To identify and assess the extant literature on lesbian and gay families, we conducted a systematic review of the three leading journals in family studies: *Journal of Marriage and the Family* (JMF), *Family Relations* (FR), and *Journal of Family Issues* (JFI). We selected these journals for several reasons. JMF and FR are the two journals published by the National Council on Family Relations. JMF is widely recognized as the flagship journal in family studies, and FR is the leading outlet for applied family research. JFI, published by Sage, also is a highly respected journal in the field and is sponsored by the National Council on Family Relations.

We examined the topics of articles published in these journals from 1980 to 1993. First, we searched for the following key words in the subject index of JMF and FR (JFI does not have a subject index) indicating an explicit reference to a same-sex orientation: bisexual, gay, heterosexism, homophobia, homosexual, lesbian, sexual orientation, and sexual preference. We also looked for terms such as AIDS, alternative lifestyles, feminism, heterosexuality, nontraditional families, reproductive technologies, and sexuality. This process yielded few studies, thus requiring a careful examination of the contents of each article.

Next, we examined every article published from 1980 through 1993. We read the titles and abstracts of every article published during this period, and we read the complete articles in cases where any of the above key words were included in the title or abstract. We also skimmed articles with titles and abstracts that did not contain any explicit terms referring to sexual orientation. To obtain the numbers reported in Table 1, we counted all original substantive articles, resource reviews, and invited exchanges, and excluded editor's comments, book and media reviews, and feedback regarding previously published articles. To be counted as "explicit content," the central focus of the article had to be on sexual orientation or preference, the experiences of gay men or lesbians, homosexuality, or bisexuality. If the focus of the article was on something else, but one of these topics regarding sexual orientation was mentioned in the article, it was counted as an article with "related content."

Family Relations

For the period from January 1980 through October 1993, a total of 971 articles was published in *Family Relations*, a journal dedicated to applied family studies. Of these articles, 10 (or 1%) involved explicit study of lesbians, gay men, or issues pertaining to sexual orientation (see Table 1). Eight articles (Bozett, 1980; Crosbie-Burnett & Helmbrecht, 1993; Hare & Richards, 1993; Koepke et al., 1992; Renzetti, 1989; Robinson, Skeen, Hobson, & Herrman, 1982; Schrag, 1984; Wisensale & Heckart, 1993) in the past 14 years examined issues of family relations (e.g., parent-child relations, childrearing values, couple relations, support, communication, conflict, violence) in the context of lesbian or gay families, or what we call the social ecology of families that include one or more lesbian or gay members. Two articles examined AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome) and gay family members (Cleveland, Waiters, Skeen, & Robinson, 1988; Macklin, 1988).

An additional 40 articles (or 4%) contained information on sexuality education and other issues that mentioned homosexuality or sexual orientation. Most of these articles, termed "related content" in Table 1, are concerned with homosexuality as an alternative lifestyle, as deviant, as related to AIDS, and as an environment or social address with unique problems. Over the span covering 1980 to 1993, there were some gradual but noticeable shifts in the attention devoted to lesbian and gay families, in the topics studied, and in the language used to describe issues bearing on lesbian and gay families. Through 1987, there were very few articles (16 out of a total of 564, or less than 3%) that even mentioned homosexuality. In the October 1981 special issue on family life education, homosexuality was not among the topics discussed. During these years, the focus was on marriage as a monolithic relationship type. Certain values were reflected in the articles: having two parents, involvement of fathers, and good communication between parents and children. Articles on sexuality education assumed that heterosexuality is normative, exclusive, and permanent. Alternative lifestyles were defined in terms of heterosexual variations, such as cohabitation. Homosexuality was never advocated nor seen as acceptable for youth.

Some shifts occurred in the late 1980s. Although the frequency of articles in *Family Relations* mentioning or focusing on homosexuality increased slightly during this period, the articles continued to be mostly about sexuality education curricula. Issues about homosexuality appeared in more diverse contexts, using more appropriate and gay-affirmative language. The frequency of articles related to AIDS increased sharply beginning in 1988. Of course, AIDS is a disease affecting individuals (and families) of all sexual orientations, but there was not a corresponding increase in research on other issues affecting lesbians and gay men, such as their relationships or parenting styles. Instead, the preoccupation continued with defining lesbians and gay men by their sexual behavior.

Over the most recent period, 1990-1993, lesbians and gay men gained modest visibility in applied family studies, but still with definite limits. Three trends are apparent: There was a marked increase in articles examining sexual orientation during this period, AIDS forced people to talk about sexual behavior of all types, and there was greater recognition of family diversity, including the families of lesbians and gay men. This recognition ranges from a perfunctory mention of "homosexual families" in a list of other diverse family types to illustrations and examples involving lesbians and gay men. The editor's call for papers for a special issue on family diversity (July, 1993) specifically requested articles examining a wide variety of family types. Over the

past 2 years, articles on relationship quality (Koepke et al., 1992) and domestic partnerships (Wisensale & Heckart, 1993) involving lesbian and gay couples appeared for the first time in FR.

In sum, the gradual trend since 1980 has been from mentioning monolithic homosexuality as a topic to be included in a sexuality education program, to discussing gay men in articles about AIDS, to discussing lesbians and gay men in contexts beyond their homosexuality, that is, as family members, parents, and partners. Still, it is clear that lesbian and gay families are commonly ignored, poorly understood, stigmatized, and problematized. Family practitioners view gay parents as holding a master status; their sexual orientation clouds the perception of them as parents, partners, or extended kin. We have yet to reach the point where they are viewed as family members who happen to be lesbian or gay. Only in the past few years have there been discussions in the premier applied family journal--a journal designed for practitioners--of multiple contexts associated with being lesbian or gay.

Journal of Marriage and the Family

Our review of the *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, the flagship journal for basic research on families, uncovered even fewer studies related to lesbian and gay families. For the period from February 1980 to November 1993, a total of 1,209 articles was published in JMF, only two of which involved explicit study of sexual orientation or homosexual experience (Table 1). The first of these was Reiss' (1986) Burgess Award Address in which he expanded his theory of sexuality to apply to "both heterosexual and homosexual relationships" and integrated references to homosexuality throughout. In the second article, Williams and Jacoby (1989) compared attitudes about homosexual and heterosexual experiences of college students from the University of North Dakota and Harvard University. They found evidence of a generalized homophobia, whereby students overwhelmingly rejected as potential mates those individuals with any form of same-sex experience. Family and relational issues were not studied.

An additional 23 articles (or less than 2% of articles published in JMF) either mentioned homosexuality or addressed only peripherally issues related to sexual orientation. In articles examining a wide range of topics including dating, nuclear and extended family structures, marital adjustment, wives' employment, parenting behavior, and premarital and/or extramarital sexual permissiveness, the status of marriage and heterosexuality are automatically and routinely assumed. Generally, each attempt at new knowledge begins with marriage and heterosexuality as baseline assumptions. There are, of course, exceptions. Reiss (1981) described Americans' intolerance and fear of homosexuality, and D'Antonio (1985) documented that, in American Catholic families, "Homosexuality is presented as an even graver deficiency [than masturbation] since it prevents people from becoming sexually mature, maturation being a function of the heterosexual relationship" (p. 397).

For the most part, lesbians and gay men, as individuals or couples, but rarely as members of families, are mentioned at the beginning or end of an article in a list of examples of diverse experience. Hendrick (1988), for example, recognized gay couples as one type of alternative relationship for which her revision of the Dyadic Adjustment Scale might apply.

Research published in the *Journal of Marriage and the Family* in the past few years seems to indicate that family researchers are beginning to be more sensitive to, or at least more cognizant of, sexual orientation. Thompson (1992), for example, illustrated feminist standpoint theory with a cogent discussion of lesbian identity. Tucker and Taylor (1989), in the only article that mentions Black Americans and sexual orientation, addressed a methodological problem in posing questions about romantic involvement to unmarried individuals. They explained that the question, "Do you have a main romantic involvement at this time?" did not distinguish gender and could have "elicited some gay and lesbian relationships" (p. 658). Fossett and Kiecolt (1991) explicitly recognized the problem presented by "homosexuals" for investigators conducting research on the sex ratio and heterosexual marriage markets. Noting that reliable information about the geographic distribution of gays and lesbians is "virtually nonexistent" (p. 955), they advised that "homosexuals should probably be excluded from the sex ratio in conventional analyses," but as a practical matter, researchers should keep them "in mind when examining outliers and anomalous cases" (p. 944). Despite this growing recognition that lesbian and gay

populations challenge conventional ways of thinking about and studying families, family research is derelict in its responsibility to investigate, describe, and explain the life course and social ecology of lesbian and gay families.

Another trend is evident in recent investigations that do not examine or consider sexual orientation but have implications for lesbian and gay parenting. Downey and Powell (1993) conducted a comprehensive analysis of 35 social psychological and educational outcomes for children in different living arrangements to evaluate the evidence for the "same-sex parent argument." This argument, based largely on psychoanalytic and social learning theories, holds that the presence of and identification with the same-sex parent is necessary for the child's healthy emotional adjustment and appropriate gender role development. The argument is frequently used to deny lesbians and gay men custody of their children, and more broadly to challenge the adequacy and competence of lesbian and gay parents. Importantly, Downey and Powell found no evidence to support the same-sex argument. However, the authors were unable to consider the parents' (or children's) sexual orientation because the national data set they used did not collect these data.

Basic family research lags behind applied work intended for practitioners. Much of the research published in JMF is based on large data sets that systematically exclude lesbians and gay men. For example, nonmarital cohabitation, consistent with U. S. Bureau of the Census designation, is explicitly defined as "opposite sex partners" (e.g., Bumpass, Sweet, & Cherlin, 1991; Glick, 1988; Surra, 1990). The deletion of same-sex unions from new data sets that are supposed to be representative of the population denies lesbian and gay couples and families an opportunity to be counted.

Journal of Family Issues

For the period spanning March 1980 (the first issue of JFI) to December 1993, a total of 418 articles was published. There is far less substantive inclusion of lesbians and gay men in JFI than in JMF or FR. No article explicitly examined lesbian or gay families or issues related to sexual orientation; 14 articles (3.3%) contained related content.

For the first 7 years of JFI (1980-1986), same-sex relationships were mentioned in only two contexts: in a list of several alternative lifestyles departing from the traditional nuclear family, or as an experience opposed by the extreme religious right (Cherlin, 1983; Scanzoni, 1982; Stuart, 1984). An exception is Walker and Thompson's (1984) suggestion that studying lesbians and gay men provides a way of broadening the literature and gaining a better understanding of family life.

One sign of visibility appeared in the late 1980s, as discussion of homosexuality and homosexual relationships was used as a criterion for evaluating family textbooks (Meyer & Rosenblatt, 1987). Through the early 1990s, however, there was a consistently narrow interpretation of family issues. One of the distinguishing characteristics of JFI is that, each year, two of its four issues are devoted to special topics. A liberating feature of special issues, and of the many invited papers they contain, is the greater latitude researchers have to transcend conventional boundaries, frameworks, and modes of thinking. Yet research published in JFI is characterized by a systematic exclusion of lesbians and gay men, an exclusion that is manifested in both subtle and covert ways. At a subtle level, some authors acknowledge that they deliberately excluded lesbians and/or gay men and cite a particular reason for doing so, thus recognizing both the diversity and the relevance of sexual orientation. For example, Martinson and Wu (1992) described how their elaborate coding scheme used to define 20 family types excluded families in which children are raised by same-sex couples. As with other studies using secondary analysis, the authors were unable to examine the influence of parental sexual orientation because these data were not collected. Similarly, Marsiglio (1991) acknowledged that he excluded gay fathers from his analysis of male procreative consciousness and responsibility. At a more covert level, most authors ignore sexual orientation altogether, assume its irrelevance, or assume their sample consists entirely of heterosexuals. Studies of cohabitation, for example, routinely assume this experience is a developmental stage in a natural progression leading to mate selection and marriage. Likewise, research on teenage sexuality rarely acknowledges same-sex scripts, relationships, or attractions. The pervasive, insidious, and multidimensional

nature of heterosexist bias in family research also is evidenced by a persisting focus on the sexual behavior of lesbians and gay men, by references to their relationships using the pejorative term "homosexual," and by ignoring broader aspects of their family relations.

Recently, there has been greater recognition of diversity. The March 1993 special issue, "Re-thinking the Family as a Social Form," shows some change, containing three articles that mention diversity by sexual orientation. There are indications that researchers are beginning to question the adequacy of their concepts, measures, and theories. White (1992) pointed out some limitations of relying on marital status as a major explanatory variable. Bould (1993) argued that the census definition of the term familial obscures many aspects of familial caregiving by failing to recognize "ties that are solely emotional and lacking in any legal or blood relationship" (p. 136). And Scanzoni and Marsiglio (1993) proposed a theoretical framework for incorporating and valuing a variety of family structures, including same-sex couples, a framework intended to replace "the prevailing dichotomy" of benchmark family versus deviant alternative family.

Other Outlets for Family Scholarship

Collectively, the three leading journals dedicated to family research published 2,598 articles between 1980 and 1993, of which 12 articles (less than half of 1%) focused on the families of lesbians and gay men. With so few studies of lesbian and gay families appearing in the major family journals, the question arises as to whether the exclusion and invisibility extend to related fields. Has relevant research been published in journals in psychology, sociology, human development, or close relationships? Or are these fields similarly characterized by the marginalization of issues related to diverse sexual orientations?

To address these questions, we conducted a thorough review of leading journals in related fields. We examined the following: the preeminent developmental journal, *Child Development* published by the University of Chicago Press for the Society for Research on Child Development; two journals published by the American Psychological Association (APA), *Journal of Family Psychology* and *Developmental Psychology*; two highly influential and prestigious general sociology journals, one published by the American Sociological Association, *American Sociological Review*, and one published by University of Chicago Press, *American Journal of Sociology*; and a top journal in the field of close relationships, *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*. We read the titles and abstracts of every article and research note published in these journals between 1980 and 1993, searching for any of the key words described earlier (bisexual, gay, heterosexism, homophobia, homosexual, lesbian, sexual orientation, and sexual preference). We read articles containing these key words in the abstract, as well as articles containing related wording in the abstract (e.g., male couples, female couples).

Space does not permit a detailed discussion of our review of each of these journals, but we provide below a concise summary of the frequency and general content of articles related to sexual orientation. The numbers reported in Table 2 specify the total number of articles and research notes published in each journal over the 14-year period. We did not include comments, replies, editors' introductions, book reviews, or other reports that did not contain abstracts, with one exception. For the *Journal of Family Psychology*, the first 5 years of the journal contained numerous lengthy comments, replies, and key editorials, and these are reflected in the numbers we report in Table 2. We also report in Table 2 the number of articles each journal published between 1980 and 1993 on the broad topic of sexual orientation.

Collectively, the six related journals published 5,465 articles and research notes over this period, of which only 15 articles (less than one-third of 1%) concerned issues related to sexual orientation. In short, research is sparse on the families of lesbians and gay men, and the exclusion characterizes diverse disciplines, substantive areas, and publication outlets.

The *Journal of Family Psychology* (JFP), which began as a family therapy journal in 1987, has become a mainstream psychology journal since its publication by APA in 1992. Marriage is the cornerstone of the families treated and studied by psychologists publishing in JFP. Only three articles (Kurdek, 1992a; Kurdek, 1992b; Ross, 1988) out of 213 (or slightly more than 1%) broached the subject of sexual orientation, reflecting

the marginalization of lesbians and gay men in family psychology. The traditional model, legal definitions of family, and "the standard package" prevail, with studies routinely employing samples of husbands and wives, fathers and mothers. Few studies even acknowledge that heterosexual marriage was a requirement for inclusion.

Child Development (CD) published 2,102 articles between 1980 and 1993, the vast majority of which were experimental studies involving infants and young children in laboratory settings. Although many studies linked aspects of the family environment such as mother-child interaction, sibling relationships, and maternal employment to a broad array of children's outcomes, there was not a single empirical study examining parent-child relations in lesbian or gay families, the influences of parents' or others' sexual orientation on children, the diverse environmental and genetic factors affecting children's developing sexual orientations, or the characteristics and experiences of pre-gay, pre-lesbian, gay, or lesbian youth. Our key words did not appear in the titles or abstracts of any article, with one exception. A thorough and provocative review article (Patterson, 1992) identified emerging patterns in the study of children reared in lesbian and gay households, documented the overall well-being of such children, and directed attention to the urgent need for more systematic investigation of the diverse living arrangements and life circumstances of children with lesbian or gay parents. In most of the research published in CD, however, it is assumed that normal child development involves two biological parents (one male, one female), same-sex friendships in middle to late childhood, and a transition to heterosexual relationships in adolescence.

Developmental Psychology (DP) published 1,491 articles between 1980 and 1993. The terms gay or lesbian appeared in the title or abstract of only one article (Kurdek & Schmitt, 1986), and the term sexual orientation appeared in the abstract of one other article (Roberts, Green, Williams, & Goodman, 1987). None of the other titles or abstracts contained any of the key words we identified. In addition to these two articles that focused on the topic of sexual orientation, we noticed four articles that briefly mentioned in the text one of our key words: two articles listed homosexuality or cohabiting gay and lesbian couples as types of nonnormative lifestyles, one article included heterosexuality in a list of personality traits, and one study mentioned sexual orientation in relation to same-sex friendships. Although the majority of studies published in this journal involved subjects pertaining to young children, many issues contained sections on parenting, parental and family influences on development, family relationships, and family processes. Yet it is clear that issues of social location are still marginalized or sidestepped in developmental psychology. Instead, the focus is on differences, especially differences by age and gender and, to a lesser degree, differences by social class and race. However, a special issue titled "Sexual Orientation and Human Development" was scheduled to appear in DP in January 1995.

The Journal of Social and Personal Relationships (JSPP) began in 1984 as a journal devoted to the interdisciplinary study of personal and close relationships. Associate editors are assigned responsibility for submissions in the fields of clinical psychology (which became "clinical and community psychology" in 1986), communications, developmental psychology, and sociology (which became "family studies and sociology" in 1990). Of 312 articles published since its inception, three articles (or less than 1%) examined lesbian and/or gay relationship issues. Three articles by Kurdek (1989, 1991, 1992c) analyzed data from a sample of lesbian and gay cohabiting couples to investigate relationship quality, dissolution, and stability, respectively. Consistent with other studies, Kurdek's findings challenged the gender difference model which posits that men are agentic and women are communal, illustrating many similarities in lesbian and gay styles of relating. Three other articles, although they did not contain our key words in the title or abstract, involved closely related subjects and illustrated ways in which sexual orientation diversity can be integrated into family research: Dossier, Balswick, and Halverson (1986) explained how homophobia contributes to male inexpressiveness; Milardo (1992) described some distinctive characteristics of exchange networks among lesbian couples; and Crandall and Coleman (1992) discussed the connection between AIDS-related stigmatization of homosexuals (and other groups) and the disruption of their social relationships. Most studies, however, are unreflexively heterosexist in that they are designed to explore patterns of attraction to and intimacy with opposite sex partners, thus excluding consideration of same-sex partners. In many cases, this occurs because researchers restrict their sample to married couples or to people who are romantically involved with individuals of the opposite sex, but,

in a few cases, a homosexual orientation was mentioned as a reason for eliminating respondents from the sample and analysis.

The American Sociological Review, the premier general sociology journal published by the American Sociological Association, published 817 articles between 1980 and 1993, of which four articles (half of 1%) concerned aspects of sexual orientation. These numbers corroborate Risman and Schwartz's (1988) conclusion that sociological research on male and female homo-sexuality "is conspicuously absent from prominent sociological journals" (p. 126). Further, and perhaps equally important, extant sociological work treats homosexuality as deviant, focuses on sexual behavior and attitudes, and ignores the family context and family relations of lesbians and gay men. Stephen and McMullin (1982) identified correlates of tolerance of sexual nonconformity, Bainbridge (1989) discussed the influence of religion in deterring homosexuality and other forms of deviance, and Connell (1992) described the construction of diverse masculine identities among a sample of gay men. One other article (Kollock, Blumstein, & Schwartz, 1985) commented on some similarities and differences in conversational privileges and duties among female couples, male couples, and opposite-sex couples. In general, however, sociologists have not examined sexual orientation or have assumed that it is irrelevant.

The American Journal of Sociology published 530 articles between 1980 and 1993, with only two articles examining topics related to sexual orientation. Davies (1982) associated homosexuality with bestiality and transvestism, and discussed a same-sex orientation as a perverse form of sexual deviance. Greenberg and Bystryn (1982) traced the social history of Christian intolerance of homosexuality. No article published in AJS since 1982 has focused on the social context, correlates, or consequences of sexual orientation.

As a discipline, sociology emphasizes social stratification and inequality by socioeconomic status, race, age, and gender, but sexual orientation has been ignored as an axis of stratification. Sociologists routinely study the social structural influences of "background variables" such as religion, residence, region, and rural/urban background, but they have not seriously addressed sexual orientation. They are concerned with social movements and social change, with the intersection of biography and history, and with understanding socialization and the life course, but have not applied or extended these interests and theoretical frameworks to the study of the gay civil rights movement or the lives of lesbians and gay men. Longstanding concern with prejudice, discrimination, oppression, and social conflict has not been extended to the situation of lesbians and gay men. Where sexuality is studied, teenage and premarital sexual activity are the foci, behaviors which are assumed (falsely) to be uniformly heterosexual. Marriage and parenthood are often studied as indicators of a successful transition to adulthood. For example, Hirschman and Rindfuss (1982), in an article titled, "The Sequence and Timing of Family Formation Events in Asia," stated that "the transition from adolescence to adulthood is marked by a number of role changes, none more central than the beginnings of family formation with marriage and parenthood" (p. 660). By not even mentioning in abstracts or in sample descriptions the words heterosexual or homosexual, gay or lesbian, researchers are assuming either that respondents are heterosexual, or that sexual orientation is irrelevant.

CHALLENGING HETEROSEXISM IN FAMILY RESEARCH

Our review of journals that publish family research leads to two observations: First, there is very little research in which the families of lesbians and gay men are the central focus, and the research that does exist is conducted by a small and sometimes prolific group of scholars. Second, mainstream family research does not include sexual orientation of family members as an integrative component of investigations. Although there is growing recognition of a paradigm shift toward family pluralism, and lesbian and gay families often are listed as an indicator of that shift, researchers have yet to find meaningful ways to incorporate sexual orientation into their studies of family phenomena. We concur with other commentators (e.g., Laird, 1993; Lewin, 1993; West-on, 1991) that heterosexism underlies the limited information accumulated to date about lesbian and gay families and the impact of sexual orientation on family life. Heterosexism is a bias, defined as "conceptualizing human experience in strictly heterosexual terms and consequently ignoring, invalidating, or derogating homosexual behaviors and sexual orientation, and lesbian, gay, and bisexual relationships and lifestyles" (Herek, Kimmel,

Amaro, & Melton, 1991, p. 958). Heterosexist bias reflects a widespread cultural ignorance surrounding sexuality and relationships, and the subsequent labeling of sexual orientations other than exclusive heterosexuality as different and therefore deviant. Few social scientists have incorporated Bell and Weinberg's (1978) finding that lesbians and gay men are a heterogeneous group, characterized by diversity in age, race, education, and religion; instead, their diversity "has been pre-empted by a focus--perhaps an obsession--on characteristics thought to distinguish homosexual from heterosexual people" (Savin-Williams, 1990, p. 198).

Heterosexism operates in personal belief systems and in institutional practices. Like racism, sexism, and classism, heterosexism is a form of institutional oppression designed to ridicule, limit, or silence alternative discourses about identity and behavior. Societal institutions reinforce heterosexism by shaping and controlling knowledge. Gatekeepers, including funding agency administrators and proposal reviewers, human subjects review members, reviewers for professional journals, and academic colleagues on promotion and tenure committees, exert considerable power in their evaluations of proposals, manuscript submissions, and published papers that focus on what may be deemed sensitive topics. Such evaluations, in turn, govern what is researched and what is not researched, determine what is published and what is not published, and influence the career advancement of scholars interested in sexual orientation as a topic for study. In addition, there are practical impediments. As suggested by one reviewer, school boards may not allow questions about sexual orientation to be included in surveys that are administered to adolescents in their schools. National funding agencies may want to avoid situations where they have to defend to elected officials why they awarded a grant on a topic as controversial as "lesbian mothers" (Lewin, 1993, p. xvii). An untenured assistant professor may be warned by a superior never to disclose his sexual orientation in class lest he jeopardize his chances for promotion and tenure (Savin-Williams, 1993). In these and other ways, institutional and individual heterosexist biases limit the scope of knowledge generated by family research.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FAMILY THEORY AND RESEARCH

Lesbian and Gay Standpoint Theories

A new and affirmative research paradigm is needed that recognizes "the legitimacy of lesbian, gay male, and bisexual orientations, behaviors, relationships, and lifestyles" (Herek et al., 1991, p. 962). The small core of studies that is beginning to accumulate across disciplines suggests that the families of lesbians and gay men are diverse, variable, resilient, and thriving. Because of their diversity and complexity and the limited empirical research describing their lives, they require their own standpoint for investigation to yield what is unique, positive, and valuable about lesbian and gay family life (Brown, 1989). Laird (1993) argued that ethnographic research is the most urgent research direction at the present time, needed to generate "detailed, wholistic accounts of the daily lives of gay and lesbian families" (p. 320). Studies from lesbian and gay standpoints would place their narratives, meanings, and beliefs in the center of analysis, would bracket existing, presumably heterosexist, theories, and would avoid producing "what it is we thought we would see in the first place" (Laird, 1993, p. 320).

Biculturalism--the contradiction of being between two cultures--offers a promising theoretical direction from a lesbian and gay standpoint (Brown, 1989). For example, lesbian mothers and gay fathers are bicultural in terms of the main-stream heterosexual culture in which they interact as parents of their children, and the lesbian and gay community in which they relate with peers who share a same-sex identity. An aspect of bi-culturalism is resilience and creative adaptation in the context of minority group oppression and stigma (Brown, 1989; Laird, 1993). The concept of biculturality offers a potential link to other oppressed groups in American society. Peters (1988) documented, for example, the dual socialization that many Black parents provide for their children, preparing them for the institutionalized racism they will confront and at the same time helping them "to become self-sufficient, competent adults" (p. 238).

Family Theories

In addition to descriptions of lesbian and gay families from their own standpoints, family theories can illuminate the multiple contexts of lesbian and gay family relations. Like symbolic interactionist theories, family ecology and feminist theories emphasize that researchers must understand these families from the

subjective perspectives of individuals living within them. How do they feel about their family situations, their time together, their relationships with one another, their sexual orientation, their parenting experiences, practices, values, and involvement? How do children in these families view their family experiences and relationships? Young children, for example, are not likely to define their parents as "lesbian" or "gay." More consequential for understanding these children and their well-being is whether they feel secure and attached to their parent(s), whether they view parents and others as warm, supportive, and nurturant, and whether their social environment provides control and stability.

The underlying values of family ecology theory—values including justice, freedom, loving and nurturing relationships, a sense of community, tolerance, and trustworthiness—dictate that researchers "must attend to special problems of groups and subcultures who lack power, self-determination, and access to resources and who experience discrimination and prejudice" (Bubolz & Sontag, 1993, p. 427). As we gain understanding of the social ecologies of lesbian and gay families, including the societal and institutional constraints on their well-being, the "knowledge can be used to transform oppressive social structures in order to bring about greater justice and freedom for all family members and for a diversity of families" (Bubolz & Sontag, 1993, p. 428).

Feminist perspectives contribute to our understanding of the interaction of gender and other social locations, such as sexual orientation (Osmond & Thorne, 1993). Consider the example of lesbianism and motherhood, formerly viewed as two mutually exclusive and opposing life domains, and now recognized as simultaneous and interdependent experiences (Falk, 1989; Lewin, 1993). The lesbian and gay civil rights movement, the feminist movement, and women's disenchantment with traditional marriage and parenting arrangements have allowed mothers who are lesbians to be more open about their sexual orientation. Lesbians have always raised children, but until recently, they were likely to be restricted and closeted due to fears of harassment and of losing custody of their children. In a male-dominated society, women's responsibilities for child-rearing and childbearing are assumed to be natural, and mothering is assumed to be essential for the adequate development of the child (Baber & Allen, 1992). A feminist perspective reveals that mothering in the context of legal marriage is the standard against which all other forms of mothering (and parenting) are judged. Within this cultural context for appropriate motherhood, lesbian mothers are devalued relative to heterosexually married mothers (DiLapi, 1989), yet motherhood pulls lesbians, "however ambiguously, into a central position in the gender system" (Lewin, 1993, p. 184).

A life course perspective underscores the need to recognize the multiple pathways and transitions involved in the formation and development of lesbian and gay families, the short-term changes and long-term trajectories of individual development and family life, and the socially created and organized meanings of these life events (Elder, 1991). In addition to illuminating the rich diversity of lesbian and gay families, a life course framework highlights the interplay of historical, demographic, and social structural influences in shaping family experiences, as well as the dynamics of intergenerational relations (Bengtson & Allen, 1993). A life course perspective also provides a conceptual framework for guiding inclusion of lesbians and gay men and their families in samples representative of the general population. Taken together, the ecological, feminist, and life course perspectives offer the promise to enrich our understanding of the internal dynamics, social ecologies, transitions, and turning points of lesbian and gay families.

Research Directions

We have described some of the costs and problems of excluding a significant minority population, lesbian and gay families, from investigations of families. Lesbians, gay men, and their families are not a demographic anomaly. By ignoring them, family research misrepresents how diverse all families are. This distortion, like the distortion in research on African American families (Demos, 1990), is not harmless or value-free. Our silence as family researchers on this issue contributes to a general climate of intolerance and to maintenance of the status quo. Lesbian and gay partnerships and some parent-child relationships do not have the same civil rights or legal status that heterosexual marriage and legal parenthood confer on non-gay people (Bersoff & Ogden, 1991; Editors of the Harvard Law Review, 1990; Falk, 1989).

The neglect of lesbian and gay families in family research can be corrected. First, sexual orientation is relevant to most aspects of family life; thus including questions about sexual orientation in large-scale data sets would contribute knowledge that is more representative of all families. We found in our review of research published in nine leading journals that a substantial proportion of family research relies on secondary data analysis. The a priori exclusion of lesbians and gay men from these samples precludes examination and comparison of particular kinds of questions and subjects. Recognition and appreciation of lesbian and gay families can be and should be incorporated into the research and peer review processes at all levels. Investigators should acknowledge these families in conceptualizing and designing their projects, in defining research questions and devising measures, and in testing, revising, and constructing theories. Colleagues, journal reviewers, and editors can challenge sample descriptions in which sexual orientation is not mentioned or heterosexuality is assumed. In this regard, it is important to recognize that marital status is not always an appropriate proxy measure for sexual orientation.

Relevant questions to be included in general population research would address the multiple contexts in which sexual orientation is expressed and experienced in families. It would use language that affirms the complexity of lesbian and gay experience but does not reduce gay people to their sexual orientation (e.g., "homosexuals"). Research on cohabitation, romantic relationship development and dissolution, sexual behavior and attitudes, and intergenerational relations are among the many content areas in which heterosexist bias should be challenged and replaced with knowledge of diversity. Guidelines for avoiding heterosexist bias in psychological research can be adapted to inform research designs in family studies. In formulating the research question, for example, Herek et al. (1991) suggested that investigators consider whether the research question devalues or stigmatizes lesbians, gay men, and bisexual people, and whether the research question implicitly assumes that observed characteristics are caused by the subjects' sexual orientation. Regarding research design and procedures, Herek et al. (1991) recommended considering, among other issues, whether sexual orientation is assessed appropriately, if all participants are assumed to be heterosexual, and in what ways researchers' personal attitudes and feelings might influence participants' responses.

Second, in addition to integrating questions about sexual orientation and family relations into general family research, detailed investigations of lesbian and gay families will help family researchers shed new light on such little-understood phenomena as the intersections of sexual orientation and gender in families and the ability of families to cope with stigma while forging permanent, enduring bonds without societal support. Lesbian and gay family kin relations offer new conceptual inroads into older concepts in the family literature, such as the static dichotomies of voluntary versus obligatory ties or family of origin versus family of procreation. While knowledge accumulates about lesbian and gay intimate relationships and parenting, new investigations of intergenerational and extended family relations beyond the procreative family life cycle will become a priority. Holistic, ethnographic studies of lesbian and gay families from their own standpoints will correct the deficit character of much of the existing research and balance the existing record with positive aspects (Laird, 1993).

The investigation of lesbian and gay family relations is a new frontier in family studies. Integrating these families into our knowledge base will require uprooting timeworn assumptions about the primacy of heterosexual identity, coupling, parenting, and kin relations. Yet, the challenge is offset by the promise of new ways of thinking about families, broad enough to include family forms and processes still on the margins of how we conceptualize family diversity.

NOTE

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Journal	Total Articles	Explicit Content	Related Content
Family Relations	971	10	40
Journal of Marriage and the Family	1,209	2	23
Journal of Family Issues	418	0	14
Total	2,598	12	77

Journal	Total Articles	Articles on Topic
Journal of Family Psychology	213	3
Child Development	2,102	1
Developmental Psychology	1,491	2
Journal of Social and Personal Relationships	312	3
American Sociological Review	817	4
American Journal of Sociology	530	2
Total	5,465	15

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