Research on Lesbian and Gay Parenting: Past, Present, and Future

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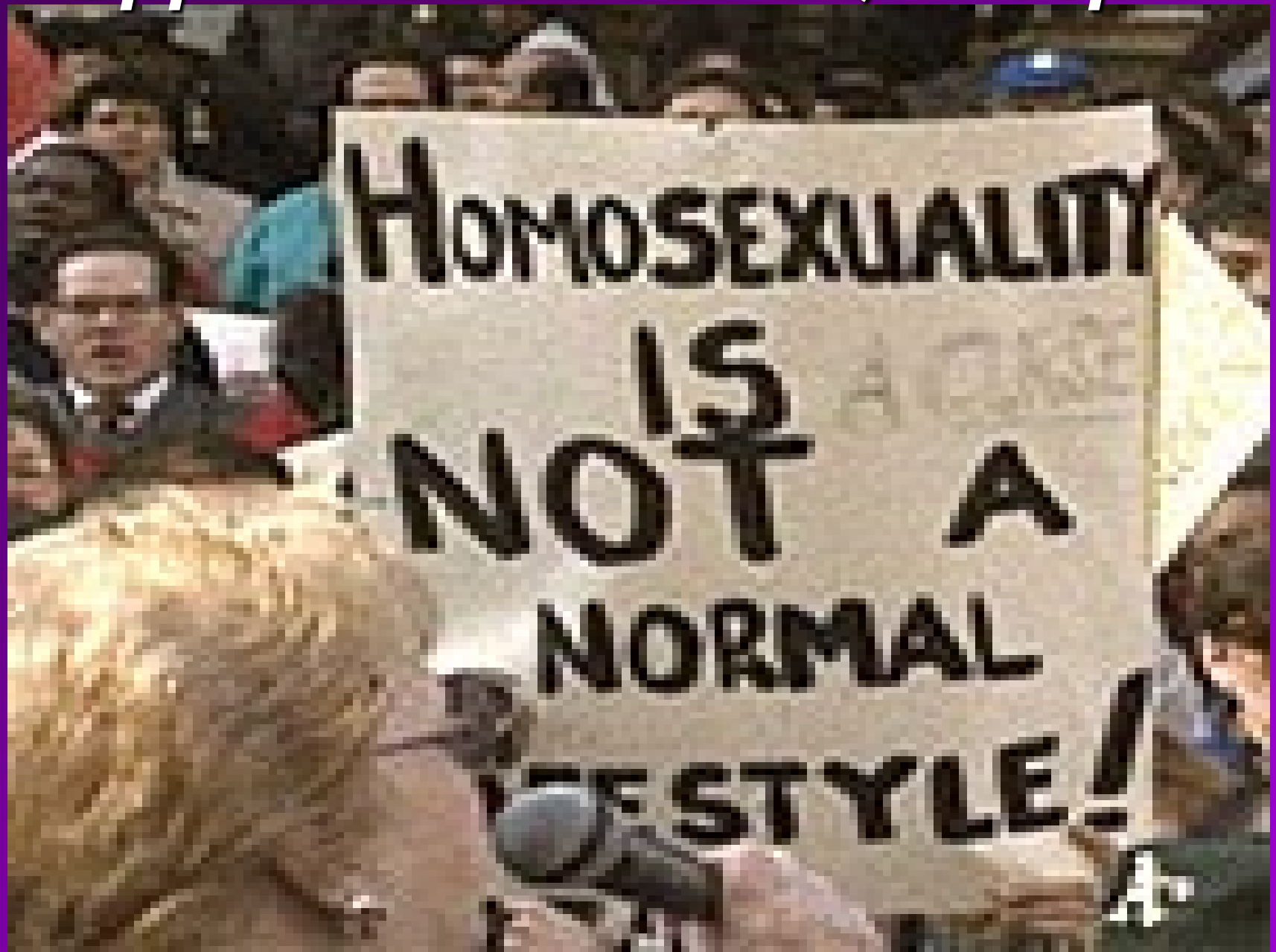
How does parental sexual orientation affect children's development?

- *Homophobic/negative views*
  - *What are the negative ideas?*
  - *How have these ideas been studied?*
  - *What has research revealed?*
- *Supportive/positive views*
  - *What are strengths of lesbian/gay parents?*
  - *What can we learn from lesbian/gay parents?*

Support for LGBTQ+ Parents

Opposition to LGBTQ+ People



Opposition to LGBTQ+ People

Lesbian and Gay Parenting: Homophobic/Negative Views

- ***Virginia Circuit Court Judge Buford Parsons, describing Sharon Bottoms, in his decision to deny her custody of her child:*** *"her conduct is illegal and immoral, and renders her an unfit parent"*

- ***Dr. David Stevens, Executive Director Christian Medical and Dental Associations:***

  "…the gay lifestyle when merged with parenting results in increased domestic violence, mental disorders, substance abuse and low self-esteem"

Parsons, 1993 opinion in Sharon Bottoms case
Stevens, letter published in *Pediatrics*, Feb 20, 2002.
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Lesbian and Gay Parenting: Homophobic/Negative Views

- *Roman Catholic Church:*
  - *"Allowing children to be adopted by persons living in such (same-sex) unions would actually mean doing violence to these children, in that their condition of dependency would be used to place them in an environment that is not conducive to their full human development"*

-- Vatican document, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 2003

Why Study Children of Lesbian and Gay Parents?

- ***Controversies in law and policy***
  - ***Child custody and visitation***
    - *"Exposing a child to such behavior has a destructive and seriously detrimental effect on the children. It is an inherent evil against which children must be protected."*
      - » *Chief Justice Roy Moore, Alabama Supreme Court, denying child custody to a lesbian mother, 2002*
  - ***Adoption***
    - *"Children should have a male and female parent to grow up and have a normal life…"*
      - » *Mississippi State Representative Tom Cameron, arguing that his state should ban all gay adoptions, 2000*

Research on Lesbian/Gay Parents and Their Children

Methods

- *surveys*
- *interviews*
- *observations of behavior*
- *peer reports*
- *teacher reports*
- *grades, other records*

Age Groups

- *Under 5 years old*
- *6 – 12 years old*
- *adolescents*
- *young adults*

Topics

- *Mental Health*
  - *anxiety*
  - *depression*
  - *self-esteem*
- *Success at School*
  - *grades*
  - *attainment*
- *Peer Relations*
  - *popularity*
  - *relationship quality*
- *Substance Use*
  - *alcohol*
  - *tobacco*
- *[and much more]*

Results of Research on Lesbian and Gay Parenting

- ***How do offspring of lesbian/gay parents compare with those of heterosexual parents?***

- ***Similar in central aspects of development***
  - ***Overall adjustment and mental health***
    - ***Behavior problems, anxiety, depressive symptoms***
  - ***Self-esteem***
  - ***Peer relations***
  - ***Success at school***
  - ***[And more]***

- ***<u>Conclusion:</u>***
- ***Children of lesbian/gay parent develop at least as well as do those of heterosexual parents***

Reactions to Research on Lesbian/Gay Parenting

- *Critiques of early research on lesbian/gay parenting*
  - *Small sample sizes*
  - *Mostly white participants, few racial minority participants*
  - *No control groups (i.e., some studies include only lesbian mother families, not others)*
  - *Convenience samples might be biased*
  - *Self-presentation bias was possible*
  - *Less research on some sub-groups (e.g., gay fathers, young adult offspring)*
- *All of these were addressed by later studies, which found the same results*
- *After 30 years of research scrutiny, scholars agree that children of lesbian and gay parents are doing well, and even thriving*

Results of Research on Lesbian and Gay Parenting

Conclusions of individual scholars have been backed by professional associations, such as the American Psychological Association (APA)

APA policy states:

- *"The children of lesbian and gay parents are as likely as those of heterosexual parents to flourish"*

- *"Lesbian and gay parents are as likely as heterosexual parents to provide supportive and healthy environments for their children.."*

APA Resolution on Sexual Orientation, Parents, and Children.

Adopted by APA Council of Representatives, July 2004.

Strengths of LGBTQ+ Parents

- *Instead of:*
  - *What is wrong with lesbian/gay parenting?*
  - *What problems do children of lesbian/gay parents seem to have?*
- *Current approach:*
  - *What are the strengths of lesbian/gay parents?*
  - *What can others learn from lesbian/gay parent families?*

Strengths of LGBTQ+ Parents

- *Fewer Negative Attitudes*
  - *Homophobia and perhaps transphobia less common among children of lesbian/gay parents*
- *Children are Wanted*
  - *Lesbian/gay parents work hard to have children*
  - *Fewer unwanted or mistimed births in lesbian/gay parenting*
  - *Children may be more likely to be "wanted"*
- *Traditional Gender Norms are Less Powerful*
  - *Division of labor often more equal for lesbian/gay than for heterosexual couples*
  - *Balancing of career and family often more harmonious than for heterosexual couples*
  - *Children of lesbian/gay parents may feel more choice of gender roles than those in heterosexual parent families*

Hopefully, future research will clarify these and other issues

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Coping with Discrimination

Carl Cade, 12 years of age:

"At my old school when I'd get sick, the nurse would say, 'who is this other person on your emergency card?' I never answered, and I hoped she'd stop asking. At my new school, everybody keeps asking me things. When they see my moms, they say,'I thought that other one was your mother'… I shrug the questions off. I told one kid that one was my aunt and that I just call her my mom. My mom is not very happy about me saying that. But it's hard sometimes. I don't know what the kids would do if they knew."

“The hardest part of my life right now is that both of my moms are vegetarians.”

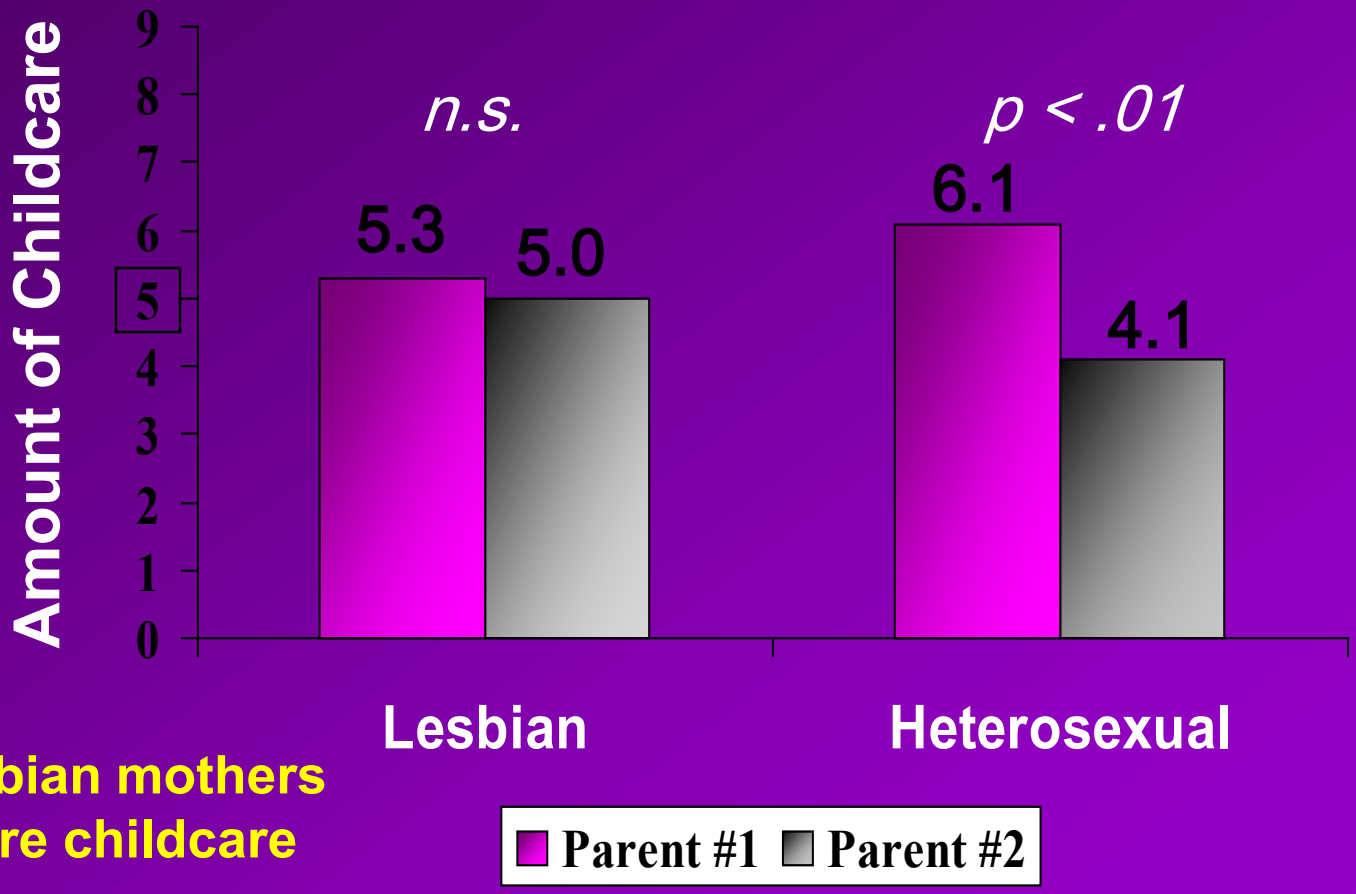
Carl Cade in

“Two Moms, No Hamburgers”

Division of Labor: Atlantic Coast Families Study

- ***66 couple-headed families rearing children***
  - *N=33 lesbian couples*
  - *N=33 heterosexual couples*
  - *All intact families: children were born to (or adopted by) lesbian or heterosexual couples who participated*
  - *Children's average age = 5 years*
- ***Topics of study included division of labor***
  - *Proportion of childcare done by each parent*
  - *Hours per week spent in paid employment*
  - *Prestige of job*
  - *Earned income*

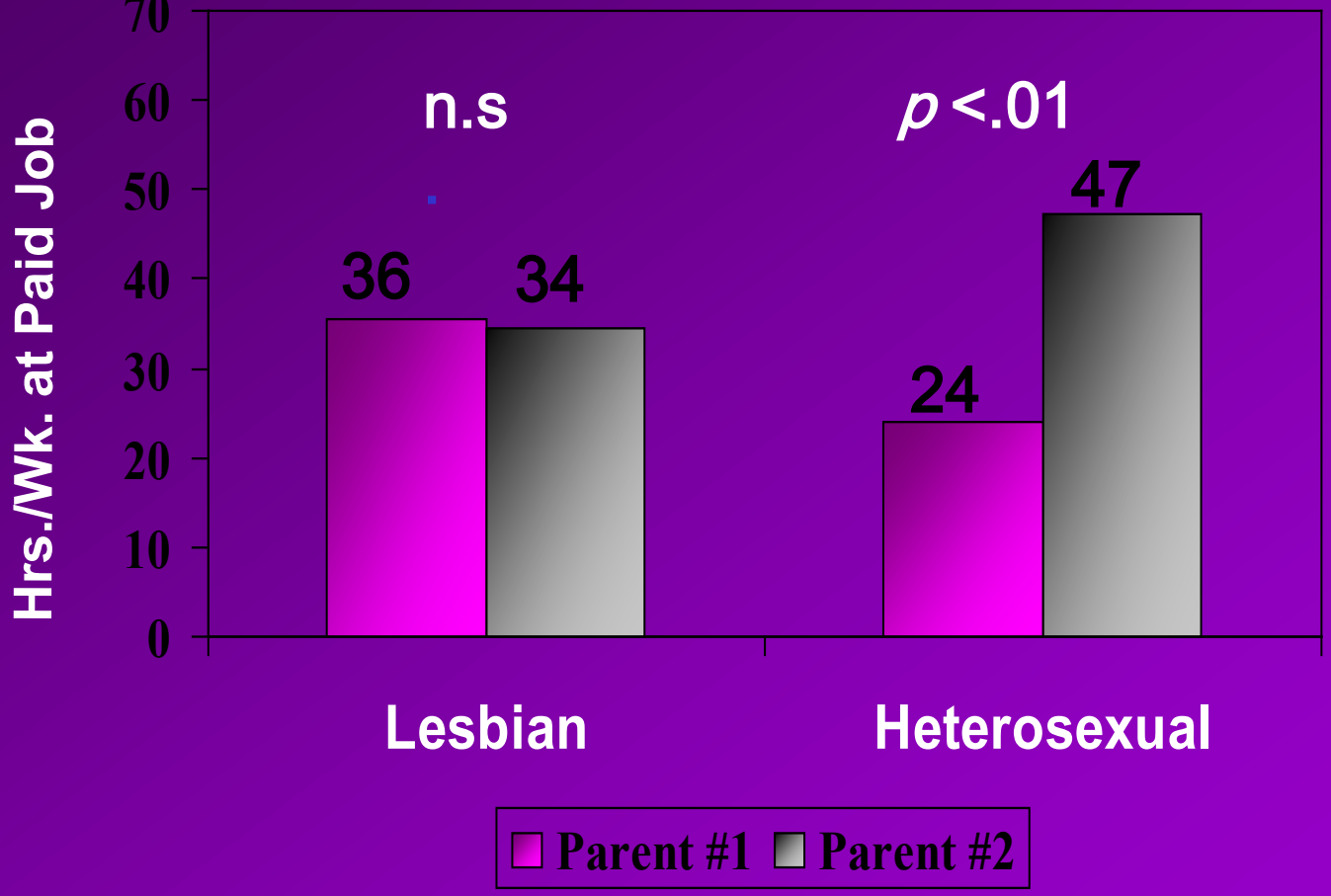
Division of Labor Among Lesbian and Hetero. Parents: Childcare



→Lesbian mothers share childcare

Data from Patterson, Sutfin & Fulcher (2004) - Division of Labor Among Lesbian and Heterosexual Parenting Couples: Correlates of Specialized Vs. Shared Patterns. Paper prepared for special issue of *Journal of Adult Development*. Scores from Cowan & Cowan, *Who Does What?* (5= we share it all, 9=I do it all).

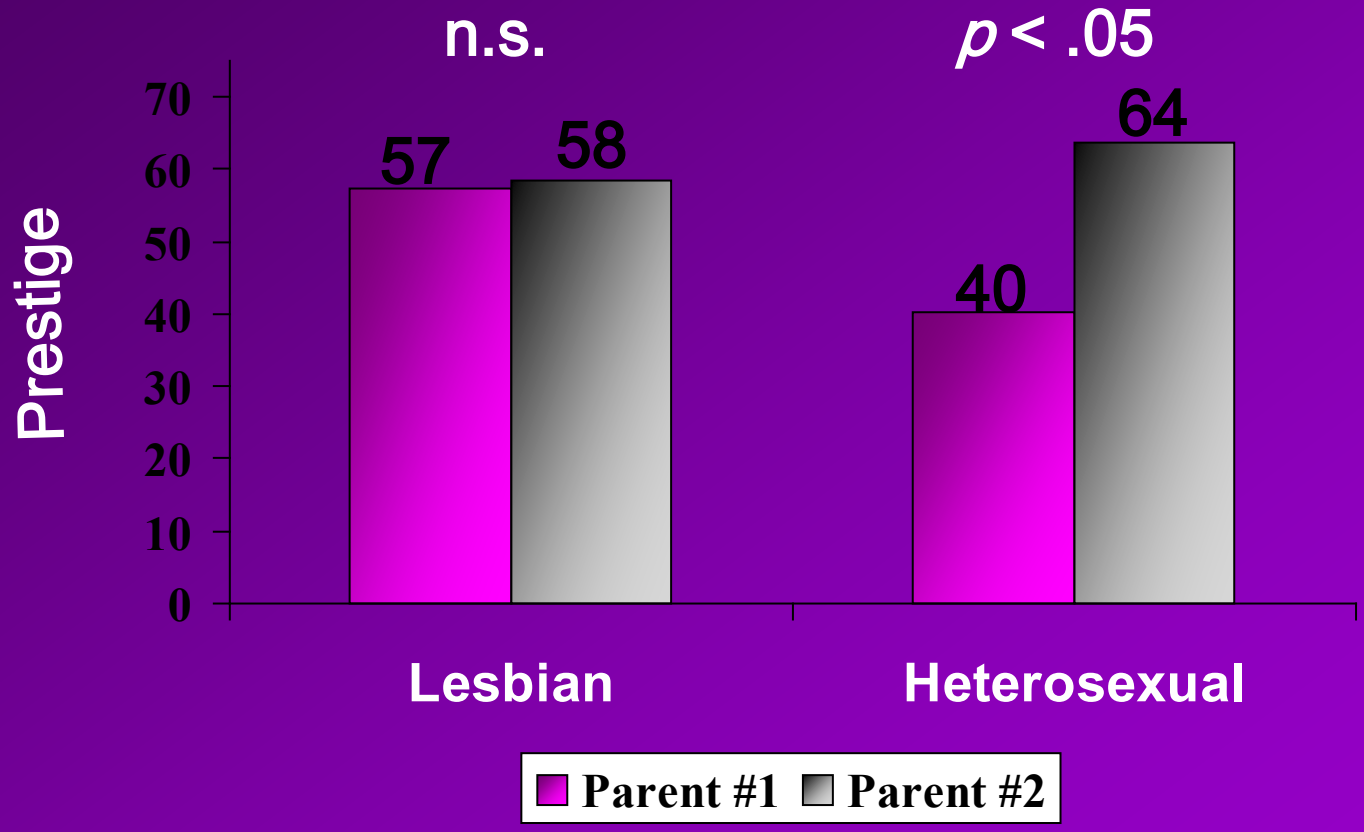
Time Spent in Paid Employment by Lesbian and Heterosexual Parents



→Lesbian mothers share paid work

Data from Patterson, Sutfin & Fulcher (2004).

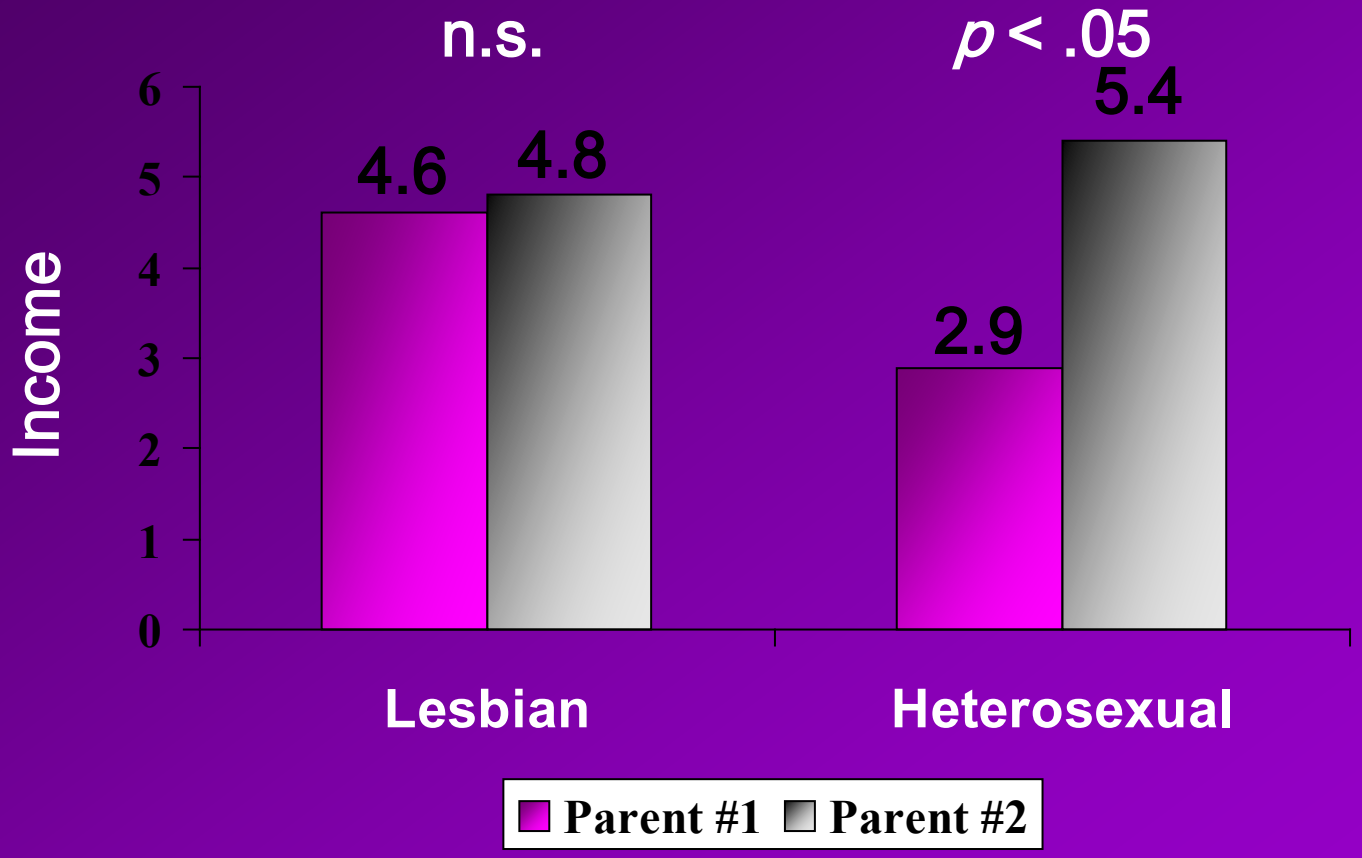
Prestige Ratings of Jobs Held by Lesbian and Heterosexual Parents



→Lesbian mothers have jobs that are similar in prestige

Data from Patterson, Sutfin & Fulcher (2004).
Prestige scores vary from 0 to 100, with higher scores describing greater prestige.

Earned Incomes of Lesbian and Heterosexual Parents



→ Lesbian mothers earn similar incomes

Data from Patterson, Sutfin & Fulcher (2004).
Annual income scored as 1=<$10K, 1=$10-20K, 3=$20-30K, 4=$30-40K, 5=$40-50K, 6=$50-60K, 7=>$60K

Division of Labor: (How) Does it Matter?

Lesbian mothers share the labors of life

Heterosexual parents more often specialize

Implications for children?

- ***Family harmony***
- ***Envision broader occupational futures***
- ***Need to learn more here***