

ONLINE SUPPLEMENT
to article in

AMERICAN SOCIOLOGICAL REVIEW, 2008, VOL. 73 (APRIL:335–56)

Gendered Power Relations among Women: A Study of Household Decision Making in Black, Lesbian Stepfamilies

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THE STUDY OF HOUSEHOLD ORGANIZATION AND EGALITARIAN PRINCIPLES AMONG BLACK WOMEN

This study analyzes family processes, household organization, and the division of labor in a sample of families headed by black, gay women. There are several reasons why African American women are the focus of this inquiry. First, the family studies literature identifies several household patterns that are more common among black heterosexuals than whites: the greater importance black women place on their partners' economic contributions when they choose and evaluate potential mates (Bulcroft and Bulcroft 1993); the more traditional gender ideologies among black wives and husbands relative to white women and men (Hunter and Sellers 1998; Kamo and Cohen 1998; Ransford and Miller 1983); and the greater tendency for separate rather than jointly-controlled financial accounts in black heterosexual unions

(Kenney 2006). It is instructive to see if these patterns of family life, common among black heterosexual couples, also occur among blacks in same-sex unions.

Black women are also a useful comparative population for studying lesbian household organization and the division of labor because they developed a lesbian sexuality outside of the feminist ideologies of the 1970s women's movement (Moore 2006). Middle-class white women largely came to understand lesbian sexuality in the context of consciousness-raising meetings or women's studies classes on college campuses (Wolf 1979). For black women, however, racial segregation in housing, education, occupations, indeed, the very fabric of social life, limited their involvement in those groups. Instead, they primarily entered the lesbian social world through private parties and other events in informal environments (Kennedy and Davis 1993; Moore 2006; Thorpe 1996). Even

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many college-educated black lesbians first came into their gay sexualities in predominantly black social or political circles (Abdulahad et al. 1983). The racial segregation of these social and political environments influenced whether and in what form black women incorporated egalitarian ideologies into their self-images.

Another advantage in using a sample of black women is that the process of family formation that they employ better represents the experience of gay and lesbian parents in the larger population. Black lesbians are less likely than white women to use alternative insemination methods to bear children for several reasons (Morris, Balsam, and Rothblum 2002): the high costs associated with many donor insemination procedures, the small number of African American sperm donors, the practice of informal adoption and foster care of kin in black communities, and racial differences in the timing of childbearing and the timing of lesbian self-identification. The most common method of producing children in black gay households is through one partner's prior heterosexual experience. This results in a stepfamily structure with parents who come out as gay after participating in a heterosexual union. Approaching the question of how lesbian stepfamilies negotiate paid work, housework, childrearing, and household financial management may provide a different picture of these processes than what we have seen in previous studies of alternative insemination couples. Using a predominantly African American sample to address this question adds a new dimension to the findings and interpretation of family process in past work.

A final benefit to analyzing family formation and household organization among black women in same-sex unions is the opportunity to examine how race and culture affect the social organization of lesbian households. Analyses of unmarried partner households in the 2000 Census suggest that on several demographic indicators, black same-sex couples are significantly different from white same-sex couples and more similar to black heterosexual couples.¹ Dang and Frazer (2004) report that the majority of black, same-sex partnered households are in predominantly black neighborhoods, which provide very different contexts for gay parents raising children compared to the predominantly white environments of the families that are usually studied (e.g., greater concentrations of poverty and higher crime rates). Black same-sex couples in the Census also look more similar to black heterosexual couples and significantly different from white same-sex couples on other demographic measures, including household income, educational completion, and home ownership.

¹ In 1990 and 2000, the U.S. Census allowed same-sex cohabiting couples to self-identify as "unmarried partnered household." The female-female and male-male couples who self-identified in this way are referred to as "same-sex couples" or "same-sex households" (Dang and Frazer 2004).

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American Sociological Review, 2007, Vol. 73 (April:335–56)

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