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The Christian right and homophobic discourse : a response to "evidence" that lesbian and gay parenting damages children.

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Abstract

Abstract: This 'rapid response' piece, submitted under the 'Sexuality and the Church' theme, examines claims by Christian writers that lesbian and gay parenting is bad for children. The author analyses aspects of what he terms a 'Christian homophobic discourse' in order to demonstrate the problematic claim to neutrality made by these writers. In addition, the author shows how the Christian writers' view of research rests upon a series of positivist assumptions. Claims that research evidence shows children of lesbian or gay parents demonstrate gender or sexual identity confusion are disputed, and the author argues that the Christian writers present their own moral interpretations rather than the 'facts of the matter'. The author argues that the Christian writers construct a version of homosexuality as highly diseased and dangerous, before concluding that it is both epistemologically and morally misguided to see 'sexuality' as an object or variable which influences the development of children.

Keywords:

Lesbian Parenting; Gay Parenting; Child Development; Christianity; Homophobia; Christian Right; Homophobic Discourse

Introduction

1.1

The publication of Patricia Morgan's book, *Children as Trophies? Examining the Evidence on Same-Sex Parenting* ([Morgan 2002](#)), was supported by a press release from the Christian Institute^[1] which argued that "same-sex parenting is bad for kids" ([Christian Institute 2002c](#)). This was timed to coincide with the UK Houses of Parliament debate on an amendment to the Adoption & Children Act 2002 to allow joint adoption applications by unmarried couples, including lesbians and gay men. The Christian Institute, which published Morgan's book, sent copies to every Member of Parliament and funded a survey that claimed that 71% of respondents were against adoption rights for gay men^[2]. Survey results were sent to all MPs, supported by a poster and briefing paper ([Christian Institute 2002a](#)).

1.2

This example, a highly organised and well-funded campaign to oppose all forms of lesbian and

gay parenting, is part of the anti-gay agenda being promoted by some Christian organisations in the UK and the US. The Christian Institute, for example, has mounted campaigns in the UK to oppose the equalizing of the age of consent for gay men ([Christian Institute 1999a](#)) and to uphold and even extend the reaches of Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1987-88^[3] ([Christian Institute 1999b](#)). At the same time that Morgan's book was published, Joy Holloway, who is married to the Reverend David Holloway a trustee of the Institute, self-published a paper on lesbian and gay foster care and adoption which argued that "the majority [of the UK population]...have moral concerns" and "...do not want vulnerable youngsters to be drawn into this kind of lifestyle" ([Holloway 2002](#):5). This paper made very similar claims to those in Morgan's book, and was sent to all foster care and adoption panels and their medical advisers across the UK^[4]. In the US, Paul Cameron of the Family Research Institute ([Cameron 1999](#); [Cameron & Cameron 1996](#); [Cameron et al. 1996](#)) and others ([Smith 1993](#); [Wardle 1997](#)) have made similar arguments.

1.3

This 'rapid response' paper has been written in order to object to these Christian arguments for a number of reasons. Firstly, I do not see them as 'extremist' arguments far removed from those of 'ordinary people'. Instead I think that they share elements in common with other homophobic discourses and therefore merit sociological attention rather than dismissal. Secondly, these arguments do have significant impact upon political and public debates about topics like lesbian and gay adoption. The "same-sex parenting is bad for kids" press release, for example, was taken up by the UK Channel 4 television programme 'Richard & Judy'^[5], with Morgan's claim that lesbian or gay parents damage children accepted and presented as expert 'fact'. In addition, some participants in the Houses of Parliament debates repeated Morgan's arguments^[6]. Finally, I wish to present a discussion of the key elements of what I term a 'Christian homophobic discourse'.

◆ Objectivity and Scientific Value

2.1

The first element of this homophobic discourse is the suggestion of an impartial or neutral perspective on the part of the author. Morgan, for example, claims to have no moral agenda, adding "[a]ctually it is irrelevant what a reviewer or critic's views are on a particular subject - in this instance, same-sex parenting or homosexuality" ([Morgan 2002](#):34). Instead, Morgan plays the role of the detached scientist and says that she assesses research on the basis of "veracity or validity of the observations" alone ([Morgan 2002](#):34). This she contrasts with the heavy political bias she attributes to any researcher who supports lesbian or gay parenting, implying that such people are likely to be gay themselves and so unable to be impartial. Cameron ([Cameron 1999](#); [Cameron & Cameron 1996](#)) makes similar claims.

2.2

Ironically, this is what Grace Jantzen has termed a 'God's eye' or 'from nowhere' view of knowledge ([Jantzen 1998](#)), in which the author claims to have no agenda or moral standpoint in order to establish their own view as both objective and expert. In Morgan's case, this is linked to a suggestion that her work will likely be subject to "furious reflex accusations about homophobia" ([Morgan 2002](#):34) - like mine - since, in her view, the topic of lesbian and gay parenting is dominated by 'political correctness'. Both Morgan and the Christian Institute argue that lesbian and gay adoption is now totally supported by "social work orthodoxy" ([Morgan 2002](#):9), and Morgan positions herself as the lone voice that dares to question this:

There is fear for professional and academic reputations, where the promotion, tenures

and research funds of those who speak out are at risk. Academics and researchers tend to cowardice anyway, something reinforced by an ivory tower snobbery against involvement in 'vulgar' public debate ([Morgan 2002](#):34).

2.3

Quite apart from the ludicrous idea that the universities are run by 'gay research mafia' that control promotions, funding and even 'tenure'^[7], Morgan is engaging in a number of discursive devices which attempt to ensure her claims are treated as impartial. Firstly, she claims the entitlement to objectivity via 'expert' status. Secondly, she uses what Jonathan Potter calls "stake inoculation", or the attempt to deny any particular interest in her subject matter ([Potter 1996](#):125). Thus, in anticipating the accusations of 'homophobia' by types like me, she tries to head off any such arguments by linking these to 'gay research mafia' and political bias.

2.4

This 'view from nowhere' stance also encapsulates the epistemological standpoint taken by the various Christian writers. Existing examples of research into lesbian or gay parenting are criticised from a positivist standpoint, so that they are described as exhibiting methodological flaws on the basis of lack of comparison groups, small and biased samples, use of anecdotal opinions, lack of statistical testing and the inability to control for correct variables ([Cameron 1999](#); [Christian Institute 2002a](#); [Holloway 2002](#); [Morgan 2002](#)). Indeed Morgan suggests that sexuality should be seen as a "causal mechanism" ([2002](#):50).

2.5

Thus, all interpretivist work in this area is written off as 'anecdotal' and does not really count as knowledge at all. For example, my own work with Janet McDermott on lesbian and gay foster care and adoption ([Hicks & McDermott 1999](#)) is called 'a "collection of self-congratulatory testimonials" which proves nothing' by Morgan ([2002](#):48-9). This is hardly a generous reading of work that set out to collect personal accounts by lesbians and gay men, which is by no means entirely positive or 'self-congratulatory', and which made no claims to be a representative or generalizable 'sample'. However, the Christian writers' positivist epistemology only really counts as reliable knowledge that which is objective, directly observable and generative of scientific laws. In relation to the very concept of "sexuality" this is a problem because, in their terms, it has to be treated as an object which can be isolated and tested, rather than being seen as the very complex and socially constructed set of ideas about sexual knowledge that I believe it to be.

◆ The 'Facts of the Matter'

3.1

Morgan's arguments are based upon what she presents as a straightforward reading of the 'evidence' on lesbian and gay parenting, as though this can and indeed should be assessed without any recourse to a moral or political standpoint. However, my argument is that, even if we accept that 'evidence' can be so straightforward, then the claims presented as the 'facts of the matter' are actually disingenuous. A key example is Morgan's suggestion that the children of lesbians or gay men exhibit differences to those of heterosexuals in their gender and sexual identity development.

3.2

In relation to gender, Morgan refers to a study by Beverly Hoeffler ([1981](#)) which used social learning theory to suggest that children acquire a 'sex-role', and that this can be determined by considering their toy preferences. Hoeffler gave the children a choice of toys that were, problematically I think, pre-determined as gender-typed by her. Putting aside these very serious qualms about 'sex-role' determination for a moment, Hoeffler actually reported that there were no

significant differences in toy preferences between the children of heterosexual and lesbian mothers, and that most of them chose traditionally gender-typed toys ([Hoeffler 1981](#):542). However, in Morgan's account, Hoeffler's study becomes 'evidence' that children with gay or lesbian parents suffer terrible gender confusion, with "daughters of lesbian mothers more likely to value and exhibit male sex-typed traits, and sons more female-valued traits" ([Morgan 2002](#):78). In fact, this is Morgan's *interpretation* of Hoeffler's suggestion that some lesbian mothers are less likely to insist that their children play with traditionally gender-typed toys ([Hoeffler 1981](#):541), but my point here is that any questioning of fixed gender roles is interpreted and stated as 'gender confusion' by Morgan.

3.3

Regarding sexuality, Morgan argues that a study by Susan Golombok and Fiona Tasker ([1996](#)) shows that children of lesbian mothers are more likely to become gay than those of heterosexuals ([Morgan 2002](#):67). However, the study actually states that children with lesbian mothers were more likely to think about a same-sex relationship, more likely to try this at some point, but not more likely eventually to identify as lesbian or gay ([Golombok & Tasker 1996](#)). These same claims about gender confusion and 'distorted' sexual development appear in other Christian examples ([Christian Institute 2002a,2002c](#); [Cameron 1999](#); [Cameron et al. 1996](#); [Holloway 2002](#)).

3.4

In addition, the Christian writers argue that children of gay parents suffer terrible stigma, teasing, poor peer relationships, and are at greater risk of sexual abuse. Paul Cameron, for example, refers to the work of Charlotte Patterson ([1992](#)), claiming that she demonstrates a greater likelihood of child sexual abuse by gay parents. This is a gross misrepresentation of Patterson's work, which actually says that the equation of gay people with child abuse is a common homophobic belief and that most abuse is committed by, mainly heterosexual, men ([Patterson 1992](#):1034).

3.5

In addition, Cameron also suggests that Tasker & Golombok ([1995](#)) found 'evidence' of greater peer stigma and depression amongst children of lesbians ([Cameron 1999](#): 311,306). Actually, Tasker & Golombok's study stated that these children "were no more likely to remember general teasing or bullying by their peers," but "were more likely to recall having been teased about being gay or lesbian themselves" ([Tasker & Golombok 1995](#): 210). This is a very different finding indeed from saying that children of lesbians suffer greater teasing than those from heterosexual homes. Tasker & Golombok also reported no significant differences in anxiety levels or depression amongst children with heterosexual or lesbian mothers ([Tasker & Golombok 1995](#): 211). Here it is worth recalling that one of the reasons that Cameron was expelled from both the American Psychological and Sociological Associations was for the deliberate distortion of other's research findings ([Herek 1997-2002](#); [Herman 1997](#)).

3.6

Having pointed out that these Christian authors misrepresent the 'evidence', or disguise their own interpretations of findings as 'facts', my more important problem with their approach is a theoretical one. It is that they suggest gender and sexuality are things acquired by children as a direct result of parental and environmental influences, that they are measurable outcomes of having gay parents. This homophobic discourse thus presents the children of lesbian or gay parents as 'being different', and these differences are seen as suspect and exemplifying failed socialisation. Epistemologically, then, gender or sexuality are seen as variables or a set of traits which can be easily measured and determined as an outcome^[8], but this occurs within a normative moral framework which clearly sees homosexuality as an identifiable and absolutely deficient object. In Morgan's terms, behaviour that is less gender stereotypical is regarded as an obvious sign of

'inversion'. There is no sense of the many feminist interventions that have pointed out that gender is attributed rather than inherent, and that this is done in hierarchical ways that aim to maintain rigid distinctions between the very ideas of man and woman¹⁹¹.

◆ Moral Agendas, Moral Knowledge

4.1

Christian homophobic discourse presents lesbians and gay men as diseased, violent, perverse and dangerous. There are a number of features of this discourse which are worthy of note. Firstly, homosexuality is presented as unnatural. Morgan, for example, describes it as "essentially non-generative" ([Morgan 2002](#):25), arguing that children are the result of the natural union of a man and a woman, and therefore that all other desires to become a parent are the imposition of adult's over children's rights. Further, Morgan argues that lesbians and gay men only desire children to acquire the benefits of a life that imitates heterosexuality. The Christian Institute adds that only married couples have shown a true commitment to each other, and, like Cameron, claims that this relationship is the recognised 'gold standard' ([Cameron 1999](#); [Christian Institute 2002a](#)). Morgan actually describes lesbians and gay men as "paedophobic" ([2002](#):109), and various Christian writers represent 'gay culture' as hedonistic, singles-oriented, adult-focused and rejecting of children ([Cameron 1999](#); [Cameron & Cameron 1996](#); [Christian Institute 2002a](#)).

4.2

For example, Morgan suggests that a study by Lott-Whitehead & Tully ([1999](#)) found the lesbian community to be anti-children. Morgan also says that the study showed that lesbian mothers lack family support, cannot turn to other lesbians for help because of 'paedophobia', and so exhibit greater stress levels ([Morgan 2002](#):110). However, Lott-Whitehead & Tully actually argued that a sector of the lesbian community was unsupportive of those with children, but that this was decreasing ([Lott-Whitehead & Tully 1999](#):251-2). They found stress levels were higher amongst single lesbian parents, but those with good support systems were not stressed. In addition, lesbian mothers' stress was compounded by societal homophobia ([Lott-Whitehead & Tully 1999](#):256). In the book I co-edited with Janet McDermott, we also talked about how some aspects of the 'gay scene' are not accommodating of those with children, and about how some lesbians and gay men do not support them. Our contributors talked about how it can be difficult to form new adult relationships when caring for fostered or adopted children ([Hicks & McDermott 1999](#)). Ironically, these points are also used by the Christian writers to argue that all gay people are anti-family and anti-children because they are so narcissistic ([Morgan 2002](#): 109-10). This demonstrates the use to which homophobic discourse puts any criticism of 'the lesbian and gay community'.

4.3

In addition, this discourse aims to associate the 'natural family' with heterosexuality, and all things 'unnatural' and 'anti-family' with homosexuality. Thus for the Christian writers, lesbians and gay men who do have children are something of a problem since they appear pro-family or pro-children. Homophobic discourse deals with this by suggesting that such families do not count, that they are pale imitations or - in the words of Section 28 - 'pretend', and that adults are merely using children as political pawns or 'trophies' ([Morgan 2002](#)). This explains why so much of the literature on lesbian and gay parenting concerns itself with who actually counts as 'family' ([Hicks & McDermott 1999](#); [Kaeser & Gillespie 1999](#); [Weeks et al. 2001](#); [Weston 1991](#)).

4.4

The Christian writers further present lesbians and gay men as a source of disease and danger. Both Morgan and Holloway, for example, suggest that homosexuals are responsible for most rape and

child sexual abuse. This claim is 'evidenced' by taking figures from national random surveys to show that there are very few lesbians or gay men in the population as a whole, and then suggesting that all sexual crimes by men against other men and boys are 'homosexual'. Thus, in this reasoning, because there are many 'homosexual' assaults and so few 'homosexuals', then it must be that gay men commit the most rape and child sexual abuse ([Holloway 2002](#); [Morgan 2002](#)). What this does not admit, of course, is that figures for the gay and lesbian populations vary enormously, that the Christian writers use the lowest possible figures, and that a 'true' figure for prevalence is an impossible and indeed objectionable task. Further, sexual crimes officially labelled 'homosexual' actually refer to men abusing other men and boys, which is by no means the same as saying 'gay men'.

4.5

Homosexuality is also described as a learned pathology linked to higher incidence of murder, blackmail, nuisance, violence and theft, and is associated with psychological and social danger and higher mortality ([Cameron 1999](#); [Cameron et al. 1996](#)). Cameron's 'finding' that gays have a short life expectancy, for example, is actually derived from research in which he studied the ages of gay men whose deaths from HIV-related illness were reported in gay press obituaries ([Cameron et al. 1996](#):393). The depravity of gays is emphasized by an obsession with sexual acts and the reporting that they regularly engage in rape, bestiality, child abuse, sado-masochism and scatophilia ([Cameron & Cameron 1996](#)). Thus homophobic discourse associates homosexuality with sexual deviance and danger, especially towards children.

◆ Conclusion

5.1

It is the suffering of children at the hands of 'the homosexual' that is suggested by the Christian homophobic discourse. Children are seen as the pawns or trophies of homosexuals, and likely to suffer abuse, developmental deviance and stigma by association. This discourse thus presents children as innocent, pure and, therefore, close to 'God' because they are without sin. However, this also has the effect of preventing children from having any agency or voice, which I argue is an ethical problem when 'evidence' from children with gay parents is available ([Saffron 1996](#)). Homosexuality, on the other hand, is represented as sinful, corrupt, guilty and is associated with sex, or rather stands for all forms of non-procreative sex. In addition, homosexuals are described as having the greatest voice or agency because they are presented as a powerful force, the 'gay mafia' against which most are afraid to speak.

5.2

One problem in trying to oppose such homophobic discourses is the possibility of playing into the 'evidence game' whereby Christian assertions of 'fact' about lesbian and gay parenting are merely replaced with a corrective set of 'better truths' ([Smith 1994](#)). This is a dilemma I have had to face in writing this 'rapid response', because I have opposed the Christian writers' versions of the research 'evidence' with what I see as a better reading. I would, for example, entirely oppose the idea that gay and lesbian adoption is now an accepted "social work orthodoxy" ([Morgan 2002](#):9). My own research with social workers in the field led me to argue that practice in this area is unpredictable and that there are plenty of practitioners who use arguments that share much in common with the homophobic discourse outlined here ([Hicks 2000](#)).

5.3

Nevertheless, my point has also been that "sexuality" itself should not be seen as an object or variable, and I do not believe that the topic of lesbian and gay parenting can or should be assessed on the basis of 'the evidence' alone. That evidence is too thin, too equivocal and, more importantly,

does not represent the facts of the matter, for these are moral as well as epistemological questions. Instead of asking whether lesbian and gay parenting is 'bad for kids', we should be asking how homophobic Christian discourses are bad for such families and, indeed, how those discourses maintain the very idea that lesbians and gay men transmit their essential and deficient 'differences' to their children.

◆ Notes

¹ <http://www.christian.org.uk>

² It should be noted that the survey was carried out in the Prime Minister, Tony Blair's constituency of Sedgefield by ICM, but no sample total is given. The survey asked respondents, in the event of their unexpected death and where they had no relative or nominated guardian to look after their children, whether they would be happy for their children to be looked after or adopted by two homosexual men. 86% of fathers were unhappy about this and 71% of all respondents were against adoption rights for gay men ([Christian Institute 2002b](#)).

³ Section 28 prohibited the 'promotion of homosexuality' by any local authority and outlawed the "teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship" ([Smith 1994](#):183).

⁴ Panels decide whether to approve foster care or adoption applicants and they are supported by medical advisers amongst other members.

⁵ At the time that it was featured, the 'Richard & Judy' programme went out on Channel 4 every weekday at 5.00p.m.

⁶ See, for example, Lord Bishop of Chelmsford's comments in Hansard, debates for 16th October 2002, Houses of Lords, Adoption & Children Bill, column 888:

"The Judaeo-Christian ethic clearly emphasises that it is within the context of the committed heterosexual relationship of marriage that the paramount interests of the child are best served. All of us emphasise that it is the children who must be our paramount concern and that has emerged repeatedly throughout the debate. Children are not pawns or trophies. They need and deserve to be cared for and nurtured ideally within a home environment in which the complementarity of the sexes is expressed by a male and female parent."

⁷ Academic tenure was abolished in the UK by the 1988 Education Reform Act.

⁸ A criticism that I would also level at Hoeffler ([1981](#)).

⁹ Morgan is opposed to feminism itself (see [Morgan 1994](#)).

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