

When Propaganda Is Disguised As Research: The Case of Charlotte J. Patterson

By Gerald Schoenewolf, Ph.D.

A recent news article appearing in the *AFA Journal*, sponsored by the American Family Association, was critical of a study of gay and lesbian parenting and its co-author.

The co-author is not a researcher but a propagandist, asserted Joe Glover, president of the Family Policy Network. Glover noted that the co-author of the study, University of Virginia professor Charlotte J. Patterson, is a lesbian living with a female partner and raising three children.

The study, titled, "Children of Lesbian and Gay Parents: Research, Law and Policy," claims that the children of lesbian couples are as happy and well-adjusted as children living in traditional homes. In addition, the study recommends — as steps toward "breaking down legal barriers to maintenance of parent-child relationships in families headed by gay and lesbian parents" — repeal of all sodomy laws, legalization of same-sex marriage throughout the U.S., and legalization of adoption by same-sex couples as well as "second-parent adoptions" (adoption of the children of the other same-sex partner). Such reforms, states the report, "would extend to gay and lesbian parents and their children the legal protections that are now generally taken for granted by other families." In the paper Patterson cites her own research extensively.

Patterson, Glover added, is a radical homosexual activist "who has a clear agenda to redefine what a family is or should be." The article went on to point out that Patterson acknowledged in a newspaper interview that her paper didn't address one of the questions most often asked about lesbian families: do their children turn out to be homosexual? She and others who promote lesbian families have always indicated that such a question is irrelevant because it doesn't matter, since homosexuality, in their view, is simply a variant of normal sexuality. Such questions are dismissed as "homophobic."

The article aroused my curiosity, so I began some research of my own—an internet search of Charlotte J. Patterson. I found that she has been writing on gay and lesbian issues since the early 1990s. She is the co-editor of two books published by Oxford University Press—*Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Identity Over the Lifespan* (1995) and *Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Identity and Youth* (2001), as well as the author of a number of journal articles in prestigious journals such as *Child Development* and *Developmental Psychology*. Apparently she is considered the expert on this subject, for the *American Psychologist* cites her as one of its main experts on gay and lesbian issues, and she is the author of an Online Public Interest article by the American Psychology

Association on "Lesbian and Gay Parenting."

This "public interest" article cites a long list of research on various aspect of lesbian and gay parenting. The research compares homosexual parenting to heterosexual parenting, and concludes that there is no significant difference. At one point she does note a difference: children of lesbian mothers report greater symptoms of stress than children of heterosexual mothers. However, she dismisses this difference as "within a normal range."

Typically, Patterson's study of children of lesbian parents are based on interviews with the children in which they are asked questions about their social adjustment, their sexual orientation, and their mood (happiness); these interviews are also conducted with children of heterosexual parents and then compared. In other studies, projective testing is used (such as the Rorshach Inkblot Test). For example, one study involved two groups of 44 children, aged 12 to 18 (children of lesbians and children of heterosexuals). Both groups were said to have similar ethnic backgrounds, family income and parent educational level. The conclusions: no difference in perceived well-being, social adjustment, or sexual orientation (percentage of homosexuality) among these youth.

Sampling Flaws And Researcher Bias

There are several problems with this kind of research. No study of 44 children is representative of the population at large. No matter how well the sampling is done, it can't be representative. According to the National Adoption Clearing House, there are about 6 to 14 million children living with a gay or lesbian parent. How can 44 children be representative of 6 to 14 million children?

The interpretations of projective tests such as the Rorshach, TAT or House-Tree-Person test, are always subject to bias. Given that in this case the administrators of the test obviously have an agenda to find evidence that children of lesbian and gay parents are normal, it is likely that their interpretations of what children project onto inkblots will be colored by their bias. Interviews of children of lesbian and gay parents are not scientific or reliable. Children have a tendency to say what their parents want them to say and to protect their parents. Even most adults do that. All psychotherapists are familiar with this resistance. "My parents were fine and we had a normal family," is a typical statement of somebody going into therapy for the first time. Another frequent statement is, "I don't want to blame my parents." Also, if the interviewer is a lesbian, she may convey to the interviewee that she is looking for a certain kind of answer.

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