



The Cultural Cognition of Gay and Lesbian Parenting

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The Project

Family law has always been a flashpoint in the culture wars. It’s not just true in the US; marriage and parenting have long been areas of intense concern across the globe wherever distinctive and competing cultural outlooks are intermingled. Here in the US, the fierce debate over gay marriage and parenting is just the latest in a long line of battles over what the most fundamental building blocks in any society – our families – should look like.

The nature of that debate, however, is changing. As is appropriate in a liberal democracy, public welfare – particularly the promotion of child welfare – has overtaken discriminatory attitudes as the touchstone of the debate over gay-and-lesbian family life. As the number of children raised by gay and lesbian parents increases, courts and legislatures are turning to empirically grounded inquiries into child welfare in order to assess the quality of parenting that gays and lesbians provide their children: are the children of gay and lesbian parents, they ask, equally well off along dimensions that matter, such as happiness, health, and the ability to form stable and supportive relationships?

This is surely a step in the right direction. A respectful and reasonable discussion about the welfare of children is precisely what parents and children might hope for. And, were the public, courts and legislatures to objectively evaluate the quality of parenting provided, children – whether of gay and lesbian or heterosexual parents – would be far better off than they are at present, and public debate over these issues would be more balanced.

Unfortunately there is little reason to think that the debate over gay and lesbian parenting will be driven by a balanced evaluation of empirical research. Studies investigating the phenomenon of cultural cognition have demonstrated that in debates over everything from HPV vaccine to HIV positive health workers to gun control to global warming, individuals of diverse cultural outlooks come from competing factual beliefs that are highly resistant to empirical data. The debate over gay and lesbian parenting has many of the same characteristics as other debates where this kind of bias is present: a culturally divided public, anxious about whose values will be privileged in the law, becomes cognitively disposed to ignore or dismiss empirical evidence. This is a serious problem not only in the formation of public attitudes and the shape of public discourse more generally, but also in the specific instances in which judges and legislators are asked to make factual findings. The lesson these studies teach is humbling indeed: Even when earnestly attempting to objectively assess factual issues, individuals are often cognitively disabled from doing so.

Fortunately, these same studies show that there are strategies that can make individuals receptive to new information that they would otherwise dismiss. Using a host of social psychological techniques, Cultural Cognition Project research has shown, for example, that even on issues as divisive as the HPV vaccine, global warming, and the death penalty, individuals can be made receptive to information that runs contrary to their prior position.

The current project is aimed at investigating whether and how cultural cognition could influence public receptivity to sound information on the child welfare effect of gay and lesbian parenting. Using a set of protocols developed in the study of various other issues (including climate change, HPV vaccination, and nanotechnology), Cultural Cognition Project researchers are conducting three sets of studies.

In the first, Cultural Cognition Project we (through a variety of techniques) investigated how factual beliefs about the child-welfare effects of gay and lesbian parenting are distributed across different groups defined by their cultural values and commitments.

In the second – currently underway – we are assessing how cultural values influence receptivity to sound information on gay and lesbian parenting.

And in the third, we will explore communication techniques, including ones focusing on information framing and source credibility, designed to make it possible for persons of diverse cultural perspectives to accept the best empirical information on the child-welfare effects of gay and lesbian parenting.

The goal of this research is to create conditions in which individuals are disposed to give empirical data a fair appraisal, and because research tells us that public attitudes help drive social policy, we hope that our research will advance social justice and public welfare in this area.

What We Learned in Stage 1

We have completed Stage 1, which focused on charting how beliefs about the child-welfare effects are distributed across persons of different values and cultural orientations. This first stage of the study investigates the existing relationship between cultural values and perceptions of the child-welfare effects of gay and lesbian parenting through a survey of existing literature, interviews of opinion leaders, and the completion of a national survey.

We interviewed “stakeholders”—individuals who currently play a critical role in research and advocacy relating to gay and lesbian parenting. Their perspectives on the issues and the debate have helped guide the development of the remainder of Stage 1 and have helped in establishing the parameters of Stage 2.

We conducted two focus groups designed to elicit potential concerns about the gay and lesbian parenting from members of the lay public. Focus group participants were drawn from those who

believed that the children of gay and lesbian parents were likely to suffer from some significant welfare deficit. Through a series of guided questions, we elicited responses to various factual claims, assessed their plausibility, and developed specific language to better measure potential concerns among members of the public.

The central component of Stage 1 was an on-line survey of a diverse, national sample of approximately 1,500 persons. The survey, drafted by the principal investigators after discussion with stakeholders and review of the focus groups, measured subjects' cultural outlooks, using survey items approved for use in previous cultural cognition studies, and subject beliefs about a variety of factual issues relating to gay and lesbian parenting. The questions about cultural outlooks were based on two scales that are designed to measure preferences for how society should be organized.

Along the first dimension, a preference for an individualist society, in which individuals are expected to secure the conditions of their own well-being without interference or assistance from the collective contrasts with a preference for a relatively communitarian society, in which the needs of the collective take precedence over those of the individual and in which the collective is deemed responsible for securing the conditions of individual flourishing. Along the second dimension, the preference for a hierarchical social order, in which all manner of prerogatives and obligations are assigned in a stratified way on the basis of relatively stable individual characteristics, such as gender, ethnicity, and class contrasts with the preference for a relatively egalitarian social order in which such characteristics are treated as irrelevant to the distribution of status and entitlements.

The Survey

We contracted with Polimetrix to administer the survey. Polimetrix, founded in 2004 by Stanford Professor Douglas Rivers, is headquartered in Palo Alto, California. They are funded by Alloy Ventures, a leading early stage venture capital investor. The company has assembled a talented staff from the worlds of survey research, political science, applied statistics, and Internet technology. Polimetrix is in the business of polling, and it assumed responsibility for drawing a representative sample of respondents, administering the survey, and then coding the data.

Polimetrix interviewed 1789 respondents who were then matched down to a sample of 1500 to produce the final dataset. The respondents were matched on gender, age, race, education, party identification and political interest. Polimetrix then weighted the matched set of survey respondents to known marginals for the general population of the United States from the 2006 American Community Survey. Those marginals are shown below.

Age:	18-34: 30.21%
	35-54: 39.69%
	55+: 30.10%
Gender:	Male: 48.27%
	Female: 51.73%
Race:	White/Other: 76.17%
	Black: 11.06%
	Hispanic: 12.77%
Education:	HS or less: 46.36%
	Some College: 28.63%
	College Graduate: 16.15%
	Post-graduate: 8.86%

Findings

Not surprisingly, people are divided on gay-lesbian parenting. The survey included various GL parenting items, each of which enjoyed varying levels of support and opposition. Overall, 58% of adult Americans “agree” at some level that gays & lesbians should be allowed to adopt children. As can be seen in Figure 1, below, nearly all of the policy items, including the adoption item at right, are characterized by dissensus. Moreover, it is not a statistically normal form of dissensus in which most people grouped at the center with fewer people at the extremes; rather, the modal response is at the extreme on either side. In fact, for all gay- and lesbian- related issue-items in our study, a majority of people indicated that they either strongly support or strongly oppose the policies. The modal responses on both sides of this issue are at the extremes – Americans feel strongly about these issues.

Strong Views On Gay & Lesbian Parenting

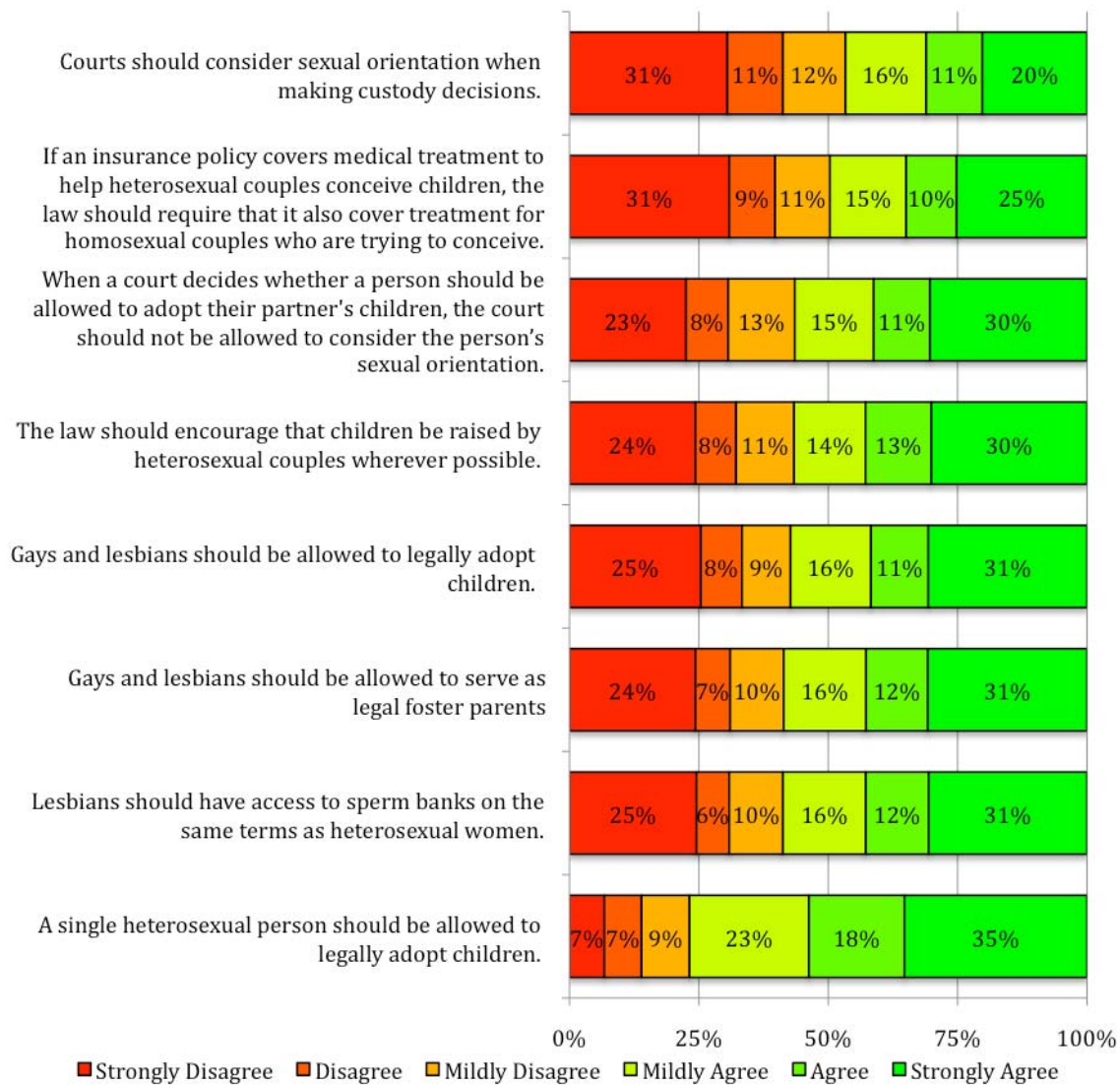


Figure 1: Policies Related to Gay & Lesbian Parenting

There is also significant disagreement over the various expressive sentiments associated with gay and lesbian parenting. As can be in figure 2 below, differences across various value and demographic measures are also evident for various expressive beliefs about GL parenting. And again, the modal response in every case is “strongly agree” or “strongly disagree”.

Strong Disagreement on "Expressive" Statements

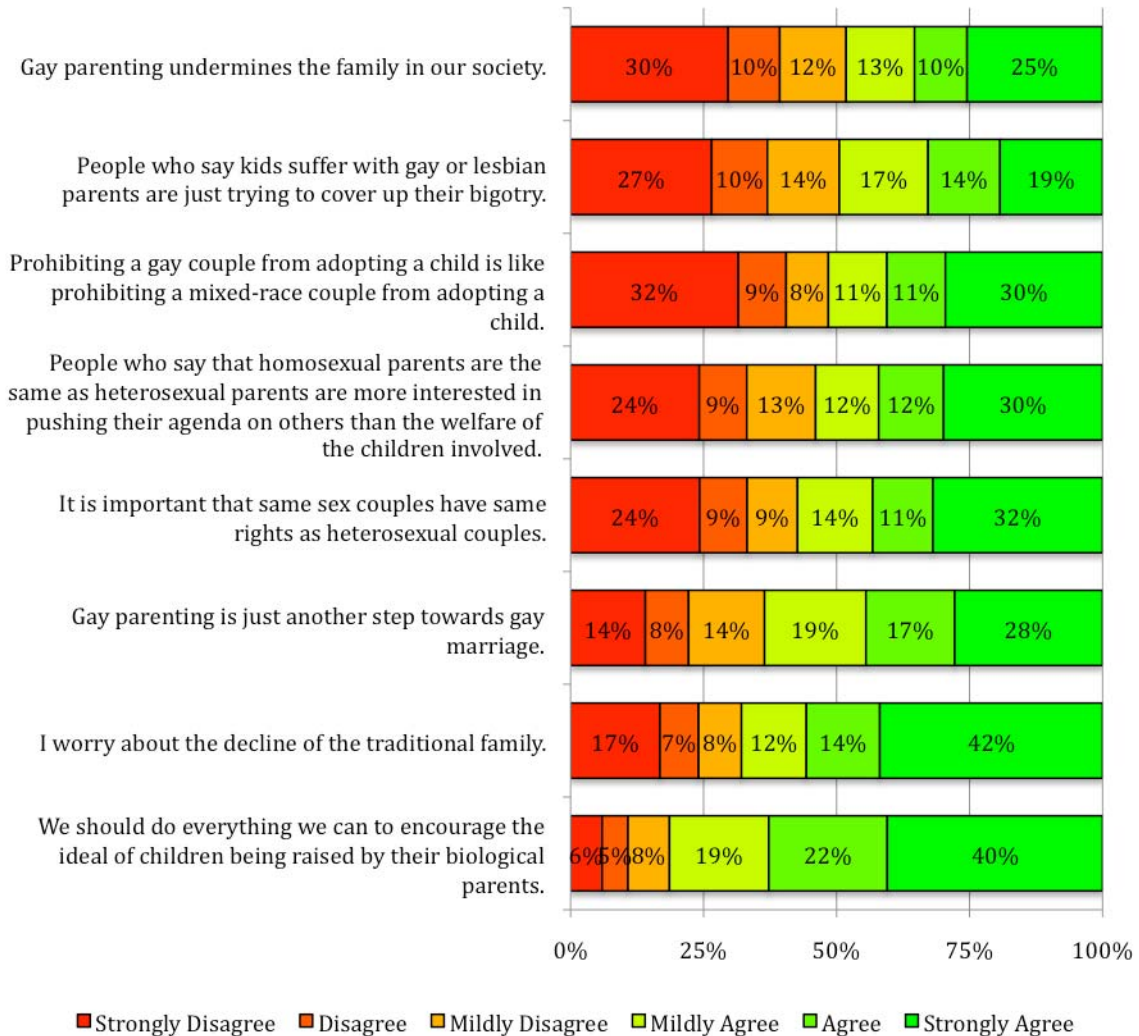


Figure 2: Expressive Attitudes

The vast majority of people – whether they support or oppose gay or lesbian parent, want to “encourage the ideal of children being raised by their biological parents”. Of course, few of the policy disputes would *directly* reduce the likelihood of children being raised by biological parents, but those on both sides emphasize the importance of a biological link with a child. Those who oppose gay and lesbian parenting generally view it as a threat to the ideal of the biological family; those who support gay and lesbian parenting argue for a right to have biological children through various reproductive technologies and innovative legal and parenting arrangements. Gay and lesbian adoption, which might seem to be entirely divorced from biological parenting on the surface, the two are profoundly related in the way the public views both issues – or at least that what those we interviewed told us.

If cultural cognition is operative, then we would expect to see dissensus over perceptions of child welfare effects related to gay and lesbian parenting, which is precisely what we do see in figure 3, below.

Compared to other children, how much more likely do you think the children raised by gay or lesbian parents are to...

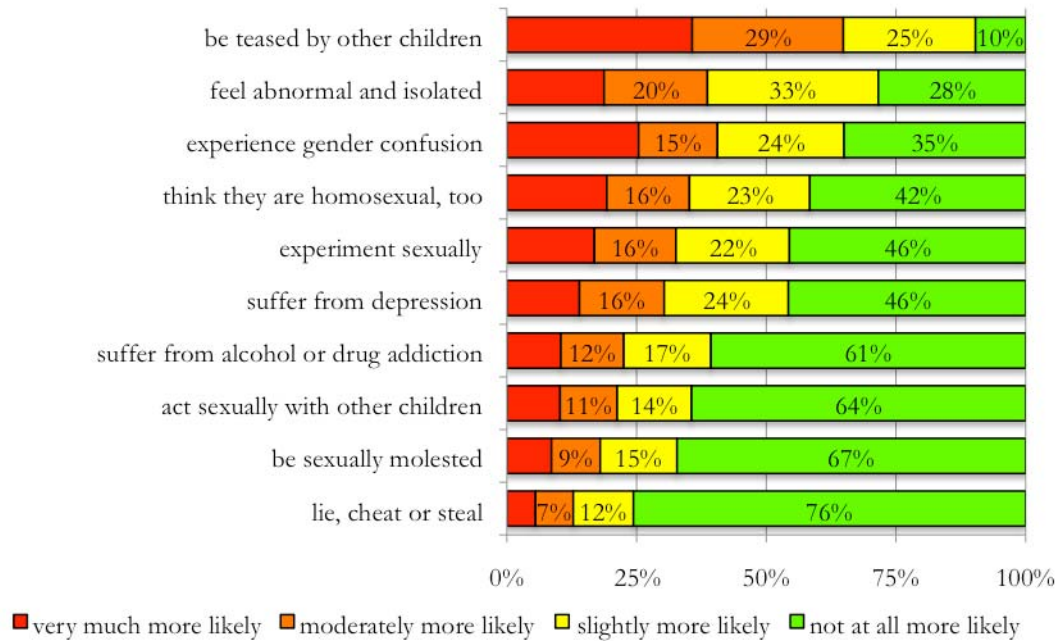


Figure 3: Perceived Risks of GL Parenting to Children

Some of these are not necessarily harms, but were perceived as harms by many of our focus group participants. So, for example, “think they are homosexual, too” and “experiment sexually” are not established measures of child well-being, but rather are indicators of some respondent’s perceptions of child well-being.

Other perceived risks, as focus groups made clear, may not be a function of being having gay or lesbian parents, but rather a function of living in a society where bigotry against gay and lesbian families is prevalent. While disputed, some focus group members described “being teased by other children,” “feel[ing] abnormal and isolated,” “depression,” and even increased risk of “alcohol or drug addiction” as something children from mixed-race marriages may have suffered in the past.

A substantial minority – nearly a third – believe that children with gay or lesbian parents are at greater risk of sexual molestation, a perception that has a long and sordid history.

Nearly a quarter also believe that children of gay or lesbian parents are more likely to lie, cheat or steal – something is closely correlated with the belief, shown in figure 6 below, that “because children raised by homosexual couples are taught that homosexuality is morally acceptable, they will have trouble learning right from wrong in other areas as well.”

One issue we did not touch on, but will in future surveys, is the perceived relative risk of HIV infection.

We also measured risk perceptions using a standard Likert agree/disagree scale. Results were similarly divided – and, while the responses were not as abnormal in their distributions, the modal response was “strongly agree” or “strongly disagree” on most items.

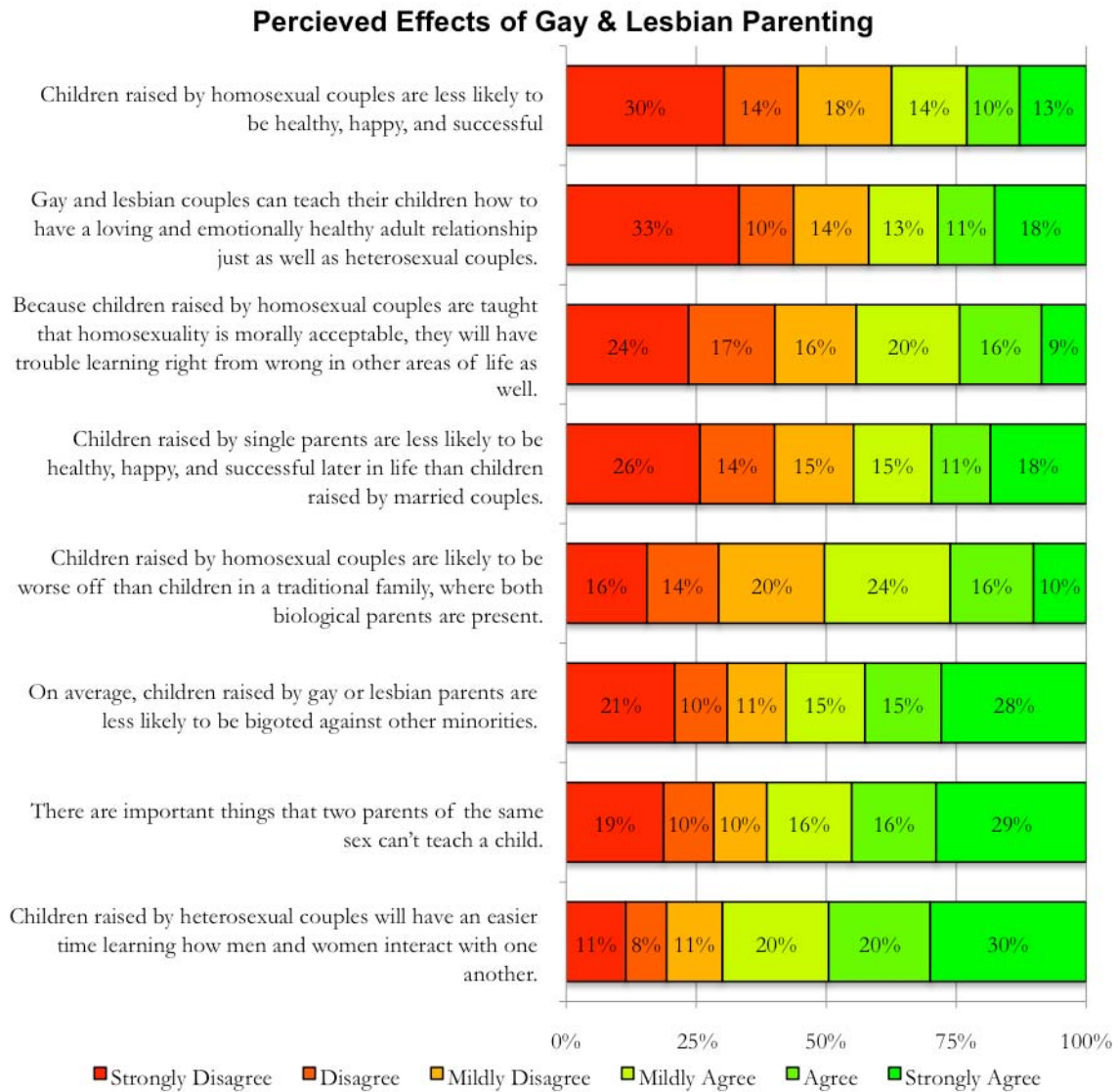


Figure 4: Beliefs about the Effects of GL Parenting

We included a one item for comparison: “Children raised by single parents are less likely to be healthy, happy, and successful later in life than children raised by married couples.” This item was strongly correlated with the other items in this study, so feelings about gay and lesbian parenting appear to be bound up with similar concerns about single parenting.

And, finally, we measured attitudes towards other gay and lesbian issues, like gay marriage, civil unions, protection from housing decimation, and protection from job discrimination. On the latter two, there is very little dissensus: the idea that gays and lesbians should not be protected from that kind of discrimination is now relatively marginal. Civil unions and, to a much larger extent, gay marriage remain controversial – and again the feelings are abnormally “strong” on both sides of these issues, statistically speaking.

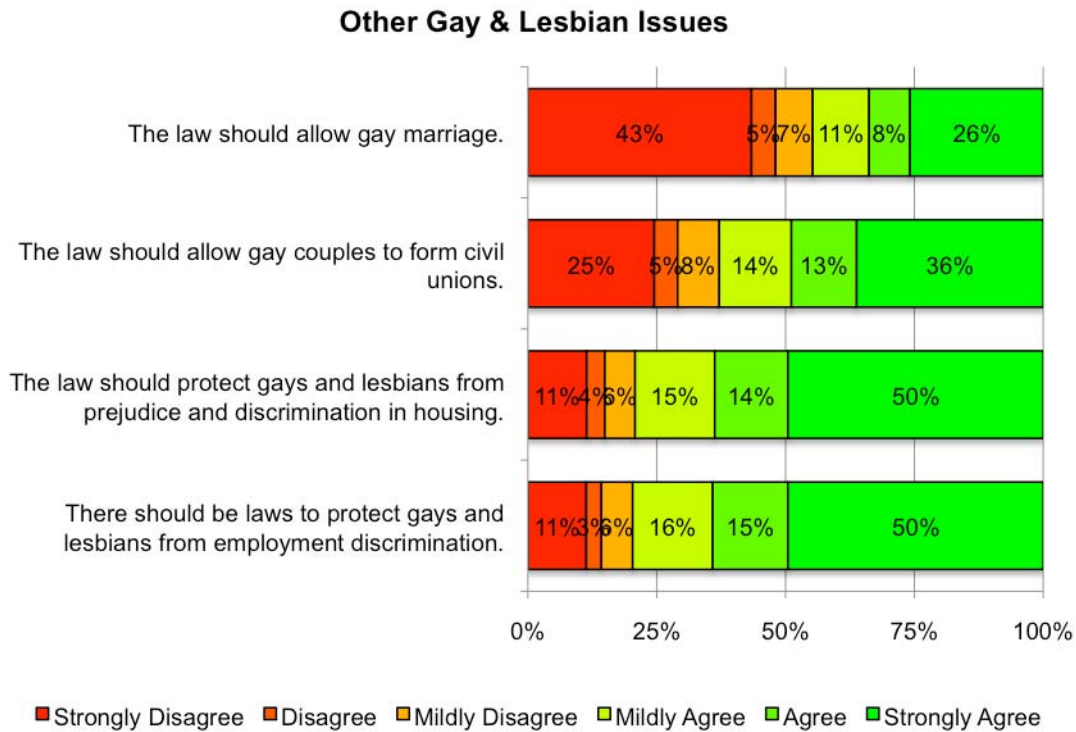


Figure 5: Other Gay & Lesbian Issues

Unsurprisingly, given a common nexus in family matters, attitudes towards gay and lesbian parenting are most closely correlated with attitudes towards gay marriage and civil unions.

We also found that public perceptions of risks related to gay and lesbian parenting, like public perceptions of societal risks generally, are largely affect driven: individuals' visceral reactions to gay and lesbian family life (ones based on attitudes toward family life more generally) were powerful predictors of variance in individuals' perceptions of risks and benefits related to gay and lesbian parenting.

As can be seen in figure 6 below, differences in affect varied across various scenarios; nevertheless, they were all strongly correlated with one another.

Imagine that you saw each of the following events. How would you feel if you witnessed it with your own eyes?

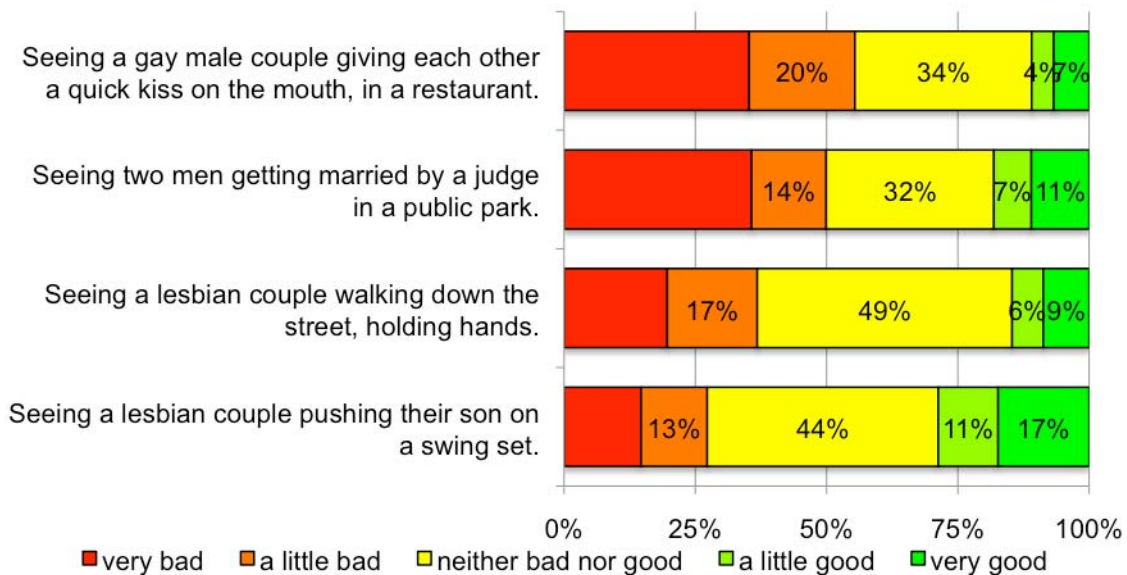


Figure 6: Affect towards Gay & Lesbian Family Life

This is consistent with the theory of cultural cognition, which holds that powerful affective associations are often culturally specific, and shape individual perceptions of the benefits and risk present in any culturally-inflected situation.

Affect plays an important role in cultural cognition: it mediates the effect that values have on perceptions of efficacy: one experiences the emotion — fear or happiness, dread or affection — that embodies one's moral appraisal of gay and lesbian family life; that emotion in turn determines — usually in a rapid, intuitive fashion — the perceived effect that those family arrangements will have. This account is suggested by a growing body of work documenting the contribution affect makes to the formation of risk perceptions and related facts.

The question we turn to next is the central concern of this first stage: *What drives the variation in risk perceptions, policy preferences and the affective responses driving them?*

Sources of Disagreement

So Americans disagree – and strongly – on many issues related to gay and lesbian parenting. The two additional questions we posed were: why do they disagree, and how important is the issue of child welfare to their positions?

As is apparent in Figure 7 below, there are differences in support for adoption across many value and demographic measures (it's coded as any level of agreement). Similar variation obtains for other gay and lesbian parenting issues, although opposition and support are more concentrated at one end or the other as you can see below (coded as various levels of agreement or disagreement).

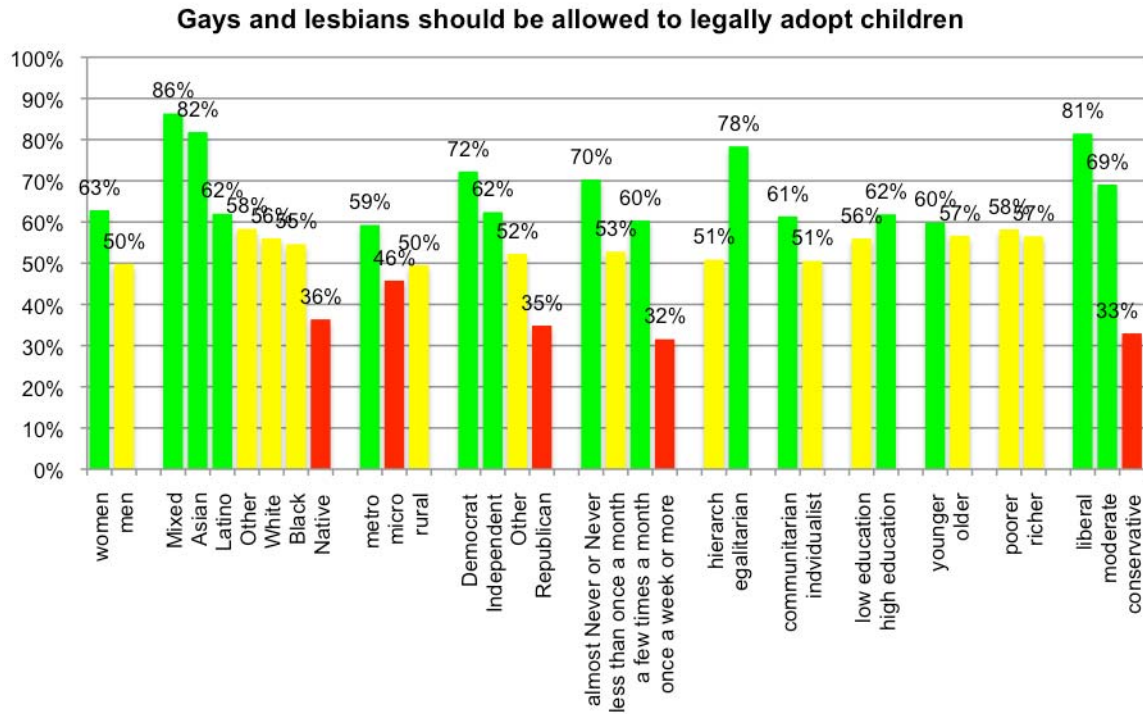


Figure 7: Who Disagrees?

Liberals (81%) and conservatives (33%) are very divided, as are hierarchs and egalitarians (as measured by the cultural outlook questions described above) and those who attend church frequently (32% support) and those who never go to church (70% support). Surprisingly, communitarians seem more supportive than individualists (67% to 46%), but this effect turns around in the multivariate analysis (suggesting that the inverse correlation between egalitarianism and individualism in this survey -- higher than we usually see -- is obscuring the real effect of individualism).

We find similar disagreements over risk perceptions. Figure 8 below reports the variations along the same demographic groups for perceptions of increased risk of depression. Similar variations are present in every risk perception item we examined.

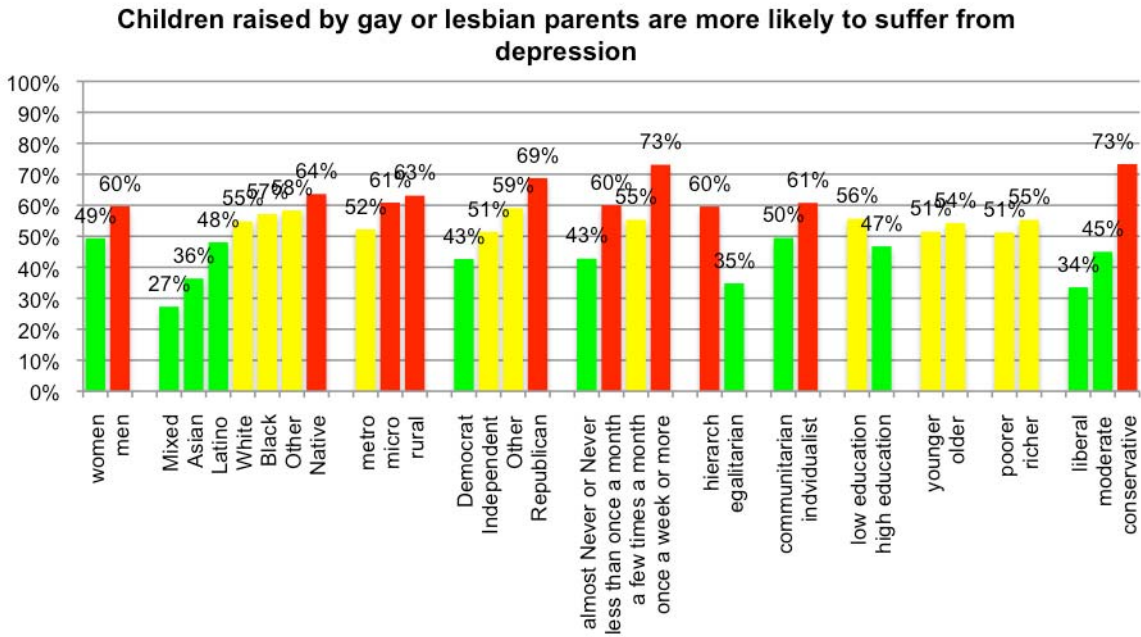


Figure 8: Increased Depression Risk Perceptions (coded as any perception of increased risk)

Strikingly similar variations are found in affective responses to two men being married in a park.

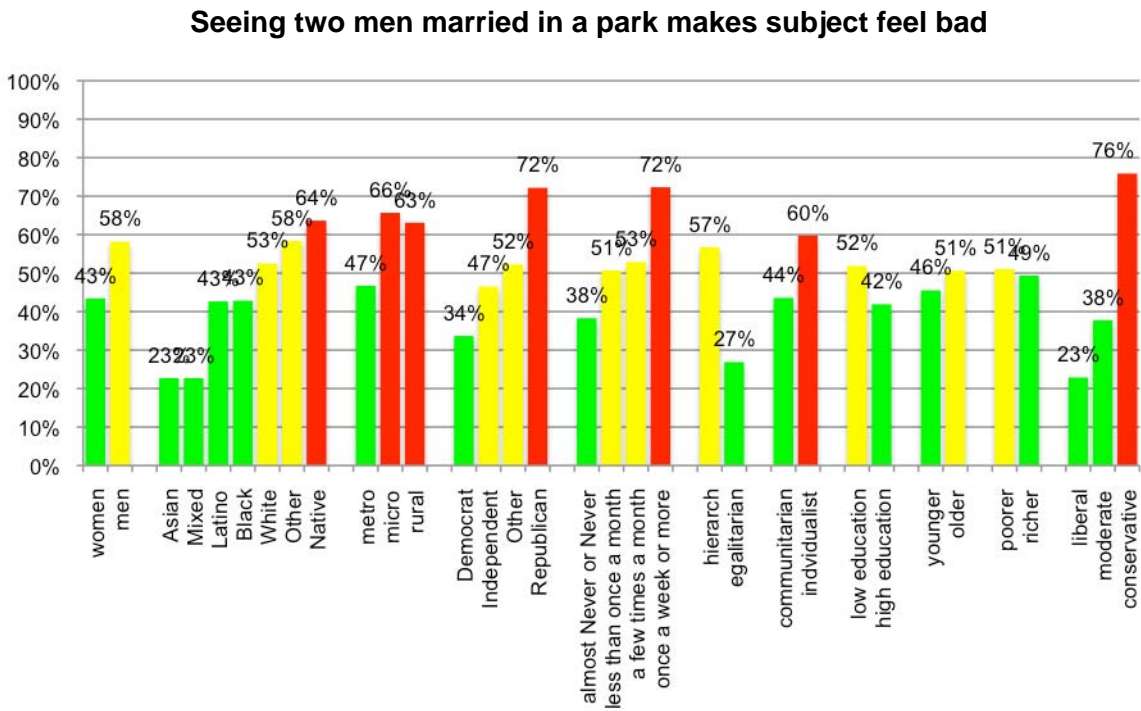
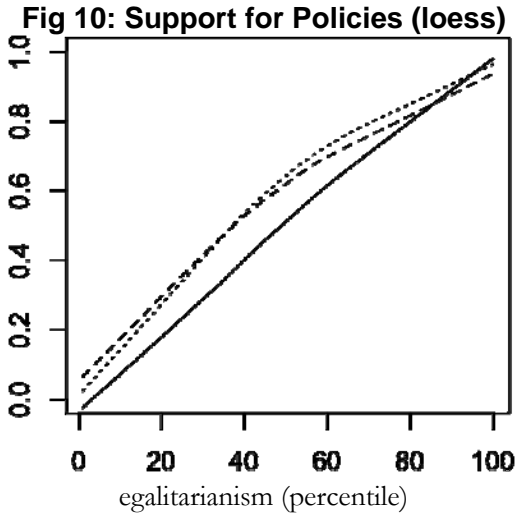
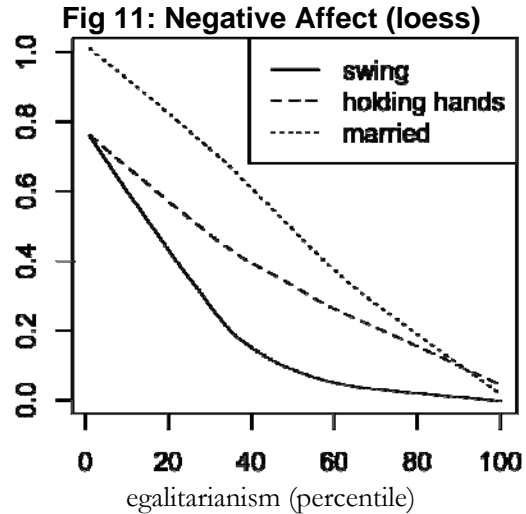


Figure 9: Affective Response to Gay Marriage (coded as bad feelings)

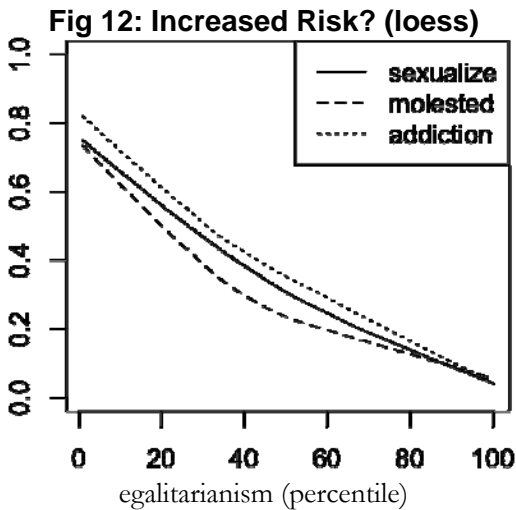
These graphs above are somewhat misleading, though, as they tend to simplify the relationships between the demographic groups and the policy preferences, risk perceptions, and affective responses. Take, for example, the relationship between egalitarianism and these measures. Simply dividing the sample into two groups (egalitarians and hierarchs) is entirely artificial, and obscures the almost linear effect that egalitarianism has on risk perceptions, empirical beliefs, affect and policy preferences:



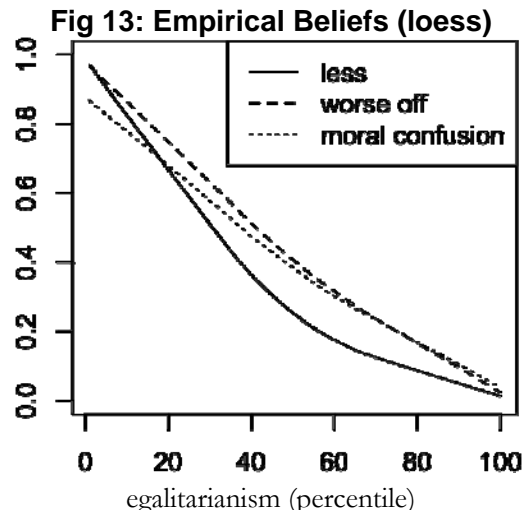
fertility: *If an insurance policy covers medical treatment to help heterosexual couples conceive children, the law should require that it also cover treatment for homosexual couples who are trying to conceive.*
 partner: *When a court decides whether a person should be allowed to adopt their partner's children, the court should not be allowed to consider the person's sexual orientation.*
 adopt: *Gays and lesbians should be allowed to legally adopt children.*



Would feel badly upon seeing the following:
 swing: *Seeing a lesbian couple pushing their son on a swing set.*
 holding hands: *Seeing a lesbian couple walking down the street, holding hands.*
 married: *Seeing two men getting married by a judge in a public park.*

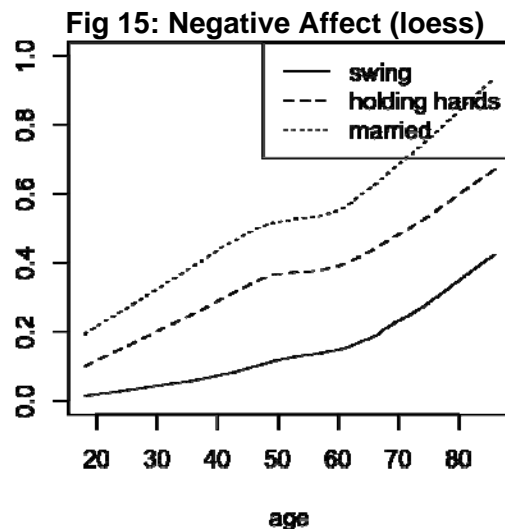
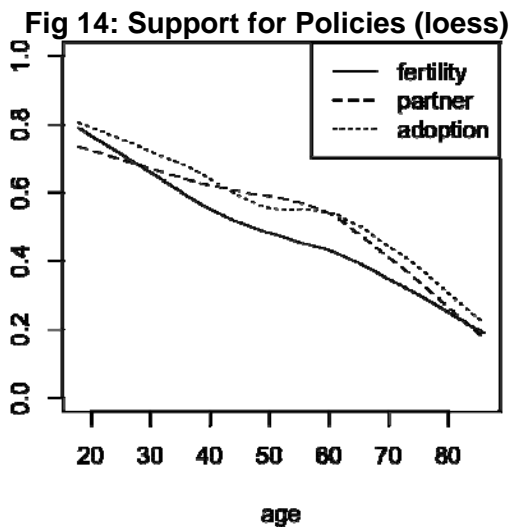


Perceives increased risk, relative to children with heterosexual parents, that children of gay and lesbian parents will:
 sexualize: *act sexually with other children*
 molested: *be sexually molested*
 addiction: *suffer from alcohol or drug addiction*



less: *Children raised by homosexual couples are less likely to be healthy, happy, and successful*
 worse off: *Children raised by homosexual couples are likely to be worse off than children in a family where both biological parents are present.*
 moral Confusion: *Because children raised by homosexual couples are taught that homosexuality is morally acceptable, they will have trouble learning right from wrong in other areas of life as well.*

Similarly, simply splitting the sample in two older versus younger groups obscures the incremental relationship between age and gay and lesbian family perceptions and policy preferences. As the figures below reveal, the relationships with age is also closer to linear than it is to binary:



fertility: *If an insurance policy covers medical treatment to help heterosexual couples conceive children, the law should require that it also cover treatment for homosexual couples who are trying to conceive.*
 partner: *When a court decides whether a person should be allowed to adopt their partner's children, the court should not be allowed to consider the person's sexual orientation.*
 adopt: *Gays and lesbians should be allowed to legally adopt children.*

Would feel badly upon seeing the following:
 swing: *Seeing a lesbian couple pushing their son on a swing set.*
 holding hands: *Seeing a lesbian couple walking down the street, holding hands.*
 married: *Seeing two men getting married by a judge in a public park.*

Fig 16: Increased Risk Perceptions (loess)

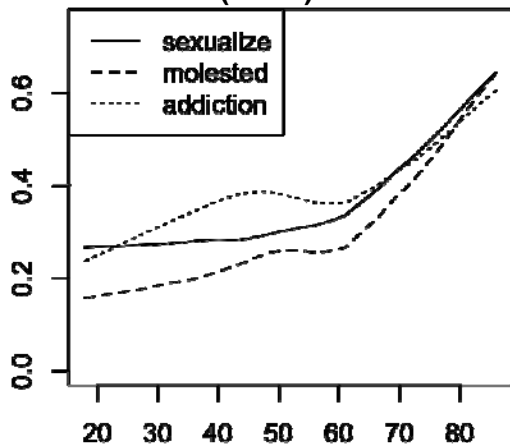
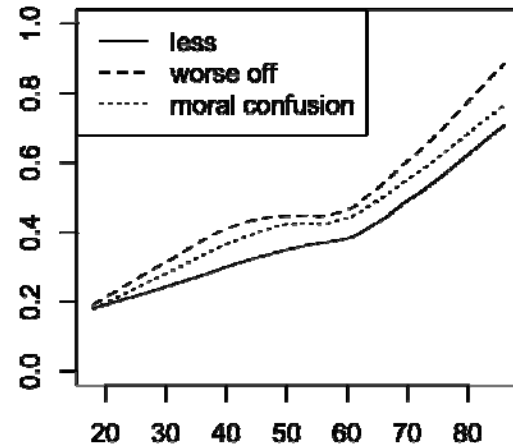


Fig 17: Empirical Beliefs (loess)

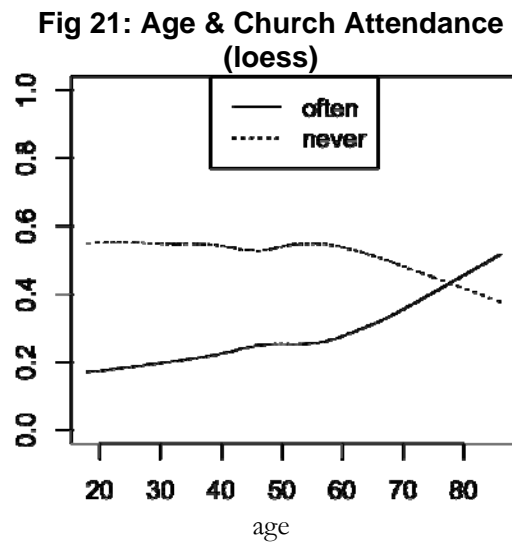
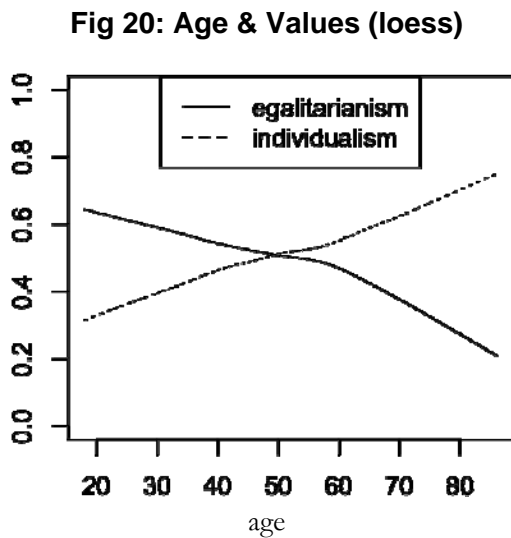
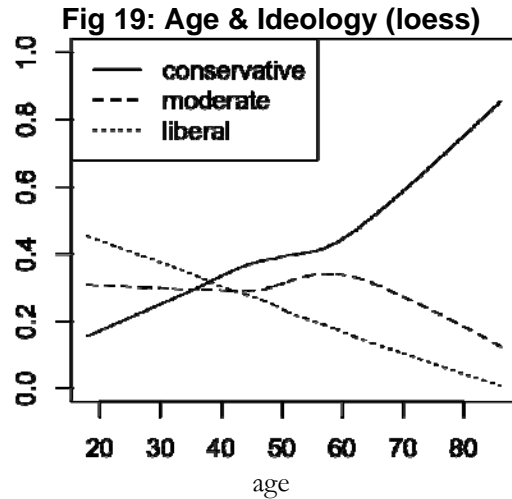
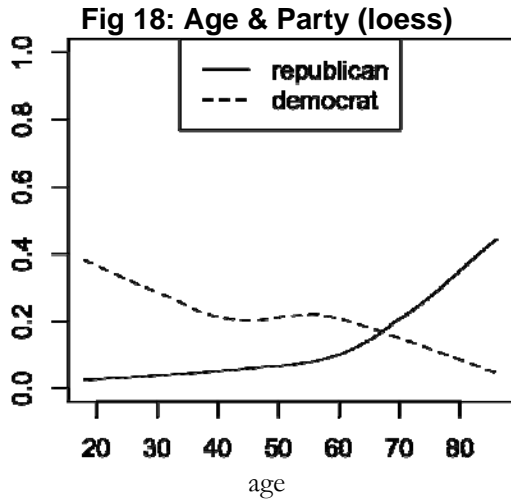


Perceives increased risk, relative to children with heterosexual parents, that children of gay and lesbian parents will:

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less: *Children raised by homosexual couples are less likely to be healthy, happy, and successful*
 worse off: *Children raised by homosexual couples are likely to be worse off than children in a family where both biological parents are present.*
 moral Confusion: *Because children raised by homosexual couples are taught that homosexuality is morally acceptable, they will have trouble learning right from wrong in other areas of life as well.*

The relationship between age, risk perception, affect, and policy preferences is unsurprising given the relationship between age and many other strong predictors of these same attitudes and beliefs. Consider the relationship, for example, between age and other predictive factors like egalitarianism, party, ideological self-identification, and church attendance:



Because age is related to identities, values, and practices that generate anxiety over the threat that gay and lesbian parenting poses to traditional conceptions of family, it is also associated with those things. If individuals were to stay fixed in their values, practices, and beliefs, then we would expect there to be a significant rise in support for gay and lesbian parenting over the next decade, as the generation most adamantly opposed to and concerned about it ages out of the population. Of course, these relationships are not static – individuals may change over time – so it remains to be seen whether this will bear out.

Empirical Disputes

In assessing the nature of the debate, we also measured the kinds of concerns that individuals said were most important to them by asking them to rank several concerns: child welfare, religion, equal rights, and morality. Fifty-two percent of the sample ranked child-welfare as the most

important factor in their thinking on gay-lesbian adoption. Fifty-four percent of liberals ranked that concern number one, but so did 48% of conservatives. Hierarchs and egalitarians were indistinguishable in this regard (52%). Highly religious folk-- those who go to church at least once a week -- were less likely than those who never go to church to rank child welfare first; nevertheless, a full 40% of the highly religious ranked child welfare consideration number one.

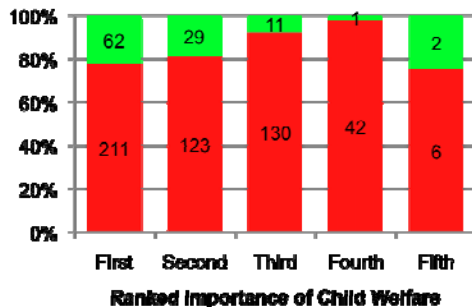
Non-welfarist rationales don't elicit substantial open support. Only 12% ranked "religion" as number 1 among reasons for their position. Not surprisingly, frequent church goers were most likely to adopt that view, but still, only 31% of frequent church goers--lower than the percent ranking child welfare first in that group--said religion was number 1. "Rights" presented a mirror-image picture: 18% overall ranked it 1; about one-third of liberals did, but that still makes it a distant second to child-welfare among liberals.

The inclination to rank child welfare first also suggests that strong values translate only unevenly into a professed non-welfarist orientation on this issue. Multivariate analysis showed that subjects disposed to individualism are modestly less likely to rank child welfare first, presumably because they find interference with choice noxious. But holding strong cultural outlooks on the hierarchy-egalitarianism dimensions, or strong ideological views on the liberal-conservative scale, does *not* move people away from a consequentialist view. If these values influence people, in other words, they don't seem to influence them by making them averse to professing welfarism. One might expect that subjects more disposed to a harm-based moral outlook would rank child-welfare first than those less inclined toward a harm-based moral outlook. But this is not so. So this is even more evidence that people who are non-welfarist in their moral outlook are disposed to say they put child welfare issue first on this policy issue.

Nevertheless, most people say they *wouldn't* change their minds if shown contrary empirical evidence on child welfare. Only 33% of the subjects said they'd change their minds if shown child-welfare evidence that suggested their disfavored position would be better for kids. Indeed, even among those who ranked child-welfare first, willingness to change positions in that case was muted. Only 50% of the child-welfare-first subjects who support gay-lesbian adoption said they'd change their view, and only 22% of the ones who oppose it said they would. This finding suggests that people tend to overstate their consequentialist orientation.

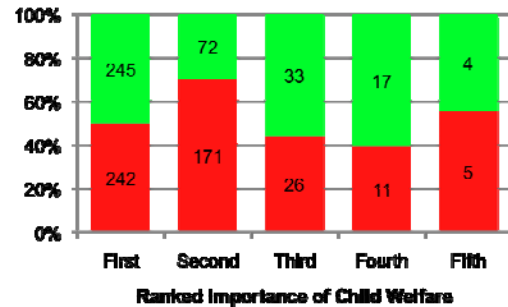
OPPONENTS OF GL ADOPTION: If convincing evidence were shown to me that children raised by gay or lesbian couples are just as likely to be healthy and well-adjusted as children raised by heterosexual couples, then...

- I would still oppose allowing gay and lesbian adoption because it is immoral.
- I would no longer oppose allowing gay and lesbian adoption.



SUPPORTERS OF GL ADOPTION: If convincing evidence were shown to me that children raised by homosexual couples are less likely to be healthy and well-adjusted than children raised by heterosexual couples, then...

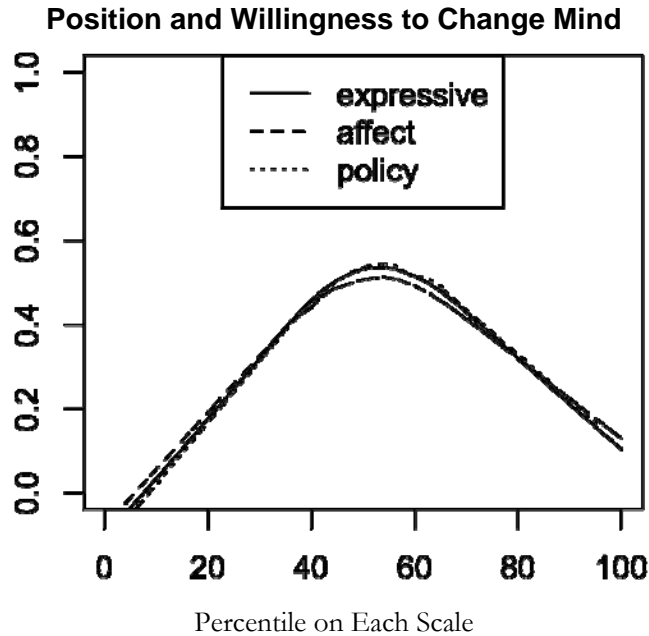
- I would still support allowing gay and lesbian adoption because the state should not discriminate against gay and lesbian couples.
- I would no longer support allowing gay and lesbian adoption.



Figures 22 & 23: Affect towards Gay & Lesbian Family Life

Our analyses suggest that it's the strength of position on gay-lesbian adoption, that best indicate how willing people are to say they'd change their positions if shown new evidence. This is especially true among *opponents* of gay and lesbian adoption. In the figure ___ below, for example, the x axis represents percentiles of the population, from the most opposed to gay and lesbian parenting on all

the policy items to the most supportive, then again for affect and expressive items. The portion of the population that is most likely to profess a willingness to change its mind is right in the middle – the people who are relatively moderate. But also notice that those who support gay and lesbian parenting are by and large more likely to change their minds – they never quite reach zero likelihood and are more likely across the board.



Figures 24: Willingness to Change Mind

Conclusions From Stage 1

We draw the following tentative conclusions from this research.

1. A majority of Americans say that their position on gay and lesbian adoption is centered on the welfare of the children. However, few say they would change their minds if shown convincing contrary evidence. This can be explained by two phenomena:
 - The more extreme people are in their positions on gay and lesbian issues more generally, the less likely they are to say they will change their position on adoption in light of contrary welfare considerations. Because moderation is in short supply on this issue and, surprisingly, few people are willing to change their minds on this issue. A majority of those on both sides of the debate say they would not change their minds even if presented with convincing contrary evidence regarding child welfare. This is so even among those who rate child welfare as their most important consideration.
 - This is especially true for opponents of GL adoption. There is more welfare sensitivity on the pro-adoption side of the debate. This makes the task of identifying opponents of gay and lesbian adoption who say they are open to changing their minds hard because there are so few of them (104 in our sample, to be precise).
2. Based on other research into culturally disputed issue of fact, we believe that a great many people—possibly even a majority of the population, and enough to have a large impact on the resolution of the gay and lesbian parenting issue—genuinely care about the child-welfare effects of gay and lesbian parenting and have a desire to be able to identify and credit the best available

data in an open-minded way, even if it means changing their minds on the issue. To achieve a deliberation climate in which this form of open-minded attention to the evidence is possible, it will be necessary to focus on information framing. Research into biased assimilation suggests that people instinctively resist information when they perceive that the consequence of accepting it threatens their values; when that same information is presented in a way that is compatible with their defining values, they will give it open-minded consideration. The second stage in our study will be devoted to developing information frames that make it possible for persons of diverse cultural worldviews to recognize and give open-minded attention to the best available information on the child-welfare effects of gay and lesbian parenting.

Stage 2

Based on the information collected in Stage 1, we have begun Stage 2, which involves an assessment of the impact of cultural values on information processing. The principle components of this stage consist in the administration of a series of on-line survey experiments aimed at identifying the mechanisms through which cultural cognition affects the processing of information about the effects of gay and lesbian parenting.

We have drafted some scientific reports in an effort to test dynamics such as “biased assimilation and polarization” and “cultural credibility.” The Subjects will be drawn from a nationally representative panel of persons ($N \approx 2,000$) whose values and demographics have been measured in advance. Data collected in the proposed survey-experiments, like data collected in previous ones, will be unidentified. Study investigators will again conduct stakeholder interviews in the development of survey-experiment stimuli, and will consult with social psychologists and sociologists before finalizing the materials.

The goal is to determine whether individuals will selectively find flaws in each report conditional on the reports findings being inconsistent with their predicted priors.

Stage 3

Based on the information gathered in Stages 1 and 2, in stage three we will test a number of methods for making individuals more open-minded in consideration of empirical information about gay and lesbian parenting. We anticipate testing the following types of procedures:

1. **Vouching.** We plan to test the effects of having a fictional authorities with a variety of distinct and clearly identifiable values describe the data and vouch for their credibility. We expect vouching to influence assimilation of the information conditional on subjects having values congruent with the values of the vouching authority.
2. **Framing.** We plan to test the effects of a number of information frames that affect the social meaning of the information being provided. Again, we expect this procedure to increase open-minded consideration of the information when social meaning is congruent with values prized by study participants.
3. **Story structure.** We plan to embed information in a number of narrative formats. Extensive research indicates that readily recognizable narrative forms enhance open-minded consideration of information embedded in them. We’ll test which of a variety of forms will increase (or decrease) open-minded evaluation the most relative to simple, non-narrative forms of information communication.