



Conversations with the Experts

Observations on Work/Family Research on Gay and Lesbian Couples



Christopher Carrington, Ph.D.

Bio: Christopher Carrington, Ph.D. teaches in the Department of Sociology, and the Human Sexuality Studies Program at San Francisco State University. He holds a Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. He is the author of *No Place Like Home: Relationships and Family Life among Lesbians and Gay Men* published recently by the University of Chicago Press. Dr. Carrington teaches several courses at San Francisco State including Families and Society, Social Aspects of Human Sexuality, as well as a new course in the Human Sexuality Studies Program that focuses on relationships and family issues for lesbians, bisexuals and gay men.

Editors Note: Christopher Carrington is an academic whose research interests include ethnographic methods, issues related to the family, sexuality, and the sociology of both social conformity and deviance. We discovered Carrington's work when we read his article, "Domesticity and the Political Economy of Lesbian Families," published in *Families at Work: Expanding the Bounds*, (edited by N. Gerstel, D. Clawson, and R. Zussman, Vanderbilt Press, 2002). We spoke with Dr. Carrington about his research within the context of the broader topic of research in the work and family area of study that focuses on gay and lesbian families.

An Interview with Christopher Carrington

Although there is certainly a substantial body of gay and lesbian academic literature, very little research on gay and lesbian work/life issues currently exists. According to Carrington, the lack of related work/life research is due to the fact that "when people study gay and lesbian life, they tend to focus on sexuality, and other aspects of gay and lesbian life get pushed to the background."

Carrington observes that, by concentrating on sexuality and excluding other elements of gay and lesbian life, work/life researchers may miss valuable opportunities. Population groups, such as gay and lesbian families, can serve as a "kind of relief against which you can compare and contrast work and family patterns and other relationships in the society." Carrington points out that in the specific case of gay and lesbian families, researchers have a unique chance to study the influence of factors other than gender that play a role in determining both the character of family life and the division of domestic labor.

There are, however, concerns associated with conducting research on individual population groups. For instance, Carrington believes that researchers may become so intent on exploring population group characteristics such as race, ethnicity, or gender, that the "importance of socioeconomic factors disappears from the analysis. Thus, when researchers are moving across class lines, it is important that they remember to pay attention to multiple variables and factors, including income and status.

Carrington also notes that researchers working with various population groups need to be aware of the impact of their work on public policy. Often, work/life research findings may uncover or support policy agendas that may or may not be popular among policy makers:

"Public policy becomes more difficult when you must account for diversity and variation, and I think that proves frustrating for people trying to create a one-size-fits-all public policy...If you really want to create public policy that benefits a wide range of Americans and a wide range of family formations, then that policy must be much grander, and it requires many more resources."

Academics who elect to study work/life issues among specific groups, Carrington emphasizes, should be cognizant of the policy implications of their work.

Carrington remains conscious in his own work of both the benefits and the disadvantages of researching work/life issues in various populations groups. In his book, *No Place Like Home: Relationships and Family Life among Lesbians and Gay Men*, as well as in his related articles, he describes and interprets varying household arrangements among lesbian and gay couples. Carrington is particularly interested in how these couples divide and share domestic, unpaid labor. In order to understand the division of labor, he observed and interviewed a sample of gay and lesbian families, and also spent a week living with a small number of these families. Employing multiple research strategies allows Carrington to achieve “triangulation,” since he can then use his analysis of contradictions and contrasts from his varied approaches to delve deeper.

Even with a mixed bag of research tools, there are many challenges to conducting gay and lesbian work/life research. In “Domesticity and the Political Economy of Lesbian Families,” Carrington describes the “egalitarian myth.” Similarly to African Americans in the 1950s, gay and lesbian Americans are very aware of the effects of media images on social attitudes and beliefs. Based on this awareness, lesbian and gay families strive to portray themselves as creating and maintaining egalitarian households, in which both partners contribute equally to domestic work. Efforts to present an ideal picture may obscure the truth, since these families “struggle with real world concerns about how to balance work and family obligations...and the dynamics that produce inequality in heterosexual families also produce inequality with lesbian families.” Work/life researchers must seek ways of acknowledging and respecting this phenomenon, while still painting an accurate portrait of lesbian and gay family life.

An additional challenge of gay and lesbian work/life research, stressed by Carrington both in his writing and in the interview, is recruiting a representative sample population. He chose to recruit his sample deliberately rather than randomly when he noticed that working class and poorer couples are rarely included in random samples. These couples do not have the resources that enable them to be “free,” or to come out of the closet. Carrington reminds researchers that they must be careful to develop recruiting methods that include individuals from all socioeconomic levels.

Carrington expects to use similar methodologies, those of observation, ethnography, and interviewing, in his future research on gay and lesbian work/life issues. As for the focus of his next project, that is yet to be decided. He is inclined toward two different topics: the effects of the aging process on gay and lesbian couples, and how gay and lesbian parenting is influenced by the manner in which the couple becomes parents.

While Carrington plans further research in this area, the future of the field itself is still unclear. There are still very few work/life researchers who are studying gay and lesbian populations, and those who are tend to focus solely on parenting. Yet although it remains unclear what shape gay and lesbian family research will take, it is evident that a great deal remains to be learned from this emerging area of work/life research.

Sloan Work and Family Research Network **Selected Articles Related to Division of Labor in Same-Sex Families**

Bialeschki, M.D. & Pearce, K.D. (1997). ‘I don’t want a lifestyle – I want a life’: The effect of role negotiations on the leisure of lesbian mothers. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 29(1): 113-131.

Carrington, C. (2002). Domesticity and the political economy of lesbian families. In N. Gerstel, D. Clawson, & R. Zussman (Eds.) *Families at Work: Expanding the Bounds*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press.

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Dunne, G.A. (2000). Opting into motherhood: Lesbians blurring the boundaries and transforming the meaning of parenthood and kinship. *Gender & Society*, 14(1): 11-35.

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Johnson, T.W. & Keren, M.S. (1998). *The families of lesbian women and gay men*. New York: Guilford Press.

Oerton, S. (1997). Queer housewives? Some problems in theorising the division of domestic labour in lesbian and gay

households. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 20(3): 421-430.

Sullivan, M. (1996). Rozzie and Harriet? Gender and family patterns of lesbian co-parents. *Gender & Society*, 10(6): 747-767.

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