Relationship Adversity in Early Parenthood among Gay, Lesbian, and Heterosexual Couples Who Adopt Through the Child Welfare System

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Abstract

It is well-established that when couples become parents, their relationship changes and sometimes undergoes stress (Cowen & Cowan, 2004). Little research has examined relationship quality among couples that adopt their children, and, in particular couples that adopt through the child welfare system. Parents who adopt via child welfare may encounter unique challenges that add stress to the transition to parenthood due to the characteristics of the children available for adoption (e.g., they tend to be older and are more likely to have a history of parent abuse than children adopted privately or internationally. Goldberg, Moyer, Knikian, & Richardson, 2012; Howard, Smith, & Ryan, 2006; USDBIS, 2012). Further, given that same-sex couples are increasingly adopting (Gans, Balliet, Muofhe & Chambers, 2007), research on their experiences during this transition is particularly important. Same-sex couples who adopt via child welfare may experience unique stressors, such as encountering insensitive support systems, experiencing a placement strain on their relationship, thus threatening the stability of the adoptive placement and family in general.

The current qualitative study examined perceived relationship functioning during the transition to parenthood among gay, lesbian, and heterosexual couples who are adopting through the child welfare system. We approached our exploratory analysis with a social constructionist perspective that attends to the meanings that individuals’ beliefs and experiences are not static, but take shape over time and according to social context (Schwandt, 2000).

Method

Participants

This exploratory, qualitative study examined individual narratives within 17, 15, 13, and 12 heterosexual couples who were placed with a child via child welfare three months earlier, when they were looking for and intended to adopt. Participants were mostly White and fairly affluent (see Table 1 for demographics). This sample was selected from a larger study of couples who had recently adopted via child welfare, domestic, private, or international adoption.

Table 1: Demographics by Family Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family Type</th>
<th>Total Sample</th>
<th>Lesbian</th>
<th>Gay</th>
<th>Heterosexual</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age (M, SD)</td>
<td>38.1 (5.4)</td>
<td>36.7 (4.5)</td>
<td>38.3 (5.8)</td>
<td>38.1 (5.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education (M, SD)</td>
<td>4.0 (1.0)</td>
<td>3.9 (1.0)</td>
<td>4.1 (1.1)</td>
<td>4.0 (1.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income (M, SD)</td>
<td>$75,000 (15,000)</td>
<td>$70,000 (10,000)</td>
<td>$75,000 (15,000)</td>
<td>$75,000 (15,000)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results

Themes endorsed by participants are included in Table 2, with a breakdown according to family type and gender. Our findings indicate that parents perceived general and adoption-specific stressors associated with the transition to parenthood, causing strain on their relationship with each other.

Table 2: Challenges and Support Needs Endorsed by Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Support</th>
<th>Total Sample</th>
<th>Lesbian</th>
<th>Gay</th>
<th>Heterosexual</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Financial Support</td>
<td>10 (50%)</td>
<td>4 (26%)</td>
<td>1 (6%)</td>
<td>5 (25%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological Support</td>
<td>9 (45%)</td>
<td>3 (18%)</td>
<td>2 (12%)</td>
<td>4 (20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Support</td>
<td>7 (35%)</td>
<td>2 (13%)</td>
<td>1 (6%)</td>
<td>4 (20%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Placement of Child Has Created Shifts in Roles

Many parents discussed family role shifts and challenges as a result of adopting. The process is stressful, especially for those struggling with having a different parental role from their partners. For example, Carla, a lesbian who was placed with a school-aged girl said, “I feel like the burden of responsibility falls often to me [in terms of chores and taking care of [daughters]]. In addition, 9% (n = 84) was associated with differences in expectations as parents to parents or disrupt the placement. For example, Avery, a lesbian who had been placed with a teenage boy (whose placement later dissolved), explained, “Lincoln has discovered how badly she wants to be a mom. I have discovered how much I love her. I don’t want to see this disrupted. They described challenges related to differences between parents in their ability/willingness to bond without legal security of a finalized adoption.

Conclusion

These findings have implications for those who work with lesbian, gay, and heterosexual adoptive parents, particularly during their transition to parenthood. First, practitioners should be aware of the unique stresses of the adopt-to-adopt process. The complex legal transition to parenthood is further complicated when couples lack security in their placements, or have more challenging placements. Second, practitioners should identify and explore access to support services, especially during the post-placement period, to help families overcome early adversity related to stress within the parental relationship. More work is needed to explore how the ambiguity of identity and privilege may affect the transition to parenthood for families who hope to adopt from the child welfare system.

References


This study was funded by grants from the American Psychological Foundation and the National Institutes of Health, awarded to the fourth author.