A Strengths-Based Assessment of Diverse Adoptive Families: Experience of Young Adult Women Raised by Lesbian Mothers

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Abstract
The primary goal of this study was to identify themes around the strengths of lesbian adoptive families and their children by obtaining the unique perspective of young adult children of adoptive lesbian mothers.

Central questions included:
• Are they more open to difference?
• Do they identify ways in which lesbian mothers are uniquely qualified to be adoptive parents?
• Do they have an integrated sense of identity?
• How do they see their family as different or similar to heterosexual-parent led families?
• What aspects of their identity are most salient?
• How do they navigate discrimination?

Purpose
The primary goal of this study was to identify themes around the strengths of lesbian adoptive families and their children by obtaining the unique perspective of young adult children of adoptive lesbian mothers.

Data Collection and Analysis
Recruitment
Snowball sample method, community organizations, professional organizations and adoption events
Participants = 7 Young-Adult Women
Ages 20-28
All adopted prior to age 3
Type of Adoption
International = 4
Domestically = 3
Child-parent racial difference = 4
 Mothers' marital status separated = 5
Method
Semi-structured interviews lasting between 1 - 2.5 hours
Analysis
Qualitative analysis of transcribed interviews utilized a modified grounded theory method

Results
Participants’ sense of core identity, which include feeling that they have an openness to difference, citing “what matters” is having loving and supportive parents, and maintaining a strong sense of self and advocacy. Participants consistently discussed their ability to think flexibly and understand difference in a way that they perceived to be above and beyond others who have not experienced the same aspects of minority status as a core personal strength and something on which they pride themselves.

Aspects of Identity Described by Adult Children of Adoptive Lesbian Mothers

Parents
Adoption
Lesbian Family
Race
Multiple Identities

Core Identity

Major Findings
All participants identified aspects of their core identity that are central to how they view themselves. They described their core identity as being shaped and influenced by multiple unique identities including:
• Parents/Family Identity
• Adoption Identity
• Lesbian Family Identity
• Racial Identity
• Multiple Identities (Intersecting Identities)

Central Aspects of Core Identity

Being Open to Difference
• Flexible/adaptable
• Not judging others based on difference
• Not categorizing people

What “Matters” to Them
• Personality of parents
• NOT sexual orientation of parents
• Having loving and supportive parents
• Having parents who allow children to be themselves (accepting of child no matter what)
• Participants attribute this to having ongoing open discussion of their multiple identity statuses and aspects of their family structure

Having a Strong Sense of Self
• Knowing who they are
• Having confidence in themselves

Ongoing Involvement in Advocacy Work
• Speaking up for groups that are marginalized

Additional Findings

Regarding Discrimination
All participants reported experiencing discrimination. Their response or lack of response to discrimination depended on:
• Context/Situation (relationship with the person or group)
• Energy level
• Severity of discrimination

Disclosure Practices Regarding Minority Statuses
• Circumstantial
• Open about adoptive status/identity
• More careful about disclosing about their lesbian-parent family
• Some engaged in passive avoidance or non-disclosure - “passing”
• Parent sexual orientation seen as more personal/private information
• Based on past experiences and perceived safety

Implications in Adoption and Clinical Practice
• Adoption professionals can educate same-sex parents about the strengths they have to offer adoptive children
• Children appreciate and report finding ongoing open discussion about diverse family factors including adoptive identity, racial identity, and sexual orientation to be important
• More comfortable with disclosure
• Promote opportunities for open dialogue as is developmentally appropriate and as children are ready
• Participants note that they “are just like any other family” thus promoting same-sex parent adoption within private and government funded adoption agencies
• Provide training within these organizations to educate about same-sex parents being not only a viable option for prospective parents but as having unique strengths
• Call to re-examine the importance of different family types

Acknowledgments
We extend our gratitude to the Lesbian Health Fund of the Gay and Lesbian Medical Association. Without their grant funding, this research would not have been possible.
We also acknowledge the Widener University Adoption Research Collective and Drs. Nath, Rutter, Rourke and Boyer for their contribution of ideas and feedback.
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References: Please see handout for cited works

Introduction
Adoption policy continues to limit adoption by gay and lesbian parents in some states
Previous research has namely focused on
• Children who are biological children of heterosexual couples who later divorced (with one parent who came out as gay or lesbian in the child’s life
• Concept of “no-difference” between children of heterosexual parents and same-sex parents

Minimal research has investigated
• Strengths of gay or lesbian parents and families
• Gay and lesbian adoptive families
• Gay and lesbian parents who have chosen to become parents after identifying as gay or lesbian
• Subjective experience of adoptive children
(Christ, 1998; Patocke, 1992, Shelley-Sheehy & Coates-Byrne, 2002)

Literature suggests that gay and lesbian individuals may be uniquely qualified to parent adopted children
• Gay parents are minority given their sexual orientation
• Children are a minority through their adoption status
• Parents can therefore help children navigate minority status and support in identity development
• Parents may teach children to be more open to diverse identity factors
(Choi, 2004)

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