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

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Abstract

This exploratory, qualitative study examines individual narratives within 17 lesbian, 15 gay, and 12 heterosexual couples who were placed with a child via child welfare three months earlier, when they were interviews 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 prenuptial, or international adoption.

Introduction

It is well-established that when couples become parents, their relationship changes and sometimes undergo stress (Conway & Cowan, 2000). Little research has examined relationship quality among couples that adopt their children, and, in particular, couples who 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 parental, physical, or sexual abuse than children adopted privately or internationally. Goldberg, Moyer, Kuskin, & Richardson, 2012; Howard, Smith, & Ryan, 2006; USDA, 2012). Further, given that same-sex couples are increasingly adopting (Glass, Bauserman, & Macri, 2007), research on their experiences during this transition is particularly important. Same-sex couples who adopt via child welfare may experience unique stresses, such as encountering resistance or support from the extended family that is a challenge that heterosexual couples may have shared. These stresses then threaten the stability of the adoptive family and may lead to adoptive dissolution. The current study examined perceived relationship functioning during the transition to parenthood among lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples who are adopting through the child welfare system. We approached our exploratory analysis with a social context perspective such that we examined the effects on the individuals’ beliefs and experiences are not static, but take shape over time and according to social context (Schwab, 2000).

Research Questions

1. How do participants perceive the transition to adoptive parenthood as impacting their intimate relationship?
2. What context do participants’ relational experiences appear to affect normative stresses associated with the transition to parenthood, versus stresses specific to adoption, child welfare adoption, and the parenting stage?
3. What sources of support do participants draw on to ease their transition to parenthood?

Method

Participants

Thirteen couples were recruited in Table 2, with a total of 31 participants (20 heterosexual, 9 lesbian, and 2 gay, participants). They were systematically selected to match the demographics of the national study that compared adoptive and non-adopting parents. Thus, participants were matched on age, length of courtship and time since adoption, type of adoption (domestic vs. international), whether adoption was planned or emergent, type of family structure (heterosexual or same-sex), and whether co-parents were biological or not. Given that participants were recruited from a national study, this sample was not intended to be representative of the general population of adoptive parents. However, our findings underscore that parents perceived general and adoption-specific stressors associated with the transition to parenthood, causing strains on their relationship with each other.

How, a lesbian who was placed with an infant boy, explained: “It’s very difficult for us because we can only have him watched by certain people as per the DCS (Department of Children’s Services) regulations. You have to be COBA (Certified Offender Record Information) checked and you’d better. So we don’t have many options for babysitters; it takes time to coordinate.”

In addition, 12% of participants (n = 10) described struggling with that child. For instance, a gay couple in their 30s who had been placed with a school-age boy, said: “I definitely think we’re probably not as close as we were, because we’re so much of the focus in June.”

Placement of Child Has Created Shifts in Roles

Many participants discussed family role shifts and challenges as a normal consequence. Ten percent (n = 8) of the sample felt straining with having a different parental role from their partners. For example, Gill, a lesbian who was placed with a school-age girl, said: “I feel like the burden of responsibility falls often to us [in terms of chores and taking care of [daughters].” In addition, 9% (n = 8) experienced differences between partners in desire to parent or disrupt the placement. For instance, Aved, a lesbian who had been placed with a teen-age girl (whom placement later disallowed), explained, “Linsey has discovered how badly she wants to be a mom. I have discovered that I’m not ready to be a step-mother.” The participant’s reports described challenges related to differences between partners in their ability/willingness to bond with their child (without legal security of a finalized adoption). For example, Susan, a heterosexual woman who had been placed with a teen-age girl, felt it was better to stay “standoffish” and reserved her husband for allowing himself to bond despite the legal insecurity. For two couples, disagreement about whether to move ahead with parenting represented a threat to the intimate relationship; they ultimately separated.

Conclusions

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 nature of the foster-to-adopt process. The complex life transition to parenthood is further complicated when couples lack security in their placements, or have more challenging placements. Second, adoptive agencies should allow and support 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 integrity of support and privilege may affect the transition to parenthood for families who hope to adopt from the child welfare system.

References


Conclusion

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