



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

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Abstract

The current qualitative study of 84 individuals within 42 couples (17 lesbian, 13 gay, and 12 heterosexual), who were placed with a child via foster care three months earlier, examined perceived changes in their intimate relationships across the transition to parenthood. Findings indicated that, like heterosexual biological-parent couples, some adoptive parents perceived the loss of their partner’s undivided attention as stressful to the relationship. Adoption-specific stressors were also identified, including the need to find state-approved child care to facilitate “couple time” and the legal insecurity of foster-to-adopt placements. Although our findings were similar for heterosexual, lesbian, and gay adoptive parents, same-sex couples cited some additional stressors related to their sexual minority status. Findings have implications for individual, couple, and family practitioners who work with lesbian, gay, and heterosexual adoptive parents, particularly during their transition to parenthood.

Introduction

It is well-established that when couples become parents, their relationship changes and sometimes undergoes stress (Cowan & Cowan, 2000). 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 parental abuse/neglect than children adopted privately or internationally; Goldberg, Moyer, Kinkler, & Richardson, 2012; Howard, Smith, & Ryan, 2004; USDHHS, 2012). Further, given that same-sex couples are increasingly adopting (Gates, Badgett, Macomber, & Chambers, 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 inadequate support services, which may place strain on their relationship, thus threatening the stability of the adoptive placement and the family system as a whole.

The current study examines 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 constructionist lens, which assumes that individuals’ beliefs and experiences are not static, but take shape over time and according to social context (Schwandt, 2000).

Research Questions

1. How do participants perceive the transition to adoptive parenthood as impacting their intimate relationships?
2. To what extent do participants’ relational experiences appear to reflect normative stresses associated with the transition to parenthood, versus stresses specific to adoption, child welfare adoption, and/or lesbian/gay parenting?
3. What sources of support do participants draw on to ease their transition to parenthood?

Method

Participants

This exploratory, qualitative study examines individual narratives within 17 lesbian, 13 gay, and 12 heterosexual couples who were placed with a child via child welfare three months earlier, whom they were fostering 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

| | Total Sample (M, SD, or % of n = 84) | Lesbian (M, SD, or % of n = 34) | Gay (M, SD, or % of n = 26) | Heterosexual (M, SD, or % of n = 24) |
|------------------------------------|--|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|
| Age (yrs) | 37.55 (6.17) | 36.00 (6.19) | 38.00 (5.08) | 39.25 (6.91) |
| Relationship Length (yrs) | 7.88 (3.80) | 7.13 (3.78) | 8.27 (4.06) | 8.50 (3.49) |
| Personal Income (\$) | \$53,595 (\$32,044) | \$38,854 (\$22,771) | \$65,423 (\$36,801) | \$61,667 (\$30,692) |
| Family Income (\$) | \$107,220 (\$46,957) | \$77,704 (\$19,926) | \$130,865 (\$50,127) | \$123,417 (\$49,624) |
| Wait Time for Child (mos) | 16.82 (16.6) | 12.48 (8.80) | 13.47 (8.42) | 25.71 (25.30) |
| Age of Child at Placement (mos) | 55.57 (58.61) | 53.09 (63.14) | 45.77 (44.41) | 69.71 (64.87) |
| Prior Placements | 4.40 (6.70) | 5.47 (9.02) | 2.92 (2.52) | 4.52 (5.97) |
| White (Parents) (%) | 86% | 88% | 77% | 92% |
| White (Children) (%) | 50% | 24% | 62% | 75% |
| Boys (%) | 52% | 35% | 67% | 50% |
| Girls (%) | 41% | 47% | 23% | 50% |
| Siblings (%) | 7% | 18% | 0% | 8% |

Procedure

Participants completed a semi-structured telephone interview (60-90 minutes). Interviews were transcribed verbatim and pseudonyms were assigned. Interviews were analyzed by the primary investigator and three trained graduate students using thematic analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

Our analysis focused on the following interview questions: 1. How is parenthood? (Prompts: Is there anything that has surprised you?) 2. How has your relationship with your partner changed since becoming a parent? (Prompt: What issues have come up?) 3. What has it been like for you, trying to balance work with parenthood and your relationship with your partner? 4. How do you see your parenting role/style – how you “are” as a parent as different from your partner’s parental role? 5. How is your relationship with your child different from your partner’s relationship with your child? 6. Has your experience attaching to your child been different from your partner’s? 7. Have you and your partner had any differences of opinion about child-rearing issues? 8. Have there been changes in who you are spending time with and relying on for support?

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 Supports Endorsed by Participants

| | Total Sample (n; % of n = 84) | Lesbian (n; % of n = 34) | Gay (n; % of n = 26) | Hetero Women (n; % of n = 12) | Hetero Men (n; % of n = 12) |
|--|---|---|---|--|--------------------------------------|
| Placement has created shifts in time, energy, and space | | | | | |
| No “couple” time | 26 (30%) | 8 (24%) | 11 (42%) | 4 (33%) | 3 (25%) |
| Child is focus of our attention | 10 (12%) | 2 (6%) | 6 (23%) | 2 (17%) | 0 (0%) |
| Placement of child has created shifts in family roles | | | | | |
| Differences in parental roles | 10 (12%) | 4 (12%) | 1 (4%) | 3 (25%) | 2 (17%) |
| Differences in willingness to bond | 4 (5%) | 2 (6%) | 1 (4%) | 1 (8%) | 0 (0%) |
| Differences in desire to parent/disrupt the placement | 4 (5%) | 3 (9%) | 1 (4%) | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) |
| Child’s behavior has created stress | | | | | |
| Child more attached to/prefers one parent | 18 (21%) | 8 (24%) | 6 (23%) | 2 (17%) | 2 (17%) |
| Child is “splitting” us | 8 (9%) | 2 (6%) | 1 (4%) | 2 (17%) | 3 (25%) |
| | Total Couples (n; % of n = 42) | Lesbian Couples (n; % of n = 17) | Gay Couples (n; % of n = 13) | Hetero Couples (n; % of n = 12) | |
| Types of Support | | | | | |
| Child Therapy | 14 (33%) | 6 (35%) | 6 (46%) | 2 (17%) | |
| Family Therapy | 11 (26%) | 4 (24%) | 5 (38%) | 2 (17%) | |
| Individual Therapy | 6 (14%) | 4 (24%) | 2 (15%) | 0 (0%) | |
| Couples Therapy | 2 (5%) | 1 (6%) | 0 (0%) | 1 (8%) | |
| Support Group | 10 (24%) | 5 (29%) | 2 (15%) | 3 (25%) | |

Placement of Child Has Created Shifts in Our Use of Time and Energy

The placement of their child(ren) shifted parents’ use of time and energy, with 30% ($n = 26$) noting that **they now lacked “couple time.”** Many of these participants asserted that they were looking forward to getting out for “date nights.” Yet eight of them noted that, given that they were still technically “foster parents,” they were required to abide by state regulations regarding who could care for their child.

Josie, 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 Child Services] regulations. You have to be CORI [Criminal Offender Record Information] checked and yada yada. So we don’t have many options for babysitters; it takes time to coordinate.”**

In addition, 12% of participants ($n = 10$) described struggling with their child as **the main focus of their attention.** Rusty, a gay man who had been placed with a school-age boy, stated, **“I definitely think we’re probably not as close as we were, because so much of the focus is on Joey.”**

Placement of Child Has Created Shifts in Roles

Many participants discussed **family role shifts and challenges** as a result of placement. Ten parents (12% of the sample) described struggling with having a **different parental role from their partners.** For example, Callie, a lesbian who was placed with a school-age girl, stated, **“I feel like the burden of responsibility falls often to me [in terms of] chores and taking care of [daughter].”** In addition, 5% ($n = 4$) experienced differences between partners in **desire to parent or disrupt the placement.** For instance, Avery, a lesbian who had been placed with a teenage girl (whose placement later disrupted), explained, **“Lindsay has discovered how badly she wants to be a mom. I have discovered how badly I don’t want to be a mom.”** Finally, 5% ($n = 4$) described challenges related to **differences between partners in their ability/willingness to bond** to their child (without legal security of a finalized adoption). For example, Susan, a heterosexual woman who had been placed with a teenage girl, **felt it was best to stay “standoffish” and resented her husband for allowing himself to bond despite the legal insecurity.** For two couples, disagreement about whether to move ahead with parenting represented a fatal threat to the intimate relationship; they ultimately separated.

Child’s Behavior is Causing Stress to Our Relationship

Participants also described their child(ren)’s behaviors as causing stress to their intimate relationships. Specifically, 21% ($n = 18$) said their **child was more attached** to one parent than the other, and 9% ($n = 8$) noted that at times **their child was “splitting” them.** Esther, a heterosexual woman who was placed with an older school-age girl, and whose marriage ultimately ended, said, **“We’ve had some pretty nasty arguments. And then one of us will say, ‘Wait a minute, she’s doing this splitting thing quite well.’”**

Getting Help: Use and Benefits of Support Services in the Post-Placement Period

Many parents (see Table 2) reached out for formal support (i.e., therapy, support groups) during the post-placement period to address familial stress and the strain that the transition to adoptive parenthood had placed on their relationship with each other. Additionally, sexual minority parents found that therapy was a useful medium to engage in dialogue with their child(ren) about what it meant to be placed with a same-sex couple. Marcos, who had been placed with a school-age boy, stated, **“The counselor asked him what he thought about. . .two dads, and his comment was that two dads meant two belts. So he was a little fearful.”**

Obtaining this information helped Marcos and his partner to reassure their child during the post-placement period. Karin, a lesbian mother who attended a support group explained, **“They get us. They’ve experienced the same things that we’ve experienced.”** Notably, very few couples ($n = 2$) accessed couples therapy during this time.

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 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, adoption agencies should facilitate 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 interplay of difference and privilege may affect the transition to parenthood for families who hope to adopt from the child welfare system.

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