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

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Abstract

The way in which society defines the concept of family has shifted a great deal over the past few decades. This shift is likely related to an increase in diverse family compositions and changes in law and societal perspectives on acceptable parental configurations. While the number of children raised by gay and lesbian parents is unclear, early estimates range from six to 14 million children and continue to grow. Despite a vast psychological literature on adoption and an emerging literature focusing on same-sex parenting, research has minimally attended to the experience of children of adoptive lesbian mothers. Extant research has focused on the concept of “no-difference” between children of same-sex parents and heterosexual parents.

The current study used qualitative semi-structured interviews with young-adult children raised by adoptive lesbian mothers to gain a richer understanding of their unique experiences. Emergent content themes provide a description of the young adults’ experiences and explore issues surrounding identity development, peer relations, stigma, and the concept of “passing” to add to the literature on the functioning of children of same-sex parents. The study specifically aimed to identify strengths of lesbian adoptive mothers and their children. Themes culled offer insight for adoption policy, those serving adoptive lesbian families in clinical practice as well as offering future directions for research.

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 later in the child’s life)
- Concept of “no-difference” between children of heterosexual parents and same-sex parents

(Chan, Raboy, & Patterson, 1998; Fitzgerald, 1999; Flaks, Fisher, Masterpasqua, & Joseph, 1995; Patterson 1992; Telingator & Patterson, 2008; Wainright, Russell & Patterson, 2004)

Minimal research has investigated

- *Strengths* of gay or lesbian parents and families
- Gay or lesbian *adoptive* families
- Gay and lesbian parents who have *chosen to become parents after identifying as gay or lesbian*
- *Subjective experience* of adoptive children

(Fitzgerald, 1999; Patterson, 1992, Shelley-Sireci & Ciano-Boyce, 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 (Colberg, 2004)

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.

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?

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

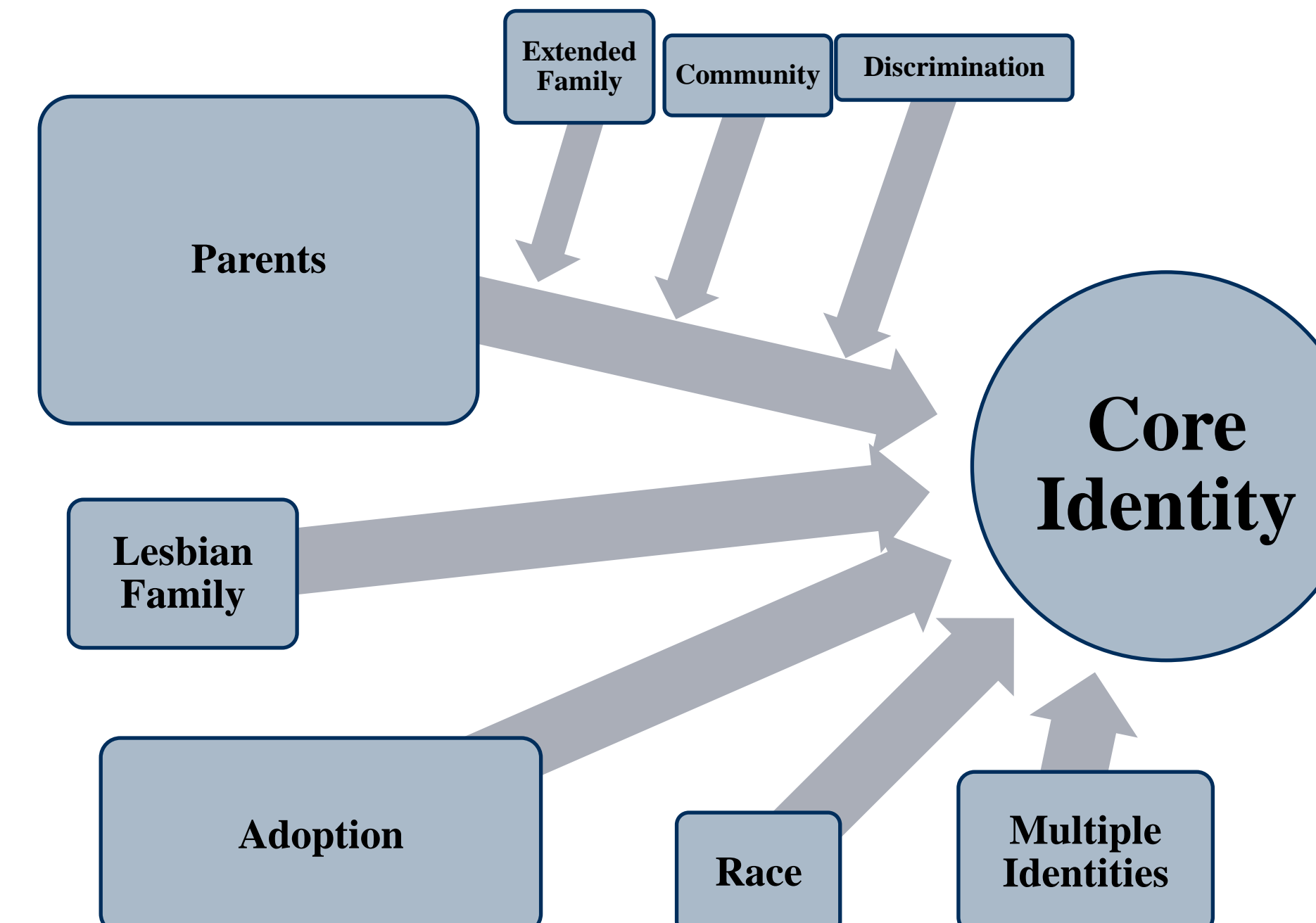
Analysis

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



Results

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
(though which the following experiences were filtered: Extended Family, Community, and Discrimination)
- Adoptive 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 (as suggested by Brodzinsky, 1998)
- 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-define what constitutes “family”

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References: Please see handout for cited works