Growing Up in a Same-Sex Parented Family: The Adolescent Voice of Experience

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This study gives voice to a unique group of youngsters who are observed and discussed frequently but rarely engaged in the debate about their development. Emerging research on the adjustment of children being raised by same-sex parents focuses on measuring achievements and outcomes. Missing from the literature are studies that capture the voice of the adolescent and his or her experience of growing up in same-sex parented families. These are the same individuals who are caught in the public eye amid a storm of political, legal, and social change. To expand the existing base of knowledge, 14 adolescents who range from 13 to 18 years of age were interviewed. This qualitative method of study allowed for each participant to explore their thoughts, feelings, and perceptions, thus creating an opportunity to assign meaning to their experiences. Study findings include themes of (1) Family Concepts, (2) Development of Self, (3) Tough Times and Tough Transitions, (4) Coming Out, and (5) Communities of Understanding. This unique perspective from inside the gay- or lesbian-parented family highlights topics that must be studied further.

KEYWORDS adolescents, same-sex parents, gay families, lesbian parents, gay parents

INTRODUCTION

The process of achieving adolescent milestones involves a tumultuous journey. It is suggested that no other group of individuals is more varied and complex than a group of adolescents (Elkind, 1998). Psychologists have established progressive stages of social, emotional, and cognitive development that most adolescents will traverse (Miller, 2002). During this journey we can...
predict that individuals will experience states of disequilibrium; question their beliefs and values; expand upon their cognitive understanding of the world; experience fluctuating emotions; and endure a great deal of stress and confusion all in an attempt to achieve a higher level of psychological integration (Elkind, 1998; Erikson, 1950, 1968; Miller, 2002). Despite its complexity, we know a fair amount about the period of adolescence. We know that typical adolescent development is a multifaceted process involving the collision of thoughts, emotions, and behavior, a process which necessarily disrupts the stability of the individual in the service of growth and development.

Outside of the research designed to document the normalcy of children and adolescents who have gay or lesbian parents, children who are being raised by same-sex parents remain largely in the background in the professional literature. Missing from the literature are studies that capture the day-to-day experiences of adolescents who are being raised by same-sex parents in the current climate of political, legal, and social change. Individual voices are lost while we attempt to define, calculate, quantify, or predict the constructs and outcomes of gay family life. Adolescents who are raised by gay and lesbian parents are discussed in the literature, but the discussion excludes the adolescent perspective. This study offers a voice to this unique population of adolescents; a place to begin a conversation about the ways in which they individually and collectively understand and assign meaning to their experience of having same-sex parents.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Research estimates that approximately 1 to 5 million lesbian mothers and 1 to 3 million gay fathers with anywhere from 12 to 14 million children are spread across our nation (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004; Patterson, 1996). In 2000, the United States Census Bureau recorded approximately 600,000 self-identified same-sex couples living in the United States (Simmons & O’Connell, 2003). The Massachusetts Department of Public Health, Registry of Vital Statistics (2007) recorded 9,695 same-sex marriages in the state of Massachusetts since the legalization of same-sex marriages in May 2004. However, recording of same-sex marriages does not account for the number of minors living in gay- and lesbian-parented households. Therefore, as with census information, these numbers do not provide an accurate representation of the number of same-sex-parented families that are woven into the social fabric of the United States. What these numbers do indicate is that same-sex-parented families are becoming more visible within our social, political, and legal institutions.

We are born, develop, and grow within the context of a family. Each unique family is embedded within a larger sociopolitical culture that shapes and determines the evolution of an individual life cycle. Regardless of
genesis, a family system must remain open and flexible to ever-present demands for change to accommodate the developmental needs of each member. To gain an understanding of the experiences of adolescents in same-sex-parented families, we must appreciate the interplay that individual change sets in motion. Many family therapists who use the family life cycle framework suggest that most families pass through predictable stages of relational growth and development. Early theorists emphasized the timing of significant family events typically experienced by intact, middle-class, American families as they progressed through life together (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004). When a child reaches adolescence, families must deal with difficult processes of interpersonal restructuring. They must allow teenagers more freedom to move in and out of the family system as they become less dependent on parents and seek guidance and support from their peer culture (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004).

Slater and Mencher (1991) suggest that general family life cycle concepts can be applied to lesbian families; they also suggest that due to a lack of useful role models typical family transitions can introduce episodes of extreme uncertainty and complexity around issues of role negotiation. Goldenberg and Goldenberg (2004) write:

Later, during adolescence, when conformity to peer group pressures is likely to be particularly strong, children may attempt to distance themselves from their parents. While this is a developmental task common to all adolescents struggling to find their own identities, for children of same-sex marriages, the rejection of their parents’ alternative lifestyle may be especially fraught with conflict. (p. 48)

These authors hypothesize that the negative impact of marginalization, social disapproval, and discrimination by a majority culture may invite internal conflict in adolescents who attempt to distance themselves from their parent’s orientation and life choices (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2004). It is not clear if these authors are suggesting that family loyalty or pride in parentage are jeopardized if a conscious act of distancing is pursued because of a parent’s sexual orientation. There is not yet a body of literature or empirical data that provides additional clarity for this hypothesis.

In her book *Families Like Mine*, Garner (2004) gives voice to and documents the disclosures of more than 50 individuals, now in their twenties and thirties, regarding their experiences of being raised with GLBT parents. She reports numerous challenges GLBT families have faced in their attempt to gain acceptance in the mainstream culture. She writes:

Many of those challenges have nothing to do with the parents’ sexuality but rather with the complexity of family dynamics that could occur in any family. However, since sexual orientation is the issue that puts our
families under scrutiny in the first place, it's nearly impossible to acknowledge those other complexities without risking exploitation by opponents to gay parenting. Our families currently lack the “luxury” to be as openly complicated, confusing, or dysfunctional as straight families. (p. 6)

Garner (2004) further suggests that regardless of how their families were formed, children still face common challenges in a society that questions the validity and value of their families. She writes, “... children with GLBT parents who see how they are represented publicly begin to internalize a paradox: to be accepted for being different, they first have to prove that they are ‘just like’ everyone else” (p. 15).

Despite projected hypotheses about the possible influence of complex family systems on adolescent development and the adult reflections on challenges associated with being raised in same-sex-parented families, findings from psychological literature repeatedly report children with lesbian parents, either born from previous heterosexual relationships or born into an already established same-sex relationship, demonstrate few differences in adjustment. Rather, this group of adolescents is reported to be comparable with adolescents who have heterosexual parents on central issues such as psychological adjustment, the quality of family relationships, peer relationships, and psychosexual developmental outcomes (Tasker, 2005). Concerns that children who are raised by same-sex parents are socially or emotionally disadvantaged are not supported by the professional literature. Empirical studies comparing children raised by sexual minority parents with those raised by otherwise comparable heterosexual parents have not found reliable disparities in the mental health of those children (Patterson, 1992, 2000; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001; Wainright, Russell, & Patterson, 2004). Furthermore, several studies show that the majority of children with same-sex parents demonstrate evidence of positive peer relationships and social competence (Fulcher, Sutfin, Chan, Scheib, & Patterson, 2006; Gartrell, Deck, Rodas, Peyser, & Banks; 2005; Golombok, Spencer, & Rutter, 1983; Patterson, 1992, 1994, 2006; Vanfraussen, Ponjaert-Kristoffersen, & Brewaeys, 2002).

With regard to psychosocial adjustment, one ongoing concern, primarily expressed by the courts, is that the children of same-sex parents will suffer social stigma, shame, and be subject to bullying from peers and others in the community. These concerns also appear largely unsubstantiated when investigated. Tasker and Golombok (1991) interviewed 37 children with lesbian mothers and 38 from single heterosexual mothers and found 2 children from each group had poor peer relationships. In their 1995 follow-up study, these authors asked the subjects, who were now adults, to reflect on their childhood friendships and report whether they felt they were ostracized, teased, or bullied due to their marginalized family status. They found no significant difference in the amount of teasing or bullying each group experienced. In
contrast, children from lesbian families were more likely to remember peer group teasing about their own sexuality (Tasker & Golombok, 1995).

While evidence to confirm that bullying by peers jeopardizes a child’s overall adjustment is lacking, Gartrell and colleagues (2005) suggest that homophobic experiences of children being raised by same-sex parents should not be dismissed without further consideration. In their 2005 study, the fourth in a series of longitudinal follow-ups to the National Lesbian Family Study (NLFS) originally launched in 1986, it was reported that 43% of NLFS participants reported encountering anti-gay sentiments from their cohort of 10-year-old peers. In addition, 69% of those who did report such encounters indicated that their experiences left them feeling angry, upset, or sad. Furthermore, Gartrell and colleagues (2005) noted that NLFS participants who demonstrated high behavioral problem scores on the Children’s Behavioral Checklist and who reported psychological distress were associated with those who reported experiences of homophobia. This suggests that direct experiences of homophobia may indeed affect a child’s general sense of well-being.

Recent research has generally indicated that adolescents who have same-sex parents achieve expected developmental milestones and outcomes that suggest healthy adjustment, yet very little data have been collected from the perspective of this group of youngsters. Reviewing the professional literature on children and adolescents raised by same-sex parents published within the past decade revealed a very small proportion of studies using interviewing techniques with adolescents as part of their methodology (Gershon, Tchann, & Jemerin, 1999; MacCallum & Golombok, 2004; Tasker, 2005; Vanfraussen, Ponjaert-Kristoffersen, & Brewaeys, 2003). This suggests a dearth of current research that takes into consideration the adolescents’ perspective.

**METHOD**

Qualitative methods afford the opportunity to expand upon, enrich, and compliment quantitative methods in a manner that provides a context for better understanding the meaning of previously collected quantitative data (Bordens & Abbott, 2002; Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999). In addition, qualitative research designs create an opportunity to learn about individual experiences and the meaning that is assigned to such experiences. The goal of this study was to gain a better understanding of a small cohort of individuals who have been the subject of psychological inquiry but have rarely been given the voice to describe and elaborate upon their lived experiences. This phenomenological study allowed adolescents who have been raised by same-sex parents the opportunity to generate their own stories that included personal ideas, perceptions, and opinions. This approach invited the participants to be co-researchers of their own experience. It is a method that
allowed for personal meaning to be explored while honoring the lived experiences of each participant.

Participants
For inclusion in this study, participants must have been 13 to 18 years of age and lived with a parent who identifies as gay or lesbian for the past 5 years. Parents could be single, coupled, married, or divorced. Participants may have joined the family through birth from a heterosexual relationship, adoption, surrogacy, or insemination. Prior to recruiting participants, a pilot interview was conducted to test the viability of the interview procedure.

Participants were recruited by sending a letter and a flyer that briefly described the nature of the study and associated procedures to various local community agencies and organizations, such as the following: Fenway Community Health Center, Alternative Family Matters, Gay Fathers of Boston, Cape & Islands Gay & Straight Youth Alliance (CIGSYA), Boston Area Gay and Lesbian Youth (BAGLY), and the Boston branch of Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere (COLAGE). E-mails and phone calls were also made to each agency to follow up and answer questions. Another means of formal recruitment involved posting a call for participants in Options Magazine, a nonprofit publication that is circulated to approximately 6,000 households in Rhode Island and Southeastern Massachusetts. In addition to formal solicitation of participants, recruitment procedures also included gathering participants through informal networking. Informal networking involved recruitment of participants through word of mouth by colleagues and acquaintances, as well as snowball sampling. Recruitment efforts took a total of 4 months; 14 adolescents agreed to participate. Two males and 12 females from a wide variety of family structures were interviewed. Seven of these participants were identified through the organization Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere (COLAGE). The other seven participants were identified and contacted through informal networking strategies. The teenagers who participated were from Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New Jersey, Georgia, and New York.

Data Collection
Once participants were identified, phone calls were made to the identified parent(s) to introduce the project, answer questions, and obtain verbal consent to proceed. Written consent/assent was obtained at the time of the interview. If a phone interview was required, written consent/assent was obtained via mail prior to scheduling the phone interview. Eight of the 14 interviews were conducted face to face, and six were conducted via telephone due to the geographic distance between participant and researcher. Data were collected through the use of individual semi-structured, open-ended
This interview format provided the participants with a focused place to begin and allowed for fluid exchanges between the participants and the researcher. An interview outline provided additional structure. The interview outline covered three broad topic areas: family relationships, school experiences, and community perceptions. Each topic area was designed to have an open-ended question with additional probe questions that could be used to help participants elaborate and to encourage information sharing. Key questions from each topic area were asked of each participant. All interviews lasted just a little more than one hour and were tape-recorded. Notes were also taken during the interviews to add emphasis and help ensure clarity of shared experiences. Interview questions were amended to mirror the language used by participants to describe their family relationships.

Data Analysis

Phenomenological research is a dynamic exercise that is concerned with an individual’s personal perception or account of an object, event, or experience; a process concerned with understanding what the respondents think or believe (Smith et al., 1999). Interview data were evaluated and organized using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) as outlined by Smith and colleagues (1999). To begin this process, all interviews were tape-recorded and then transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were checked against the audio tapes for accuracy. The typed transcripts and notes of each interview were then read and reread, and the researcher noted how participants described and assigned meaning to their experiences. Each transcript was then coded for thematic content. Codes were then examined to see if they could be grouped together in a meaningful way. A structured approach that allowed for a more in-depth analysis of the coded data clusters was then used to identify significant statements and direct quotes from each transcript. This approach helped ensure that themes would be represented in the words of the participants.

Once this process was complete for each transcript, another analysis was conducted to search for themes reflecting shared aspects of experience across interview transcripts. Primary themes were established if there were multiple references to the concept across participants. Through this process clusters emerged into subthemes, which were then grouped together to form five overarching primary themes, each of which had significant support from all 14 interviews.

RESULTS

The adolescents who participated in this study have demonstrated the use of complex and creative strategies to establish and understand themselves in the
varied context of their families, peer groups, and larger communities. Five primary themes emerged from the data and reflect this individual process. The themes are

1. Concepts of Family;
2. Developing a Sense of Self;
3. Tough Times and Tough Transitions;
4. Coming Out; and
5. Communities of Understanding.

Concepts of Family

For the participants in this study, concepts of what it means to be a family transcend the stereotypical limitations of the traditional model of family. Biological and legal ties provide a framework of shared language, but do not fully constitute what it means to be a family. These participants used language that broadly reflects bonds of love, support, connection, and tolerance to describe concepts of family. Subthemes of *relationships of love* and *comments on marriage* help to further elucidate ideas about family structure.

**Relationships of Love**

Twelve participants described ways in which fluid, communal, relationships of love shape their experience of family. These reflections emphasize an understanding of the diversity and fluidity that exists among contemporary families:

I love everything about my family because it’s not based on the typical family structure. I have a family that is really based on respect and love and even friendships—in this way I am incredibly fortunate.

My family, I think, extends to not just my immediate family, but my cousins and my grandparents and my friends. I consider them all family. All families need is love really. Some people live with their grandparents or they live with just their dad because their mom died. It’s not about structure, it’s about love.

Some participants spoke of their surprise when they learned that not all families have two moms. They also spoke of experiences of feeling devalued by others because of the structure of their family. Others expressed frustration about statements or comments that suggest that their family is abnormal. One participant said,
We’re just like everyone else. There is no status quo family anymore. People get divorced, you’ve got single moms and single dads, people live with their grandparents . . . everyone has a little bit of whacky in their family, and this is mine.

COMMENTS ON MARRIAGE

Twelve of 14 respondents adamantly expressed some variation on their belief that same-sex marriage is a civil right that should be afforded to all human beings. Embedded in these statements were concepts asserting that “marriage doesn’t make a family,” and highlighting the hopeful possibility that the institution of marriage could help fast-track society into a stance of tolerance and acceptance. For example, one participant stated,

If we had marriage, over time it wouldn’t even end up being something that people consider to be so different. I know we are an actual family, but having other people realize we are a family is the best way for the world to get over it.

Developing a Sense of Self

Participants in this study demonstrated a conscientious approach to answering the question “Who am I?” Participants affirmed that individual answers to this question are rooted in the process of forming an integrated identity. The way in which this process is experienced differently from the traditional task of identity development is that, for these participants, significant elements of family affiliation are either unrecognized or over-exaggerated by our society, therefore compounding an already complicated developmental process. In subthemes of I Am Not My Parents and Where Do I Fit In?, participants spoke of negotiating difficult thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

I Am Not My Parents

This subtheme reflects the developmental process of separation and individuation. However, built into this typical developmental trajectory is a notion of “Sexuality shouldn’t matter, but it does.” One participant commented, “That’s how people knew me . . . the girl with two gay dads . . . that was like my image.” Other participants shared experiences that reflected their desire to disassociate with parents’ sexual orientation in a way that would allow them to define their own unique characters without the added layer of social assumption or stereotypes that are frequently tied to this aspect of their family structure:
Your family being different is different than something like your favorite color. It’s about you, but it’s not about you. It shouldn’t matter but I guess sometimes it does. It’s hard to deal with it separately; it’s just another thing to think about.

I obviously have things that make me unique. I think it would be harder if I was gay to have to deal with people. It would be hard because it would be like, oh it’s because your parents are gay that’s why you are... That would be really hard to deal with.

It was difficult because I have queer parents. We stand out. I stick out. I’m already queer. I already stick out. I am already different, and, then on top of it, I have queer parents. When I was younger, people didn’t know if I was queer because my parents are queer. They don’t understand, just assume, or get confused.

WHERE DO I FIT IN?

Deciding on where one fits into family, peer groups, and community systems requires the interpretation and integration of complex and confusing role expectations. Some of the confusion reportedly revolves around the ways these youngsters must learn to manage the concept of having multiple identities. One participant expressed feelings of anger and frustration stemming from a sense of being boxed in by the assumptions that others make about her:

Don’t assume that because of my demographics and because I have gay parents and because I come from a multiracial family that I am going to think a certain way; there are more levels to me than that, and my actions are self-motivated.

Participants talked about specific situations in which they did not know for sure what was expected of them or how to negotiate new social situations. Four of the participants were freshmen in college and all four of them commented on feeling confused when gaining geographic distance from the family; of being in a situation where they have an opportunity to redefine themselves away from their immediate family. Again, this is an experience that is well within the expected norm for what we know about late adolescents and identity development. However, these respondents described feeling a certain degree of loss or betrayed loyalty for choosing not to orient themselves around the once prominent family identity. One participant shared:

College is hard because in high school you feel like kind of a warrior because of it... you have this thing you need to defend and you just have to live life and not choose a side, but once you get to college you
have a choice. It is hard to reconcile and figure out what your ideas are... you can lose your sense of self.

Despite the difficulties of discerning the complex yet subtle demand of role expectations, a number of participants believe having gay or lesbian parents contributes to their strength of character, resiliency, and overall self-confidence. These adolescents express a deep understanding of diversity, as well as describe their ability to be flexible and accepting of self and others.

I see how cruel the world can be, but at the same time I see how forgiving and loving it can be. I see diversity all the time. There are a lot of gays and lesbians who adopt and have interracial families. I have gotten tolerance, maturity, and diversity from my family.

From a young age I could really understand where other people are coming from—the minority and how that can lead to feeling depressed. I started a civil rights team in my school because I feel like I have a slightly different level of understanding when it comes to things like this.

Tough Times and Tough Transitions
This is one of the most revealing of the primary themes, as it highlights a struggle that is difficult to name; a struggle which has, to date, remained undifferentiated from the challenges that occur during typical adolescent stages of development. Participants described the ways in which biological maturation, social relationships, and pressures to be normal influence thoughts and feelings about self and family. Many of the thoughts and feelings shared by these participants appear to be socially driven and serve to mobilize defenses in an attempt to protect vulnerable egos against negative social assumptions. Fears of homophobia result in the use of strategies such as posing and passing to promote a sense of in-group belonging and to protect the self and family from social disapproval that frequently results in feelings of guilt, shame, and loss.

Transitions
This subtheme includes difficult transitions within families, at school, and in the community. All 14 participants described experiences pertaining to the stress or occurrence of painful situations related to having gay or lesbian parents. They highlighted a number of memorable and emotionally charged events that were difficult for them to manage. All respondents reported that middle school has been the most difficult time in their lives. For anyone working with or parenting an adolescent, this is not surprising news. Yet, this group of youngsters spoke of an additional layer of experience associated
with the subtle yet powerful encounters with heterosexism and homophobia. These shared insights define and bring new awareness to a painful struggle. Some examples of their words are the following:

Middle school was the hardest. You fall in with different groups of friends, and it’s the time when you feel like you don’t have anybody close to you that’s the hardest. People are also talking more about who they are and their own sexuality and parents or dating stuff comes up more often.

... I’d get hate calls on my cell phone. “You shouldn’t be on this planet” or “You have two dads, and they can’t have a kid so you shouldn’t even be alive right now.” I got a lot of those kinds of calls going through eighth grade. I still get them every once in awhile, but I have learned to just ignore restricted calls.

When my mom came out, my dad chose to react pretty immaturely. He told the entire church before my mom had a chance to, so we ended up actually having to move from our town to another town because she couldn’t deal with the harassment anymore.

I hate to turn on the radio and hear people talking about my parents like they aren’t worthy citizens and that my family isn’t as valid as other families. The negative political ads really hurt and it’s just sad. It’s upsetting to hear these things from people in your community, from people in your state who are angry at your family and are against them. That’s scary for me. Do kids really need to hear people telling them their parents are sinners and are going to hell?

In addition to these difficult situations, several adolescents described experiencing a need to be vigilant and always prepared to speak on behalf of their families. Participants expressed a sense of frustration and fatigue about explaining and educating others about their families. One participant shared:

Sometimes you don’t want to constantly fight for your family. Sometimes advocacy feels like an obligation—you try to fill in the gaps for everyone else and you never really know what the outcome will be.

PROTECTING AND POSING

Many of the teens shared experiences that describe a belief that they must protect and defend their parents. Five adolescents described situations in which they attempted to shield their parents from experiences that would cause their parents to be worried, fearful, or sad. Evident in these shared statements is the sense that they must independently resolve their internal and external conflicts. In addition, these comments revealed that acts of
protecting were motivated by a strong sense of family loyalty and a desire to protect the family image as well as attempts to avoid further hardships for parents:

Although I almost always talk to my parents about bullying and teasing, you still hate to tell them about bad experiences. You don't want them to feel like it's their fault.

I tell them things, but I don't tell them the full story because I don't want them to feel like horrible people. I don't feel like that's fair, I don't want them to feel bad for feeling happy. Plus, it's not like one day they are just going to stop being gay.

As much as I was never comfortable, I never wanted them [the parents] to know that I worried about things because I never wanted my family to ever feel bad about who they are or to think that I was ashamed of them just because I didn't want to stand out.

Five additional participants identified a responsibility to represent themselves as non-stereotypical, well-adjusted, stable teenagers who just happen to have gay or lesbian parents. Some participants further cautioned that the giving of appearances can be harmful in that a piece of the self can be concealed, disregarded, or unacknowledged.

The media against gay rights really pressures kids into thinking that they have to defend their parents. It's a good thing if you are a kid and want to defend it, but it is important not to feel pressured to be a poster child because if you just repeat a story about "my parents are gay and everything is completely fine," then you may lose the chance to look at your own life in a true manner.

I feel like I need to somehow portray myself in a way that's going to make other people look favorably on my family... like any faults I have, people are going to see those as a result of me growing up in a family with gay parents. I feel like I have to be nice all the time and that I can't have a mental breakdown, which I felt like I needed to have 100 times in middle school, but that I can't show fault.

It's not just about how great it is to have gay parents. I think that is what some people want us to say. There are things that are really hard and upsetting, and it's even harder to find someone you feel safe saying these things to... you don't want to dis your own parents or have people take it the wrong way or judge you and your family.
PASSING

Twelve of the participants described experiences pertaining to passing. Webster’s Dictionary (2002) defines the term passing as “to go, take place, or be accepted without question, dispute, or challenge; to gain acceptance as a member of a group by assuming an identity with it in denial of one’s ancestry, background, etc.” (p. 1051). Davis (1997) notes that while passing as a term originated from the social context of racial discrimination it has evolved and has “… come into common usage as a general descriptive verb indicative of masking or disguising any aspect of identity, such as class, ethnicity, religion, or sexuality” (p. xxx). In this study, variations of passing experiences ranged from hiding and actively concealing items within the home that may give their parents away as homosexual to more complicated strategies of deception. One example of hiding is described in this participant’s words:

I feel ashamed about this, but I remember taking specific pictures down of my stepmom and mom together. I would turn them down or put them away. It was when I was in middle school…it’s still hard to think that I did that [in context of having friends over].

Strategies of deception were separated into active and passive approaches. Active strategies involve putting forth an untrue or misleading statement, whereas passive deception was characterized as intentionally withholding specific information. Both strategies are used as a way of representing oneself in a manner that is perceived to be socially acceptable:

A lot of times I have to decide if this is a person I want to be vague with my use of pronouns or not say anything at all. Sometimes if they ask me about my father, I just answer as if they asked about my second mother.

My mom didn’t hide. She had a rainbow sticker on her car and when she came to my sporting events and stuff I would be like, “Oh it’s my aunt!” or stuff like that.

Coming Out

These findings suggest that disclosure of family structure can be understood as an extension of the developmental process of acknowledging, accepting, and consolidating aspects of one’s identity. The idea of supported exposures, which is aptly described in the subtheme of Meet the Parents, seems to be an important first step in the coming-out process. This strategy appears to serve a positive function that can help create an opportunity to observe parents interacting and addressing the topic of coming out and gives adolescents a sense of control by allowing them to feel supported. All forms of disclosure
allowed the adolescents in this study to retain a sense of control over anxiety-provoking situations that held the potential for negative outcomes. All 14 participants made a conscious decision to disclose their family structure at some point in early adolescence. The subtheme *Damage Control* helps to identify a few salient factors that influenced their individual coming-out processes.

**DAMAGE CONTROL**

Wanting to prevent current and future distress was a primary factor in deciding to share family information with selected others. A number of respondents described weighing out aspects of trust and safety as essential factors in their decision-making process:

How close you feel to the person really matters. Even when you are pretty comfortable, you definitely need to plan it out—who should I tell and who will be listening to the conversation and how will they react when I tell them—it's kind of strategic.

It's terrifying to have the kind of family secret that people might find out. If my friends, the two I came out to first, would have seen my mom in town holding hands with her partner, it would have been really awkward.

I just decided that I couldn't deal with hiding my family all the time. I couldn't deal with them [my friends] not coming over just because my mom was different. I just felt like it needed to be done. I couldn't hide anymore. I felt like a Coke bottle about to burst. It was something I had to do even though most people probably knew. So I did and it felt so good, it felt so good to have people's support and it helped me see who my real friends were and helped me build stronger relationships.

**MEET THE PARENTS**

This subtheme reflects an intentional, covert strategy that involves exposing a friend to the family structure by inviting them home to meet their parents. It is an interesting strategy, as the adolescent is actively choosing to reveal themselves and their family; however, they intentionally refrain from entering into a conversation or having dialogue prior to the exposure.

It's just easier to let them [a friend] see your parents and then decide what to do from there... in a way it takes the pressure off you and puts it on them.
There were some friends who I didn’t actually tell outright but they came to my house and it was kind of apparent. I didn’t have to talk about it; I could just see if they had a problem with it and then go from there.

Communities of Understanding

Feeling connected to others who share a similar experience helped these teenagers feel empowered and in control of their lives. Access to peer support may also moderate experiences of stress and anxiety. Being with similar others can create the opportunity for individuals to see their internal experiences as normal; they can learn skills to negotiate conflict or navigate precarious social situations; they can witness and support peers who are struggling with similar issues; and they have a safe place to speak about personal struggles that may otherwise be avoided. All participants reflected on their need to be part of a community that understands their family structure:

Having gay parents can take a lot of work to understand and to figure out stuff like that you aren’t gay just because your parents are... the only people who really understand is other kids who have gay parents.

When I hang out with them [friends who have gay parents] it doesn’t matter. More than anything it just makes it so much easier to know that I’m not alone...it’s just reassuring. It makes it feel less serious, like defusing a bomb...especially when I was younger it was very, very, very helpful.

DISCUSSION

Each participant’s interpretation of what it means to have gay or lesbian parents and live in a nontraditional family is shaped by a unique set of life experiences. Findings from this study highlight a proliferation of mixed messages given by the media, by peers, and by the larger community about what it means to have gay or lesbian parents. These messages serve to create preferred models of family that adolescents must evaluate, reconcile, and then integrate into their developing sense of self. The adolescents who participated in this study affirmed that while dominant cultural paradigms continue to reinforce traditional heterosexual nuclear family structure, their understanding of socially constructed criteria for what makes a family a family extends well beyond conventional concepts. The language they used to define what family means to them more broadly reflects bonds of love, support, connection, and tolerance.

While it seems that the meaning these youngsters assign to their experiences of having gay or lesbian parents has the power and potential
to neutralize political and legal arguments centered on topics of same-sex parented families, it also reveals that these youngsters must face challenges and struggles as part of their growing-up experience. Many of the participants in this study reported experiencing a sense of loss and/or guilt, and a perceived lack of control over life during early and mid-adolescence. Many identified this time in their lives as normatively difficult, but went on to suggest that the sexual orientation of their parents created an additional factor that required them to acknowledge, accept, and integrate this portion of their parent’s identity into their developing sense of self. For these study participants such challenges were reported to be both complex and powerfully felt. They further articulated that their unique experiences are often unrecognized or overemphasized by society, therefore compounding an already difficult developmental process.

In a discussion regarding family life cycle trajectories, Goldenberg and Goldenberg (2004) hypothesize that the negative impact of marginalization, social disapproval, and discrimination by a majority culture may invite internal conflict in adolescents who attempt to distance themselves from their parents’ orientation and life choices. Findings from this study suggest that issues of internal conflict regarding familial loyalty or family pride can occur when a conscious act of distancing is pursued due to a parent’s sexual orientation. However, further study into the possible moderating effects of family support on personal identity integration are required to more fully understand the potential benefits and challenges associated with the process of reconciling issues associated with family loyalty and pride.

Teenagers who participated in this study also suggested that the most awkward and difficult time for children of same-sex parents is middle school. During this time, fears of homophobia resulted in the use of secretive behavioral strategies, such as passing, in an effort to promote a sense of in-group belonging. This phenomenon seems to protect the self and the family from aspects of shame and social disapproval. Study participants also attested to the power that in-group membership has on the experiences of stress and the development of relationships. Elkind (1998) suggests that most psychological stress is produced when a conflict exists between self and society, situations in which, “we satisfy a social demand at the expense of a personal need or satisfy a personal need in defiance of social approval” (p. 195). For these participants, the desire to fit in and be accepted occurs at a point when social connections, mutual peer relationships, personal competence, and a sense of belonging are particularly fragile. The adolescents who participated in this study are members of a group, by no choice of their own, which identifies their families as alternative or nontraditional, words that designate difference, being outside the norm, away from the arbitrary point of reference assigned by the larger community. This alone suggests that this is a group of youngsters who can be expected to endure additional layers of
psychological stress as they work to reconcile the conflict that exists between self and society. Participants affirmed that having gay or lesbian parents is ego-syntonic and the disparity and felt distress is most often generated by the external demands that are communicated through the expectations of dominant cultural values.

The collective experience of this group of teenagers also highlights a changing perception of their parents’ same-sex relationships. Becoming a teenager brought an increased wariness about how family is presented to society, even for teens who reported feeling confident and proud of their family structure. Shifts in understanding about how gay and lesbian relationships are perceived by others affected how participants publicly talk about their family. At particular times in their lives they were less able to embrace notions of family because of the tension created by the need to have a “normal,” mainstream family life. Furthermore, the theme of Tough Times and Tough Transitions elucidated the ways in which identities are complex and fluid, shifting with time and proximal distance from the family unit. As older participants moved through high school and then advanced to college, they expressed excitement and frustration, as well as a sense of loss and sometimes confusion. They described their perplexity with separating and individuating from their parents while wanting to remain connected to a family identity that is not visible to others. Additional complications arise when factors related to family structure change as a result of events such as divorce, adoption, or the blending of families. Acknowledging, understanding, and accepting the realities of family structure is essential in supporting one’s ability to acquire a sense of self that is connected to parents, peers, and society. Other factors that require further study, such as parent separation, geographic location, and how “out” parents are regarding their sexual orientation, may illuminate additional obstacles for adolescents as they work through the process of identity integration.

Participants expressed an intense desire to have others understand the benefits of having gay and lesbian parents as they have experienced them. They described numerous ways in which their parents’ sexual orientation positively influenced their lives. These authentic expressions of gratitude reinforce the ways these adolescents embrace diversity and appreciate their respective families. It is important to note that these same comments may also carry an additional layer of meaning that reflects what participants consider to be expectations of a dominant mainstream culture. Participants in this study expressed feeling pressured to achieve, of being tokenized, and serving as a poster child for gay families—positions that may create a strain for all members of the family. These participants echo Garner (2004) when she stated, “... our families currently lack the luxury to be as openly complicated, confusing, or dysfunctional as straight families” (p. 6).

In this regard, these teens have taken on mature adult roles of advocacy, support, and protection on the behalf of their families. They share the
pain and struggle associated with the complex process of advocating for, coming out about, and protecting themselves and their families from stereotypes, rhetoric, and homophobia. When arguments for the rights of sexual minority individuals or couples to maintain or create families are rendered to the over-simplified statement that youngsters living in these families appear similar to youngsters in heterosexual families, vital information is lost. While recognizing that such a statement is well intended and holds within it the best interest of individuals, children, and families, it also negates reason. It highlights the denial of the existence and power of the challenges that occur in the lives of these adolescents and their families. What message are we, the researchers, clinicians, and educators, sending if we place little or no importance on the issues that are likely to arise for these individuals and their families?

In no way does this suggest that gay- and lesbian-parented families cannot appropriately and competently address the social and emotional needs of their children. Nor are they incapable of providing educational and social supports. Rather, a lack of attention to the quality and depth of individual experience suggests that we may miss the opportunity to fully arm these families with the knowledge that would help them make more informed decisions about advocacy and support for all their members. Adolescents who participated in this study emphasized that their needs extend well beyond the basic affirmation of having experiences similar to others their age. They expressed a need for acknowledgment of experience; a need for individually tailored advocacy and support systems; and a need for comprehensive education for the development of social problem-solving skills for managing issues of heterosexism, homophobia, and microaggressions.

We must also recognize that conflicting messages are directed toward these teenagers from numerous sources. Weighing in with their own arguments and opinions about these youngsters and their families are the mainstream public, queer communities, and political, legal, and religious groups. Each adolescent is called upon to address this barrage of conflicting messages in some manner. In so many ways, this is a group of youngsters who are in the spotlight, but they aren’t being seen. The data also revealed that a community of understanding is an influential factor that allows these teenagers to feel empowered and in control of their lives. We know that when one encounters a unique experience, such as having gay or lesbian parents, it can be difficult to evaluate one’s abilities and competence for negotiating social situations, as there is no internalized experience upon which one can easily draw. There exists a need to have a broad range of experiences to evaluate oneself as competent and stable, as well as for a positive sense of self to flourish. Feeling supported by others can also moderate experiences of anxiety. The teenagers in this study describe how necessary it is to establish relationships of trust with similar others. The collective voice of those who participated in this study affirmed that it is not one event, but
an accumulation of supportive contact that helps individuals feel empowered, validated, understood, proud, and confident. Not only are they able to see their internal experiences as normal; they are able to see their peers struggling with some of the same issues, thus granting them perspective and allowing them to make sense of their own experiences. Having access to a supportive community also allowed these participants to give voice to personal struggles rather than avoiding issues and dilemmas that they may feel would reflect badly on their family.

In summary, the themes covered by the adolescents in this study are powerful. They indicate changes in the adolescents’ thoughts and feelings about their experiences, particularly as they advanced through early adolescence; through transitions from middle to high school and then to college. Voices of wisdom accentuate the need to expand research on same-sex-parented families to focus on social issues that are prominent and influential in the lives of these adolescents. More qualitative research in this area should be pursued.

Qualitative studies of adolescent thoughts and feelings about their day-to-day experiences, how they define who they are, and how they feel about their connections to their families regarding separation/divorce, as well as the impact of blending racially and culturally diverse backgrounds can provide further insight into the experiences of children raised by gay and lesbian parents. This study included adolescents who became members of their family through heterosexual relationships, alternative insemination, and adoption. A more detailed exploration of experience by type of family form would further add to our understanding of what can be helpful in supporting individuals and their families. Likewise, it must be noted that this study was limited regarding issues of gender. Two adolescent males were interviewed, both of whom were being raised by lesbian mothers, and two of the participants interviewed were being raised by gay fathers. While no specific data points revealed a confirmed difference in experience, the sense is that experience would likely be different for male and female adolescents being raised by either lesbians or gay males. This is certainly an aspect of study that requires additional examination.

Results of this study stress the need for school personnel (educators, counselors, and administrators) to be mindful of the messages that are conveyed, via what is said as well as what is left unsaid, to children and adolescents of same-sex-parented households. Further study of school climates, policies, and programs may aid in better understanding the factors or conditions that help these adolescents feel safe and supported. A better understanding of such factors would allow for the development of programs that focus on teaching coping skills to bolster social confidence and esteem.

Finally, the data from this study, especially if supported by future studies, can be utilized in training programs and educational institutions to develop
models of service that integrate existing theoretical and practical perspectives with new findings. Such a model would facilitate an ongoing understanding of the relevant issues and help prepare a greater number of clinicians for providing counseling services to those being raised by gay and lesbian parents. Judging by the ongoing polemical arguments that continue to take place between those for and against the creation of same-sex-parented families, the establishment and practice of such a model would provide enormous contributions to the education of clinicians, policymakers, educators, families, and adolescents themselves around the many complexities inherent in the experience of being raised by same-sex parents.

Emerging from this study are numerous clinical implications for adolescents being raised by gay and lesbian parents. Several of these have been discussed in relation to the interpretation of the data. Here, I will present suggestions for working with adolescents who have same-sex parents that are based on my experience with this project. These points, while simple and fairly straightforward, are fundamental to the process of supporting individuals and families. Individualized acknowledgment is essential to the process of validation, and the need to relate a unique story is critical. In addition, allowing the story to unfold honors the individual experience and reduces the risk of stereotyping. The clarification of family roles and expectations, while also a means of validation, can help focus a parent’s helping behavior in a way that can meet the individual needs of the adolescent and simultaneously reinforces aspects of open communication between the parent and the child. Insights into the reality of personal circumstances can contribute to the creation of meaningful changes and proactive systemic interventions that genuinely recognize those living in our ever-changing society.

As clinicians, educators, and advocates, we can interact and provide services that empower these individuals rather than contribute to the sense of disenfranchisement created by the larger society’s attempts to maintain a certain status quo. An objective other outside of the family who can listen, and offer support and guidance, will provide a safe space to reflect. Finally, because this is a group of people who may not have an identified place of support within their school or local community, they should be encouraged to access groups of similar others through national and local programs such as COLAGE, PFLAG, and YouthPride.

While the majority of studies focused on children growing up with gay and lesbian parents have utilized approaches that examine adjustment outcomes with regard to social, academic, and psychological outcomes, few have examined the complex nature of individual experiences in their research. By extending an invitation for adolescents to join this conversation, the voices of these youths can be heard as they reflect on their experience of having gay and lesbian parents. As researchers, clinicians, educators, and advocates we understand how psychologically painful and potentially damaging it can be to bear a stigma. Each individual who participated in this
study put forth an effort to define their family in some way, to establish a personal ego, while also determining how to serve something larger than oneself with regard to their family, peer group, and community. This is a complex process that requires validation and support. Through their insight and wisdom these teens have helped create an opportunity for adults to intercede; to provide leadership, guidance, support, and advocacy.

REFERENCES


