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## Same-Sex Relationship Dissolution and LGB Stepfamily Formation: Perspectives of Young Adults with LGB Parents

*Research has increasingly focused on intentional or planned lesbian, gay, bisexual (LGB)-parent families; however, how young adults in these families navigate the aftermath of parental break-up and subsequent repartnering is unexamined. This qualitative study of 20 young adults who had experienced their LGB parents' relationship dissolution and/or the formation of an LGB stepfamily examined how young adults perceived their parents' relational transitions and their own relationships with stepparents and siblings. Results indicated that (a) nearly all families negotiated relational transitions (e.g., relationship dissolutions) informally and without legal intervention, (b) young adults perceived both advantages and disadvantages in the ambiguity surrounding their family's nonlegal status, (c) relationships with biological mothers were the strongest tie from break-up to repartnering and stepfamily formation, (d) geographic distance from their nonbiological parents created hardships in interpersonal closeness, (e) yet, on the whole, young people perceived their*

*families as strong and competent in handling familial transitions.*

In the past decade, research on lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) parenting has shifted from exploring family relationships and child well-being in LGB-parent families formed postheterosexual divorce to examining the experiences of intentional or planned LGB-parent families (LGB parents who have or adopt children in the context of same-sex relationships; Goldberg, 2010). Given the recent nature of this shift, it is not surprising that little research has explored same-sex relationship dissolution in these families (Gartrell, Bos, Peysers, Deck, & Rodas, 2011), nor has it examined stepfamily formation and functioning post-same-sex relationship dissolution.

Research on same-sex parents' relationship dissolution is crucial, inasmuch as some LGB couples who have or adopt children will ultimately break up. Yet though heterosexual couples often complete legal divorces to sever their relationships, most same-sex couples do not have access to civil marriage, and thus their relationship dissolutions—like their relationships—are not legally recognized. The absence of legal recognition may create unique challenges, and perhaps unanticipated advantages, for families. For example, lacking legal guidance, LGB parents must creatively and independently manage

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the details of their separation and agree on the roles and obligations of each partner to each other and to their children—a process that may be aided if both parents have formal legal ties to their children. Indeed, in some states (e.g., New York), the same-sex partner of a woman who conceived and gave birth to the couple's child can complete a second-parent adoption, which enables her to become a second legal parent of the child. But in many states, same-sex partners have not been successful in obtaining second-parent adoptions, or there are statutes limiting their use to heterosexual persons (Human Rights Campaign, 2011).

Nonbiological mothers who are not married to their partners and who have not formally adopted the children in their care have no legally enforceable rights or duties (i.e., custody, child support; Hertz, Wald, & Shuster, 2009) and are at best considered “de facto” parents in the eyes of the law (Mahoney, 2006). About one half of U.S. states recognize parentage based on parental conduct and significant bonding with the child, which should theoretically improve the nonbiological mother's standing in court. However, in the other one half of U.S. states, if no legal adoption has been completed, the biological parent is almost universally viewed as the sole legal parent (Hertz et al., 2009).

The dissolution of a same-sex relationship can therefore represent a very threatening event for de facto parents who confront the possibility that their relationship with their children may be severed should legal parents wish to assert their legal authority in this manner (Hertz et al., 2009). Indeed, although legislation in virtually all jurisdictions says that custody decisions are to be based on “the best interests of the child,” judges often show preference to biological parents, potentially displacing persons who have taken on parenting responsibilities but have no biological connections to children (Barsky, 2004). Sibling relationships may also be endangered in situations in which each partner has his or her own biological children. When an LGB parental relationship dissolves, parents may take their own biological children, thus threatening and possibly severing their relationship with their other parent and their sibling(s) (Allen, 2007).

In this study we examined the perspectives of 20 young adults with LGB parents with regards to their parents' relationship dissolution and their experiences in LGB stepfamilies. All of the

participants had experienced their LGB parents' relationship dissolution, living in an LGB stepfamily, or both. Our aim was to explore how young adults perceive and describe their parents' relationship dissolution, custody and contact arrangements, and their parents' repartnering.

### *Research on LGB Parents' Relationship Dissolution*

Little research has addressed the processes and consequences of LGB parents' relationship dissolution. One exception is the National Lesbian Families Study (NLFS), a longitudinal study of 73 planned lesbian-mother families conducted by Gartrell and colleagues (Gartrell et al., 2011; Gartrell, Deck, Rodas, Peyser, & Banks, 2005, 2006). By the time the children in the study were age 10, 30 couples (41% of the sample) had dissolved their unions (Gartrell et al., 2005, 2006). Custody was shared in 13 of these 30 cases; in 15 cases, the birth mother retained sole or primary custody (Gartrell et al., 2005, 2006). Nine of the 30 nonbiological mothers had secured a second-parent adoption prior to the separation; of these nine, seven were among the 13 families that shared custody. Thus, the presence of legal safeguards seemed to help ensure family stability postseparation. By the time the children were age 17, 10 additional couples had split up. Thus, 40 couples (55% of the sample) were no longer together (Gartrell et al., 2011). Custody was shared in 25 of the 40 families, and the biological mother was the primary custodial parent in 10 of the 40 families. Custody was more likely to be shared if the nonbiological mothers had adopted the children. The percentage of adolescents who reported being close to both mothers was higher in families in which their nonbiological mothers had adopted them. Further, adolescents whose nonbiological mothers had adopted them spent more time with their comothers.

These data shed light on patterns of parental separation and the implications of legal parentage for postdissolution custody relationships in two-mother families. However, little is known about the details and nuances of postdissolution relationships, with regard to custody and visitation, stepfamily formation, and how young adults view these arrangements. Unknown, for example, is how young adults with LGB parents explain and evaluate the custody and visitation arrangements that unfold when

their parents' relationship ends. Among young adults who have infrequent contact with their nonresident parents, how do they explain this? Do they invoke legal inequities, their nonresident parents' lack of interest, geographic constraints, or other factors? Further, how and to what extent do they view legal inequities as undermining family stability and their connection to their nonbiological mothers specifically?

Although the experiences of persons whose LGB parents dissolve their relationships will inevitably differ from persons who experience their heterosexual parents' divorce, it is worth considering the literature on heterosexual divorced families as it may be relevant in considering some of the above questions. First, despite the fact that true joint physical custody (situations in which children share equal time with their mother and father) is increasingly common, most children consider their mother's home to be their primary residence, postdivorce (Nielsen, 2011). Some research suggests that joint physical custody has beneficial effects for mother, father, and child (Nielsen, 2011; Spruijt & Duindam, 2010) and is regarded positively by children (Fabricius, 2003). In the absence of joint physical custody, regular contact with nonresident parents seems to have positive effects, under most conditions (e.g., a cordial relationship between ex-spouses; Baum, 2003; Golish, 2003). Regular contact with nonresident heterosexual fathers is enhanced when spouses have lower levels of conflict at the time of the divorce (Spruijt & Duindam, 2010) and when ex-spouses maintain cooperative relationships postdivorce (Adamsons & Pasley, 2006). Contact between the child and the nonresident parent also tends to be greater when former spouses remain close geographically (Cooney, 1994; Stephen, Freedman, & Hess, 1993). Finally, pursuing mediation as opposed to litigation is linked to greater contact between the child and the nonresident parent (Emery, Laumann-Billings, Waldron, Sbarra, & Dillon, 2001). It is possible that lack of legal recognition for same-sex parents' unions may lead them to resolve custody arrangements out of court, which might facilitate more contact with the nonresident parent.

#### *Research on LGB Stepfamilies*

No research has focused on the perspectives of young adults who experienced their parents' same-sex relationship dissolution and the

subsequent formation of an LGB stepfamily. Research on LGB stepfamilies has focused solely on stepfamilies formed postheterosexual divorce (Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Lynch, 2004), in part because planned LGB-parent families are a relatively new phenomenon (Goldberg, 2010). Research on LGB stepfamilies has examined the challenges associated with the stepfamily transition, such as tensions with children (Lynch & Murray, 2000) and stigma associated with both family members' stepfamily and LGB status (Robitaille & Saint-Jacques, 2009). LGB stepparents may experience a lack of role legitimacy outside of, and possibly within, the family, in that their efforts to discipline may be resisted by their partners and the children (Moore, 2008). The LGB stepfamily is not perceived by the broader society as a legitimate family form, which can create challenges for LGB stepparents (e.g., in asserting their authority as parents; Hall & Kitson, 2000). This lack of legitimacy and recognition may also pose problems related to stepsibling relations (e.g., stepsiblings may not acknowledge one another as family outside of the home for fear of being "outed"; Baptiste, 1987).

Again, this research has been conducted on lesbian stepfamilies formed postheterosexual divorce. Thus, the children in these studies tended to be adjusting to their parent's coming out at the same time that they were adjusting to living in a stepfamily. Children who grow up in an LGB-parent family from birth, and then experience the formation of an LGB stepfamily, might experience different challenges and opportunities, in that they are (a) already aware of their parents' sexual orientation, and thus more likely to be prepared to deal with the stigma associated with homosexuality in society (Gartrell et al., 2011); and (b) navigating the reality of other (possibly nonresidential) parental figures as they form relationships with new stepparents and stepsiblings. Of interest are the types of relationships children in these arrangements form with their stepparents and stepsiblings, and what language they use to describe these relationships. Also important are the challenges and advantages they describe associated with living in LGB stepfamilies.

It is useful to again consider the research on heterosexual stepfamilies, which suggests that the ambiguity surrounding stepfamily relationships—and the "authority" of the stepparent—is not limited to LGB stepfamilies.

Studies of heterosexual stepfamilies have demonstrated ambiguity in expectations for and enactment of stepparents' roles (Fine, Coleman, & Ganong, 1998; Marsiglio, 1992). The boundary ambiguity for stepfamily roles can create tension in families (e.g., biological parents may be asked to run interference in conflicts between their children and their new partners; Golish, 2003). Notably, stepparents who join stepfamilies when children are younger tend to experience less role ambiguity, view their role as more "parent like," and have an easier time establishing relationships with stepchildren (Fine, 1995; Stewart, 2007).

### *Research Questions*

Given the lack of knowledge on how young adults experience their LGB parents' same-sex relationship dissolution and subsequent repartnering, our research questions, which include the following, aim to address unexplored family structures and processes in these families.

1. What types of postdissolution custody/visitation arrangements do children have with their LGB parents, particularly those who lack any legal or biological ties to them?
2. What types of relationships do they form with their parents' new partners and children? How do they view these persons (e.g., do they view these new partners as stepparents?)
3. What challenges and opportunities do they perceive in relation to their parents' relationship dissolution and stepfamily formation?

### *Theoretical Perspective*

We integrate concepts from family systems theory and social constructionism to guide this study. Family systems theory emphasizes the interconnectedness of family members' lives and the dynamic relationship between families and social forces (Minuchin, 1988). Rather than focusing on biological and legal relationships as indicators of family membership, this approach focuses on primary relationships characterized by complex emotions, commitment, and interdependence (Cox, 2010). Family systems theory recognizes that for LGB-parent families, family membership and definitions of family may be more ambiguous than for members of "traditional" families (Stewart, 2007), which may

affect relationships inside and external to the family. For example, because state laws define who is considered "family," same-sex couples with children who seek legal involvement to manage their relationship dissolution are at the mercy of the courts, who may decide custody in ways that do not acknowledge the reality of families' lives (e.g., by disregarding the parental status of the nonbiological parent; Holtzman, 2011).

Social constructionist ideas hone this perspective on family systems by emphasizing that the process of meaning making in human relationships is an active, cooperative process (Gergen, 1999). Families are not static entities but are constructed through daily interaction. The meaning of family is revealed through family discourse, which is the language of family life (Gubrium & Holstein, 1991). Examining how individuals talk about those whom they feel are family to them illuminates the meanings, contradictions, and new cultural patterns that are emergent, especially at a time when new family phenomena (e.g., planned LGB-parent families) are occurring.

A social constructionist perspective offers a critique of the presumed naturalness, legitimacy, and superiority of biological family ties over forms of family relationships, including nonbiological parents and stepparents (Gabb, 2005). By positing that all relationships emerge and are negotiated through interaction, and that meanings are variable depending on social context, this perspective provides a way to interpret children of LGB parents' reactions to the social construction of families—such as how they make meaning of the disconnect between their own experience of family and that of the dominant culture. Children with two lesbian mothers, for example, might define both mothers as "real" parents, resisting societal imperatives that define their biological parent as the more legitimate parent (Gabb, 2005).

The integration of family systems theory and social constructionism allows us to examine the realities of young people who are living in families where the conventional conversation about nuclear families is not likely to provide insight into how they make sense of their lives. It enables us to explore families in which multiple layers of meaning exist, and connections are forged through blood, adoption, law, or simply love. Again, although children with LGB parents are aware of dominant norms about families

(e.g., family members are heterosexual and biologically related), their reality differs from these norms (Goldberg, 2010). Thus, they must construct meanings and definitions of family that in some cases defy these prescriptions.

## METHOD

### *Description of the Sample*

Twenty individuals, ages 15 to 29 ( $M = 22.50$ ,  $Mdn = 22$ ), participated in the study. Sixteen participants identified as female, and four as male. Regarding sexual orientation, 17 identified as heterosexual, two as queer, and one as “unlabeled.” With the exception of one Asian participant, all participants were White. Two participants had less than a high school education (because they were in high school), seven participants had some college education (because they were currently in college), one participant had an associate’s degree, nine participants had a bachelor’s degree, and one participant had a masters’ degree. Nine participants grew up in California, three in Pennsylvania, two in Massachusetts, two in Minnesota, one in Georgia, one in Maine, one in Ohio, and one in Oregon.

Participants were reared in various family types. Sixteen participants were part of planned lesbian two-mother families: 15 were born to two mothers via insemination, and had a biological mother and a nonbiological mother, and one was adopted as a toddler by two mothers. Three participants were born to two lesbian, gay, or bisexual parents who were not romantically involved but who coparented. One participant was born to a single lesbian mother, via insemination.

The 16 participants whose parents were in intimate same-sex relationships when they were born or adopted experienced their parents’ relationship dissolution at varying points throughout their childhood, ranging from younger than age 1 to 13 ( $M = 6.34$  years,  $Mdn = 5.50$  years). With regards to legal protections, one participant’s parents had obtained a domestic partnership prior to the end of their relationship. In three cases, participants had been legally adopted (via a second-parent adoption) by their nonbiological mothers.

Nearly all of the 20 participants ( $n = 18$ ) experienced at least one stepfamily formation, regardless of the type of family configuration

into which they were born. These configurations included the following: (a) biological and nonbiological mothers split up, one mother repartnered (one stepfamily formed,  $n = 6$ ); (b) both mothers split up, both repartnered (two stepfamilies formed,  $n = 7$ ); (c) both mothers split up, and both mothers repartnered; both new partnerships split, and both mothers formed new partnerships (four stepfamilies formed;  $n = 1$ ); (d) single parent or nonromantically involved coparenting partners formed new partnerships that dissolved, and then they repartnered (one to three stepfamilies formed;  $n = 4$ ).

Sibling constellations were comprised of a variety of biological, adoptive, legal, and stepfamily ties. Five participants had no siblings of any kind. Of the remaining 15, the number of siblings (e.g., biological, adoptive, step) ranged from 1 to 5 ( $M = 2.46$ ,  $Mdn = 2$ ). Six of the 15 participants with a sibling had a half-biological sibling (in five cases, they had the same donor as their sibling, but a different mother; in one case they had the same mother, but a different donor). One participant had a full biological sibling (they shared the same mother and donor). Three participants had adoptive siblings: their parents had adopted their siblings via a private domestic or international adoption. Finally, four participants were born into a planned lesbian-parent family in which their nonbiological mother had one or two children from a prior relationship.

Seven participants gained between one to four stepsiblings when one or both of their original parents entered into a new relationship. Four gained new siblings through one parental stepfamily formation (i.e., one of their parents repartnered, and their parent’s new partner had children); two gained new siblings from two parental stepfamily formations (i.e., both of their parents repartnered, and both of their parents’ new partners had children); and one participant gained new siblings through her biological mother’s formation of three sequential stepfamilies (i.e., she had three new partners, all of whom had children).

### *Participant Recruitment*

The participants in this study were selected from a larger sample of young adults with LGB parents because they had experienced their LGB parents’ relationship dissolution. Young adults (age 14 – 29) with LGB parents were invited via

listserv announcements to participate in a study focused on understanding their perspectives on and experiences with marriage and marriage (in)equality. For example, calls for participants were placed on listservs maintained by the Safe Schools Coalition, a partnership of organizations that promote tolerance in schools; and Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere (COLAGE), an organization run by and for people with a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ) parent. LGBTQ centers on university campuses throughout the United States also disseminated information about the study to their students. Finally, several chapters of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) provided information to their members.

*Procedure.* The first author's contact information was included with the study description; participants contacted her for details. They were mailed a consent form ensuring confidentiality and detailing the conditions of participation and then completed a semistructured telephone interview with the first author or a graduate research assistant. Participants were interviewed between March and October, 2010. Interviews were transcribed and pseudonyms were assigned.

*Interview questions.* Our analysis mainly focused on the following interview questions (probes are omitted): (a) What type of family situation were you born or adopted into? (b) Have there been any changes in your family situation (e.g., separations)? (c) If so, how many years did you spend in each situation? (d) Who do you consider your parents? (e) Tell me about closeness in your relationship with each parent. (f) What is your legal relationship with each parent? (g) How did things work after your parents separated in regards to custody, visitation, etc.? (h) How do you think custody, visitation, etc. may have been different if your parents had access to and had been in a civil marriage? (i) Do you have siblings? (j) Tell me about your relationship with your siblings.

#### *Data Analysis Process*

We conducted a thematic analysis of the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003), which involves a thorough exploration of recurrent patterns to create a coding system to organize the data. The empirical literature and our theoretical framework informed the analysis. A focus of our

analysis was how participants perceived their parents' relationship dissolution, and how they constructed family relationships before and after the split. Both authors coded the data, engaging in a process of analytic triangulation. This process involves having multiple persons analyze the same data and compare findings and ensures that multiple interpretations are considered (Patton, 2000). First, we engaged in line-by-line analysis to generate initial theoretical categories (Charmaz, 2006). Line-by-line coding closely tracked each participant's responses to the interview questions. By combing through each interview, common and discrepant themes began to emerge. For example, some participants described how the residential closeness of their nonbiological parent affected their feeling of emotional closeness, postseparation. Participants whose nonbiological mother had moved far away made the connection that geographical distance was linked to their sense of emotional distance with that parent. The literature from nonresidential traditional stepfamily arrangements supports this contention (Cooney, 1994; Golish, 2003). Thus, we used the thickness of data, supported by the literature, to follow this lead in the initial coding phase.

As we moved to focused coding, we refined these codes. For example, "relationship with the nonbiological parent" was replaced with three more specific codes: (a) quality of the parent-child relationship, (b) challenges to maintaining contact postdissolution, and (c) role of the lack of legal recognition in the relationship dissolution experience. We further specified our codes by developing subcodes, which denote information about participants' interpretations of how or why they feel a particular way. We also attended to relationships among categories (Charmaz, 2006). As an example, we attended to whether the presence or absence of a second-parent adoption by the nonbiological mother might be related to postdissolution contact and closeness. Participants in only three of the 16 planned two-mother families had been adopted by their nonbiological mother. In all of these three cases, participants reported living with each parent in equal or near equal amounts during childhood. These participants also reported being on good terms with both parents.

We discussed the emerging codes and our differences in interpretation throughout the coding process. The final coding scheme was established once we had reached agreement

among all the independently coded data. We continued to reapply the coding scheme to the data and made subsequent revisions until all data were accounted for with the codes. The coding scheme was revised seven times. The findings are presented in response to the three research questions.

## RESULTS

Our first research question concerned postrelationship dissolution custody and visitation arrangements. Thus, the themes that are relevant to this first research question (navigation of custody/contact, change and continuity in contact with parents) as it relates to the 16 participants who were born to/adopted by two mothers, and who experienced their same-sex parents' relationship dissolution, are discussed. Then, we discuss the four remaining participants, whose LGB parents were single and/or coparented with nonromantic LGB partners, as some aspects of these themes (i.e., contact with nonresident parents) are relevant to their experiences.

### *Participants Raised in Two-Mother Families from Birth*

First, we consider the 16 participants who were born into a planned lesbian-parent family, but their mothers' intimate relationship dissolved during their childhood. Nine participants had experienced their parents' split by the time they were age 5; three participants experienced the split between ages 6 to 11; and four experienced the split between ages 12 to 15. Most ( $n = 12$ ) participants did not comment on their perceptions of why their parents ended their relationships; however, four did offer their interpretations of the reasons underlying their parents' split, noting that "they didn't put work into their relationship," "they were incompatible," and "they grew apart," echoing findings from research on divorcing heterosexual couples (Kressel, Jaffee, Tuchman, Watson, & Deutsch, 1980). Most participants ( $n = 12$ ) described the split as "amicable" and "diplomatic," with only two describing it as unpleasant or "unfriendly." Many of those who described their parents' split as noncontentious also described their parents' current relationship as "friendly." As Anne, a 22-year-old woman whose two mothers had broken up when she was age 5, stated, "Luckily, they have a really

good relationship as friends; not immediately, but now they're really good friends.... We're all going on vacation in August."

Some participants were sensitive to the ways in which legal recognition of their parents' relationship—and its dissolution—would have made it easier to explain, and receive validation for, their parents' split. For example, two women observed that, in the wake of their parents' split, outsiders (e.g., teachers, peers, and extended family) failed to recognize their parents' relationship dissolution as a real divorce because they had never been married in the first place. Meredith, age 19, described how she felt when the news of her mothers' separation became known:

I remember telling people right when they had told me that they were separating that they were getting a divorce and being told by both teachers and my friends that they can't get a divorce because they weren't married.... There was another kid in my class [whose] parents were getting a divorce, and watching the ways that people saw that as opposed to how they saw my family, it really brought to light that they didn't see it as equal. My teacher actually announced [to the class] that mom and her partner were breaking up . . . I said, "You mean my moms" and she was like, "No. She won't be your mom anymore. They're breaking up."

Thus, some participants encountered people who could not seem to understand why they were upset by the dissolution of their parents' unions and the departure of their nonbiological mothers from their primary residence. Whereas their biological mothers' role as a parent was taken for granted, their nonbiological mothers' parental role was not recognized, consistent with Gartrell et al.'s (2011) study findings on adolescents whose mothers had broken up. Judith, age 20, explained how unfair it would be if her "second mom" had tried to gain legal custody of her but was unsuccessful because of her nonbiological status—a situation that fortunately did not come to bear because her mothers had worked out a mutually agreeable postseparation arrangement:

On paper, nobody can understand that I have a separate relationship with her . . . [If they went to court], this woman who helped raise me and who loves me wouldn't be considered to have any rights to see me because on paper she and my mom aren't married.

Here, Judith speaks to the fact that her own definitions of *family* and *parent* differ from those that are dominant in society—and which pervade legal and social discourse about parentage (Gabb, 2005). Furthermore, her narrative reveals the ways in which these discourses become instantiated in law, ultimately shaping, and potentially harming, LGB-parent families.

*Navigating Custody and Contact  
Postdissolution*

None of the 16 participants whose parents had them in the context of same-sex committed relationships was legally married at the time that they dissolved their relationship (but one had a domestic partnership). Thus, in the absence of formal legal recognition of the relationships (e.g., same-sex marriage), there was no formal legal recognition of their dissolution (e.g., divorce).

In three cases, participants' nonbiological mothers had been able to obtain second-parent adoptions. These participants were cognizant that they were "lucky" that their nonbiological parents had been able to legally adopt them. All three grew up in states (e.g., Massachusetts) that afforded sexual minorities at least some legal rights and were relatively young (age 15 – 22); thus, their nonbiological mothers had been able to access second-parent adoptions during their childhood. As Hattie, a 21-year-old woman whose parents split up when she was age 5, said, "We were very lucky to live where we lived, where it was not an issue to have a second-parent adoption." Notably, all three participants reported that their parents negotiated custody of them informally, without legal involvement. Thus, even though both of their parents did have legally recognized relationships to their children, they chose not to utilize the courts as a means for arranging custody. Nora, age 15, whose mothers split up when she was age 3, described:

When my brother and I were born, each of our nonbirth moms adopted us, so technically both Jennifer and Louisa are both of our legal guardians. As far as custody went, they just figured it out. They came up with the plan . . . they never had to have lawyers involved.

In the other 13 cases, participants' nonbiological mothers lacked any legally protected relationship to them. In all but one of these 13 cases, postrelationship dissolution contact

and custody were, according to the participants, arranged verbally and informally, without any legal involvement or guidance. They emphasized that despite the legal inequity in their parents' relationships to them, their parents were committed to ensuring that both parents' rights and relationships were respected. Alison, a 19-year-old woman whose parents split when she was age 9, recalled that "when they split up, there was absolutely no question that I would go to both of them; they never disputed that. Neither one of them claimed that they had more of a right to me." Krista, age 20, whose two mothers split up when she was age 3, shared her view of their arrangement:

There was just an understanding between the two of them that my brother and I would go back and forth. There was no paperwork involved. I don't think either of them was looking to take away my brother and me from anyone, just because they had us knowing that we were both of theirs.

In only one of these 13 cases was a participant's parents (who split when she was age 3) unable to come to an informal agreement about postdissolution contact. According to Rosa, her nonbiological mother took her biological mother to court and sued for joint custody; the case was "thrown out" because "there wasn't any legal basis for that." Rosa, in turn, had no relationship with her nonbiological mother, a reality that she regretted: "I've thought quite a bit about it . . . I think the courts probably would rule differently now." Rosa's situation speaks to the ways that the legal system can shape and define families—but also to the socially and historically changing nature of laws pertaining to LGB family relationships, particularly if children's interests, and not just traditional definitions of families, are considered in custody decisions (Holtzman, 2011).

Some participants ( $n = 7$ ) explicitly recognized that, had their parents been unable to settle upon postdissolution custody arrangements so amicably, their biological mother would have had the legal "upper hand" to dictate such arrangements. Meredith, age 19, reflected: "If it had been an angry split, the legal system would have penalized [the] nonbiological mother." Meredith went on to say that she was "very lucky" that her parents' split had not been contentious, "because if it had been, I could have been . . . ripped from my mom. They didn't have any legal things in place." Gabe, a 24-year-old



man whose two mothers split up when he was age 12, reflected that

If [my parents' split] had been less than incredibly amicable, I think [nonbiological mother] would have been [up against] a lot to get any sort of custody rights. If [biological mother] just decided to be a jerk about it and say, "No, sorry," that would've really sucked for [nonbiological mother], 'cause she wouldn't have been able to see her son.

#### *Change and Continuity in Contact with Parents, Postdissolution*

These 16 participants reported a range of contact and informal custody arrangements postsplit. In most cases, participants described these arrangements as stable over time; in a few cases, however, they described these arrangements as changing over the course of their childhood.

*Joint custody maintained over time.* Seven participants reported that after their mothers' broke up, they maintained a true joint physical custody agreement. They did not have a primary residence but spent equal time with both parents. As Kate, a 24-year-old woman whose mothers broke up when she was age 13, explained, "When they split up, I spent half my time in the house I grew up in with [biological mother], and the other half of my time I spent in a house around the corner with [nonbiological mother]." Participants generally described this type of arrangement as favorable, noting that it helped them to "remain really close" to both parents during their childhood. Two participants, however, noted that it was sometimes challenging to have two residences and described mild frustrations with "misplacing stuff" (e.g., homework).

Notably, in all seven cases, participants' parents lived very close to one another—as close as one street away, and no further than a few miles away. As Tanya, a 17-year-old woman whose mothers broke up when she was age 6, stated, "My parents never really fought over custody of me. They were always pretty equal, so I would go back and forth with each one of them. They just moved a few miles apart, so it wasn't too bad." These participants' parents' apparent commitment to maintaining such close proximity to one another served to ensure that they would have regular and consistent contact

with both parents, with minimal stress in their daily lives.

Notably, two of the three participants whose nonbiological mothers had adopted them reported that their two mothers had joint custody throughout their childhoods. Consistent with Gartrell et al.'s (2006, 2011) work, this finding suggests that legal protections for the nonbiological mother may facilitate shared custody as well as long-term contact with both parents.

#### *Biological mother retained primary custody; Regular contact with nonbiological mother.*

Four participants (including one of the three participants whose nonbiological mothers had adopted them) described a pattern whereby their biological mother maintained primary physical custody of them, and they saw their nonbiological mother regularly (e.g., on weekends). For two of these participants, this arrangement was consistently maintained throughout their childhoods. In the other two cases, participants described an early initial pattern of joint custody but noted that this changed after about a year, such that their biological mother assumed primary physical custody, and their contact with their nonbiological mother lessened but remained constant. For instance, Meredith spent equal time at her two mothers' homes during the year after the split but then lived mainly with her biological mother because her town had a better high school. She continued to see her nonbiological mother, who lived in a nearby town, regularly.

#### *Biological mother retained primary custody; Infrequent contact with nonbiological mother.*

Four participants described a stable pattern whereby their biological mother maintained primary custody of them, and they saw their nonbiological mother infrequently (e.g., a few times a year). In three of these cases, their nonbiological mothers had moved cross-country, and in one case, their biological mother had moved them across the country. Two of these participants noted that they had not only been separated from their nonbiological mother, but also their sibling: Each parent had taken the child that was biologically related to them. Anne, a 24-year-old woman whose two mothers broke up when she was age 5, reflected that, had her nonbiological mother been her legal parent,

and had they gone to court, things might have gone differently:

If there was someone like a judge telling her she couldn't move, maybe she would have worked something else out, and we could have grown up together. I didn't question it til I was older, but then I was like, this doesn't make sense. Just because we were biologically related to [my birth mother] and my brother was biologically related to [my nonbiological mother], you split it? No, you're a family. A judge wouldn't have allowed [us to move].

Noteworthy in Anne's statement is her resentment, realized over time, that by physically separating her original family, her parents put their own needs ahead of hers and built a barrier to maintaining solidarity as a family unit (Golish, 2003). Further, she, and others, interpreted some of their trouble in being separated from one half of their family to a lack of legal support or intervention, which may have helped to apply pressure to keep their family system within geographic proximity.

Two of these four participants noted that they had had no contact with their nonbiological mothers since their parents' split. Their mothers had broken up when they were both younger than age 2; in one of these cases, as described earlier, the participant's nonbiological mother had sued for joint custody but was unsuccessful. This case reveals the ways in which legal inequities may have serious implications for postdissolution parent-child relationships (Allen, 2007). These two women were the only participants in the sample who did not regard their nonbiological mother as a parent, pointing to ways in which legal and societal institutions can shape how individuals define and make meaning of relationships (Gartrell et al., 2011; Goldberg, 2010; Mahoney, 2006).

*Nonbiological mother retained primary custody; Infrequent contact with biological mother.* In one unique case, Justine described how her nonbiological mother had been the more stable and attentive parent during her childhood. When she was age 13, Justine's biological mother relinquished her legal rights as a parent and her nonbiological mother became her legal guardian. Justine was aware that her biological mother held the power in this situation and was grateful that she was willing to cede legal parenting authority to her nonbiological mother: "She

gave up her rights after we realized she was not in a place to be a parent and did that willingly, so I'm very thankful for that." Because Justine's parents had never been married, there was no legal authority dictating that her nonbiological mother should be the one to raise her; in turn, she was dependent on her biological mother's goodwill to "do the right thing." Justine's story illustrates how some LGB family relationships defy dominant narratives about families, such as the notion that biological relatedness dictates the meaning or closeness of family relationships (Gabb, 2005).

#### *Participants Raised in Single or Coparenting LGB Families from Birth*

Now, we turn our attention to the remaining four participants who did not share this experience of having the relationship between their two original parents' dissolve, although they did experience some form of LGB stepfamily formation at some point in their childhood. One participant was born to a single lesbian mother, who, when the participant was age 4, entered into a long-term relationship with a woman whom the participant viewed as "another parent"; they split up when the participant was age 12. Three participants were raised by LGB adults who coparented. Namely, one was born to a bisexual mother and a bisexual father; one was born to a bisexual mother and a gay father; and one was born to a single lesbian mother, who initially coparented with an ex-girlfriend (who had wished to be involved in raising the participant but who was not romantically involved with her biological mother at the time). In these latter three cases, at least one of their LGB parents formed a long-term same-sex partnership during the participants' youth.

The three participants who were raised by LGB coparents said their parents verbally negotiated a physical custody arrangement, whereby they split their time equally between their parents' homes, or had a primary residence with their biological mother and saw their other parent regularly. Cassie, age 25, who was raised by her bisexual mother and gay father from birth, split her time equally between them. She described herself as "growing up, half of the time switching between the two houses, more or less . . . once I got into school, it was every week, and then in high school, I switched every two weeks." LGB coparenting relationships are

distinctly different from LGB relationships in which children are born or raised in that the LGB adults are involved with each other solely for the purpose of raising children (Gartrell et al., 2011). Thus, although LGB adults in coparenting relationships might disagree, or even have a falling out, they may more easily navigate custody issues than a romantically involved couple who decide to end their union.

*The Formation of Stepfamilies: New Partners, New Siblings*

Considering our second research question, 18 of the 20 participants described one or both of their primary parents as entering other long-term same-sex relationships during their youth and described themselves as spending part of their life in an LGB stepfamily. They used a range of terms to describe their relationships to their parents' new partners. In two cases, participants described their mothers' new partners as "parents." For example, Allison, age 19, who also considered her mother's partner's children to be her siblings (as opposed to "stepsiblings"), emphasized an inclusive notion of kin in explaining why she embraced her mother's partner and her children as "family": "Growing up, I always had [people] that I just kind of adopted as my aunts and sisters and brothers. So I kind of have experience bringing people into my family." Allison and the other woman who considered her mother's new partner to be a parent described their relationships with these women as "extremely close." Thus, willingness to refer to one's stepparent as a parent may reflect, in part, strong affective ties to that parent (Golish, 2003).

In 10 cases, participants considered their parents' new partners to be stepparents. They reserved the "parent" identifier for their two primary parents and felt that stepparent was the most appropriate term to describe their parents' new partners. In explaining their use of this term, some individuals offered examples of ways that their stepparents were "parental" (e.g., they helped pay for college) but also clarified how their relationships with stepparents were different from those they had with their parents (e.g., "the truth is, that is how I attached to her, as a stepparent").

Importantly, the naming of parents' partners as "stepparents" did not necessarily imply poor, distant, or strained relationships with these

partners. Rather, these participants described varying degrees of closeness to their stepparents. In a few cases, they explicitly emphasized that they considered their relationships with their stepparents to be closer than those of children in "traditional" (heterosexual) stepfamilies. Hattie, age 21, reflected: "I have a closer relationship to her than a lot of people have to stepparents. She didn't come into my life until I was in high school, but I definitely call her a lot when I have problems."

In five cases, participants used terms like *aunt* and *good friend* to describe their parents' new partners. Their choice of these terms appears purposefully aimed at capturing the fact that these individuals were important people in their lives, but not considered to be parents—because in all five cases, these individuals were no longer in relationships with their parents. Although the romantic relationships between their parents and these partners had ended, the participants continued to remain close with these individuals, and to consider them "kin." In turn, the terms *aunt* and *friend* may have seemed most appropriate to describe these roles and relationships. For instance, Krista, 20, noted that her mother's relationship with her "Aunt Linda" had ended "five or six years ago now. But she continues to be a really, really close family friend."

Finally, a 24-year-old woman named Susan referred to her father's partner as "my 'vice-dad' because we lived with him for seven years and he used to pick me up after school, and I definitely have had a strong relationship with him." This is an example of how participants innovated language, thereby constructing their own discourse (Gubrium & Holstein, 1991) to appropriately describe the complexity of their family arrangements.

In seven cases, participants' parents' new partners had children. Four participants viewed these children as "siblings." Interestingly, only one of these four participants viewed their mothers' new partners as a full "parent"; in two cases, they referred to these new partners as "stepmothers," and in one case, as an "aunt." Thus, a few participants demonstrated a willingness to define their stepsiblings in terms of the traditional nuclear family nomenclature—an ease that did not extend to their stepparents. Then, in three cases, where participants described their parents' new partners as stepparents, they also viewed these partners' children as "stepsiblings."

### *Challenges and Opportunities in Stepfamilies*

Finally, in light of the third research question, most participants described few issues or challenges with their stepparents, likely in part because, in most cases, they were in or had recently graduated from college and were no longer living at home. Terry, age 20, a college student whose biological mother had repartnered when he was age 11, mused, "I think there's always a little bit of issues when you get new stepparents, but I get along pretty well with mine." Tanya, a 17-year-old woman in high school whose biological mother repartnered when she was age 11, said, "I get along with my stepmother really, really well."

Some participants did mention challenges in relation to their stepparents. Five described ambiguity and confusion related to defining their parents' new partners' roles. Leigh, 23, whose mothers separated when she was age 2, and whose biological mother repartnered with another woman, said, "I didn't understand the relationship or family structure. I saw her as a really close—like an aunt. I learned a lot from her, but didn't see her as another mother." Leigh's comment suggests that the lack of similar family structures like hers in society led to uncertainty about how to define her own family relationships in the context of a lesbian stepfamily. Cassie, 25, who was born to a bisexual mother and gay father, described a lack of clarity over the role of her father's new partner in raising her, which grew more evident when he and her father broke up: "It was hard for him, because he didn't have a very clear role in raising me. Then when he wasn't in the relationship with my dad, he could have asked to see me, but he just didn't."

In only three cases did participants describe negative feelings toward their parents' new partners. In these situations, the person not considered to be family was the nonbiological mother's new partner. For example, Kate described her nonbiological mother's partner as "emotionally abusive." Hattie did not talk to her nonbiological mother's partner due to "personality clashes."

At the same time that negotiating stepfamily relationships was sometimes challenging, entering into an LGB stepfamily provided new opportunities for valuable kinship relationships. Seven participants gained between one to four stepsiblings when one or both of their parents began a new relationship. Specifically, four

gained new siblings through one parental stepfamily transition; two gained new siblings from two parental stepfamily formations; and one participant gained new siblings through her biological mother's formation of three sequential stepfamilies.

These seven participants often described their stepsibling relationships as sibling-like. In order to respond to the question, "Do you have siblings?" participants first had to provide a context. They could not just say, "she is my sister," given so many possibilities for being perceived as a sister (one could be a full or half biological sister; an adopted sister; a stepsister via one's biological mother's new partner, etc.). Thus, participants needed more flexible language to explain what they meant by a "sibling relationship." As their narratives revealed, their definition of "sibling"—and their sibling network—was expansive enough to include persons who were biological siblings, adoptive siblings, and stepsiblings. Tanya's description of her family circumstances illustrates the merger of biological, adoptive, and stepsibling relationships:

I was adopted.... My mom got a sperm donor, so my sister is biologically one of my mother's children, and then I was adopted when I was two-and-a-half.... Both my parents got divorced and remarried [when] I was in first grade.... They're both currently remarried and each of my new parents had children from previous relationships, so in total I gained four stepsisters and stepbrothers. I have a big family now.

### DISCUSSION

This study builds on the limited research on LGB parental relationship dissolution (Gartrell et al., 2011) and LGB stepfamilies (Robitaille & Saint-Jacques, 2009). Our findings reveal that young adults who experience their LGB parents' relationship dissolution are confronted with challenges and opportunities in reconfiguring their family relationships. Most participants described their LGB parents' split as amicable and recalled little conflict in the navigation of custody and contact postdissolution. At the same time, the pain of their parents' break-up was exacerbated by the failure of legal institutions to recognize it as a real divorce. Some participants became acutely aware of the ways in which

their parents' relationships—and their own relationships to their nonbiological parents—were viewed as less valid than those of heterosexual stepfamilies. Whereas they constructed their relationships with their nonbiological mothers as meaningful and real, society—and the law—regarded them as strangers. Heterosexual couples receive significant social and legal recognition for their divorce, but same-sex couples and their children may encounter a disturbing lack of awareness about their experience (Brown & Groscup, 2008; Hall & Kitson, 2000), which may complicate and disrupt their ability to process the loss associated with the break-up of their relationship and family (Bernstein, 2007).

It is striking that only one of 16 participants who experienced their parents' relationship dissolution reported court involvement. Mistrust of the legal system may have deterred their parents from going to court (Goldberg, 2010). Regardless, it is interesting that these participants, by and large, constructed their parents' break-up as amicable. One woman, of course, noted that her nonbiological mother had unsuccessfully sued for custody of her, revealing the power of legal inequities for LGB family members. Perhaps some nonbiological mothers, especially those who had less contact with participants, wanted joint custody but, lacking equal legal or biological footing with their ex-partners, felt pressured to comply with their ex-partners' preferences for fear of losing contact with their children. Research on heterosexual divorce suggests that in some cases, fathers want joint custody but do not pursue it in court because they believe that judges will rule against them, given the bias against fathers in family court (Frieman, 2002; Nielsen, 2011). Research on heterosexual divorcing parents has found that court involvement, especially when contentious, is linked to poor coparental relationships (Baum, 2003). A research question for the future is: How does court involvement affect postsplit custody arrangements and coparenting in LGB-parent families?

Most participants described ongoing contact with their nonbiological mothers postsplit. Participants whose parents had joint custody of them reported that their parents lived close to each other during their childhoods, suggesting that partners were very committed to ensuring children's equal contact with both parents. Indeed, participants observed that maintaining dual residences had enabled them to remain

close to both parents. Participants who rarely saw their nonbiological mothers attributed this to geographic distance. Some expressed regret related to the fact that their nonbiological mother, in several cases, and their biological mother, in one case, had moved, inhibiting their ability to maintain their relationship with their nonbiological mother—and, in some cases, their siblings. Their stories speak to the sometimes unacknowledged power of biology to define and construct familial relationships (Gabb, 2005; Goldberg, 2010), and the implications of this power for creating a hierarchy of relationships in the event of relationship dissolution.

Most participants reported that their stepfamily experiences included positive relationships with their parents' new partners; only a few described antagonistic relationships. Challenges related to role definition were mentioned by some participants. As prior research has found (Hall & Kitson, 2000; Lynch, 2004), the structure and meaning of LGB stepfamily roles are even more ambiguous than those of heterosexual families, in that there are no widely accessible societal scripts to guide the enactment of these relationships. The lack of recognition of LGB stepfamilies may prevent some LGB stepfamily members from identifying each other as family (Baptiste, 1987), or even identifying as a family unit altogether (Ganong & Coleman, 2004).

Participants used a range of terms to describe their parents' new partners. Their capacity to choose identifiers that were the most comfortable for them reveals the flexibility in the informal arrangements that nonlegal unions create. Their freedom to construct their own definitions of their families (Gubrium & Holstein, 1991), and their ability to renegotiate boundaries and build solidarity as a family unit, are characteristics of strong stepfamily relationships (Ahrns, 2007; Golish, 2003). Notably, a few participants were willing to identify their stepsiblings as "siblings" but did not extend the same willingness to their stepparents. Perhaps this tendency reflected participants' concerns about perceived disloyalties from their original parents—particularly the one who was not partnered with said stepparent. After all, the dominant family narrative (and family law) implies that one cannot have more than two "real" parents but does not presume a specific number of siblings (Schmeekle, Giarrusso, Feng, & Bengtson, 2006).

As reflected in their descriptions of their stepfamilies, individuals with LGB parents who

break up can invent new ways of doing family. Flexible kin arrangements hold possibilities for identifying family members where none may have existed before (e.g., when a young adult names a new stepparent's child as "just like a sibling"). These arrangements also help to socialize them in developing close relationships as they travel toward adulthood. Children in LGB-parent families who have experienced the nonlegal equivalence of parental divorce and/or the creation of LGB stepfamilies encounter increasing impermanence in family ties and must learn to navigate family transitions without the social and legal supports that are in place for others involved in this "incomplete institution" (Hall & Kitson, 2000). The young adults in this study demonstrate their ability to adapt to changes in family relationships by making choices about who they consider kin.

#### Limitations

First, the small sample precludes our ability to address the applicability of the findings to the broader population of youth who experience their LGB parents' relationship dissolution or the formation of LGB stepfamilies. Second, we included participants who ranged in age from 15 to 29. Interviewing children would undoubtedly reveal different patterns, particularly if they had recently experienced their parents' relationship dissolution. Third, our sample was mostly White and well educated. Future studies should seek more diverse samples. Fourth, our sample comprised primarily persons with lesbian parents; research is needed that addresses the experiences of young adults whose gay male parents' relationships dissolve. Finally, we did not include the perspectives of multiple family members (e.g., parents, stepparents, siblings). Participants' parents might certainly describe their relationship dissolutions differently than the participants recalled.

#### Implications for Practitioners

Practitioners who work with LGB-parent families during parental dissolution or stepfamily formation must consider the ways in which their "outsider" status, with respect to dominant narratives about divorce and stepfamilies, may benefit and disadvantage them (Goldberg, 2010). They should be aware that children's relationships with their nonbiological parents may

not be recognized by the legal system or society; this lack of recognition may be exacerbated in the wake of parental relationship dissolution (Goldberg, 2010). But practitioners should also be mindful of the ways in which LGB-parent families may be in a position to resist dominant narratives about what postdissolution relationships are supposed to look like (e.g., children live mainly with their biological mothers) and should encourage parents to seek arrangements that support children's bonds with both parents. Practitioners should remind LGB parents who are ending their unions that the coparental relationship will continue (Ahrns, 2007); thus, partners should discuss the long-term nature of their relationship, including the viability of maintaining geographic proximity. They should also educate LGB parents who are separating of the effects of multiple transitions on children, and advise them to use caution before moving in with new partners (Bernstein, 2007).

In conclusion, this study provides a valuable first step toward articulating the perspectives of young adults who have experienced their LGB parents' relationship dissolution and/or stepfamily formation. The findings reveal the complex ways in which young adults with LGB parents navigate, construct, and give meaning to family diversity and family relationships. Future research should build on this project to explore, in greater depth, how all members of LGB-parent families (parents, new partners, and children) experience family change.

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