

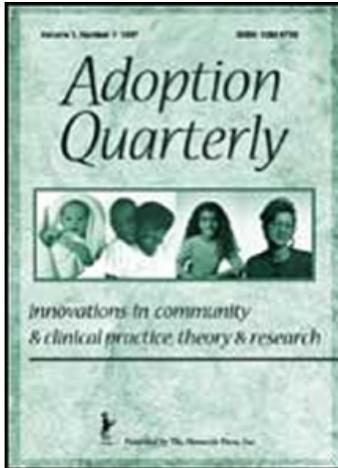
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Family Outings: Disclosure Practices Among Adopted Youth With Gay and Lesbian Parents

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This study uses qualitative data from 14 interviews with multicultural youth aged 13 to 20 to explore how they negotiate disclosures of their adoptive status and gay and lesbian parent-headed family structure within their schools and friendship networks. Findings reveal a continuum of disclosure practices ranging from not telling anyone that they have gay or lesbian parents to more open disclosure, with several participants being forced to “come out” often about their families. Participants described receiving positive responses from others about their adoptive status, but they were often apprehensive about disclosing that their parents were gay or lesbian. Findings suggest that parental preparation for dealing with adoptism, racism, and heterosexism/homophobia can facilitate an easier disclosure process for youth regarding their multicultural identities and family structure. Implications for research, policy, and adoption practice are discussed.

KEYWORDS *adoption, disclosure, families, gay, lesbian, race, transracial, qualitative*

Although considerable research has focused on families headed by openly gay men and lesbians who are raising one or more children (Gianino, 2008; Goldberg, Downing, & Sauck, 2008; Patterson, 2000), the majority

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of these studies have focused on families formed through heterosexual marriage (Bigner, 1999) and alternative insemination (Chan, Brooks, Raboy, & Patterson, 1998; Gartrell et al., 1999). Such trends contrast significantly with what clinicians and researchers have described as the emergence of a “multicultural gay family” (Bennett, 2003a), that is, families that are formed through adoption and are headed by one or more gay/lesbian parents. Given that gay men and lesbians are more likely than heterosexual couples to adopt (Gates & Ost, 2004) and are increasingly recognized as a resource in that the number of children available for adoption exceeds the number of heterosexual couples pursuing adoption (Brooks & Goldberg, 2001), the lack of research on gay and lesbian adoptive parent families is problematic. While a literature is slowly emerging on the experiences of gay and lesbian adoptive parent families (Gianino, 2008), it is notable that this literature has tended to focus on *parents’* experiences. Much less attention has been paid to the perspectives of children, many of whom are of a different race than their parents.

Gay and lesbian adoptive families represent a growing but understudied and marginalized family form (Gates & Ost, 2004; Krieder, 2003). One unique aspect of life for youth with gay and lesbian parents involves the decision-making processes whereby they choose whether to disclose details about their family structure. Indeed, people who identify as gay or lesbian are not the only ones who must face decisions about whether to “come out”; their children are also faced with questions about whether and how to come out to peers, teachers, and other adults (Garner, 2004). Illustrating this point, Goldberg (2007) conducted a qualitative study with 42 adults raised by lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) parents regarding their disclosure practices regarding their families. Participants described encountering many situations and contexts that required them to decide, often very quickly, whether to come out about their families. They cited many reasons for coming out about their family, including a desire to educate others, a need for openness in their relationships, and a desire to “screen out” homophobic individuals.

CHILDREN OF GAY AND LESBIAN PARENTS

Whether and how parental sexual orientation impacts children’s development has received a great deal of attention, both within the popular press and by the research community (Goldberg, 2007; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). As a result, a growing body of research has sought to investigate the role of parental sexual orientation on child development. Such research consistently points to few associations between parental sexual orientation and the psychosocial functioning of young children raised in lesbian parent-headed families compared to heterosexual parent-headed families (Bos, Gartrell, van Balen, & Sandfort, 2007; Gartrell, Deck, Rodas, Peyser, & Banks, 2005; MacCallum & Golombok, 2004). Studies examining the parenting styles and

behaviors of gay fathers in relation to a comparison group of heterosexual fathers (Barret & Robinson, 1990; Bigner & Jacobsen, 1989a; Bozett, 1987, 1989) found few differences between the two groups. When differences were noted, gay fathers were found to be more attuned to their children's needs, more nurturing as caregivers, and less identified with the role of economic provider than their heterosexual counterparts (Bigner & Jacobsen, 1989a, 1989bb; Bigner, 1999; Bozett, 1989). Some differences between children raised in lesbian parent-headed families and children raised in heterosexual parent-headed families have been noted, including greater gender role flexibility (Green, Mandel, Hotvedt, & Smith, 1986) and greater openness to *considering* a same-sex relationship (Tasker & Golombok, 1997).

Wainright and Patterson (2008) caution that the results of studies conducted with children aged 12 and younger should not be generalized to adolescents. They note that adolescence is characterized by issues concerning personal identity, peers, and dating, making the impact of having non-heterosexual parents especially important to examine at this time of their lives. The little research that has focused on adolescent offspring of families headed by same-sex couples has revealed no association between parental sexual orientation and self-esteem (Huggins, 1989) and higher self-esteem among participants who reported higher levels of disclosure about their mothers' sexual orientation (Gershon, Tschann, & Jemerin, 1999). Further, Wainright and Patterson (2008) studied adolescents with same-sex and heterosexual parents and found no evidence that adolescent peer relations are shaped by parental sexual orientation.

An emerging body of research has begun to examine disclosure practices among youth with gay and lesbian parents. Welch (2008) studied 14 adolescents aged 13 to 18 with one or more gay or lesbian parents. Qualitative findings suggested that disclosure of their family structure was critical to informants' development of a positive sense of self and pride in their families. In a recent cross-national study, Bos et al. (2008) interviewed children of 78 planned lesbian families in the United States and children of 74 planned lesbian families in the Netherlands about their disclosure of their parents' sexual orientation and their experiences of homophobia. Results showed that children in the United States reported lower levels of disclosure and experienced more homophobia than their Dutch peers. While these studies are important in furthering our understanding of disclosure processes among youth with gay and lesbian parents, the vast majority of respondents in these studies are White and biologically related to their parents; thus, the added challenges facing transracially adopted persons regarding disclosure are as yet unexamined. Further, it may be particularly important to examine disclosure issues during adolescence, as this is an important time in identity development and a time when being accepted by one's peers and broader society is experienced as paramount (Ray & Gregory, 2001; Wainright & Patterson, 2008; Welch, 2008).

GAY AND LESBIAN ADOPTION

Of the 1.6 million adopted children younger than 18 living in the United States in 2000 (Kreider, 2003) at least 65,000 were living with gay or lesbian parents (Gates, Badgett, Macomber, & Chambers, 2007). While a fairly large literature exists on families formed by adoption (Daly, 2005; Pinderhughes, 1996) and a growing literature exists on families headed by gay and lesbian parents (Gartrell et al., 1999; Gianino, 2008; Goldberg, 2006), little research bridges these two areas. One study that compared the family functioning of families headed by gay and lesbian parents with families headed by heterosexual parents found no negative effects for the children or families of gay and lesbian parents (Leung, Erich, & Kanenberg, 2005). Other studies have investigated internationally adopted children's attachment to their lesbian mothers (Bennett, 2003b), adoptive lesbian mothers' ideas about family (Bennett, 2003a), adoptive lesbian mothers' perceptions of discrimination in the adoption process (Ciano-Boyce & Shelley-Sireci, 2002; Goldberg, Downing, Harp, & Sauck, 2007), adoptive lesbian mothers' division of labor (Shelley-Sireci & Ciano-Boyce, 2002), and adoptive gay couples' transition to parenthood (Gianino, 2008). The paucity of studies focusing on gay and lesbian adoptive family processes is problematic, as there are many issues unique to this family structure that need to be addressed in future research.

TRANSRACIAL ADOPTION, SOCIALIZATION,
AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

The term *transracial adoption* generally refers to an adoption in which a child's race or ethnicity is different than that of both parents in the couple or one parent's if it is a single-parent adoption (Smith, McRoy, Freundlich, & Kroll, 2008). Transracial adoption has been an area of considerable research interest over the past 3 decades and to this day remains a source of significant controversy (Simon & Alstein, 2000). There is some evidence that White same-sex couples may be more likely to be open to adopt transracially compared to White heterosexual couples (Gates et al., 2007; Goldberg, 2009; Shelley-Sireci & Ciano-Boyce, 2002), and national data sets suggest that 47% of adopted children of same-sex couples are non-White, compared to 37% of adopted children of married heterosexual couples (Gates et al., 2007).

The complexity of transracial adoption may be magnified in the gay/lesbian parent context. Gay and lesbian parent-headed families who choose to adopt transracially are vulnerable to the stresses associated with both heterosexism and racism. Indeed, gay and lesbian persons who are not open to adopting a child of a different race typically cite as a deterrent the

discrimination their child may be exposed to by virtue of having gay parents and being adopted; they express feelings that the additional challenge of being of a different race is too much for a child to handle (Gianino, 2008; Goldberg, 2009). Some couples also cite family and community racism as barriers to adopting a child of color (Goldberg, 2009). There is evidence that at least some gay and lesbian parents who adopt are aware of the challenges associated with adopting transracially. Bennett (2003a) interviewed 15 lesbian mothers of internationally adopted children and found that most were intentional about identifying integrated environments for their children (e.g., integrated preschools). However, women also felt that their sexual orientation, not their children's race, would represent the larger challenge for their children. Similarly, in a recent study of adoptive gay couples, the majority of whom had adopted transracially, respondents described their sexual orientation as presenting the more significant challenge for their children—not their children's race or adoptive status (Gianino, 2008). At the same time, it is noteworthy that many men also cited racial differences between themselves and their children, not their sexual orientation, as the basis for frequent questioning in public regarding their family configuration. Again, missing from the discussion have been the unique views of adolescents being raised in these multicultural, multiracial families. This study seeks to shed light on the complexities of disclosure from the perspective of transracially adopted adolescents with LGB parents.

THEORIES OF COMING OUT

Relevant to the discussion of disclosure practices among multicultural youth raised by gay and lesbian parents is the coming out literature pertaining to sexual minorities themselves (Goldberg, 2007). Much of the literature of the 1970s and early 1980s focused on the development of a staged model of identity development to describe how individuals moved through a coming out process that was relatively linear and continuous (Kaufman & Johnson, 2004). The dominant framework for understanding the coming out process was the stage model developed by Cass (1979), whereby individuals were seen to move through stages commencing in identity confusion and ending in "acceptance." Herek (1998) advanced reasons or motivations for coming out that include a desire to improve interpersonal relationships and a desire to decrease the strain associated with keeping one's identity a secret.

Although it is a useful framework for understanding disclosure and coming out processes, this model is not without notable limitations. For example, models of gay and lesbian development can be viewed as too restrictive in that they often assume that identity development is dissimilar from identity issues of other stigmatized groups (Kaufman & Johnson, 2004). In fact, "coming out" models can be applied to children of gay and lesbian persons

and, further, adopted children of gay/lesbian persons. These models may insufficiently describe the experiences of children of sexual minorities, who may “come out” about their parent but who do not have complete control over how information about their adoptive status and parents’ sexual orientation is revealed. Indeed, in his research on gay father families, Bozett (1987) observed that some children employed “control strategies” to maintain a public image of their families as nongay. One major control strategy consisted of efforts by the children to *manage boundaries*, for example, by not inviting friends to the family home or refusing to be seen in public with their father. A second strategy was *nondisclosure*, whereby some children simply did not tell others their father was gay until they felt it safe to do so (Bozett, 1987). Of interest in the current study is how adopted children of gay and lesbian parents experience the complexities of disclosure and what strategies they employ when sharing their multicultural identities and family form with others.

STUDY QUESTIONS

The focus of this study was to explore disclosure practices and processes among transracially adopted youth whose parents are gay or lesbian as well as to examine ways in which youth were prepared for disclosures through conversations within their families. Consistent with grounded theory methods of interviewing that elicit participants’ views, experiences, and actions (Charmaz, 2006), questions were designed to facilitate an in-depth exploration of participant experiences. The following questions regarding disclosure were explored: (1) How do transracially and transculturally adopted youth describe their feelings about living within families headed by gay or lesbian parents? (2) How do these feelings inform their decisions about disclosure of their family structure? (3) How do participants explain their practices of disclosure or nondisclosure about their family structure to others? (4) How do these youth describe their experiences of conversations within the family that prepare them for disclosure about their families within the larger community? (5) What challenges/opportunities do youth cite with regard to disclosing their multiple statuses as transracially adopted and as children of gay and lesbian parents?

METHOD

Although qualitative research has begun to examine cultural identity development among transracially adopted adults (Shaw, 2005) and experiences of adopted multiracial adults in navigating racial difference (Samuels, 2009), no studies have investigated the experiences of transracially adopted youth whose parents are gay or lesbian. Given the paucity of research and theory on transracially adopted youth who reside in gay and lesbian parent-headed

households (Demo & Allen, 1996) this study employed a qualitative design as a necessary first step in exploring relevant variables that have yet to be identified regarding the experiences of this population of transracially adopted youth (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). More specifically, the methodology of this study was guided by grounded theory, an approach that is deemed especially compatible with qualitative family research (LaRossa, 2005).

This study employed a nonprobability, purposive sampling method (Maxwell, 1996; Padgett, 1998) based upon the researchers' judgment that transracially adopted informants themselves are best positioned to know about the phenomenon being investigated. Criteria for participation included the following: (1) participants were adopted youth between 13 and 21 years old; (2) participants were raised or currently resided in families headed by gay or lesbian parents; and (3) participants were of a race or ethnicity different than that of their parents.

Informants for this study were recruited nationally. One challenge in the recruitment of youth through Web sites and newsletters of organizations dedicated to advocacy for gay and lesbian parent-headed families is the strong possibility of sampling bias. To minimize the chances of sample bias, four primary methods of recruitment were employed. First, advertisements were placed with organizations serving sexual minority families, including Family Equality Council; Parents, Family and Friends of Lesbians and Gays; Gay and Lesbian Parents Coalition International; Rainbow Rumpus (an on-line magazine for youth with LGB parents); and gay father/lesbian mother support groups. Second, advertisements appeared in media of organizations serving youth in gay and lesbian parent-headed households such as Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere. Third, the authors contacted organizations in the adoption community such as Adoption Community of New England, professional colleagues, adoption service providers, and transracial adoptive family groups. Fourth, the authors employed "snowball" sampling methods whereby informants were asked to pass along study details to others whom they felt might be qualified to participate. The researchers' contact information was included with the study description, and potential respondents were asked to contact the principal co-investigators. Once youth or their parents contacted the investigators, the study was explained to them either via e-mail or telephone. If they expressed interest in participating, they were mailed consent forms for participants older than 18 and assent forms for those 17 or younger and a consent form for their parent(s). Once consent forms were received, interviews were scheduled either over the telephone or face-to-face.

Data Collection Procedures and Open-Ended Questions

Data were collected between the summer of 2007 and the spring of 2008. The first author conducted interviews face-to-face ($n = 4$) and, where there were

large geographical distances, over the telephone ($n = 10$). Interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and were digitally audio taped and transcribed in order to capture participants' thoughts and feelings in their own words. A semi-structured interview format was employed with open-ended questions that addressed informant perceptions of their experiences of disclosure of their multicultural family form. The following were among the open-ended questions that were asked:

(1) How is your race and cultural background different from that of your parents? How [if at all] did your family talk with you about these differences? Who initiated these conversations? Could you describe how the conversations unfolded? What was talked about? How did you feel about these talks?

(2) When did you first become aware that your parents were gay or lesbian? What was that experience like for you? How [if at all] did your family talk with you about these differences? Who initiated these conversations? Could you describe how the conversations unfolded? What was talked about? How did you feel about these talks?

(3) What do you tell others when you talk about your family? How have others reacted when they learn that you were adopted and have gay or lesbian parents? What was this experience like for you? How do you decide when or when not to tell someone about your family? Has talking about your family changed over time? When was it easier? Harder?

Description of the Sample

Participants ranged in age from 13 to 20 with a mean age of 15.7 and a median of 14 years. The sample comprised 6 males and 8 females. This geographically diverse group of adolescents and young adults resided in Massachusetts, California, New York, New Mexico, Maryland, Illinois, Georgia, Virginia, and Connecticut. The majority of informants had lesbian mothers ($n = 12$); two had gay fathers. The majority of participants ($n = 8$) reported family incomes over \$70,000 per year. Nearly all of the youth ($n = 13$) were adopted transracially; one was adopted inracially but cross-culturally (from Russia). Adoptions were either intercountry ($n = 5$) or domestic ($n = 9$). Participants came to live in their adoptive homes at ages ranging from 2 days to 11 years, with an average of 3.5 years. The majority (72%) had been in at least one placement prior to their adoptive home. With regard to racial and ethnic heritage, youth self-identified as the following: African American ($n = 4$), Asian ($n = 3$), mixed race/ethnicity ($n = 3$), Latino ($n = 2$), American Indian ($n = 1$), and White/Caucasian ($n = 1$). Seventy-nine percent of participants ($n = 11$) attended public schools, one participant attended private school, one was enrolled in a full-time special education program, and 14% ($n = 2$) were enrolled in college. Grade levels ranged from seventh grade to first-year college, with the most frequent being ninth grade.

Analytic Method

The analytic method for the present study was grounded theory. Coding was an inductive process where theoretical categories were developed that illuminated actions, processes, and meanings about the experience of disclosure among transracially adopted youth with gay and lesbian parents (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Three major phases of grounded theory coding (initial, focused, and axial) are outlined below.

All transcribed interviews were imported and coded within the software program ATLAS.ti (Muhr, 1997). The first step of the analytic process consisted of the first author reading through each transcript multiple times, followed by an inductive stage of *initial coding* where each line of transcript was coded according to the events and actions it contained (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This stage of the analytic process generated 260 initial codes. The constant comparison method was employed, which involved comparing data to data to ensure that they were coded according to new themes that emerged (Padgett, 1998). Coding was an iterative process; as new themes emerged, the first author returned to previously coded transcripts to examine them for similar themes. In the next stage of analysis, two additional coders were brought in to assist the first author with *focused coding* (Charmaz, 2006). As this process unfolded, similar, significant, and frequently occurring codes were modified, deleted, or combined. Similar codes were grouped together under more general categories that were labeled in order to identify initial common themes; among them, for example, "disclosure" emerged as a significant theme at this stage and was regarded as a complex, multidimensional construct.

The third stage of analysis was that of *axial coding* (Charmaz, 2006; LaRossa, 2005). This phase involved sifting through many pages of transcripts to categorize, revise, merge, or discard codes related to the category "disclosure." Qualitative analysis at this stage consisted of the following steps. (1) Team members read transcripts and searched for themes related to disclosure and wrote brief memos to facilitate the process of keeping track of themes across interviews. (2) In team meetings, themes identified by members of the team were reviewed, and transcripts were subsequently reread and coded or recoded by team members under the selected themes. (3) In team meetings, a theme chart was constructed and modified as coding progressed. (4) Team members returned to transcripts with the refined coding scheme and extracted coded quotes relevant to these themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The final stage of analysis was concluded when the second author read segments of transcripts and evaluated the coding scheme against the data. These comments were then incorporated into the final revision of the scheme. There are two main themes that will be discussed in the following section. The first is *developmental processes of disclosure*, a theme that encompasses three subthemes: challenging times for disclosure (middle

school); the continuum of disclosure practices; and factors that youth consider when deciding whether to disclose their family structure. The second major theme, *family modeling*, describes how family conversations about disclosure facilitate youth comfort with sharing with others their family form.

RESULTS

This study explores the theme of disclosure of participants' adoptive, transracial, and gay and lesbian parent-headed family structure. Two main sets of findings are presented. These themes focus on (1) developmental processes of disclosure and (2) how family modeling in particular relates to these processes.

Developmental Processes of Disclosure

This section presents a discussion of disclosure processes that were derived from the interviews. The three major sub-themes concern (1) middle school challenges for disclosure; (2) the continuum of disclosure practices; and (3) factors that youth consider when deciding whether to disclose that their parents are gay/lesbian.

MIDDLE SCHOOL: CHALLENGING TIME FOR DISCLOSURE

An important factor that appeared to influence disclosure was participants' stage of development. There was wide consensus among participants of all ages that the middle school years presented the greatest challenges in telling people that their parents were gay or lesbian. Thus, middle school represented the time when they were the most scared and the least likely to come out about their families. Teenagers in early adolescence struggled to find language to explain their gay or lesbian parent-headed family structure to their peers and tended to be secretive about their parents' sexual orientation. Most participants recalled often wishing for a "normal" family during this period, and the fear of not being accepted often inhibited disclosure to peers or led them to tell only a few friends. Reflecting back on his recent years spent in middle school, one 14-year-old mixed-race youth recounted that "thirteen was the hardest because in middle school, that's when all the teasing, all the problems are." Addressing fears of disclosure during her middle school years, one 19-year-old East Indian daughter of two White mothers offered the following:

Especially in middle school, it became really evident that people might not accept my family, so I only really told my close friends . . . I think

when you're at that age, you learn about different families, you learn that your family is not going to be accepted by everyone and that some people in the country think it's shameful.

By middle and later adolescence, most participants recounted being able to form and maintain a group of friends who were accepting of their family structure. As youth were able to exercise more control over their choice of friends, they inevitably relinquished friendships with peers who were rejecting of their family structure. Some of these transitions and losses were predictable developmental tasks of adolescence as youth grew, moved into new school settings, and took on new activities. Other youth spoke of the evolution of friendships, wherein initial disclosures about their families that were met with confusion or skepticism changed for the better as their friends became more comfortable with their parents' sexual orientation. At the same time, participants were adamant that they did not base their choice of friends on the racial composition of their families or the sexual orientation of the parents. As one 17-year-old White Russian male participant offered, "I mean, usually all my friends are focused on *me* and not my parents. They just want to spend time and have fun."

THE CONTINUUM OF DISCLOSURE PRACTICES

Over time, most participants opted for more open disclosure regarding both their adoption and their gay or lesbian parent-headed family; indeed, most youth whose early adolescence was characterized by secrecy recalled developing greater comfort with themselves and within their social networks to the point where they did not attempt to hide their family form at all. Notably, youth described an easier time when it came to talking about their adoptive status as compared to disclosing their parents' sexual orientation. The continuum of disclosure processes regarding their family structure is described below.

Unintended disclosure of family structure. As members of transracial families, participants often described feelings of vulnerability and heightened vigilance in public settings due to their family's obvious "difference." A 14-year-old Asian female participant stated the following:

Well, there was this time in San Francisco when there was this guy who was drunk behind us, and it was my whole family, and he was walking behind us, and both my parents were alert, and he was like 'those gay people,' and I don't think it was threatening necessarily, but it was definitely something to worry about.

Thus, this young woman describes how her family members' racial differences prompted a stranger to recognize them as a family, and a family headed by lesbians, at that. Such heightened visibility was clearly something

to “worry” about, for example, with regard to her family’s safety. Sometimes youth were left wondering about whether strangers “knew” about their families; thus, they often described trying to ascertain the motivation behind stares or comments made by others. For example, a 14-year-old mixed-race girl noted, “I mean, like, when I am out I’m not sure if they treat me different. I guess they wonder why I have two moms most of the time and why they’re both White and I’m not White.”

Several participants reported that this ambiguity as to how their family would be regarded led to feeling that “people would judge my family when going out to restaurants, and that is what caused me the most anxiety when I was younger.” Of note is that later in the interview, this participant noted that although she “hated going into new social situations,” frequent exposure to these public “outings” diminished her anxiety to the point that “I go to places with my moms *all* the time now!” One 15-year-old African American young woman noted that feeling safe out in public with her White adoptive mother was premised on her parent “passing” for heterosexual: “Like some people you can tell, like, they’re gay or lesbian, but some like my mom, you can’t really tell with her. Like she was not, because, like some lesbians dress kind of manly.”

Some participants clearly articulated feelings of anxiety and vulnerability regarding their transracial family structure, often because they believed that these outward differences between themselves and their parents would lead others to conclude that their parents were gay or lesbian, unless their parents were somehow able to “pass” as heterosexual. Notably, these feelings were typically described as diminishing throughout adolescence.

Disclosure of adoption/nondisclosure of parental sexual orientation. Virtually all informants emphasized the public nature of their families, a reality punctuated by the frequency with which they were asked about their family structure due to the racial differences between them and their parents. Sometimes peers tried to make sense of the racial diversity within youths’ families by peppering them with questions about these differences. In response to these questions, participants would eventually reveal that they were adopted. This mixed-race 14-year-old girl describes the conversation that led to disclosure of her adoptive status:

Participant (P): It was kinda hard . . . [because] I would tell people, oh, I’m Mexican, and they’re like, “No you’re not. Your mom’s White.” And they’d be like, “You look White.”

Then I’d be like, “No, really. I am Black and you know, Mexican.”

Interviewer (I): So, did that . . . confuse them? What would you do then?P:

Yeah, after I’d be like, “I’m adopted. She’s not my ‘real’ mom.”

Compared to disclosing their adoption, participants expressed a great deal more hesitation when it came to telling their peers that their parents

were gay or lesbian. Said one 15-year old Asian daughter of two women: "I have no problems saying I'm adopted, but [*voice softens*] it is harder to say that my moms are lesbians." Participants noted that they sometimes omitted information related to their parents' sexual orientation by disclosing that they lived with only one parent when in fact they resided with two or hinting that their father might be living away from home. In one instance, when one African American participant was asked about her single White mother, she simply responded that her mother was divorced. Although this was true, her mother was also a lesbian.

Ask and tell. Since participants generally reported feeling guarded about disclosing that their parents were gay or lesbian, it is not surprising that few participants reported volunteering information about their parents' sexual orientation, that is, unless asked. Interestingly, when they chose to disclose at all, more often they would volunteer that they had "two moms" or "two dads" rather than that their parents were "gay" or "lesbian." In this way, their language emphasized the gender of their parents while concealing or minimizing their sexual orientation. Some youth expressed feelings of resentment and frustration at having to field questions about their family structure over and over again. Others voiced a wish for privacy about their families, as expressed by one 14-year-old multiracial youth: "Sometimes you just don't want to answer them; like, I don't go around asking about your dad all the time . . . or your mom. It sort of gets annoying."

FACTORS YOUTH CONSIDER WHEN DECIDING WHETHER TO DISCLOSE THAT THEIR PARENTS ARE GAY OR LESBIAN

When deciding who and what to tell about their parents, youth engaged in a careful process of screening out those they deemed homophobic. Often their decision of whether to tell someone that their parents were gay or lesbian was based on their assessment of whether that person was trustworthy. Other factors that youth considered regarding disclosure was the possibility that they themselves might be deemed gay or lesbian; the desire to fit in among their peer groups; and finally, a wish to decrease anxiety and improve friendships.

The trust factor. Once they told someone about their family structure, participants described assessing the person's reactions before moving forward (or not) with a friendship. The following example illustrates how one 17-year-old male participant would pave the way for disclosure by sensing whether people were approachable on a general level first:

I choose my friends wisely. I don't go up to random people and ask them to be friends. . . . I start talking to people and they talk to me and then we talk some more, you know? It's not like I go, that kid looks like

a good friend. He has good values. I just sort of talk to people, and the more you talk to people and spend time the better friends they become.

For most participants, trust was vital to disclosure. Said one 19-year-old woman, "Trust is a huge factor . . . telling people you don't know that you have two moms. Even now I do a pretty thorough screening process to see if everyone is going to be okay with it. That's something I've learned to do, and it's hard sometimes." Most participants were clear that acceptance of their family structure was a prerequisite to friendship, while at the same time adamantly stating that this acceptance was not the sole basis for friendship.

The fear factor: Being labeled as gay. Several adolescent participants identified the fear of being labeled as gay based on the sexual orientation of their parents as a factor involved in their decision to tell (or not to tell) others about having gay or lesbian parents. Participants were sensitive to the pervasiveness of derogatory language about gays or lesbians in their schools, even if they were not being specifically targeted. When confronted with this language, youth tried to discern the consequences of confronting it: specifically, would they be "outing" themselves as gay in doing so? Some adopted a passive approach by choosing to ignore or walk away from such behaviors without disclosing their parents' sexual orientation. One 14-year-old girl noted this response to offensive language about LGB people:

I was just kind of like, you're being really stupid, like 'whatever'. But, yeah, I wasn't really offended because I knew they were just being stupid, and if they knew what they were actually saying and how it affected people, they would probably stop. But they didn't. I saw it so much and, like, I can't tell everyone to not do it. It's too tiring. I would just rather . . . roll my eyes and walk away.

In several instances, when the sexual orientation of their parents inevitably surfaced among peers, the fear of being teased was in fact realized. Stated one 13-year-old African American son of two White lesbian moms:

I: Do you think they made fun of you because they thought you were gay?

P: Yeah, probably.

I: Was it mostly because they knew your moms were gay?

I: Yeah. They probably thought I was gay because my moms are.

For one participant, peer knowledge about his gay fathers led to relentless harassment and psychological abuse based on a presumed association between his and his fathers' sexual orientation. Here, this 18-year-old African American recounts his experiences among his high school peers:

I: What kinds of things would they say?

P: Uh, 'little homo' and 'faggot.'

I: Calling you that or your dads that?

P: Calling *me* that.

Desire to fit in. Not surprisingly, participants' disclosure processes were influenced by their perceptions of how peers would accept them. Teenage participants in this study highlighted their desire to "fit in." Clearly, peer reactions to disclosure about their family structure shaped decision making regarding further disclosures. Some informants, especially younger teenagers, reported that disclosures about parental sexual orientation were initially met with confusion, which sometimes inhibited future disclosures. Said a 15-year-old Asian daughter of two White mothers, "The first time I went to a drag show, I was really young, and I was telling my friends about it and they were kind of like, 'Whoa . . . men dressing like girls,' and they got very confused."

Among respondents of all ages, worry and anxiety about how others would respond ranked high among feelings they experienced prior to disclosing that they had gay or lesbian parents. This was especially true when they felt pushed to disclose before they felt ready: some expressed worry to the point of dread in anticipation of the questions people might ask. And yet, despite some of the exceptions noted above, fears of being labeled, stigmatized, or rejected typically did not come to pass as a result of their disclosures. In fact, several informants spoke not only of diminished anxiety after disclosure but also of closer friendships, perhaps due to greater mutual trust that developed as a function of such disclosures. In addition, some interviewees not only reported acceptance from their peers but also noted that some friends now thought their families were in fact "cool."

Family Modeling

This section describes youths' perceptions of their families' role in helping to prepare them for disclosure regarding their family structure. The data indicate that conversations in early childhood between youth and parents about their family form were critical to participants' developing the language and comfort level to disclose about their families in later youth. Two subthemes will explicate how family modeling helped shape processes of and comfort with disclosure of their multifaceted family form: (1) family conversations about adoption and (2) family conversations about having gay or lesbian parents. It is clear through these findings that conversations about the individual components of their family form (adoptive, transracial, and gay/lesbian-parented) were not recalled by informants as separate and discrete, but overlapping and intertwined. For example, discussions about race predictably led to conversations about adoption within these families. Similarly, the reality of having two mothers or fathers led to discussions

about the fact that their parents were lesbian or gay. For purposes of clarity in presenting these findings, family conversations about adoption and their gay- and lesbian-parented family forms will be presented separately.

FAMILY CONVERSATIONS ABOUT ADOPTION

With respect to their adoptive status, participants expressed that they either “always knew” they were adopted or that the conversations “must have” taken place between themselves and their parents even if they could not recall them specifically. For example, when probed about whether his parents had ever talked with him about the fact that his family looked “different” from other families, one 17-year-old male participant responded, “Actually, I don’t remember it. I’m sure we did have those talks, but I don’t remember those talks.”

In a few instances, youth recounted not only the content but also the affect associated with family conversations about adoption. Sometimes they expressed anger and resentment at the birth parents they felt had abandoned them. Other informants relayed irritation with their adoptive parents due to feeling that they simply didn’t “get it.” Said one multiracial youth about conversations with his mothers regarding race and ethnicity: “I used to get angry when we’d talk about it because I felt like they didn’t understand. I mean sometimes they can’t understand. Sometimes, there are racial boundaries.” Another youth recalled specific conversations about adoption that catalyzed longing for more knowledge about his birth mother. The following brief excerpt from an interview with a 13-year-old African American boy illustrates this experience:

- I: How did they tell you were adopted? How did that conversation go?
 P: Yeah they told me, like, they were my real moms that took care of me and stuff, but neither of them gave birth to me.
 I: And do you remember what you thought at the time?
 P: Umm, yeah. I kind of just started to wonder what my real mom, what my birth mom, looked like and what her name was and that type [of] deal.

These conversations about adoption provided youth with tool kits that incorporated language they could employ in their own disclosures. In some instances, youth recounted that it was helpful when parents gave them specific words to describe their family experiences, which at times involved correcting early narratives about the adoption experience. For example, one young woman whose sister was also adopted recounted how her parents responded to her 8-year-old sister’s exclamations that since they “bought” her; when she was older, she too wanted to “buy babies out of a catalog.” In recounting the conversation, this interviewee responded as follows:

They were like, “we didn’t pick you out of a catalog.” They handled it well. I mean, it was a whole longer process than that. I mean I think they tried to explain it to her but she didn’t care. She agreed with the idea that she was adopted. She understood from that point on.

Thus, this participant recalls her parents’ explanation to her sister as a positive model for communicating with children about difference: a straightforward and non-defensive approach that she attempted to emulate in her own disclosures.

Several informants spoke of feeling well prepared through these conversations to talk with others about their adoptive family forms. Informants described how their parents recounted their adoption stories as part of their ongoing family narratives and that as time went on, they themselves were increasingly able to recount with greater ease and confidence these stories to others. For example, an East Indian young woman noted early conversations with her family about her cultural background and adoptive status that bolstered her sense of pride as their “Indian princess.”

FAMILY CONVERSATIONS ABOUT HAVING GAY OR LESBIAN PARENTS

Informants offered detailed accounts of conversations that took place that helped them prepare for disclosure about having gay and lesbian parents. For example, interviewees recounted being introduced to books about family diversity in early childhood dealing with adoption and gay- or lesbian-parented family forms, which helped them to develop the language to understand and ultimately to talk about their families. One participant noted the following:

And I think that as I got older—when I was a teenager—they started telling me about different experiences. What it means to be a lesbian, and reemphasizing why our family is so special. . . . I think they did the same thing when I was a child. They read me these books on adoption or books on gay and lesbian couples. But it just doesn’t sink in when you are younger.

In a few instances, youth recounted wishing that they had been give more specific language to deal with difficult situations they might encounter at school or in the community. An 18-year-old describes how he felt his fathers downplayed the harassment he faced at school:

I: When people were being very demeaning of you, is that something that your dads would talk about? Did that ever come up?

P: No. I think if it did come up it would be through me. I would share with them my terrible experiences I would have at school and that would lead to things.

I: And the reaction was generally . . . how would they generally react?

P: Umm, 'Just don't mind it, if it's really bad talk to a guidance counselor,' or 'talk to somebody that could help you.'

It is important to note that not all youth felt comfortable with their parents' disclosing their family structure to others. Several informants emphasized that they wanted their parent to check with them before telling what is, in fact, a family story, rather than the parent's individual story. Finally, on this point, a few words of advice to parents from one informant: "Don't push your kids to tell someone that they (parents) are gay or lesbian. Let your kids be ready to tell if or when they are ready!"

DISCUSSION

The current study is the first to examine the perspectives of transracially adopted youth with gay or lesbian parents regarding their experiences of disclosure. Several findings emerged from this study that support prior research in this area as well as suggesting new and important directions for research and practice.

Although there was great diversity among study participants in terms of their racial and ethnic backgrounds and ages, a consistent trend emerged from youth narratives, whereby participants found greater ease in disclosure of their adoptive status as compared to telling others of their parents' sexual orientation. It may be that these youth experience decreased stigma around adoption as this family form meets with greater acceptance by society in general (Pertman, 2000). At the same time, decisions regarding disclosure about their families were made in a context of pervasive heterosexism where youth were keenly aware of pressures to conform to heteronormative standards (Goldberg, 2007). Consistent with the research of Ray and Gregory (2001), youth expressed a desire for a "normal" family most often in early adolescence where they attempted to hide their parents' sexuality. By later adolescence, few wished to change either the race of their (mostly White) parents or their parents' sexual orientation.

Findings in the current study generally support the proposition that children who are transracially adopted do indeed experience less privacy because of the inability to keep the fact of their adoption a secret (Brodzinsky & Pinderhughes, 2002; de Haymes & Simon, 2003). Further, like the cohort of adult children raised by LGB parents described by Goldberg (2007), individuals in the current study were often pressed with questions about their families. However, in contrast to the adult informants in Goldberg's study, as teenagers, the participants in this study had less control over whom and under what conditions they told others about their family form. In addition to managing disclosures about their gay or lesbian parents, the data also suggest that youth had to contend with racism as well as prejudice against their transracial family form. Therefore, youth in this study had to learn to manage

their “double visibility” of not only being transracially adopted but also having gay and lesbian parents. Study findings suggest that youth may initially be forced “out” about their adoption status in early childhood; whereas in middle school, questions begin to arise as to the whereabouts of a father (in the case of lesbian mothers) or mother (in gay father-headed families).

Participants uniformly described early adolescence as the most challenging time regarding disclosure of their gay- and lesbian-parented family structure. The middle school years in particular were recalled as a time when youth were more likely to try to “pass” with regard to their parents’ sexual orientation (Kaufman & Johnson, 2004; Ray & Gregory, 2001). Further, it was during the middle school years that youth were most likely to implement boundary management strategies such as nondisclosure (Bozett, 1987). Consistent with findings of Ray and Gregory (2001) and Welch (2008), being designated as “different” presented difficulties and anxieties about managing disclosure. Particularly strong was the fear that disclosing that their parents were gay would subject youth to teasing and harassment. Overall, young adolescents expressed guardedness about disclosure—wariness that abated somewhat during their secondary school years, at which time the evolution of friendship networks provided a source of support and understanding (Welch, 2008).

Finally, findings suggest that parental preparation for dealing with adoption and heterosexism/homophobia facilitated easier disclosure processes for youth regarding their family structure. Youth narratives reflect that parental preparation for disclosure of their adoptive status in contexts outside the family were well grounded in socialization processes at home (Grotevant, Dunbar, Kohler, & Esau, 2007). The family narrative about their adoption helped youth find the language to, at the very least, share with others the “facts” of their adoption. With regard to their parents’ sexual orientation, findings support the view that parents who are “out” to their children (as all the parents of the youth in this study were) model pride and self-acceptance of their identity, which facilitates youths’ own acceptance of their minority family structure (Boyer, 2007; Goldberg, 2007; Saffron, 1998). Further research is needed to explore how gay and lesbian adoptive parents socialize their children about racism and heterosexism and how such socialization helps youth to talk with others about their family form.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS, POLICY, AND RESEARCH

This study offers numerous practical implications for school counselors, social workers, adoption professionals, and mental health practitioners. As diverse families are increasingly represented in schools, teachers and school personnel need to be proactive in creating and maintaining safe and affirming school environments by learning the skills essential to addressing

homophobia, heterosexism (Ray & Gregory, 2001), and racism (Romney, 1995). In the post-placement phase, adoption professionals should work collaboratively with LGB organizations to develop programmatic initiatives that meet the needs of these adoptive parents and their children (Matthews & Cramer, 2006) and should seek to connect them with similar families. In order to promote healthy identity development in youth, practitioners can help parents to support their children in developing the tools and confidence to disclose about their families (e.g., by role modeling disclosure scenarios at home). In working with gay and lesbian parents and their children, counselors must be able to distinguish issues that are pertinent to the sexual orientation of the parents from other related or unrelated issues, including those common to the family's adoptive status (Boyer, 2007).

Although exploratory, the present study presents themes that suggest important implications for agency policy and practice. For example, promotion of effective practices for working with LGB foster and adoptive parents may include instituting an organizational evaluation of schools' and adoption agencies' cultural competency and sensitivity regarding LGB parent families, transracially adopted youth, and the impact of heterosexist and heteronormative environments on their development (Howard & Freundlich, 2008; Human Rights Campaign Foundation, 2007). Also, the need for stronger policies addressing prevention of heterosexist bias and peer bullying within schools is another implication (Ray & Gregory, 2001). Adoption agencies and other family service organizations can adopt policies that both identify the unique challenges that youth and their families face and implement programs that promote and build upon the resilience in this population.

Research is needed in the area of transracial gay and lesbian adoption that focuses on the diverse range of experiences among children, adolescents, and young adults adopted into this family form. Of interest, for example, is whether inracially adopted youth or youth with unpartnered gay or lesbian parents necessarily confront the same level of visibility regarding their family structure and therefore experience less pressure to come out. Does this greater control over information about their families lead to less frequent disclosure? What are the implications of this? Also of interest is how the experiences of youth of different racial and ethnic backgrounds in these families differ. For example, what does it mean to be African American and adopted by gay or lesbian parents as compared to Asian? Likewise, how do the experiences of youth with gay fathers differ from those of youth with lesbian mothers? More attention to the diversity within this group is clearly needed.

LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The current study is limited by several factors. First, the study relied on a volunteer sample of youth who self-identified as children of gay or lesbian

parents and who were willing and, to varying degrees, comfortable talking about their families. Unknown are the perspectives of those youth who for reasons of shame and stigma felt unwilling to discuss their families with others. Second, the study sample is small and contains the narratives of youth from very diverse ages and ethnic and racial backgrounds. Therefore, study results should not be viewed as representative. Third, missing from this discussion are the voices of parents. For example, we cannot assume that if youth do not remember discussions about race, ethnicity, and heterosexism within their family context that these discussions did not take place. Finally, this study takes a snapshot at one point in time and we do not know how disclosure processes will unfold in the future. For example, youth may come to a place where disclosures around race or adoption become more salient for them than those regarding the sexual orientation of their parents.

Despite these limitations, this study represents the first of its kind that explores how youth navigate disclosures around their complex family structures. It is hoped that further research will continue to push the boundaries of our understanding of gay- and lesbian-parented families, the youth who live within them, and the practices and policies that will support and sustain them.

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