

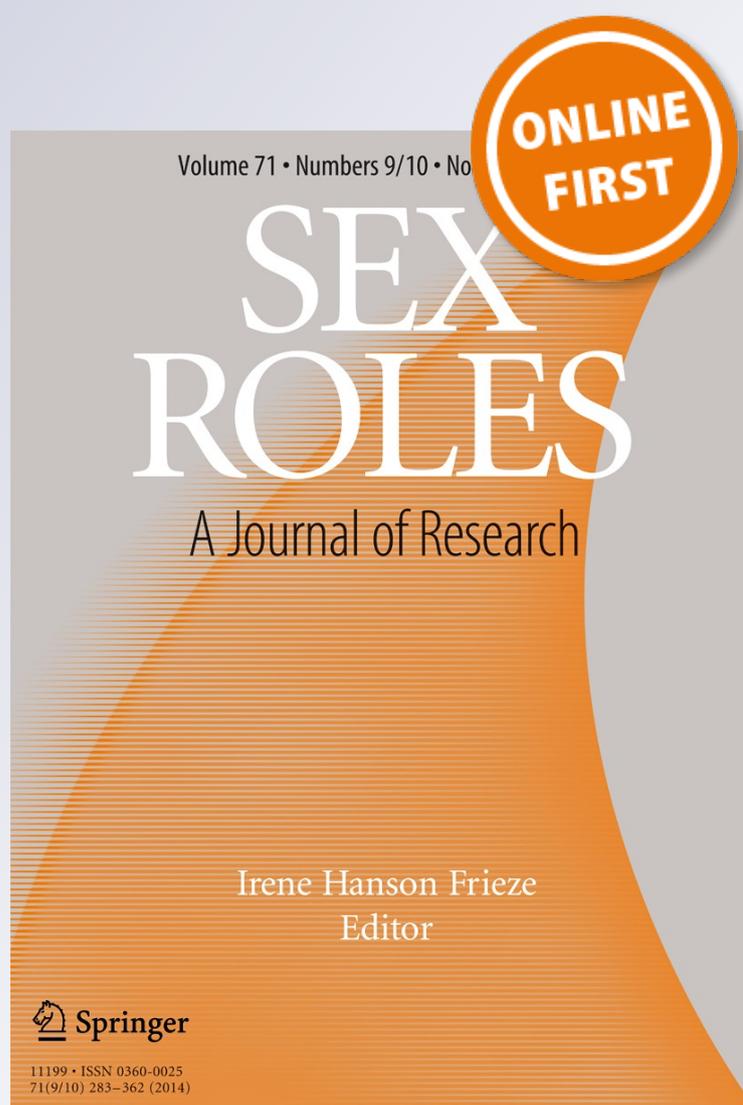
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Lesbian and Heterosexual Adoptive Mothers' Experiences of Relationship Dissolution

Abbie E. Goldberg · April M. Moyer · Kaitlin Black · Alyssa Henry

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Abstract Little research has explored same-gender couples' experiences of relationship dissolution, and no research has explored relationship dissolution in same-gender adoptive parents. Drawing from feminist and social constructionist perspectives, the current qualitative study examined the perspectives of 13 adoptive mothers (seven lesbian, six heterosexual) who had separated from their partners over the course of a longitudinal study on adoptive families. Participants were interviewed via telephone and represented a geographically diverse sample of mothers in the U.S. Becoming a parent (to a high-needs child in particular), differences in parenting style, parent problems (e.g., substance abuse), and infidelity were perceived as contributing to relationship dissolution by all types of participants. Lesbian mothers were especially likely to emphasize problems with emotional and sexual intimacy, and inequities in the division of labor, as contributors. Lesbian mothers were more likely to describe shared custody arrangements than heterosexual mothers, who were typically the primary residential parents. Participants described both practical challenges (e.g., financial insecurity) and emotional challenges (e.g., feelings of guilt, especially in light of the child's history of loss) in the wake of relationship dissolution. However, participants also identified positive changes that had occurred post-dissolution, including personal growth and improved co-parenting, with the latter being noted by lesbians in

particular. Findings have implications for professionals wishing to support diverse families during key life transitions, such as parental relationship dissolution.

Keywords Adoption · Divorce · Lesbian · Qualitative · Relationship dissolution · Separation

Introduction

The purpose of the current qualitative study is to examine U.S. adoptive mothers' (a) perceptions of the factors that contributed to their relationship dissolution; (b) post-dissolution custody arrangements; and (c) perceived challenges and benefits associated with the ending of their unions, using a sample of seven lesbian and six heterosexual adoptive mothers, all of whom were partnered at the time that they adopted a child but ended their relationships after they adopted.

As same-gender couples increasingly become parents, some studies have examined their parenting experiences and relationship quality (Goldberg 2010), but little work has explored their experiences of relationship dissolution, in contrast to a large literature on relationship dissolution among heterosexual parents (Goddard et al. 2012; Kurdek 1997; all cited studies are based on U.S. samples, unless otherwise noted). In the current study, we draw from feminist perspectives on divorce, which emphasize that dominant cultural discourses about gender and power necessarily shape the causes and consequences of divorce, such that, for example, divorce prompts different legal, economic, emotional, and community changes for women and men (Carbone 1994; Knudson-Martin and Mahoney 2009). We build upon this perspective to argue that women's relational context—whether they are partnered with men or women—also shapes their perceptions of the causes and consequences of relationship dissolution. For example, women's perceptions of power and equity may vary as

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a function of their relational context (Carbone 1994). Further, we suggest that women's relational experiences may be shaped by their family building route. Couples who adopt may be under added stress (e.g., because of the characteristics of their adopted children), which may negatively impact relationship functioning (Goldberg et al. 2013). Given that no research has examined dissolution experiences in adoptive heterosexual or same-gender couples, and same-gender couples in particular often adopt in order to become parents (Goldberg 2010), we specifically include both lesbian and heterosexual mothers in this study. In doing so, we seek to elucidate how gender, sexual orientation, relational context and family building route may intersect to shape relationship dissolution experiences (Knudson-Martin and Mahoney 2009).

Theoretical Perspective

We draw from intersectional feminist and social constructionist perspectives in this study. An intersectional feminist perspective calls attention to the ways in which experiences of family, intimate relationships, and sexuality are shaped by multiple systems of privilege and power (Chevrette 2013; Ferree 2010). Thus, of interest are areas in which gender, sexuality, familial roles, and systems of privilege naturally collide and how those experiences uniquely shape the individuals within those intersecting social arenas (McCall 2005). Lesbian adoptive parents, for example, experience their intimate and family relationships in the context of larger systems of power and oppression (Ferree 2010); they are “multiply marginalized” (Choo and Ferree 2010, p. 29). For example, despite increased recognition of same-gender unions and family-building in the U.S., heterosexual marriage and the heterosexual biological family continue to be privileged—a privileging that is instantiated and perpetuated through institutional policies and practices that “legitimize specific forms of relationship” (Jackson 2006, p. 110). In turn, lesbian adoptive parents' intimate unions and parent-child relationships may not be legally or symbolically recognized. Privileging of the heterosexual marital relationship has implications for heterosexual women as well, in that divorce is framed as inherently bad. Thus, “constructions of divorce as negative reinforce patriarchal marital conventions, with divorce constituting a potential threat to the ideal of continuing marital relationships where there is the possibility of resisting norms” (Sandfield 2006, p. 155). In line with other feminist scholars (e.g., Hung 2012), we seek to move beyond this model to explore the possibility of positive consequences of divorce.

A feminist perspective also challenges traditional assumptions about dyadic relationships in general (Malone and Cleary 2002). Most models of intimate unions assume “notions of sexual difference and gender complementarity,” which, as feminist scholars point out, precludes recognition

of any identity or behavior that violates “conventional” gender roles (Chevrette 2013, p. 177). Including the voices of same-gender couples on research on relationship processes (e.g., relationship dissolution) has the capacity to unearth new relational patterns and meanings, as same-gender relationships are not predicated upon the assumption of sexual difference. For example, in the U.S., heterosexual couples may experience women's employment differently than female same-gender couples, whereby heterosexual husbands view their wives' employment as a challenge to traditional gender roles, whereas women's employment status does not represent a gender threat or source of conflict in female same-gender couples—at least not in the same way (Goldberg 2013; Kalmijn and Poortman 2006). Indeed, given their differing relational contexts (which may include different meanings and enactment of power, labor, and equity), lesbian and heterosexual women may describe different emotional and relational dynamics as contributing to relationship dissolution. In essence, “her and her ‘divorce’” (including its precursors and consequences) may look different than “his and her divorce”; Carbone 1994; Kalmijn and Poortman 2006, p. 201).

Some feminist scholars (e.g., Choo and Ferree 2010) have emphasized the importance of not simply focusing on or privileging gender and sexuality as the central components of identity. An intersectional feminist lens emphasizes the intersections, or crossings, of these identities with other social locations (e.g., adoptive status, social class; Martin 1994). Women's perspectives on the causes of their divorce may reflect not only their gender and sexual orientation, but also their status as *adoptive* mothers (e.g., heterosexual mothers might be particularly likely to describe distress over inequities in parenting special needs children as a contributor to divorce).

Social constructionism, like feminist perspectives, emphasizes the need to understand individuals' perspectives of their experiences with attention to the larger contexts that shape these constructions (Schwandt 2000). Individuals' ideas about marriage and divorce are shaped by the dyadic context, and the broader social, political, and cultural context (Gergen and Gergen 2003). For example, gender inequality (e.g., inequality between women and men in the context of marriage) is associated with a greater likelihood of divorce in the U.S.; thus, even though marriage is prized in the U.S., the rise of feminist and individualist ideals has created a context where divorce is viewed as understandable, and even necessary, in some circumstances (Yodanis 2005).

Further, relationship dissolution is “created” or constructed whenever it is spoken of, and thus “cannot be understood solely as a legal procedure or personal experience. . . its meaning is negotiated through talk” (Sandfield 2006, p. 159). A social constructionist lens recognizes that parents whose relationships have dissolved may be motivated to justify or reconstruct the ending of such unions, or their role in

the dissolution, in part because they are aware of the social norm that divorce is bad for children and that their audience might be judging them (Walzer and Oles 2003). As Hopper (1993) notes, people are “sense-making, symbol-using creatures” (p. 811), and ending a relationship can be challenging to make sense of. (Re)constructing meaningful and clarifying stories may allow individuals to gain a sense of control over a complex and possibly confusing or traumatic life event (Koenig Kellas and Manusov 2003). Of interest in this study is how participants construct narratives to explain the dissolution of their unions and its aftermath, as well as how social locations (e.g., gender, sexuality, adoptive status) shape their explanations.

Research on Same-Gender Parents' Relationship Dissolution

The limited research on lesbian parent couples' relationship quality has found that positive well-being (Goldberg et al. 2010), greater social support (Goldberg and Sayer 2006), and a more positive sexual identity (Tomello et al. 2013) are related to greater relationship functioning. Qualitative work indicates that jealousy over one's partner's closeness to the child and uncertainty over one's parental role may contribute to relationship tension (Goldberg et al. 2013). The division and meaning of parenting roles may be complex for same-gender couples, in that they are exposed to scripts for heteronormative gendered roles in society but may face different expectations within the LGBQ community (i.e., homonorms; Kurdek 2005), such as the expectation that same-gender couples divide unpaid and paid work equally (Goldberg 2013). Failure to live up to this egalitarian ethic, because of within-couple factors (e.g., differences in work hours), child preferences (e.g., greater attachment to one parent), and parental preferences (e.g., preference for childrearing over paid work) can create friction (Goldberg et al. 2013).

Despite the timeliness of the topic (Goldberg and Allen 2013), few studies have examined relationship processes in same-gender parents who dissolve their unions. In a dissertation, Turteltaub (2002) interviewed ten lesbian mothers (five former couples) and found that women emphasized disagreements about parenting and money as contributors to their breakup. Women also noted that weak communication was often exacerbated by the challenges of parenting. These couples were not legally married and did not involve the legal system in their relationship dissolution.

Gartrell and colleagues (2005, 2006) examined relationship dissolution among lesbian mothers in the context of the National Lesbian Family Study (NLFS), a longitudinal study of 73 planned lesbian-mother families formed via donor insemination. This study found that by the time the children were 10 years old, 30 couples (41 % of couples) had dissolved their unions. Although the authors did not explore women's explanations for their separation in depth, they reported that women

cited the following reasons for ending their relationships: growing apart, infrequent sexual intimacy, incompatibility, infidelity, and different parenting styles (Gartrell et al. 2006).

Given the lack of research on relationship dissolution among same-gender parents, it is worth considering the findings of studies on same-gender non-parent couples (Kurdek 1991, 1992). Using data from six gay and seven lesbian couples who had separated over the course of a longitudinal study, Kurdek (1991) found that the top two participant-named reasons for ending the union were communication issues (73 %) and partner's problems (50 %; e.g., drugs). Sexual incompatibility and emotional cruelty were also identified as contributors to the breakup. Kurdek found that participants described personal growth, loneliness, and relief from conflict as dominant emotional reactions to the breakup. Managing financial stress, and managing the relationship with the ex-partner, were named as the dominant problems experienced during the post-separation period.

These findings are remarkably similar to studies of heterosexual couples' relationship dissolution, which have highlighted poor communication (Rogge and Bradbury 1999), growing apart (Hawkins et al. 2012), financial disagreements (Dew et al. 2012), sexual incompatibility (Terling-Watt 2001), infidelity (Scott et al. 2013), domestic abuse (Scott et al. 2013), substance abuse (Collins et al. 2007), and children with difficult characteristics (Wymbs et al. 2008) as contributors of divorce. For example, Scott et al. (2013) studied 52 divorced heterosexual individuals in an effort to understand perceived reasons for divorce, including identification of the “final straw.” The most commonly reported major contributors to divorce were lack of commitment, infidelity, and conflict/arguing. The most common “final straw” reasons were infidelity, domestic violence, and substance abuse. More participants blamed their partners than blamed themselves for the divorce.

Research on Post-Dissolution Contact and Custody Arrangements in Same-Gender Couples

Just as little research has examined same-gender parents' relationship dissolution, little work has explored its aftermath. Such research is important in that while heterosexual couples often complete legal divorces to sever their unions, most same-gender couples do not have access to civil marriage, and thus their relationship dissolutions are not legally recognized. The absence of legal recognition may create unique challenges, or unanticipated advantages, for families. Lacking legal guidance, parents in same-gender couples must independently manage the details of their separation, and agree upon the obligations of each partner to each other and their children—although, in cases where only one has a legal relationship to the child, custody arrangements are often influenced by legal parentage (Goldberg and Allen 2013). This is

illustrated in Gartrell et al.'s study of lesbian-parent families, which found that of the 30 couples that had dissolved their unions, 13 shared custody (Gartrell et al. 2005, 2006). In 15 of the 17 remaining couples, the biological mother retained sole or primary custody. Custody was more likely to be shared if the non-biological mother had a second-parent adoption, making her a legal parent.

Research with divorced heterosexual parents points to factors besides legal parentage that may determine custody arrangements. Parent emotional stability (Jamison et al. 2014), a harmonious relationship at the time of the divorce (Toews and McKenry 2001), higher income (Donnelly and Finkelhor 1993), and geographic proximity between ex-partners (in an Australian study) (Smyth 2005) increase the chances of shared custody and fairly equal contact with both parents. A qualitative study of 39 divorced heterosexual parents in New Zealand who settled their custody arrangements out of court found that prioritization of children's needs, and keeping relationship issues separate from ongoing co-parenting, helped parents to negotiate satisfying custody arrangements in which children saw both parents at least weekly (Robertson et al. 2009). Although their sample was small and not necessarily generalizable to the New Zealand (or U.S.) population, Robertson and colleagues' study elucidates ways in which some divorced parents navigate custody arrangements outside of court. Positive shared custody arrangements are also enhanced when both parents desire the arrangement, finances are not a source of strain, the father was an involved co-parent prior to the divorce, and both parents are able to be flexible in their schedules (Jamison et al. 2014; Markham and Coleman 2012).

No research has examined how members of same-gender couples navigate custody and co-parenting issues post-relationship dissolution, or the challenges they encounter in this process. Of note is that the pursuit of mediation as opposed to litigation (Emery et al. 2001) has been linked to more harmonious co-parenting among heterosexual couples after divorce. Perhaps the lack of legal recognition for same-gender parents' unions may lead them to resolve custody arrangements out of court, which might have positive consequences for post-split relationships. Conversely, efforts to decide children's living arrangements out of court may be very stressful, and angry ex-partners may wield various sources of power (i.e., legal, if only one partner adopted the child; or financial) in an effort to gain primary custody.

Adoption as an Additional Stressor to Relationship Quality

Becoming a parent can be stressful to couples' relationships (Lawrence et al. 2007). The addition of a child into the parental dyad inevitably impacts upon couples' intimacy and communication (Nystrom and Ohrling 2004). Becoming a parent via adoption may introduce additional challenges (e.g., difficult child characteristics) that can impact the

couple's relationship (Goldberg et al. 2013). Couples who adopt children who are older, have an abuse history, or have attachment problems are at greater risk for parenting dissatisfaction and disruption of the adoptive placement (Howard and Berzin 2011; Timm et al. 2011). Such strains can place stress on the couple's relationship, leading to weak communication (Goldberg et al. 2013). A study of married heterosexual women who adopted via child welfare found that dealing with disappointment regarding their children (who were often older and/or had behavioral issues) or their roles as parents, was described as especially wearing on their marriages (Timm et al. 2011).

Research Questions

Drawing from our feminist, social constructionist theoretical framework, and the relevant literature, we posed the following research questions, to be examined via qualitative analysis:

1. How do lesbian and heterosexual adoptive mothers explain the dissolution of their unions? That is, what factors do they invoke as contributing to the break up, and to what extent do themes appear to reflect the role of social locations and social context (e.g., gender, sexual orientation, adoptive parent status?)
2. What types of custody arrangements do lesbian and heterosexual adoptive mothers describe? To what extent do these arrangements, and women's perspectives on them, appear to reflect the role of gender, sexual orientation, and legal status (i.e., whether partners were married and whether they had both adopted their children)?
3. What changes, both positive and negative, do women describe as a result of ending their unions? That is, how have their lives changed as a consequence of ending their intimate relationships, and to what extent do these changes appear to reflect the role of gender, sexual orientation, and adoptive parent status?

Method

Recruitment and Procedures

Inclusion criteria for the original study were: (a) couples must be adopting their first child; and (b) both partners must be becoming parents for the first time. We recruited participants during the pre-adoptive period by asking adoption agencies throughout the U.S. to provide study information to clients who had not yet adopted. We utilized U.S. census data to identify states with a high percentage of same-gender couples (Gates and Ost 2004), and we made an effort to contact

agencies in those states. Over 30 agencies provided information to their clients, and interested clients were asked to contact the principal investigator for details regarding participation. Both heterosexual and same-gender couples were targeted through these agencies to facilitate similarity on geographical location and income. Because some same-gender couples may not be “out” to agencies, several LGBTQ organizations also assisted with recruitment.

Participants in this study completed individual telephone interviews (approximately 1–1.5 h) during the pre-adoptive stage, 3 months after they were placed with a child, 2 years post-placement, and 6 years post-placement. Regular contact with the participants enabled us to identify when a couple had split up. We then included a series of additional questions about the relationship dissolution and its aftermath at the next scheduled interview. Thus, the questions we draw from were asked at different time points, depending on when the participants' relationships ended. Some participants separated from their partners as early as one year post-placement, whereas others separated closer to 6 years post-placement (see Table 1).

Description of the Sample

The sample of 13 adoptive mothers (seven lesbian, six heterosexual) was selected from a larger, longitudinal study of the transition to adoptive parenthood. Participants were selected from the larger sample ($N=150$ couples) because they had ended their unions between the time that they were placed with their child and the 6 year post-placement assessment point. A total of seven of 47 lesbian couples (15 %), one of 41 gay male couples (2.5 %), and six of 62 heterosexual couples (11 %) dissolved their unions. That is, 9 % of the 150 couples who participated in the study up through their 6 year post-placement follow-up ended their unions.

We selected one participant from each couple to participate because we only had data from both partners in five of the seven lesbian couples and three of the six heterosexual couples. We made this decision upon realizing that analyzing the data at both the couple level (when both partners' data were available) and the individual level (when they were not) rendered a confusing and incomplete set of findings and interpretations. Thus, to arrive at a cleaner sample, we selected partners based on gender (i.e., all heterosexual women), and, within lesbian couples, we selected the partner whose narrative was richer and more nuanced. More specifically, in order to determine which partner to include from each lesbian couple, the authors collaboratively assessed the length and depth of detail given by each participant, and thoroughly discussed each transcript. This process ensured that our sample included a diverse range of relationship dissolution experiences.

Regarding legal recognition of their intimate unions, all of the heterosexual couples who dissolved their unions had been legally married, whereas only one of the same-gender couples

had been married (marriage equality was not yet a reality in most of the same-gender couples' states of residence at the time that they participated in the study, 2005–2010). The presence of a legally recognized union was associated with the use of legal safeguards in facilitating the divorce. That is, women in all but one of the heterosexual couples described using lawyers to manage their divorce, whereas women in all but two of the lesbian couples described using lawyers to facilitate their relationship dissolution—one of which was the couple that had been legally married.

Participants were 36.00 years old, on average (range: 23–50; $SD=8.07$). They had been in their relationships for an average of 8.58 years when they became parents (range: 2.00–25.00; $SD=6.02$), and 12.12 years when they dissolved their unions (range: 4.50–27.00; $SD=6.18$). All 13 women were White. Their mean annual salary was \$38,877 ($Mdn=\$20,000$; range \$0–\$105,000; $SD=\$35,273$); their mean family income was \$107,654 ($Mdn=\$100,000$; range \$70,000–\$156,000; $SD=\$31,301$). One woman had a high school diploma, two had attended some college, one had an associate's degree, four had a bachelor's degree, and five had a master's degree.

Demographic data on the children in the sample, by family type, appear in Table 1. Seven couples were placed with a girl, three with a boy, and three with a boy-girl sibling set. Children's average age at placement was 40.18 months ($Mdn=24$ months; range: 0–12 years; $SD=51.43$ months). Nine couples (six lesbian, three heterosexual) adopted infants or toddlers, and four couples (one lesbian, three heterosexual) adopted school-age children (age 4–12). The children were on average 6.91 years at the time of relationship dissolution (range: 1–16 years; $SD=4.09$). In ten cases the adopted children were of color; in three cases they were White. Five couples (38 %) adopted privately in the U.S., four (31 %) adopted via child welfare, and four (31 %) adopted from abroad.

The participants in this subsample (i.e., those whose relationships dissolved) were, in general, very similar to the larger sample from which they were drawn. They were approximately the same age, were in their relationships for approximately the same length of time, and were similar in racial composition as the larger sample. Their children were also similar in terms of age and racial composition as the children in the larger sample. However, the participants in this subsample had lower family incomes, on average, compared to the larger sample ($M=\$107,654$, versus $M=\$144,900$). Additionally, a higher proportion of the subsample had adopted via child welfare (31 % versus 14 %) and internationally (31 % versus 21 %), compared to the larger sample.

Open-Ended Interview Questions

Participant interviews were conducted by the principal investigator and trained graduate student research assistants.

Table 1 Relationship dissolution timing and children's demographics

	Lesbian women (<i>n</i> =7)	Heterosexual women (<i>n</i> =6)
Timing of dissolution (years post-adoption)		
1–2 years	–	2
2–3 years	1	2
3–4 years	1	–
4–5 years	1	1
5–6 years	1	1
6–7 years	3	–
Children's demographics		
Age at adoption		
Infant/Toddler (0–4)	6	3
School-aged (4–12)	1	3
Gender		
Boy	3	1
Girl	2	4
Boy/Girl sibling set	2	1
Race		
White	1	2
Of color	6	4
Adoption type		
Domestic, private	4	2
Domestic, public	2	1
International	1	3

Interviews were transcribed verbatim; during this process, identifying details were removed and pseudonyms were assigned. Because the sample size is small and the study topic is sensitive, we were mindful to alter or remove details such as geographic location, occupations, and quotes that could identify participants. Data for the study are derived from open-ended questions designed to probe perceptions and experiences related to the dissolution of their relationships: (a) What factors do you believe led to the breakup with your partner? (b) When did things start to “go bad” in the relationship? (c) How are you feeling about things now? (d) What has been positive about the split, for you personally? How has your life changed for the better? (e) What has been hard about the split, for you personally? (f) What struggles have you encountered related to the split with your partner? (g) What new issues have come up between you and your partner, post-split? (h) What kind of co-parenting/custody arrangement do you have? (i) How have the custody negotiations gone? (j) Have you sought therapy to deal with the split? (k) Is there anything else you'd like to add about your previous relationship?

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using a thematic analysis (Bogdan and Biklen 2003) of the data by focusing on

participants' descriptions of their experiences with regard to their relationship dissolution. We approached our analysis using social constructionist and feminist lenses (Ferree 2010; Schwandt 2000). We attended to how participants constructed narratives about their intimate relationships as well as the reasons for the breakup of these relationships.

In line with our feminist perspective, attention was paid to the possible role of broader power structures in shaping narratives of relationship dissolution (Ferree 2010). We attend to how the legal system, and potential legal or symbolic inequities between partners, might shape custody arrangements and post-dissolution relationships. We also attend to the role of perceived imbalances of power within couples in contributing to union dissolution. Further, we focus on possible intersections of gender, sexuality, income, and other social locations in our analysis.

To develop themes, we used a process of analytic triangulation, by which each of the four authors independently coded the data. This process of analytic triangulation ensures that multiple interpretations are considered, thus enhancing the credibility of the analysis (Patton 2002). The four coders constitute a diverse group of individuals (e.g., with regard to sexual orientation and parenting statuses), which ensured that multiple perspectives were represented. We discussed our social positioning

and the possible influence of our biases throughout the coding process (Gergen and Gergen 2003). We engaged in an iterative process of coding that involved a continual back and forth between the data and our emerging analysis. Once we had formed clearly articulated codes, we applied focused coding, using the most significant codes to sort the data. These focused codes, which can be understood as being more conceptual and selective (Charmaz 2006), became the basis for what we refer to as the “themes” developed in our analysis. At this stage, we examined whether any themes were more or less salient for lesbian versus heterosexual adoptive mothers.

We engaged in check coding (Miles and Huberman 1994) throughout the analysis process to help us clarify our categories and definitions and to provide a reliability check. That is, we independently coded the data and examined our level of consistency in, or agreement upon, codes. In calculating intercoder agreement, we examined our coding of all of the available data. Early on, intercoder agreement ranged from 80 to 85 % (number of agreements/number of agreements - disagreements). We discussed coding disagreements at weekly meetings and used these discussions to refine our scheme and to clarify our coding categories. Intercoder agreement using our final scheme ranged from 90 to 100 %, indicating good reliability of our inductive scheme. Some codes, such as those that addressed factual information (e.g., living arrangements) yielded higher agreement than others, such as those that dealt with emotional dynamics (e.g., feelings of failure). The final scheme was established once we had verified agreement among all the independently coded data (Table 2). Our final coding scheme contained two major overarching codes: (a) parents' perceptions of the factors that contributed to relationship dissolution, and (b) the perceived aftermath of relationship dissolution, including children's living arrangements, and positive and negative consequences of the breakup. Thus, the storyline that emerged focused on participants' perceptions of the precursors to and reverberations of their relationship dissolution.

Results

Perceived Contributors to Relationship Dissolution

Participants named several main contributors to the ending of their relationships (Table 1). Challenges related to intimacy, parenting, and parent problems featured prominently in their explanations for the dissolution of their relationships. The themes that emerged highlighted the role of women's relational (i.e., same-gender versus heterosexual) and adoptive contexts.

Intimacy

Difficulties with *emotional intimacy* were described by two of seven lesbian mothers, who emphasized a lack of attention and care from their partners as a major contributor to their breakup. They felt that the breakdown of their relationship was largely a function of their partners' inability or unwillingness to prioritize and nurture their relationship, which caused their own feelings of neglect and abandonment. Laura shared, “I didn't ask much from her and I loved her unconditionally. She cheated on me, was neglectful to me, and made me feel totally unappreciated.” Laura felt herself pulling away: “It gradually continued to fall apart and I just didn't feel like trying.” Thus, consistent with prior work, these women tended to focus on their partners' role in the breakup, rather than their own (Walzer and Oles 2003).

An additional two lesbian women emphasized problems with *physical intimacy*, which they attributed to sexual incompatibility. As Melanie explained: “We experienced a lack of sexual connection stemming from differences in sexual identity and levels of desire. Our relational and sexual needs were not being met by each other.” Both women's narratives suggested that they perceived their partners as being more sexually dissatisfied in the relationship, and less willing to work on repairing sexual intimacy, than they were. Violet asserted, “If both my partner and I had been willing to continue to work on renewing intimacy, I would have wanted to stay in the relationship.” Thus, both Melanie and Violet recognized and were upset by sexual disconnection, which challenges heteronormative constructions of sexual intimacy in relationships as being driven by male desires and sexuality (Malone and Cleary 2002) and dominant stereotypes of lesbian couples as low in sexual desire (Blumstein and Schwartz 1983). However, they seemed to perceive different levels of investment within their unions with regard to rebuilding a sexual connection, which was constructed as a contributor to relationship dissolution (Sandfield 2006).

Three women (two lesbian, one heterosexual) identified *sexual infidelity* as a primary contributor to their relationship dissolution. All of them, however, also identified other issues—such as emotional withdrawal and parenting issues—as contributors to the deterioration of their relationship. In turn, they recognized infidelity as a “symptom” or by-product of other issues in the relationship. Laura, a lesbian, explained, “[Several] years after our son was born, [ex-partner] had an affair. She was not ready to start a family and be committed solely to one person.” Thus, infidelity was constructed as not only a contributor to, but also a consequence of, relationship deterioration (Previti and Amato 2004). In all three cases, these women's ex-partners were the ones

Table 2 Themes related to relationship dissolution

Theme	Definition of coding category	Example quote	Lesbian mothers (n=7) n (%)	Hetero mothers (n=6) n (%)
Contributors to dissolution				
Intimacy				
Emotional intimacy problems	Lack of attention, care, and emotional connection	“I just didn’t feel the connection. Her schedule and her job completely took priority over everything else.”	2 (29 %)	0
Physical intimacy problems	Lack of physical connection/sex	“Our relationship struggled a lot sexually. . .we had difficulty connecting intimately.”	2 (29 %)	0
Infidelity	One partner had an affair	“I was shocked when he told me that he no longer loved me. I later found out . . .that he was seeing another woman.”	2 (29 %)	1 (17 %)
Parenting				
Becoming a parent	Transition to parenthood caused communication problems and conflict	“[When] we brought [son] home, it got so difficult to balance [our relationship and parenting]. We both tried, but our communication completely broke down.”	3 (43 %)	3 (50 %)
Child’s special needs	Child’s special needs caused relationship strain	“Our daughter was a high-needs infant and toddler, and as her sensory and regulatory challenges emerged, we lived in a state of crisis.”	3 (43 %)	1 (17 %)
Differences in parenting style	Partners disagreed on how to parent their child	“I felt like [child] should be the focus, that he should get our undivided attention. And that was one of my big frustrations and something we very much disagreed on.”	3 (43 %)	3 (50 %)
Unequal division of labor	One partner carried more childcare responsibility than the other	“When we were together, it was 9 out of 10 times that I would pick him up and drop him off. And it was 9 out of 10 times that I’d get up in the morning and put him down at night.”	2 (29 %)	0
Parent problems	Substance abuse, anger, and/or mental illness	“[Ex] has a lot of real anger management issues. . .he kind of stuffs things and then just kind of explodes as they bother him.”	2 (29 %)	4 (67 %)
Living arrangements				
Shared	Shared custody arrangement; minimal stress re: scheduling	“We share custody. The negotiations have been friendly. We both are very invested in what’s best for our child.”	5 (71 %)	1 (17 %)
Primary/Secondary	Primary/secondary custody arrangement; moderate stress re: scheduling	“Having to develop a calendar of which parent will see her on which weekend date [is hard]. [Ex’s] lack of communication makes scheduling impossible.”	2 (29 %)	5 (83 %)
Negative changes, post-diss.				
Financial	Reduced income, creating stress	“I was the major breadwinner but having to pay the mortgage on my own was extremely difficult. I now have refinanced in my name.”	2 (29 %)	5 (83 %)
Emotional	Feelings of failure and guilt	“Accepting that I am now a single mom has been the hardest part. . .I’m so sorry about that.”	2 (29 %)	4 (67 %)
Difficulty with co-parenting	Concerns about child’s well-being and frustration re: partner’s lack of involvement	“I find myself feeling worried about ways that my ex-partner is parenting”; “[Ex] expects me to take her to all appointments; [ex] has not assisted with any of this.”	3 (43 %)	5 (83 %)

Table 2 (continued)

Theme	Definition of coding category	Example quote	Lesbian mothers (n=7) n (%)	Hetero mothers (n=6) n (%)
Positive changes, post-diss.				
Personal freedom/ growth	Greater independence and personal agency	"I took the change as an opportunity to take care of me, instead of feeling responsible for [ex]. I reconnected with old friends...and started yoga."	4 (57 %)	4 (67 %)
Improved co-parenting	More equal co-parenting with ex-partner	"[Ex] was always the buddy. . .[Now] things are much more equal."	3 (43 %)	1 (17 %)

who had allegedly committed the infidelity. These women thereby described a sense of personal loss and betrayal, as well as anger at their former partners for "destroying" their children's sense of security, which was perceived as already precarious inasmuch as they had already experienced the loss of their biological parents. Shoshanna, a lesbian, stated, "I struggle to forgive my ex for causing this separation. We made a promise to the kids and that has been broken."

Parenting

For some participants, parenting issues were perceived as contributing to their relationship breakdown. Six women (three lesbian, three heterosexual) emphasized that *becoming a parent* had contributed to declines in emotional intimacy and increased conflict (Nystrom and Ohrling 2004). Violet, a lesbian, observed: "Becoming parents was part of it. Before parenthood, we never fought. . .but almost immediately after adopting our daughter, we began squabbling."

Notably, four of these six individuals identified their children's *special needs* (emotional, behavioral, and developmental) as exacerbating the stresses of new parenthood, and causing strain to their relationship (Timm et al. 2011). These parents described their lives as becoming "consumed" by the stresses of parenting high-needs children, leaving them with little time or emotion for anything or anyone else. Managing their children's difficulties was perceived as causing or escalating relational tensions: "The kids. . .and their difficulties. . .put an enormous strain on us, and I believe changed the way we interacted." Sharon, a heterosexual woman, described how adopting a teen girl who regularly physically attacked her created tension in the home, in that these interactions forced her husband to "break things up," a responsibility that he resented. She concluded that her daughter's violent behaviors, which she felt insufficiently prepared for, "led to the disintegration of the marriage." These women's adoptive status, then, significantly impacted their transition to parenthood, such that

they were exposed to unique and unexpected stressors that ultimately strained their relationships (Timm et al. 2011).

In some cases, it was not simply becoming parents, but emergent *differences in parenting style or approach* that were identified as contributing to relationship breakdown. Fundamental differences in parenting style were named by six women (three lesbian, three heterosexual). Trina, a lesbian, noted, "Our views on parenting became increasingly different. . .There was no middle ground with her. Her way or undermine me." Shelly, a lesbian, described "extremely opposite parenting styles" between herself and her ex-partner, who, in her eyes, consistently failed to adequately attend to their child: "[She'd want] a few minutes to just sit in bed and watch TV, but he's always there and he should be the priority."

Three lesbian women felt that parenthood had introduced or exacerbated *inequities in the division of labor*, which caused relationship tension. These women were upset by their partners' lack of involvement in the day-to-day tasks of parenting. Brandy explained, "Prior to our split, [ex-partner] deferred 95 % of the parenting and relationship with [child] to me." Such inequity, over time, led to women feeling "so frustrated, to the point that I'd rather just be a single parent than be parenting with someone I resent." Research on heterosexual couples points to the transition to parenthood as a key life event that restructures the couple's roles and responsibilities (Lawrence et al. 2007). However, same-gender couples may be more influenced by an ethic of egalitarianism whereby power and responsibility are socially expected to be relatively equal within the relationship (inasmuch as both partners are the same gender), leading to dissatisfaction when they are not (Goldberg 2013). For these women, the reality that they were in charge of the majority of child care represented a key inequity in the relationship—one that was unexpected and undesirable, and one that they ultimately came to view as unworkable. As Brandy went on to say, "I genuinely desire a true partnership. It doesn't have to be exactly 50/50, but 90/10 didn't work."

Parent Problems

Some participants identified their own or their partner's psychological or behavioral problems as contributors to relationship dissolution. Specifically, three women (one lesbian, two heterosexual) described their partner's alcohol/drug use as a contributor to relationship breakdown. In addition, two heterosexual women described their husbands' difficulties with anger management as a contributor to the breakup. In one of these two cases, such problems ultimately spiraled into physical violence. In only one case did a participant identify her own problems as a factor in the breakup. Heather, a lesbian, described how her own mental illness had escalated conflict in her relationship; however, she also pointed to her partner's lack of support as a contributor to relationship breakdown, noting that her partner did not understand that the "mental stuff is just the same as a physical illness. It was always my fault, my weakness." Heather was rare in constructing a narrative in which both partners' roles in the breakup were acknowledged; indeed, narratives of blame, rather than joint responsibility, may be more desirable in that they allow the individual to assume the less stigmatizing role as victim rather than cause of union dissolution (Walzer and Oles 2003).

The Aftermath of Relationship Dissolution

Participants described their post-dissolution living arrangements, and their feelings and perceptions regarding these arrangements. They also spoke more broadly to perceived negative and positive changes associated with the breakup. Their responses elucidated how social location and social contexts (e.g., relational and legal contexts) shaped their post-dissolution experience.

Living Arrangements

Five lesbian women and one heterosexual woman described their child as spending equal time with both parents, such that they alternated homes and parents every few days or every week. Notably, participants whose children spent a similar amount of time in both households unanimously described the arrangement as working well. Violet, a lesbian, noted, "We share custody and parenting 50/50. We are both very invested in what is best for our child." Shoshanna, a lesbian, said, "We have never had trouble figuring out how best to accommodate [child's] needs with a consistent, balanced schedule." Some difficulties, though, were named regarding the scheduling of holidays, such that figuring out who would have the child on certain major holidays (e.g., Thanksgiving) was a source of stress or disagreement.

In contrast, five heterosexual women and two lesbian woman described the child as remaining with one parent most

of the time (i.e., the mother, in all five heterosexual couples), and seeing the other parent less frequently: namely, once per week in four cases, once every two weeks in two cases, and once per month in one case. More difficulties and frustrations related to scheduling were mentioned by those who described a primary/secondary parent arrangement than those who shared custody equally. Melanie, a lesbian, who had her child with her "six nights out of seven," shared, "The most challenging for me has been her inability to commit to a schedule. It makes it very hard to plan." Sharon, a heterosexual woman, asserted, "He is not willing to do every other weekend or commit to certain times."

Some participants who did not share custody equally attempted to explain their children's living arrangements. The two lesbians who did not share custody—Melanie and Shelly—stated that differences in financial standing within the couple played a role in dictating decision-making about physical custody, such that the more financially stable partner assumed the position of primary residential parent. Melanie, for example, noted that they had "worked things out informally" but believed that if they had gone to court, things would have "gone the same way." Thus, financial resources represented a form of power that had the capacity to shape even informal negotiations regarding living arrangements, highlighting key ways in which sexual orientation, social class, and the broader legal context may intersect to shape relational dynamics of power and control (Martin 1994). In addition to citing financial differences, Shelly also named differences in legal status within the couple as a source of power that influenced the custody arrangement. Shelly explained that as the legal parent, it "made sense" for her to be the primary residential parent. She also noted her ex-partner's lack of parental involvement when they were together as a reason for the arrangement. Unknown is whether her ex-partner's lack of legal parental recognition contributed to her low involvement, whereby her ability to claim a parental identity was restricted (Goldberg et al. 2013).

The heterosexual women in primary/secondary residential arrangements provided very different explanations for the arrangement. Three cited geographic distance between themselves and their ex-husbands as the main reason for why the mother had primary custody. In two of these cases, the mother and child moved out of state; in one case, the father moved away. One woman cited her ex-husband's violence as the reason for her having primary custody.

Negative Changes and Challenges

Participants faced various changes and challenges in the wake of their separation. Namely, they identified practical,

emotional, and co-parenting-related challenges as negative sequelae of their relationship dissolution.

Financial Challenges Seven women (five heterosexual, two lesbian) emphasized financial challenges as a major negative aspect associated with the split. Two lesbians and two heterosexual women explicitly noted that they made less money than their partners; thus, it had been more of a challenge to “get by” since the split. Shoshanna, a lesbian, explained, “My partner’s income definitely subsidized my measly earnings over the past 12 years. With the increasing expense of two households, I am in a precarious position: existing on student loans, a part-time job, and food stamps. It’s scary.” Thus, regardless of sexual orientation, women who earned less than their partners were more likely to be financially reliant on them post-split, highlighting how financial inequities within the relationship can lead to continued power imbalances post-dissolution, across varying relational contexts (van Schalkwyk 2005).

Four of the five heterosexual women noted major changes that they had undertaken in order to improve their financial situation, including refinancing their home, launching a new business, returning to work after a long period of non-employment, and increasing their hours from part-time to full-time. This finding echoes prior work showing that heterosexual women often seek out new or additional job opportunities in an effort to approximate financial solvency post-divorce (Sandfield 2006). Heterosexual women often experience a shift in how they perceive their own income post-divorce, from viewing it as a source of luxury items to relying upon it as their primary source of income (Sandfield 2006). That lesbian women did not discuss such financial or job related changes is interesting, but does not appear to be related to greater economic or professional parity between partners prior to the dissolution: A similar number of lesbian and heterosexual women were staying home or working part-time pre-dissolution. It may, however, reflect differences in how lesbian and heterosexual former partners negotiated finances, post-dissolution, whereby lesbian former partners were forced to negotiate their financial roles and obligations outside of the purview of the legal system, for better or for worse (Shapiro 2013).

Emotional Challenges: Feelings of Failure The emotional sequelae of the separation or divorce was also challenging for participants, whereby six women (two lesbian, four heterosexual) described feelings of failure, guilt, and disappointment related to the ending of their union, such that they felt like a “failed” parent, worried about “messing things up for [child],” and struggled with “letting go of [their] vision for how things were ‘supposed’ to be.” Some of these women voiced concern as to how their children’s history (e.g., multiple transitions; attachment problems) might shape their adjustment to their relationship dissolution. Violet, a lesbian,

explained her sensitivity to her daughter’s loss in the context of her adoptive status: “The hardest part is the feeling that we’re fucking things up for our kid. She lost her family once before, and I so don’t want her to lose it again. We’re working really hard to keep our sense of family intact, but inevitably there’s still loss for her and this pierces me.”

Three of the four heterosexual women not only described a sense of failure and disillusionment about the end of their marriage but also shame or anxiety about their newly single status. For example, Sharon described sadness around her “loss of identity as a couple” and consequent “concern that I would have difficulty meeting a good man at my age. . .and whether another man would be willing to be involved with someone with a daughter with acting-out behaviors.” Such narratives represent examples of how “pro-marital conventionality and anti-divorce rhetoric” may shape heterosexual women’s accounts of their relationship dissolution (Sandfield 2006, p. 155). More so than sexual minorities or heterosexual men, heterosexual women are often exposed to family and friends who reinforce the notion that marriage is ideal (Sandfield and Percy 2003). They may be more likely to view marriage as a defining part of “normal” identity and to feel stigmatized by the “failure” of their marriage (Chasteen 1994). As van Schalkwyk (2005) writes, “Divorced women often face dominant discourses that elicit intense internal discomfort, conflict, and loss of socially constructed self,” prompting a view of themselves as “less meaningful and worthy as relational beings” (p. 90).

(Co)parenting Challenges Eight women—three lesbian, and five heterosexual—described coparenting-related challenges. Specifically, five women (three lesbian, two heterosexual) found themselves worrying about their children’s safety and well-being when their children were with their ex-partners, insomuch as they disagreed with or had concerns about their former partner’s parenting style or capabilities. For example, they worried that their children were watching too much TV, or getting inadequate attention, when they stayed at their other parent’s home. In addition, three heterosexual women voiced frustration regarding their ex-husbands’ involvement in their children’s lives. In both of these cases, women indicated that their ex-husbands were “Disneyland Dads” and that most of the parenting fell to them. “He only comes around once in a while. He doesn’t understand how hard it is. I do the day-to-day,” noted Nora.

Positive Changes and Opportunities

Some participants identified positive changes or consequences associated with the ending of their relationship. Namely, they identified personal freedom and growth and improved co-parenting as positive sequelae of the split.

Personal Freedom and Growth Eight participants, including four lesbian women and four heterosexual women, described a sense of freedom, and consequent personal growth, associated with the ending of their union. They felt “free to be [themselves],” which translated to enhanced self-esteem and a more positive outlook on life. This sense of freedom prompted many of them to make positive changes in their lives, such as (re)connecting with friends, (re)developing a spiritual or fitness practice, and (re)committing to a favorite hobby. “I took this change as an opportunity to take care of me, instead of feeling responsible for [ex’s] happiness. . . I reconnected with my oldest friends. . . I started yoga,” stated Brandy, a lesbian. Of note is that lesbians, specifically, noted that they appreciated the “breaks” from parenting they now experienced (i.e., when their children were with their ex-partners), as these enabled them to capitalize on their newfound freedom (e.g., via socializing or exercise). As Brandy went on to say, “I have found that my time apart from him gives me a healthy opportunity to balance personal growth and ‘grown up’ time with parenting.” That this theme was raised only by lesbians suggests that perhaps freedom from gendered norms of parental responsibility enabled them to feel gratitude, as opposed to guilt, about their time alone (Goldberg 2013).

Several participants contrasted their newfound sense of independence and authenticity with how they felt in their prior relationships (i.e., dissatisfied, unfulfilled, and unappreciated). Laura, a lesbian, stated, “I feel like I can be who I am without constant criticism, as well as the constant feeling of neglect.” In this way, women recounted their prior unions as limiting their personal development, and thus experienced relief associated with the separation which prompted greater life satisfaction. Their narratives of growth, renewal, and personal reconstruction are in stark contrast to the dominant discourse of divorce as tragedy (Chasteen 1994), and challenge the “failure” discourse that is so often associated with relationship dissolution (van Schalkwyk 2005).

Improved Co-parenting Four women (three lesbian, one heterosexual) observed that co-parenting with their former partner had actually improved since the breakup. Brandy, a lesbian, explained, “Prior to our split, [ex-partner] deferred 95 % of the parenting and relationship with [child] to me, and since our split this has significantly improved. I believe she is a much better parent now and her relationship with [child] is now very strong.” Laura, a lesbian, stated, “I feel like I have help now that she has to spend time with him 50 % of the time. Prior to that she helped out 20 % of the time.” Thus, whereas the transition to parenthood sometimes resulted in an undesirable polarization in parenting roles (Goldberg 2010), separating may have helped these participants and their former partners to establish greater equality in their roles. Notably, their descriptions of improved co-parenting challenge the

conventional notion that a separated couple cannot parent as well as an intact couple (Malone and Cleary 2002).

Discussion

The current exploratory study adds to the limited research on same-gender parents’ relationship dissolution (Gartrell et al. 2006; Turteltaub 2002), and relationship functioning and challenges in adoptive parents specifically (Timm et al. 2011). We used a feminist, social constructionist lens to analyze the data, attending to the role of social locations and power dynamics in understanding women’s attributions of the causes of their relationship dissolution, as well as attending to the reality that social discourses surrounding divorce (i.e., it is indicative of “failure”) may shape their constructions of relationship dissolution (Walzer and Oles 2003).

Participants’ experiences of relationship dissolution were uniquely shaped and nuanced by their status as parents in general and adoptive parents specifically. Some parents described declines in communication and intimacy as being caused or exacerbated by the introduction of a third dependent member into the family (Lawrence et al. 2007), and some further highlighted their child’s special needs—including their attachment difficulties and behavioral problems—as creating stresses that strained their relationship (Timm et al. 2011). The fact that those women who ultimately dissolved their unions were more likely to have adopted via child welfare and international adoption than the couples in the larger sample suggests that adopting older children and/or children with difficult histories may constitute a risk factor for relationship dissolution, in the context of other vulnerabilities (e.g., preexisting communication difficulties). Future research is needed that examines, in greater depth, the relationship trajectories of adoptive parents, including the factors that are associated with relationship breakdown and dissolution.

Consistent with prior work on heterosexual (Demo and Cox 2000) and same-gender (Gartrell et al. 2006) couples, differences in parenting style were described as contributing to relationship deterioration. Infidelity was also named by several women, both lesbian and heterosexual, as a contributor to (but not the singular reason for) relationship dissolution, thus echoing prior work documenting that infidelity is often constructed as a “last straw” factor in divorce, and one that is often preceded by commitment and communication issues (Gartrell et al. 2006; Scott et al. 2013). In addition, we found that both heterosexual and lesbian women identified their partner’s problems (e.g., substance use) as contributing to the breakup, which is consistent with prior work (Kurdek 1991; Scott et al. 2013). Only one woman identified her own problems as contributing to the relationship dissolution. Thus, participants may have been

motivated to downplay their own role in the dissolution of their unions, while constructing their partner's role as paramount (Walzer and Oles 2003). Such attributions likely enabled them to construct a sense of themselves as more so the victims than the causal agents of the breakup, as well as to gain a sense of control over a stressful situation (Sandfield and Percy 2003).

Perceptions of relationship dissolution varied somewhat by participants' relational context. Lesbians were particularly likely to emphasize emotional withdrawal and neglect on the part of their partners as a contributor to relationship decline, echoing prior work that has documented the significance of dyadic attachment (i.e., close-knit, emotionally intimate relationships) to female same-gender relationships (Goldberg 2010), and highlighting the devastating impact that growing apart can have on lesbian parents' relationships (Gartrell et al. 2006). Only lesbians emphasized sexual incompatibility as a primary contributor to union dissolution, challenging stereotypes of women and female couples as less invested in the sexual nature of their unions (Blumstein and Schwartz 1983; Mohr et al. 2013). Differences in perceived contributions to child care were also especially salient to lesbian women. In that same-gender relationships are not predicated upon assumptions of gender difference(s) (Chevrette 2013), these women—and perhaps their ex-partners—may have been more likely to possess expectations for shared parenthood (Goldberg 2013), prompting distress when such expectations were not met. Heterosexual women may not have had the same expectations for shared parenting, given their involvement in different-sex relationships, and thus the greater personalized salience of dominant gendered norms related to caretaking, breadwinning, and power (Knudson-Martin and Mahoney 2009).

Turning to participants' post-dissolution experiences, it is interesting that most participants in lesbian couples described their children as spending roughly equal time with each parent. All but one partner had legally adopted their child, which may have facilitated their tendency to share physical custody. Indeed, in Gartrell et al.'s (2006) study of lesbian couples who became parents via insemination, shared custody arrangements were more common among couples in which the non-biological mothers had legally adopted their children. In contrast, we found that in most heterosexual couples, mothers were the primary residential parents, echoing prior work (Waller and Jones 2014), and likely reflecting, in part, courts' tendency to view mothers as the primary caregivers (Bajackson 2013). This arrangement both benefited and challenged these mothers: Most were juggling primary custody with the need to adjust their financial situation in order to make ends meet. In contrast, lesbian participants with primary/secondary residential arrangements—all but one of whom who had negotiated their children's living arrangements out of court—described relying on differences in

financial stability or legal parental status in determining where their children should live. These findings illustrate how finances and legal parenthood may represent forms of power in shaping post-dissolution dynamics, and also highlight the intersection of finances, the legal context, and sexual orientation in shaping decision-making about custody. In the absence of widespread legal protections for sexual minorities (e.g., in the form of adoption laws that allow both same-gender partners to adopt), both same-gender partners and their children are rendered vulnerable in the event of parental dissolution (Shapiro 2013).

We found that, regardless of relational context, women who earned less income than their former partners tended to describe themselves as financially reliant on them post-split, which sometimes caused stress. Thus, the intersection of power and finances influenced not only heterosexual women, but lesbian women as well (Knudson-Martin and Mahoney 2009). And yet, only heterosexual women discussed major financial and job related changes, which may reflect differences in how lesbian and heterosexual former partners negotiated finances, post-dissolution, in that heterosexual women did so with male partners and under legal surveillance.

Some women also described challenges navigating the emotional sequelae of relationship dissolution. Specifically, they described disappointment and guilt surrounding the ending of their unions, particularly in relation to how their children might suffer due to their "failure" to stay together—a concern that was sometimes compounded by their awareness of their children's unique history of loss. Heterosexual women were especially likely to express shame and sadness regarding their newly single status, possibly because their identity was wrapped up in their status as married; in turn, they may have experienced greater stigma regarding their "inability" to preserve their marriage (Chasteen 1994; Sandfield 2006). Thus, the heterosexual women in the sample may have perceived the greatest costs to their social status, due to their inherent vulnerability to dominant discourses valorizing heterosexual marriage (Sandfield and Percy 2003); sexual minorities, in contrast, are more "experienced" in not meeting societal expectations, and may have endured less shame or distress regarding the failure to conform to family ideals.

Women, regardless of relational context, described a variety of co-parenting challenges post-split (e.g., navigating differing parenting styles; concerns about children's safety; Emery et al. 2001); however, frustrations regarding their former partners' lack of involvement in their children's lives were noted by heterosexual women only, a finding that parallels prior research (Coleman et al. 1998). This is interesting, in that perceived inequities in parental involvement were described as a causal factor in the split by lesbians only. Further, some of these lesbian women actually described improved co-parenting relationships post-split, in that their ex-partners reportedly spent more time with their child than when the

two were co-parenting under one roof. Thus, divorce appeared to prompt an even more exaggerated, traditional division of labor in some heterosexual couples, perhaps because of their vulnerability to scripts regarding post-divorce custody and parenting arrangements (Coleman et al. 1998; Markham et al. 2007); whereas, same-gender couples were less influenced by social and legal discourses surrounding relationship dissolution and parenting, which both complicated their lives and freed them to establish unique co-parenting relationships.

Consistent with some prior work on same-gender couples who dissolve their unions (Kurdek 1991), positive changes were also described by participants, highlighting the ways in which they resisted the dominant divorce narrative as necessarily tragic. Indeed, more than half of both lesbian and heterosexual women described emotional growth or “freedom” post-dissolution, which enhanced their resilience during this potentially stressful time (Jamison et al. 2014). And, as noted, some women described improvements in co-parenting, with this theme being especially salient among lesbian women. That most women in same-gender unions negotiated their custody arrangements outside of the confines of the judicial system may have contributed to enhanced co-parenting abilities and quality of life; prior work has documented this phenomenon in heterosexual couples who navigate custody arrangements outside of court (Emery et al. 2001; Jamison et al. 2014). Lesbians may also have found it easier to navigate post-separation co-parenting because they did not encounter the gendered incongruities that many heterosexual couples tend to encounter post-separation, such as pressure to (re)gain power in the relationship via custody disagreements (McCall 2005; Walzer and Oles 2003).

Limitations and Conclusions

This exploratory study is limited by the fact that only one partner in some couples chose to participate (possibly because they knew their former partner was participating, and thus were hesitant to share their own perspectives), leading us to limit our sample by selecting one partner from each couple for our analysis. By not including both members of each couple, certain perspectives were left out of our analysis. For example, the perpetrators of alleged abuse or infidelity were less likely to be heard; indeed, our analysis tended to include the alleged “victims” of these behaviors. In that individual partners’ “desires, motives, ideas, goals, and so on. . . are intertwined with the relational bond,” an analysis that can examine the interdependencies of partners’ perspectives is warranted (Gergen and Gergen 2003, p. 473). Another limitation is that there was variability in the length of time between the relationship dissolution and the interview (e.g., a few months to a few years). This may have affected participants’

accounts of relationship dissolution, such that more time may have allowed them greater distance from and insight into their own role in the split; although notably, some research (e.g., Hopper 1993) has found that individuals do not substantially change their stories about their divorce experiences over time.

In all but one couple, both partners’ relationships to their children were legally recognized, limiting our ability to examine the role of legal parentage in shaping children’s living arrangements. In addition to being very legally privileged, the sample was also exclusively White, and privileged financially and educationally. Certainly their ability to navigate the financial and emotional terrain of relationship dissolution was shaped by their access to various resources, thus illustrating the intersections among gender, race, sexuality, and social class (Ferree 2010; Martin 1994). Same-gender parents who were not legally married, and who have few financial resources, may face more significant stress when it comes to divvying up assets and responsibilities post-dissolution. Also, because we included participants in the U.S. only, our findings—particularly those related to the role of the legal and adoption context—may not generalize beyond the U.S. cultural context. Finally, the fact that only one gay male couple separated over the course of the study influenced our decision to limit the sample to women; this limited our ability to examine the role of gender, and its intersection with sexual orientation, in our analysis (Ferree 2010).

Some prior work has documented perceived causes and consequences of relationship dissolution among same-gender couples (Kurdek 1991), but these issues have rarely been studied among same-gender couples with children (Gartrell et al. 2006) or adoptive couples. The findings of our exploratory study complicate and extend prior work by highlighting issues that are specific to same-gender couples splitting up (e.g., navigating children’s living arrangements in the absence of legal relationship recognition between partners) and adoptive couples (e.g., concerns about how the split will affect children with a history of trauma). They also highlight the need for further examination of the factors associated with the transition to adoptive parenthood that may exacerbate stress for same-gender and heterosexual couples, potentially undermining relationship stability. Our findings have implications for professionals who work with complex families (e.g., families formed via adoption; families headed by same-gender couples), as these families lie outside of the heterosexual biological family ideal and thus face additional structural and symbolic challenges in the event of parental relationship dissolution. By supporting these families during a major life transition, and recognizing the possibility for personal growth and cooperative parenting, professionals

can help to change the discourse of what constitutes normative, healthy, and “ideal” relationships and families.

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