

LGBTQ-parent families: Diversity, intersectionality, and social context

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Abstract

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, and trans (LGBTQ) parents become parents in a variety of ways, including via reproductive technologies, through foster care and adoption, and in the context of different-gender relationships. This review addresses research developments over the past 5–6 years, revealing that LGBTQ people continue to face barriers in becoming parents, especially those who are trans, of color, and have limited financial means. Bisexual and trans parents are increasingly centered in research, and have unique experiences of parenthood related to navigating (in)visibility and stigma in various contexts. Recent work has documented the impacts of socio-political events (e.g., COVID-19, the Trump presidency) on LGBTQ parent families, particularly those with multiply marginalized statuses. Likewise, an increasingly intersectional lens has exposed how axes of privilege and oppression impact LGBTQ parents' sense of belongingness in various contexts and social groups. Finally, recent work has continued to document the powerful role of context and family processes in the lives and adjustment of youth raised by LGBTQ parents. More research is needed on LGBTQ parents with marginalized identities that have been poorly represented in the literature, such as nonbinary parents and parents with disabilities.

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Introduction

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ) parents become parents in a variety of ways, including with

the help of reproductive technologies (e.g., donor insemination, surrogacy), by way of foster care and adoption, and in the context of different-gender relationships. Their experience of becoming parents and navigating parenthood is shaped by not only their LGBTQ status, but by their specific sexual and gender identities, other important social locations (e.g., age, race, class), and social contextual factors (e.g., where they live). This review addresses novel and important research developments over the past 5–6 years, in several key topic areas: Family building and formation (with attention to adoption and reproductive technologies); Diverse identities and parenthood experiences (with focus on bisexual and trans parents); Social context and parenting experiences; Intersectionality and parenting; and Family processes and social context in relation to child outcomes.

Family building/formation

Adoption

Gender and sexual minorities may choose adoption, although it may be particularly appealing to cisgender male couples, who have fewer affordable options when it comes to family building, as surrogacy is quite expensive (over \$100,000) and therefore an option for only a small group. LGBTQ people may be drawn to adoption as a means of building their families because it is appealing from an altruistic perspective, affordable (if via the child welfare system, as opposed to private domestic adoption), does not introduce genetic or gestational inequities in parents' relationship to their child (as is often the case in parenthood pathways involving reproductive technologies), or, because other methods (e.g., donor insemination) failed [1].

Yet LGBTQ people across the U.S. still face barriers to adopting. Despite the fact that, as of 2016, adoptions by single LGBTQ people and same-sex couples are legal in every state in the U.S., a variety of discriminatory “religious exemption” bills have been proposed and/or passed in states across the U.S., which allow state-licensed child welfare agencies to reject LGBTQ applicants on the basis of religious beliefs [2]. Notably, a study of 732 gay fathers from 47 states who had become parents via adoption or surrogacy found that fathers living in states with more legal protections reported fewer barriers to becoming parents and less stigma

associated with gay parenthood [3]. Thus, state laws and policies have a significant impact on LGBTQ people's ability to adopt and experiences of adopting.

Other recent work has highlighted unique barriers for specific members of the LGBTQ community. Scholarship has begun to establish the high levels of discrimination that trans people face in adopting [4,5]. Yet despite this, trans adults demonstrate remarkable willingness to adopt "hard to place" children (i.e., children that have been historically overrepresented in the child welfare system), with a recent U.S. study of 448 trans adults, 1514 LBQ women, and 774 GBQ men finding that trans individuals were more open to adopting teenagers and children with mental health/behavioral issues than cisgender sexual minorities [5].

Reproductive technologies

Couples in which both partners were assigned female at birth who seek to become parents using reproductive technologies (e.g., via donor insemination) theoretically have two partners who could carry a child, yet studies suggest that it is rare that both partners want to be the gestational parents [1,6]. Reciprocal in vitro fertilization (RIVF; also called Reception of Oocytes from Partner [ROPA]), where one partner carries the child and one partner provides the egg, appears to be becoming more common, although it continues to be accessible only to couples of some financial means [6]. The attractiveness of this option is that it mutes or reduces the biological asymmetry between partners, and fundamentally challenges the biological vs. nonbiological parent distinction. Recent research suggests that ROPA may improve reproductive outcomes for couples in which both partners have ovaries and a uterus, by virtue of having the option to choose the best combination between two oocyte providers and two gestational parents [7]. This option may ultimately be especially appealing to couples in which one partner identifies as trans or nonbinary (TNB), since TNB individuals often desire biological parenthood [8], but may not wish to be pregnant, due to the gender dysphoria this could create and the stress of interacting with the world as a pregnant trans person [1,9].

Recent research has also highlighted the unique challenges of pursuing parenthood via reproductive technologies as a person or couple of color. Qualitative research suggests that LBQ women who seek sperm donors of color, and particularly Black sperm donors, encounter a dearth of options from commercial sperm banks, whose donors tend to be disproportionately White [1,10]. The centering of White sperm donors and recipients may cause LBQ women of color to seek out known donors who mirror specific racial, ethnic, and cultural characteristics [10]. It is important for researchers to continue to utilize an intersectional lens to interrogate diverse LGBTQ people's experiences of

building families using reproductive technologies—which are embedded in a medical system that is racialized, classed, ableist, heterosexist, and cissexist.

Experiences of parenthood: diversity in identities

Bisexual parents

The literature on LGBTQ parents has historically centered the "L" and the "G." Recent work has examined bisexual parents' experiences, finding, for example, that the salience of one's bisexual sexual identity may decline in the context of a long and sustained relationship with a partner, particularly once one becomes a parent [11]. Bisexual/plurisexual parents in different-gender relationships in particular may find it difficult or not relevant to "come out" amidst daily exposure to heteronormative assumptions that discourage disclosure. Yet allowing others to assume they are heterosexual can be uncomfortable for bisexual parents, and may prompt a sense of lacking identity integration and/or guilt [12]. Recent work has also documented a diversity of relationship orientations and structures among bisexual parents, with some engaging in consensual nonmonogamy (CNM) [11,13], which can become more difficult to enact in the context of parenthood, in part because of enhanced concerns about stigma that may be especially heightened if parents or children occupy other marginalized identities (e.g., are of color, are poor, etc. [11,14]).

Some work has explored the implications of bisexual and other nonmonosexual identities for intimate relationships and parenting. A recent study examined relationship trajectories among parents where one partner identifies as bisexual, queer, or plurisexual (nonmonosexual) and one identifies as lesbian/gay (monosexual). A longitudinal study of relationship quality [15] across the first 5 years of parenthood among 118 female parents in same-sex relationships found that nonmonosexual parents reported higher relationship maintenance (i.e., "working on" their relationship) and conflict compared to monosexual parents; and, parents with nonmonosexual partners also reported more maintenance and conflict compared to those with nonmonosexual partners—dynamics that could reflect the consequences of discussing these identities. Interestingly, recent work has also begun to explore outcomes among children of nonmonosexual versus monosexual parents, with one study [16] finding that children of mostly straight and bisexual mothers had higher levels of a range of health issues, including obesity, ADHD, and speech delays, compared to children of heterosexual mothers, while mixed outcomes were observed for children of lesbian mothers. These poorer outcomes, which echo research suggesting poorer pregnancy and infant outcomes among nonmonosexual mothers as well [17,18], could reflect the

impact of greater stigma and/or fewer resources—but more research is needed to determine this.

Trans parents

Increasingly, research has also focused on trans parents—a historically underrepresented group under the LGBTQ parenting umbrella. A recent analysis of national survey data found that 19% of trans respondents were parents, with over half being trans women, about one-third being nonbinary, and one-tenth being trans men [19]. While the researchers found that trans people overall reported more psychological distress and lower life satisfaction than cisgender people, there were no differences in health outcomes between trans and cis parents, suggesting that the positive experiences of parenthood may mitigate or counteract some of the negative effects of stigma [19]. Qualitative work has similarly expanded our understanding of both risk and resiliency factors experienced by trans parents. Due to the pervasiveness of transphobia in societal systems (e.g., the law, health care), trans people face many barriers in becoming parents, as well as in maintaining custody of their children if they divorce in the context of gender transition [20]. Yet a parent's gender transition does not necessarily mean the end of the partner relationship, as some couples decide to stay together; and, family resilience is often an outcome of parental gender transition, such that family members, including children, are moved embrace more expansive notions of gender and become more tolerant of marginalized groups overall [20,21]. Many trans parents and their children report positive parent-child relationships [22].

Asexual parents

There is a continued lack of research on asexuality in the context of parenting, due in part to invisibility of asexuality and misunderstanding of asexuality in the general culture (e.g., conflation with celibacy) [23]. Notably, asexual individuals may also identify as LGBTQ. Among the asexual participants in the Asexual Community Survey, 12% identified as bisexual and 12% as pansexual; and, there is evidence that a disproportionate number of asexual individuals fall under the trans umbrella [24]. More attention to asexual parents is needed, including how they navigate compulsory sexuality expectations and norms along multiple dimensions [25].

Experiences of parenthood: impact of and interactions with the social-political context

Recent research has highlighted the impact of the sociopolitical context on LGBTQ parent families. Since 2016, LGBTQ parents in the U.S. have lived through the Trump Presidency, as well as the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and racial justice movement; likewise, LGBTQ parents in other countries have also been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and, directly or indirectly, the sociopolitical upheaval created by the

Trump presidency. Research indicates that for some LGBTQ people, the 2016 U.S. presidential election of Donald J. Trump led to or exacerbated fractures in relationships with family of origin, inciting betrayal and anger especially when participants and family of origin did not share the same values or vote similarly [26,27]. A U.S. study of LGBTQ adoptive parents of mostly children of color documented how the election of Trump stirred fears surrounding child and family safety related to sexuality, race, and immigration, as well as creating stress in relationship with families of origin [28]. Parents coped with the stress of the election in both more adaptive (e.g., therapy, activism) and less adaptive (e.g., increased substance use) ways [28].

Another recent study of 15 Black lesbian mothers [29] highlighted how parents of multiple marginalized statuses experienced heightened fears surrounding the safety of their families amidst the intersectional risks posed by the Trump presidency. Specifically, the increased visibility and power of white supremacy culture and the conservative evangelical movement created a climate where women felt increasingly worried about their rights and safety. Women also spoke to their involvement in Black Lives Matter and the tensions they experienced surrounding their perception that BLM was not sufficiently inclusive enough of queer and trans identities; indeed, many described general challenges in finding communities and spaces that felt truly affirming and fully inclusive [29]. Another study, of 25 White, mostly lesbian/gay, parents, documented how parents drew on the racial justice movement to cultivate awareness and encourage activism, but also navigated concerns about their children's safety—both in general and at protests specifically [30].

Attention to intersectionality: moving beyond white middle class Lesbian mother families

Another recent advancement in the field is increased attention to intersectionality in the context of LGBTQ parenthood, including race, social class, and age. Greater inclusion of LGBTQ parents of color is essential given that Black, Indigenous, and Latinx LGBTQ people are the most likely among all LGBTQ people to be raising children—and not in urban settings with high concentrations of LGBTQ parent families but in communities where their racial/ethnic group membership are better represented [31,32]. LGBTQ parents of color are also more likely to be living in poverty [33]. Thus, LGBTQ parent families of color may have unique needs with regards to resources and finding community, as well as experiencing high levels of stigma and discrimination [31].

Recent work has begun to interrogate how race, class, and other axes of privilege and oppression intersect in

the lives of LGBTQ parents. A recent study of over 600 Black mothers in the U.S., 21% of whom were lesbian/bisexual, found that lesbian/bisexual mothers were more than four times as likely to have lost custody of their children to the child welfare system than heterosexual mothers [34]. The authors suggest that this may reflect systems-level bias (i.e., tendency to label certain mothers “unfit”) or possibly other factors related to women’s sexual minority status (e.g., lower income; criminal justice system involvement). Another recent study [35] explored the experiences of young (e.g., teen/early 20s), often financially challenged, queer mothers—a group that has historically been absent from LGBTQ parenting literature. This study describes how these women experience multiple types and layers of social exclusion—not only from heterosexual married suburban moms, but also middle-aged, middle class, lesbian mother communities, with whom they do not share the stigma, moral judgment, and stressors of poverty or teen parenthood [35].

Finally, recent qualitative research has also explored intersectionality in the context of LGBTQ parents’ relationships with other parents and school communities, highlighting how parents’—and children’s—relationships with schools are shaped not only by parents’ sexuality and gender but also by families’ race and class background, and how these intersect with those of the broader school community [36,37]. Gay fathers, for example, may experience a sense of alienation from other parents on the basis of gender (i.e., heterosexual mothers “run the school”), race (i.e., when they and/or their children are of color and the dominant parent community is White), and social class (e.g., gay fathers who became parents via adoption sometimes felt demeaned by gay fathers who pursued surrogacy; gay fathers who had children in heterosexual contexts sometimes felt marginalized by gay fathers who had their children in same-sex relationships) [37,38].

Child outcomes: the importance of context and family processes

Researchers are increasingly recognizing the importance of moving beyond examining parental sexual orientation as a predictor of child outcomes to considering the important role of both social context and family processes. Schools, for example, represent a key context for discrimination but also a site of potential affirmation vis a vis LGBTQ parent families. Recent research has increasingly examined how LGBTQ parents and their children are impacted by the school community, including administrators, teachers, and other families [37,39,40]. More negative school climates have been linked to more child victimization in lesbian/gay parent families, which in turn are related to greater psychological distress [39]; and, peer microaggressions at school have been linked to poorer social skills among children with lesbian/gay parents—but only those with

poor relationships with teachers, highlighting the significance of child-teacher relationships in amplifying or mitigating the impact of peer mistreatment [40].

Family process dimensions in relation to child adjustment are also salient and meaningful domains of influence. Recent studies of children with LGB parents, including those formed via surrogacy [41] and adoption [42,43] point to the importance of family process variables related to family origins, such that children show greater well-being when families communicate openly about origin stories and have desired contact with birth family and/or gestational carriers (i.e., important “others” involved in their origin stories). Likewise, recent work has underscored the importance of parenting quality, positive coparenting, and parent mental health for child outcomes [44,45].

The field needs to continue to evolve towards including the voices of children of LGBTQ parents, in addition to soliciting parents’ reports. Some scholars [46,47] have sought to highlight the diversity, complexity, and nuances of experiences among children with LGBTQ parents. They note the politicized nature of child outcomes in LGBTQ parent families and argue for deeper exploration of the contradictions, tensions, and complexity of children’s experiences, such that feelings of ambivalence—which tend to be stifled amidst the pressure to “do good”—are explored. One recent study [48], for example, found that young adults and adults with trans parents navigated ambiguity and ambivalence in relation to their parents’ changing roles and designations/titles. Another [47] documented how adults with LGBTQ parents navigated issues of visibility, belonging, and self-presentation across the life course.

Conclusions and future directions

More research is needed on LGBTQ parents with marginalized identities that have been poorly represented in the literature. Nonbinary parents, and parents with disabilities—including physical, cognitive, and mental health challenges—are two groups that have been significantly underrepresented in the literature. Additionally, more work is needed to explore the experiences of bisexual male parents; asexual LGBTQ parents; low-income LGBTQ parents; and LGBTQ parents of color. Further, although research has explored LGBTQ stepparenting, much of this work is older (see [49]), and does not reflect the experiences of contemporary LGBTQ stepfamilies (but see [50]), warranting fresh perspectives on this topic. Similarly, although some work has explored LGBTQ people’s relationships with chosen family, this work rarely encompasses LGBTQ parents specifically; in turn, more work is needed that explores how diverse subgroups of LGBTQ parents (such as polyamorous parents; [11,51]) (re) imagine, (re)invent, and (re)construct family structures and meanings in their own lives.

Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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- * of special interest
- ** of outstanding interest

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This study of 732 gay fathers throughout the United States uses survey data to explore parenthood routes, barriers to parenthood, and experiences of stigma. Findings indicate that pathways to parenthood vary by socioeconomic status and degree of state legal protections; fathers living in states with more legal protections report fewer barriers to parenthood and less stigma as a gay father; and fathers experience stigma in multiple contexts, most often in religious settings.

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