Article

To Tell or Not to Tell: Disclosure Experiences and Perceived Microaggressions Among Adopted Adolescents With Lesbian, Gay, and Heterosexual Parents

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Abstract

There is limited research on stigma experiences and disclosure practices among adolescents who: (a) are adopted, (b) who have LGBTQ+ parents, and (c) who are sexual or gender minorities themselves. At a time when LGBTQ+ identities are both increasingly visible and also publicly debated, we conducted interviews with 50 adolescents (*M* age = 14.86 years) in 12 two-father, 20 two-mother, and 18 father/mother families. Following protocols approved by Clark University's Institutional Review Board and through the frameworks of sexual stigma, microaggressions, and communication privacy management, we used thematic analysis to explore themes of disclosure practices, peer responses to disclosure, and parent responses to sexual and gender identity disclosure. Adolescents described various disclosure decisions around their adoptive status, LGBTQ+ parent family structure, and their own sexual and gender identities, ranging from rare to reactive to proactive disclosure. Such decisions were in some cases shaped by

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the intersections among participants' race, gender, and family structure. Participants often selectively disclosed because of concerns related to privacy and negative peer reactions. Many adolescents reported instances of microaggressions from peers around their identities. Parent reactions to their children's sexual and gender identity disclosure were more complex than peers' reactions. Findings have implications for therapists and other professionals working with adolescents and their families.

Keywords

adolescents, adoption, gay, lesbian, disclosure, coming out, peers, parents

Children with parents who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ+) parents are members of a minoritized and historically stigmatized family structure, which exposes them to the potential for stigma and discrimination, as well as necessitates decision-making about whether and how to disclose about their parents' sexual orientation or family make-up (Garner, 2004; Goldberg, 2007; Goldberg et al., 2012). Children who are adopted also face the possibility of stigmatization based on a lack of societal familiarity with and sensitivity to adoption as a highly complex and historically fraught family building form (Garber & Grotevant, 2015; Glaser, 2021). Research has examined children's experiences navigating societal stigma related to both of these identities, documenting their exposure to both explicit and implicit forms of microaggressions (Farr et al., 2016; Garber & Grotevant, 2015; White et al., 2022). Given children's exposure to or at least awareness of the specter of such stigma, some research has explored children's practices of (non)disclosure surrounding their parents' sexual orientation and family structure, including factors they consider in deciding if and how to disclose, and to whom (Gianino et al., 2009; Goldberg, 2007). Notably, despite a large literature focused on how parents communicate about adoption to their children (e.g., Brodzinsky, 2011; Goldberg, 2019) and how they handle outside inquiries directed at their families (Suter & Ballard, 2009; Suter et al., 2011), little work has focused on children's disclosure practices surrounding adoption (i.e., telling peers; Neil, 2012; Soares et al., 2017, 2019).

The current study of 50 teenagers, all of whom were adopted, and two-thirds of whom were adopted by same-sex couples, aims to address several gaps in the literature. Specifically, research is needed that addresses stigma experiences and disclosure practices among children who have (a) LGBTQ+ parents, and/or (b) are adopted, within the current sociohistorical context in

which LGBTQ+ identities and family diversity are increasingly familiar but not fully understood or accepted, at global and national levels (Dave Thomas Foundation, 2022; Flores, 2021). Furthermore, amidst dramatic social change related to LGBTQ+ identities and rights, an increasing number of LGBTQ+ young people are coming out, and at earlier ages (Bishop et al., 2020), a shift that has met with a wave of backlash (Russell & Fish, 2019). The greater visibility of LGBTQ+ identities, alongside legislative attacks on LGBTQ+ rights, may have implications for how adolescents with LGBTQ+ parents are experiencing stigma and disclosure surrounding their family identities. Stigma and disclosure experiences may be especially complex and nuanced for adolescents with LGBTQ+ parents who also identify as LGBTQ+ themselves (Kuvalanka & Goldberg, 2009). Although some research on disclosure processes among children with LGBTQ+ parents exists, it is somewhat outdated (Gianino et al., 2009) and/or was conducted with preadolescent children (Farr et al., 2016) or adults (Goldberg, 2007; Leddy et al., 2012).

Adolescents occupy an important developmental stage when it comes to identity and disclosure of potentially stigmatized identities. Compared to younger children, adolescents can potentially more easily conceal certain identities (e.g., peers may not routinely see them with their parents) yet they still live at home with their parents, and may have ongoing connections with peers who knew them at earlier stages in their lives (Kaushansky et al., 2017; Michaud et al., 2009). Peers can be a source of affirmation and support during adolescence (Gorse, 2022; Shah et al., 2022), but also a source of bullying directed at teenagers' identities (e.g., sexual orientation and gender identity [SOGI]; Hammack et al., 2022; Russell & Fish, 2019). The decision to disclose stigmatized identities to peers may be challenging, but also a point of pride (Burand et al., 2023), with some children of LGBTQ+ parents appreciating the opportunity to push back against hegemonic heteronormativity and bionormativity (Farr et al., 2022).

Adoption Related Stigma and Disclosure

Stigma is typically understood as referring to a process of social discrimination based on departure from societal norms, which is expressed via social interactions (Goffman, 1963). Adoption-related stigma often refers to biased and judgmental attitudes toward adoption that manifest via verbal and behavioral expressions of devaluation (Baden, 2016). People may possess inaccurate, biased beliefs about adopted people and their families, and often project these onto such individuals. For example, dominant assumptions include

expectations of incompleteness among adoptees, such that they are assumed to miss and also search for their birth families (Baden, 2016).

Baden (2016) observed that adoption stigma is often manifest via adoption microaggressions—routine or common slights, insults, and indignities that communicate adoption-related judgments about adoption or foster care. Baden (2016) conceptualized such microaggressions as belonging to several key categories. First, they may take the form of microinvalidations: communications that exclude, deny, invalidate, or devalue adoptees' feelings or experiences, often rooted in a "biology is best" ideology; for example, being asked if they know their "real parents" or "where they are from," suggesting they are "lucky" to be adopted. Second, there are microinsults: attitudes and communications that contain rude, demeaning, or insensitive beliefs; for example, the implication that the adoptee is a "bad seed," the idea that adoptees have deficits that indirectly explain the reasons for their relinquishment. The third category of microaggressions is microassaults: outward, explicit attacks that are intended to hurt the target, such as teasing a peer for being adopted.

Children may encounter adoption stigma from peers (Neil, 2012; Soares et al., 2019), and some research has established higher levels of bullying and exclusion among adopted children compared to non-adopted children (Paniagua et al., 2020), which in turn is related to poorer well-being (Paniagua et al., 2020; Tan et al., 2021). For example, using quantitative data assessing adoption-related stress and coping strategies, Reinoso et al. (2016) studied 68 school-aged adoptees and identified "victimization" (e.g., insults, jokes, teasing, derogatory comments, intrusive questions) as a stressor related to adoption, with implications for adoptees' social-emotional well-being. Likewise, in a sample of school-aged adoptees (age 5–13), Neil (2012) found that over half of children reported difficult experiences in relation to peers knowing they were adopted, such as peers not believing that they were adopted, or asking uncomfortable questions, with a few children reporting that peers teased them or felt sorry for them because of their adoptive status.

Amidst evidence that adopted children may face stigma related to their adoptive status from peers, little research has examined how children share their adoptive status with others. Existing research on adoption and disclosure is often grounded in communication privacy management theory (CPMT; Petronio, 2002, 2010), which has been applied to adoptive parents (Goldberg et al., 2019) and adult adoptees (Horstman et al., 2017) to understand how members of the adoption triad make decisions about whether, and what, to disclose about their adoptive family status. In a sample of 94 adopted children aged 8 to 10, Soares et al. (2017) used multiple regression analyses to determine that adoptees who perceived less positive social reactions to

their disclosure about their adoption reported more negative feelings about their school experience in relation to their adoptive status and also felt more discomfort in social interactions about adoption. Thus, experiencing micro-aggressions related to adoption can be both an unwanted consequence of sharing or disclosing about one's adoption, and a predictor of less frequent or less comfortable disclosure to peers.

Adoptees must navigate how to set boundaries surrounding their adoptive status (Galvin, 2006), which may include choosing if, when, and how to explain one's family (e.g., to educate others, to build relational closeness), asserting that one's family is legitimate (e.g., responding to inappropriate questions), and defending one's family if faced with hostility (Colaner & Horstman, 2021; Docan-Morgan, 2010). While adoptive parents typically establish these boundaries initially, children co-manage these boundaries as they grow older, which can be particularly difficult when the adoptee looks visibly different from family members (Docan-Morgan, 2010). Transracially adopted children have less control over whether and how much their adoption remains private, as outsiders often comment on their differentness and ask questions about their adoption (Galvin, 2006).

LGBTQ+ Parent Related Stigma and Disclosure

Sexual stigma (Herek, 2016), which refers to stigma associated with same-sex sexuality, affects both LGBTQ+ parents and their children (Farr et al., 2022), and varies in part according to ecological and historical context. This conceptual framework of sexual stigma refers to the ways individuals perpetuate sexual stigma (e.g., through subtle messages, overt behaviors), conveying messages of inferiority that children with LGBTQ+ parents may encounter (Herek et al., 2009).

Some work has examined experiences of sexual stigma among children with LGBTQ+ parents (e.g., H. Bos et al., 2021; Farr et al., 2016). Survey data of 72 U.S. teenagers with lesbian mothers found that 40% reported homophobic stigmatization (H. Bos et al., 2021). Within the context of adoptive families in the US, a mixed-methods study by Farr et al. (2016) found that over 50% of 49 school-aged children adopted by same-sex couples reported experiencing microaggressions, including heterosexism and teasing about their family structure. Using questionnaire data, a study of 78 lesbian-parent families in the US and the Netherlands found that school-aged children in the Netherlands reported less homophobia than those in the US, highlighting the significance of sociocultural context (H. M. W. Bos et al., 2008).

Some research has examined, within LGBTQ+-parent families, children's disclosure of their family structure and specifically two-mom or two-dad status. Children appear to consider the nature of the relationship with peers in deciding whether to share about their family, with some children in Farr et al.'s (2016) study describing discomfort related to sharing their parents' sexual orientation and gender identity with peers, preferring to establish trust before disclosing such information. Parallel to their finding that Dutch children reported less homophobic stigmatization than American children, H. M. W. Bos et al. (2008) found that Dutch children were also more open about growing up in a lesbian-parent family. Similarly, almost all participants in one study of Belgian children had come out to peers about having two moms (Vanfraussen et al., 2002), perhaps reflecting cultural variations in the acceptance and legal regulation of LGBTQ+ parenthood and marriage.

Disclosure may also vary as a function of developmental stage, insomuch as adolescence is a period where peers and peer approval become increasingly important (Erikson, 1968; Gruenenfelder-Steiger et al., 2016), and individuals have more control over if, when, and how they share details about their family with peers. Further, as children's cognitive abilities mature in early adolescence, perceptions and attributions of, and responses to, potential discrimination become more sophisticated (Spears Brown & Bigler, 2005). An increased understanding of one's social groups (e.g., related to family structure and other intersecting identities; Spears Brown, 2017) may impact decisions around disclosure. Research on adolescents with lesbian mothers suggest that experiences of or anxieties about homophobic stigmatization may cause some teenagers to be secretive about and/or avoidant of the subject of their parents' sexual orientation (Clarke & Demetriou, 2016; van Gelderen et al., 2012). Adults with lesbian mothers, reflecting on their adolescence, have described engaging in selective disclosure of their family structure, telling only close friends and/or peers whom they believe will be supportive, which increases the likelihood of positive responses (Kuvalanka et al., 2014; Leddy et al., 2012). Notably, studies of disclosure among adolescents with LGBTQ+ parents are limited by the fact that they: (a) focused on adolescents with lesbian mothers only; and (b) were conducted prior to the current period of visibility and debate surrounding LGBTQ+ identities.

Adoption and LGBTQ+ Parent Family Structure

A limited body of work has examined disclosure practices by children who are both adopted and have LGBTQ+ parents. However, there is reason to believe that disclosure practices surrounding both family structure and

adoption might be different for these individuals, given that their two-mom or two-dad family structure signals a non-"normative" family building route, which, if children look visibly (racially) different from their parents, might signal to outsiders that they are adopted. This might in turn result in less choice over disclosure. Alternatively, children may experience disclosure of their parents' sexual orientation and family structure differently than adoption, as one relates to their parents (and is possibly more stigmatized) and one relates to their own personal identity (see Tam & Spears Brown, 2020).

In a rare study of teenagers adopted by lesbian/gay (LG) parents, Gianino et al. (2009) interviewed 14 individuals aged 13 and 20, with attention to how they disclosed their parents' sexual orientation, as well as their adoptive status, with peers. Participants ranged from not disclosing at all to sharing with others openly, with several feeling as though they had little choice in whether to share, as they were part of a visibly transracial adoptive family with same-sex parents. Many participants voiced apprehension surrounding "coming out" about their families. Notably, they generally described positive responses (e.g., surprise, curiosity) from others when they revealed their adopted status specifically. In another study, Cody et al. (2017) conducted focus groups with 24 13 to 24 year olds adopted by LG parents. Among many other topics, participants were asked if and how they decided whether to tell others about their parents' sexual orientation. Dominant themes included the need for established trust with another person prior to disclosure; telling others because it is part of their identity; and, not wanting to have to explain themselves to others, which limited their ability to invite peers into their lives and homes.

Finally, Messina and Brodzinsky (2019) studied adopted children with LG parents, but did not focus on adoption-related disclosures. They found that for preadolescents (ages 10–13), sharing about their parents' sexual orientation was a source of anxiety, which they managed by either not disclosing or carefully choosing who to share this information with based on established trust, echoing other work on non-adoptive children (Clarke & Demetriou, 2016; Farr et al., 2016). Teenagers (ages 14–18) voiced feelings of loyalty and pride regarding their parents and families, which helped them feel more comfortable sharing about their family structure despite the risks of disclosure (e.g., intrusive questions from outsiders) (Messina & Brodzinsky, 2019).

LGBTQ+ Children and Disclosure

In 2023, many teenagers identify as LGBTQ+, with an estimated 9.5% of teenagers ages 13 to 17 identifying as LGBTQ+ (Conron, 2020), and those born between 1997 and 2004 (i.e., Generation Z, or Gen-Z) being the most likely to identify as LGBTQ+ (19.7%; Jones, 2023). A recent Pew Research

Center survey found that although about 1.6% of U.S. adults are trans or nonbinary, in adults under 30, the percent increases to 5.1% (Brown, 2022). Within Gen-Z, 13.1% self-identified as bisexual, 3.4% gay, 2.2% lesbian, and 1.9% trans—all higher compared to prior generations (Jones, 2023).

A growing literature suggests that patterns of coming out are shifting, likely in response to increased societal acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals (Charlesworth & Banahji, 2019). Members of Gen-Z are more likely to come out to friends and family earlier than previous generations (Bishop et al., 2020). Likewise, compared to earlier cohorts of parents, contemporary parents tend to be more accepting of their children when they come out (van Bergen et al., 2021). Notably, demographic factors may affect the nature and timing of coming out (Richter et al., 2017). Abreu et al. (2022) collected anonymous online survey data from 6,387 LGBTQ+ adolescents aged 13 to 17 and found that LGBTQ+ participants of color experienced lower support from parents than White LGBTQ+ participants, which may affect disclosure. Yet even when parents are supportive, LGBTQ+ teenagers tend to disclose to friends before disclosing to parents (Ryan et al., 2015).

Some research has examined how having LGBTQ+ family members impacts LGBTQ+ children (i.e., the "second generation"; Kuvalanka & Munroe, 2020; McCurdy et al., 2023). Access to queer extended family, for example, can help LGBTQ+ children to navigate unsupportive parents and introduce them to LGBTQ+ community norms (e.g., Pride, drag; Stone et al., 2022). Some LGBTQ+ children have LGBTQ+ parents—who are often, but not always uniformly, supportive of their LGBTQ+ identities. In a study of LGBQ mothers with trans children aged 6 to 11, responses to their children's gender identity varied, ranging from acceptance and support to negative or mixed reactions (Kuvalanka et al., 2018). Some mothers reported experiencing blame from others and from themselves for "causing" their child to be trans. LGBTQ+ young adults with LGBTQ+ parents tend to report positive experiences overall in relation to coming out to parents (Garner, 2004; Kuvalanka & Goldberg, 2009; McCurdy et al., 2023). However, some may worry about disclosing to parents out of concerns that their parents will face outside scrutiny (i.e., did they make their kids gay?) or because they occupy a different identity than their parents and are not certain of their parents' unconditional support (e.g., as in the case of trans children of lesbian/bisexual mothers; Kuvalanka & Goldberg, 2009). Unknown is whether Gen-Z experiences similar worries as earlier cohorts related to disclosure to parents, amidst changes in the sociopolitical landscape related to LGBTQ+ identities.

The Current Study

The current study explores disclosure experiences of adopted teenagers of diverse sexual and gender identities, many of whom have LG parents, at a period in history when LGBTQ+ identities are both increasingly visible and normalized but also publicly debated (Russell & Fish, 2019). It also examines how, among those individuals who do identify as LGBTQ+, they describe their disclosure process to parents and also their parents' reactions to such disclosures. It draws from sexual stigma (Herek, 2016), microaggression (Baden, 2016), and communication privacy management (Petronio, 2002) frameworks in its conceptualization, analysis, and research questions. We interrogate these teenagers' lived experiences amidst a societal context that lacks understanding of and devalues their family formation (e.g., adoptive, LGBTQ+ parent headed), wherein they must make disclosure decisions to peers and parents about their family and personal identities—identities that intersect in complex and nuanced ways.

Specifically, we examine the perspectives of the perspectives of 50 teenagers (ages 13–19, *Mdn* age 15), all of whom were adopted, and two-thirds of whom were adopted by same-sex couples; the remainder were adopted by heterosexual couples. We explore participants' perceptions of LGBTQ+- and adoption-related microaggressions, disclosure practices to peers (regarding their parents' identities and their own identities), and disclosure practices to parents (regarding their own LGBTQ+ identities, where relevant). All participants were interviewed between 2020 and 2022, a period marked by heightened political discourse surrounding LGBTQ+ rights, as well as individual and family diversity in general. For example, while most Americans are in favor of legalization of same-sex marriage (Borelli, 2022), the country remains divided over the extent to which society should accept trans people (Blazina & Baronavski, 2022; Parker et al., 2022).

Our research questions were as follows:

1. How, and why, do teenagers disclose their adoptive status, family structure, and SOGI identities to friends, peers, and other non-family members? What considerations do they emphasize as impacting their disclosure decisions?
   a. How are patterns of disclosure shaped by teenagers' developmental and social contexts?
   b. How do peers respond to such disclosures?

2. How do teenagers disclose their SOGI identity to parents (who may also be LGBTQ+)?
    a. How do parents react to such disclosureS?

Method

Sample

The current sample consisted of 50 adolescents, ages 13 to 19 (*M* age = 14.86 years of age, *Mdn* age = 15.00, *SD* = 1.31), almost two-thirds (*n* = 32; 64%) with lesbian/gay parents, and just over one-third (*n* = 18, 36%) with heterosexual parents. Specifically, 20 participants were in two-mother families, 12 were in two-father families, and 18 were in father-mother families. Two-thirds (*n* = 33; 66%) of participants were of color, and one-third (*n* = 17; 34%) were White. Thirty-nine participants (78%) were cisgender (cis) (17 girls, 22 boys), and 11 (22%) were nonbinary, trans, or gender-questioning (i.e., trans or gender diverse [TGD]). Twenty-eight (56%) identified as LGBQ+ (including questioning) and 22 (44%) identified as heterosexual. Thirty-one (62%) had siblings. Six (12%) had divorced parents. Teenagers largely resided in the Northeast and West Coasts of the US, with smaller numbers in the South and Midwest. Three lived outside the US. Half lived in the suburbs and half lived in urban areas. See Table 1 for participant data according to case ID and pseudonym.

Procedure

Participants completed a Zoom or phone interview about 1 to 1.5 hr in length. Participants' parents were contacted regarding an opportunity to interview their teenaged children (13–19) for a study on adoption, adolescence, and identity. Participants' parents had completed a number of prior interviews as part of a longitudinal study on adoptive parenthood. Both parents had to give permission for their children to participate; teenagers also gave assent. Parents were offered the opportunity to review the questions in advance, and some did so. They were given the opportunity to veto any question or set of questions; none did so, although a few noted that their children might find the length of the interview challenging due to a diagnosis of ADHD. The Principal Investigator, a clinical psychologist and professor of psychology, as well as doctoral students in clinical psychology, conducted the interviews. The study was approved by Clark University's internal Human Subjects Review Board. All interviews were transcribed verbatim.

Table 1. Description of Sample (N = 50).

Case #	Family type	Pseudonym	Age	Race	Parent race	Gender	Sexual orientation	Region	Adoption type
1	Two moms	Daisy	16	Black	Both White	Cis girl	Bisexual	West Coast city	Private domestic, closed
2	Two moms	Carter	15	Multi-racial	Both White	Cis boy	Heterosexual	Midwest suburb	Private domestic, open
3	Two moms	Carly	15	White	Both White	Cis girl	Omnisexual	Northeast suburb	Private domestic, open
4	Two moms, divorced	PJ	15	Biracial (B/W)	Both White	Nonbinary	Gay/queer	Midwest city	Private domestic, open
5	Two moms	River	15	Latinx	Both White	Cis boy	Not sure/ Questioning	West Coast city	Private domestic, open
6	Two moms	Maya	16	Latinx	Both White	Cis girl	Bisexual	Midwest city	International
7	Two moms	Lila	15	Multi-racial	Both White	Cis girl	Heterosexual	East Coast city	Private domestic, open
8	Two moms	Hannah	14	White	Both White	Cis girl	Bisexual	West Coast city	Private domestic, open
9	Two moms, divorced	Tate	16	Asian	Both White	Cis boy	Heterosexual	East Coast suburb	International
10	Two moms	Sage	15	White	Both White	Nonbinary	Lesbian	East Coast suburb	Private domestic, open
11	Two moms	Latham	15	Black	Both White	Cis boy	Bisexual	East Coast city	Private domestic, open
12	Two moms, divorced	Andrew	15	White	Both White	Cis boy	Gay	West Coast city	Private domestic, open
13	Two moms	Ben	15	Latinx	Both White	Cis boy	Heterosexual	East Coast city	International
14	Two moms	Morgan	15	Latinx	Both White	Trans boy	Pansexual	East Coast city	International

(continued)

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Table 1. (continued)

Case #	Family type	Pseudonym	Age	Race	Parent race	Gender	Sexual orientation	Region	Adoption type
15	Two moms	Andy	15	Latinx	Both White	Cis boy	Heterosexual	East Coast suburb	International
16	Two moms, divorced	Jeremy	13	White	Both White	Cis boy	Asexual	East Coast suburb	Private domestic, open
17	Two moms	Sierra	19	Black	One White One Black	Cis girl	Heterosexual	Canada	Public domestic
18	Two moms	Brit	14	Black	Both White	Genderfluid	Panromantic, asexual	East Coast city	Private domestic, open
19	Two moms	Sebastian	14	Latinx	Both White	Cis boy	Heterosexual	East Coast suburb	International
20	Two moms	Tori	13	Black	Both White	Cis girl	Bisexual, questioning	East Coast city	Private domestic, open
21	Two dads	Marcus	14	Biracial (B/W)	Both White	Cis boy	Heterosexual	Southern city	Private domestic, open
22	Two dads, divorced	Jessie	17	White	Both White	Cis girl	Heterosexual	East Coast suburb	Private domestic, open
23	Two dads	Elliot	15	White	Both White	Cis boy	Bisexual	West Coast suburb	Private domestic, open
24	Two dads	Sasha	16	White	Both White	Cis girl	Lesbian	West Coast city	Private domestic, open
25	Two dads	Alia	15	Black	One Black One White	AFAB, questioning	Questioning	West Coast city	Private domestic, closed
26	Two dads	Taylor	16	White	Both White	AFAB, gender nonconforming	Lesbian	Southern city	Private domestic, open
27	Two dads	Peter	15	Asian	Both White	Cis boy	Heterosexual	West Coast city	International
28	Two dads	Devon	15	Black	Both White	Cis boy	Heterosexual	Midwest city	Public domestic

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Case #	Family type	Pseudonym	Age	Race	Parent race	Gender	Sexual orientation	Region	Adoption type
29	Two dads	Tess	15	White	Both White	Cis girl	Bisexual/ pansexual	East Coast city	Private domestic, open
30	Two dads	Juliette	14	Latinx	Both White	Cis girl	Heterosexual	West Coast city	Private domestic, open
31	Two dads	Mateo	16	Latinx	Both White	Cis boy	Heterosexual	Midwest city	Private domestic, open
32	Two dads	Jaxie	13	Black	One Latinx, One White	Nonbinary	Questioning	West Coast city	Private domestic, open
33	Mom and dad	Lizzie	16	White	Both White	Cis girl	Heterosexual	Southern suburb	Private domestic, open
34	Mom and dad, divorced	Martin	15	White	Both White	Cis boy	Heterosexual	Midwest suburb	Private domestic, open
35	Mom and dad	Eddie	16	Latinx	Both White	Cis boy	Gay	Canada	Private domestic, open
36	Mom and dad	Taylor	13	White	Both White	Cis girl	Heterosexual	West Coast city	Private domestic, open
37	Mom and dad	Sawyer	16	Asian	Both White	Cis boy	Heterosexual	East Coast suburb	International
38	Mom and dad	Vincent	14	White	Both White	Cis boy	Heterosexual	East Coast suburb	Private domestic, open
39	Mom and dad	Drew	18	Asian	Both White	Cis boy	Heterosexual	Midwest suburb	International
40	Mom and dad	Kat	15	White	Both White	Genderfluid	Questioning/ unsure	East Coast suburb	Private domestic, open

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Table 1. (continued)

Case #	Family type	Pseudonym	Age	Race	Parent race	Gender	Sexual orientation	Region	Adoption type
41	Mom and dad	Vincent	17	White	Both White	Cis boy	Heterosexual	East Coast suburb	Private domestic, closed
42	Mom and dad	Denae	15	Black	One Black, One White	Cis girl, questioning	Omnisexual	East Coast suburb	Private domestic, open
43	Mom and dad	Emily	15	Asian	Both White	Cis girl	Questioning	West Coast city	International
44	Mom and dad	Tara	14	Asian	One Asian One White	Cis girl	Bisexual	Outside of US	International
45	Mom and dad	Tim	14	Biracial (Latinx/ White)	Both White	Cis boy	Gay	West Coast city	Private domestic, open
46	Mom and dad	Travis	15	Black	Both White	Cis boy	Heterosexual	Midwest suburb	Private domestic, open
47	Mom and dad	Lisette	15	Latinx	Both White	Cis girl	Heterosexual	East Coast suburb	International
48	Mom and dad	Jonah	13	White	Both White	Cis boy	Questioning	West Coast city	Private domestic, open
49	Mom and dad	Lu	13	Biracial	Both White	Nonbinary	Aromantic/ questioning	West Coast suburb	Private domestic, open
50	Mom and dad	Nic	13	Black	Both White	Unlabeled	Unlabeled	East Coast suburb	Private domestic, closed

Note. AFAB = assigned female at birth; B/W = Black/White.

The interview focused on teenagers' identities (e.g., adoption, sexual orientation, gender identity, having two moms/dads) and how these identities shape experiences at school, with peers, and with parents. In our analysis, we primarily drew on responses to the following interview questions, which were routinely accompanied by probes and clarifying questions. Questions related to experiences at school included: (a) Does anyone bother you at school (e.g., about having two dads/moms? Being adopted?)?, (b) Do your peers or friends ever ask questions about you having two dads/two moms? Teachers/coaches?, (c) Have you ever been afraid to tell someone you have two mom/dads? How did you respond?, and (d) Do you tend to tell most other people that you're adopted? How does it typically come up? Have you ever been afraid to tell someone you're adopted? Tell me about that. Questions about gender identity included: (e) How do you identify in terms of gender?, (f) Are there any parts of being trans [or whatever word they use] and adopted that is difficult for other people to understand?, (g) When you think of a "stereotypical" girl/boy, how gender-conforming or gender nonconforming are you?, Questions about sexual orientation included: (h) How do you identify in terms of sexual orientation?, (i) What was it like coming out to your parents, if you have come out?, and (j) Do you have friends who are also LGBTQ+? Is it easy or hard to be LGBTQ+ where you go to school?

Data Analysis

Interviews were examined using thematic analysis. We chose thematic analysis because it is a flexible, yet rigorous approach to analyzing qualitative data whereby patterns (i.e., themes) in the data are attended to and organized (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Data analysis focused on teenagers' understanding of their own identities (e.g., adoptee, sexual/gender minority, having two moms/two dads) and how and why they chose to disclose these identities to parents, peers, and other outsiders. The authorship team was comprised of two White cis women with extensive experience working with diverse teens and families in a variety of contexts, including research and clinical capacities. Our disciplinary backgrounds include clinical and developmental psychology, enabling complementary vantage points in exploring adolescents' stories around identity, family, relationships, and disclosure.

We began the coding process with open coding, reading the transcripts multiple times to gain understanding of participants' perspectives and noting preliminary ideas about identity development and disclosure. Our knowledge of the relevant literatures, our overarching theoretical frameworks, and our familiarity with the dataset as a whole (i.e., several years of interviewing participants) informed our initial analysis (Goldberg & Allen, 2015).

Following the initial open coding, we each read through the transcripts of participants with two moms, writing memos for each individual to describe their experience and understanding of adoption, sexuality, gender, school, and family topics, and generate ideas about emerging codes. We then moved on to the transcripts of teenagers with two dads, and then teenagers in mom-dad families, repeating the memo-writing process and adding to emerging codes. We used selective coding to sort the data into initial categories that stayed close to the data and were specific (e.g., peers' responses to disclosure: negative, positive, neutral). We then identified larger groupings that unify and provide meaning to codes. For example, "prompted disclosure" is a theme that subsumes "coming out about both [adoption and family structure]" and is also connected to larger constructs of interest (e.g., microaggressions, sexual stigma).

We collaboratively refined and elaborated upon our emerging coding scheme throughout the process. For example, we began by coding "coming out to peers about SOGI," as one unit before breaking it apart (i.e., "coming out to peers about sexual orientation" and "coming out to peers about gender identity"), as teenagers often described different processes and reactions to disclosure about sexual orientation versus gender identity. We also examined the extent to which teenagers' identities and characteristics (e.g., gender, race, sexual orientation, age, geographic location, family structure, mental health) intersected with key themes. The final coding scheme was applied to all interviews.

Results

Disclosing About Adoptive Status

Participants' narratives related to disclosure of their adoptive status revealed several key patterns in responses, such that some rarely shared, others shared reactively or when prompted, some felt little choice in whether they disclosed due to visible differences between themselves and their families, and still others disclosed proactively or on their own accord. Significantly, participants' race, gender, and family structure intersected with their disclosure practices in unique ways.

"I generally keep it to myself": Rare disclosure. Eight participants, all cis boys, and all but three of whom were White (four with lesbian mothers, four with heterosexual parents), shared that their adoptive status was not something that they routinely went out of their way to share with peers. As teenagers, they possessed some degree over control over whether and how to share this

element of their background, and some chose not to. As Tate, a 16 year-old Asian cis boy with two moms, shared, "I don't go out of my way to tell people." Four of these nine clarified that they tended to keep their adoption status close to their chests in part because of negative experiences sharing in the past, reflecting a recursive phenomenon whereby past negative experiences shaped future reluctance to disclose. As Tate described, peers' response to his sharing about his adoption was typically "dramatic, [like], 'You're ADOPTED?!'" Andrew, a 15 year-old White cis boy with two mothers, shared: "My experience with sharing about being adopted is not really the brightest; it's not really looked upon as a good thing in my life." These participants generally felt that it was not worth sharing their adoptive identity given their peers' general ignorance about adoption.

Notably, four of these participants shared a history of being bullied more generally. In turn, they may have been particularly reluctant to share about their adoption because it might render them additionally "different" or a target. Travis, a 15 year-old Black cis boy with heterosexual parents, said, "People really don't know; it's not something I talk about." Travis, in general, tried to keep to himself, stating, "I do get picked on a lot." Keeping their adoption private may have helped to avoid uncomfortable interactions, including intrusive queries or comments, enabling them the safety of blending in with peers to the extent possible.

"I share when it comes up": Prompted disclosure. Almost half of participants ($n=24$), with a variety of gender identities and a range of racial/ethnic backgrounds and family structures, noted that they shared their adoptive status "when it came up" ("I'll casually say it"; Lizzie). Some of them commented that because they shared the same race and/or physical similarities to their parents, the fact that they were adopted did not routinely come up in conversation with peers or others. Participants were presumed to be biologically related to their parents unless or until they took it upon themselves to correct this assumption. Tim, a White cis gay boy with heterosexual parents, said, "If comes up, I'll just like casually say that I'm adopted. . .[because I] look really similar to [my family], it's not really obvious." Tim added that being adopted "barely comes to my mind, unless someone else brings it up." Tara, a 14 year-old Asian American cis girl with heterosexual parents, noted that insomuch as she looked like her mother, her adoptive status was rarely raised in conversation, but said that she shared it if it came up or if she was asked directly:

> Lots of people assume that I'm not adopted because my mom is Asian and my dad is White. . .[but] like if someone was like, "Are you adopted?" I'd be like, "Yeah, from the Philippines." But I don't bring it up as a topic of conversation. . .It's kind

of just like, I don't know. . .Kind of like, I play the guitar, but I don't go around telling everyone that I play the guitar.

Here, Tara frames her adoption as just one fact about herself, but also implicitly acknowledges that sharing this information was more personal and "risky," and something that she did not always feel up to discussing, elaborating on, or explaining to an outsider.

Like the first group, who did not routinely share their adoptive status with new people, five of these participants, four of whom were of color, tended to broach their adoption only when it came up in part because they faced negative reactions to such disclosures in the past, with peers assuming that adoption was "negative." Kat, a 15 year-old White genderfluid participant with a mom and dad, said: "I'll be like 'Yep, I'm adopted', and they're like 'Oh I'm sorry'. They immediately assume that I don't like it, like they think something bad happened, or that I am absolutely devastated about it."

Coming out about both. Notably, 9 of the 15 participants with LG parents in this group said that adoption and their two-mom or two-dad status were so intertwined that, when it did come up, they often found themselves "coming out" about both their adoption and same-sex parents. PJ, a 16 year-old biracial nonbinary queer participant with two moms, said:

I don't go around telling people I'm adopted; [I tell] when we are talking about our parents, like, "Yeah, one of my moms. . ." I'll kind of say one of my moms instead of my parents. It isn't really big and it's kind of hinting but I'm not even trying to hint, I'm just talking.

Elliot, a White 15 year-old cis boy, shared: "If someone asks about my parents, like, 'I bet your mom's really nice', I'll say, 'I have two dads'. And they're like, 'You have two dads?' And I'm like, 'Yeah, I'm adopted'." In such situations, participants confronted heteronormativity and bionormativity, which, rather than compelling them into continued silence, spurred them to reveal details of their family structure and adoptive status. They chose not to lie by omission, but to directly challenge the assumptions that peers and others made about them as a way of pushing back on (i.e., resisting or "queering") normative family discourses.

"I don't have a choice about sharing": Disclosure as unavoidable. Ten participants—all but one of whom were Black, Latinx, or Asian, most with lesbian (four) or heterosexual parents (four)—were clear that the fact of their adoption was not something that they felt they could avoid or hide, even if

they wanted, because of the visible differences between them and their parents (i.e., different races/skin tones). Specifically, they noted that because they were of color and their parents were White, the fact that they were adopted was "obvious." Eddie, a 16 year-old Latinx cis boy with heterosexual parents, shared: "It's kind of a dead giveaway, because my skin tone is not very white, and my parents are White." Ben, a Latinx cis boy with two moms, commented that people could put "two and two together" when he "[drove] up to school with a White lady." The "obviousness" of their adoption meant that they sometimes fielded "rude" or "insensitive" queries about their adoptive background (e.g., "Where are you from?"). These slights communicated messages of judgment about their family structure, and were intrusive and unwanted.

Five of these participants felt that their adoptive status was additionally "obvious" because they had two moms or two dads. This, coupled with their racial differences from their parents, seemed to "tip people off" as they "put two and two together." Maya, a 16 year-old Latinx cis girl with two White moms, said, "I feel like they can figure it out [when] I say I have two moms."

Disclosure as purposeful and proactive.   Nine participants, all of whom were of color with at least one White adoptive parent, from a mix of family structures, said that they made no effort to hide their adoptive status, and, in fact, made an effort to tell people. Thus, they engaged in proactive disclosure. Emily, a 15 year-old Asian American cis girl with heterosexual parents "used it as a fun fact; it's something that makes me unique." Tori, a 13 year old Black cis girl with two mothers, shared, "It's usually the first thing I tell people about me." These participants tended to be open about their adoptive status despite sometimes encountering ignorant or negative reactions from peers in the past (e.g., "They say they're 'sorry'"). Emily, for example, said that she often found herself educating others about adoption, because "they think I was left on the doorstep like Annie." Insomuch as all of these participants were transracially adopted, proactive disclosure may have operated as both a coping strategy (e.g., education and advocacy is a means of grappling with others' ignorance) but also a way of "getting ahead" of potentially uncomfortable questions and reactions from peers who might have commented on racial differences within their family.

Peers' Responses: Adoption Related Microaggressions

Participants who did not tend to share openly about their adoption, those who shared "when needed," and those who were more forthcoming and/or took the initiative to share, all experienced microaggressions. Some cited their

negative experiences with adoption related stigma with peers as reasons for their hesitancy to share. Others, though, drew on these experiences as evidence of people's ignorance, and were seemingly more motivated to share their adoptive background, especially when they felt that their audience was curious as opposed to hostile.

In our sample, and consistent with Baden's (2016) model, the most common type of microaggression reported was **microinvalidations** by peers and others ($n = 17$), which participants often intuited were based in ignorance or lack of familiarity with adoption. Participants described peers as responding to learning of their adoption with pity or shock, which conveyed (a) that adoption was something negative, and (b) a presumption that they must feel bad about being adopted. Such reactions drew on stereotypes of abandonment and hardship (e.g., their birth parents did not want them; they must have suffered adversity prior to adoption). "I'm sorry" was a common response among their peers. In some cases, this type of response made them hesitant to disclose in the future. Explaining her tendency to share "only when it came up," Taylor, a 13 year-old White cis girl with heterosexual parents, said:

> I shared a lot more when I was younger, just because I felt like I had to get that out there [and] wanted at least someone to know. [But] they were like, "Oh, hmm" and it seemed like they felt a bit bad for me, and that's when I realized that maybe telling them isn't the best idea 'cause I don't want people to feel bad for me.

When asked what she thought her peers believed about adoption, Taylor said, "I think that they think that something bad must have happened to my biological family and I have absolutely zero connections to them. But that's not true."

Sierra, an 18 year-old Black cis girl with two moms, said that she shared that she was adopted when it "naturally" came up, but also said that she approached such conversations with some wariness based on the assumptions she had encountered throughout her life:

> I feel like a lot of people say, like, "Oh, I'm so sorry," "I'm sorry that happened to you." But, it's like, being adopted is not like a sad thing at all. It's a happy, good thing. For me, it's more like the reasons why I had to be adopted or why I had to be in the foster care system are [sad].

Several participants noted that sharing about their adoption opened them up to questions about their "real parents," and comments about how they didn't "look like" their parents or siblings. Kat, a 15 year-old White

genderfluid participant with a mom and dad, shared: "It does get annoying. [People] will ask a question and say 'real parents'. And I'm like 'Do you mean my birth parents? Or my parents? Which one are you considering my 'real' parents?"

Just three participants described experiences with **microinsults** by peers. Significantly, all three identified as trans/nonbinary and of color, suggesting that they may have been vulnerable to stigmatizing remarks that explicitly targeted their adoption but were perhaps linked to or motivated by intolerance of children's gender identity or expression and/or race. Jaxie, a 13 year-old Black nonbinary participant with two dads, shared that peers assumed "that, like, the parents didn't want [me] or something, so they just gave [me] away to some random person." Jaxie shared that they often corrected their peers and told them to "not to just assume things." Nic, a 13 year-old Black unlabeled/nonbinary participant with heterosexual parents, recalled how peers said things like "Did your birth mother not want you?" and "Do your parents see you differently?"

Five participants described **microassaults**. All of these individuals had ADHD diagnoses, and three had diagnoses of anxiety and/or depression. In turn, these individuals may have had social difficulties to begin with, which may have interacted with identity-related differences to render them especially vulnerable to microassaults. Sage, a 15 year-old White nonbinary participant with two moms, shared experiences of hostile teasing from peers surrounding their adoptive status, with one classmate saying, "'Well blah blah blah that's why your mom didn't love you'. I'm like, 'Whatever'. And he's like, 'That's why your mom gave you up'. And I'm like, 'Shut up, at least my mom wanted me'." Jeremy, a 13 year-old White cis boy with two mothers, shared how one peer had "told me I was a mistake," a comment that spurred Jeremy to "hit him."

Fourteen participants, all with LG parents (eight with gay fathers, six with lesbian mothers), specifically described having encountered **positive or neutral responses** from peers, including respectful questioning and curiosity. Jessie, a 17 year old White cis girl with two dads, shared, "I've had friends ask, 'Oh, at what age were you adopted?' Stuff like that. It's more curiosity."

Disclosing About Family Structure

Among those with same-sex parents, participants' narratives related to disclosure of their two-mom or two-dad family structure differed somewhat. For example, no participants said that they rarely or never shared their family structure—likely in part because it is generally less concealable than

adoptive status (e.g., as for those who are the same race as their heterosexual parents). Also, those who disclosed when prompted or "when it came up" often provided the caveat that they preferred to share only when they felt safe. We next describe the full spectrum of approaches to disclosure of family structure, and how these overlapped with their approach to adoption disclosure.

"I share when it comes up": Prompted disclosure. Most (25 of 32) participants with two mothers or two fathers asserted that they shared their lesbian mother/ gay father family structure "when it comes up" or "if they ask." Many of them (*n*=12) navigated disclosure of their adoption in similar or parallel ways, such that they were among those who shared their adoptive status "when it came up," with most of the others in this group (*n*=6) framing adoption disclosure as "unavoidable" given their racial differences from their parents. About revealing that she had two moms, Lila, a 15 year-old multiracial cis girl, said that she shared "if they ask. Or if it seems right in the conversation. I don't tell everyone the first time I meet them or whatever. But if they ask or we're talking about family stuff then I'll mention it." These participants often added the caveat that "nobody cares" and/or that many students at their school or in their friendship group were LGBTQ+. River, a Latinx cis boy, shared that he had two moms "if they ask, but I don't think people really care that much anymore. For my generation—like, [no one], like, cares enough about it enough to like make you feel bad about it or anything." In a few cases, participants' peers responded with questions or curiosity—but their reactions were not inherently negative, even when "they can be nosy" (Sasha).

Conditional disclosure, based on trust. Nine of these participants elaborated to emphasize that although they sometimes disclosed their family structure when it came up, and especially when it was "difficult to sidestep the question," they preferred to share their structure only with people they trusted— that is, when peers became friends. Carter, a 15 year-old multiracial cis boy with two mothers, said: "If I introduce myself to someone new, that wouldn't be the first piece of information that I would share. But when I do make closer friends, I do feel comfortable sharing that." Jeremy, a 13 year-old White cis boy with two mothers, tended to disclose "after a while, [when] I know they're a trustworthy friend and they won't be rude to me and tell everyone." Notably, Jeremy recalled how his approach had not always been so selective, noting that he had a friend in middle school who "told everyone," prompting his more restrained approach to disclosure. Latham, a 15 year-old Black cis boy with two moms, narrated the process of navigating if, when, and what peers could be trusted with information about his family structure. When

he went to sleepaway camp, for example, Latham typically waited a few days before bringing up his two moms out of concern about harassment from "kind of conservative" kids: "Maybe the first two days I'll just say 'mom', you know." Sometimes these teenagers experienced anxiety even when sharing with friends, noting that they were unsure how people would react, and worrying they might "judge" participants.

Conditional disclosure, based on perceived safety. In 4 of these 25 cases, participants modified their approach according to circumstance and perceived safety. All four individuals lived in large cities, two of which were in the South. Marcus, a biracial 14 year-old cis boy with two dads, explained: "Personally, now with going to a Catholic school as an atheist with gay parents, I'm a little nervous about what people will think." Marcus found it easier to share at his old school, "an Episcopal school; those are not religiously as strict." Brit, a 14 year-old Black genderfluid individual with two moms, shared: "It depends on the circumstance, because obviously if I go to the more rough sides of where I live, or I'm in a place I don't know, no. If people ask me about my family, I'm not gonna [say], 'Oh, yeah! My entire household is gay!' No. Sometimes, safety plays a factor."

Proactive disclosure. Six participants, four of whom had gay fathers, said that they proactively shared that they had same-sex parents, in order to avoid certain undesirable situations (e.g., having peers find out from others; peers making homophobic remarks in front of them). Five of them were among those who tended to share proactively about their adoption, as well. For example, Jaxie, a 13 year-old Black nonbinary participant, said that they tended to share proactively so that peers did not "find out from other people," thereby disclosing in order to maintain agency and control over the when and how of disclosure. Notably, Jaxie disclosed despite some prior negative experiences with sharing, noting that "people can assume that it's embarrassing to have two dads; it's not." Elliot, a White 15 year-old cis boy, proactively shared so that peers would not make jokes about gay parents or adoption in front of him ("I try to tell people when I can, to kind of just, 'Heads up'. . . and if they crack gay jokes, then I'd be like, 'Hey, shut up'"). Peter, a 15 year-old Asian cis boy, shared:

> It comes up in many ways, like if I say when I'm going to the beach, "Oh yeah, my *dads* are going to be there," and then they don't really say anything because it's not really a big deal. . .nobody makes it out to be. I've always been open about it, and that's because my dads have done a good job at reinforcing the idea that it's okay to have two dads.

The tendency for participants with gay dads, in particular, to disclose this fact proactively may in part reflect their status as a subject of heightened scrutiny: in fact, gay father families are rarer than lesbian mother families, and are more likely to be formed via adoption, rendering them more visible and less likely to be shielded by heteronormative and bionormative assumptions.

Peers' Responses: Family Structure Related Microaggressions

Participants described fewer instances of microaggressions related to their family structure than adoptive status, although those they did face were generally more intense than the general ignorance (i.e., microinvalidations) they encountered upon disclosing their adoptive status. **Microinvalidations** (e.g., questioning of their family's legitimacy) were rarely described. Only two teenagers detailed instances of their families being undermined by peers (e.g., a peer questioning whether their two-mom family was "complete" without a dad)—although they often described microinvalidations at the structural level (e.g., erasure of their family in school curricula). **Microinsults** (i.e., commentary that conveyed stereotypes) were described by three participants, who detailed peer reactions that reflected ignorance yet did not seem intended to harm. Tess, a 15 year-old White cis girl, shared that peers sometimes asked her which of her dads "played the mother role." Sasha, a 16 year-old White cis girl, said that her peers would ask her "insensitive" questions about her two dads, to which she would respond, "You wouldn't ask that if it were a guy and a girl."

Microassaults were also identified by three participants. Andrew, a 15 year-old White cis boy, who had struggled with depression and anxiety, tended to be open about his two moms despite the fact that peers had not always responded positively. He recalled how some peers had called him "fatherless" and "mama's boy." Such microaggressions stung, but the teasing did not dissuade him from sharing his family structure. Brit, a 14 year-old Black genderfluid individual, was also fairly open about having two moms, but recalled being asked questions like, "'What's it like being raised by d-slurs?' [dykes], and I'm like, 'I'm not gonna answer that'."

Four participants said they tended to receive **positive responses** (e.g., "that's cool"), which were accompanied by curiosity in three cases. Maya, a 16 year-old Latinx cis girl with two White mothers, said, "Some of my new friends that I met this year are just like, 'What is it like? Is it different?' But they won't bug me about it. They think it's cool. . .A lot of my friends like hanging out here at our house because of my two moms."

Disclosure About Own SOGI identities

Twenty-nine participants were LGBTQ+ themselves. In turn, we explored their narratives about coming out to both friends and their parents about these identities.

Coming out to peers. Most of the 29 LGBTQ+ participants noted that they were out in general, with some noting that most of their friends were also LGBTQ+. Many (*n* = 13) specifically said that it was "not a big deal" and that they had lots of LGBTQ peers, with several sharing that their school had a prominent LGBTQ+ affinity group. Maya, a 16 year-old Latinx cis bisexual girl with two moms, said: "A lot of my friends are like gay or bi, so it's just easy to be around them. I like having that group of people. Like, my ex-best friend is gay, my new best friend is pan." Daisy, a 16 year-old Black cis bisexual girl with two moms, said, "It's pretty easy [to be bi]; there are a lot of people in my school that identify as LGBTQ+." A few participants, however, described low LGBTQ+ representation in their schools and peer groups. Elliot, a White 15 year-old cis bisexual boy with two dads, shared that his best girl friend was also bisexual, but he had few other LGBTQ+ people in his life. Several others explicitly noted that their communities were not especially LGBTQ+ affirming.

Two participants noted that while they were out about their sexual orientation, they were less out about other aspects of their identity (nonbinary gender identity in one case, identity as a furry in another). And, a few found more support and understanding in their peer groups for their sexual identity than their gender identity. PJ, a 16 year-old biracial nonbinary queer/gay participant with two moms, said, "Fifth grade is actually when I [came out as] nonbinary. In a lot of my classes, it'd be like, 'You still have female parts. You're a girl!' And they'd keep calling me 'she' and. . .bully me in that way." Regarding the types of microaggressions they faced currently, PJ shared, "It's very interesting to explain to someone I am a nonbinary person who's gay. Because they'll be like, 'Oh, are you going to date another nonbinary person?'"

Coming out to parents. Many (*n* = 17) were out to both parents: lesbian couples in eight cases, heterosexual couples in five cases, and gay male couples in four cases. Two participants, a cis girl and a cis boy, both with heterosexual parents, said that they "tested the waters" initially by saying that they were bisexual. Eddie, a 16 year-old Latinx cis boy, shared:

I came out as bi, just to test the waters a little bit before I really came out as gay. I don't really think that was necessary, but it just was to help myself and my understanding. My mom's friend, he's also gay. So it was really easy for my mom and my dad to accept.

Parents' reactions were largely positive, such that they were "totally accepting." Said Daisy, a 16 year-old Black cis bisexual girl with two moms, "I felt very supported. I just remember them saying, 'We support you and however you identify, and we're here for you'." Nic, a 13 year-old Black participant, described their heterosexual parents as "cool with it" in regard to their "unlabeled" sexual and gender identities.

Three participants noted that one advantage of having LG parents was that it was easier for them to come out, with PJ even noting "my birth mom wasn't gay," and wondering if it would have been harder for them to come out if they weren't adopted. Daisy, a 16 year-old Black cis bisexual girl, shared: "I came out to my [moms] two months ago. They were very supportive, obviously, because they're both gay."

Six participants (three with lesbian mothers, two with gay fathers, one with heterosexual parents) described invalidating reactions by parents. Andrew, a 15 year-old White cis gay boy, said that one of his moms "wanted to me to at least be bi" and was "trying to find me a cool girlfriend, and I said I didn't want a girlfriend. I felt pretty pressured there." Tess, a 15 year-old White cis girl who identified as bisexual or pansexual, said her dads were "really weird about it," seeming to mock her for being bisexual: "They just don't believe me in a way."

Brit, a 14 year-old Black genderfluid individual, ultimately came out as pansexual but first as asexual; both of their moms were somewhat "doubt-ful," as they were only familiar with "lesbian and gay." Additionally, Brit's moms were more accepting of Brit's sexuality than their gender identity ("they use 'she' more than 'they'"). Sage, a 15 year-old White participant who was genderqueer and a lesbian, said that coming out to their moms about their gender identity was "a lot harder" than coming out as a lesbian, which Sage was "not surprised" by. Regarding gender identity,

their understanding of it was very old. It wasn't very accurate at all. I was like, "I don't really identify with the gender I was assigned with." And they were just like, "What does that mean?" And I was like, "Well I'm not exactly a boy, I'm not exactly a girl." They were like, "What are you?" So that was a little bit of a period where I had to keep on explaining to them. They're so used to being in the loop with being gay [but] were kind of thrown with my gender identity. . .They try to respect it. [Parent A] is really good about using my chosen name and pronouns. [Parent B] really isn't, and it's been a [process] of. . .being like,

"Hey remember?" Without her getting all like, "Well, I've known you for so long the other way so. . ."

Five participants (three with two moms, two with heterosexual parents) were not out to their parents. Three of them suspected that their parents might know they were queer, but had not told them. One participant recently realized that he was asexual, but had not told his moms yet as it was so "new." One participant was exploring their gender, but was hesitant to tell their heterosexual parents as they anticipated a negative response ("so for now my pronouns are she/her"). Thus, being early in the identity exploration process, and anxiety about parents' responses, were invoked as reasons for not being out to parents.

Discussion

Although several studies have examined microaggressions (Farr et al., 2016) and disclosure experiences (Cody et al., 2017; Gianino et al., 2009) among adopted people with LG parents, the current study is the first to focus on adopted adolescents' disclosure experiences surrounding adoption and family structure, as well as, for some, their own LGBTQ+ identities, within a U.S. social and political climate characterized by hegemonic heteronormativity and bionormativity. Drawing primarily from microaggressions (Baden, 2016) and stigma (Herek, 2016) frameworks, we sought to understand how Gen-Z adoptees navigate disclosure experiences with peers and parents. Our findings advance Baden's (2016) conceptual framework in that they provide nuance to microaggressions and stigma theories and highlight how developmental stage and family structure may intersect with adoptive status and race to impact the social experiences of adoptees. Centering adolescents' perspectives, our findings offer new insights into what this cohort of young people consider before sharing aspects of their identity, why they disclose (if at all), and the types of responses they receive from peers, friends, and parents. Our results have implications for scholars and practitioners who interface with adolescents and families.

Adolescents in our sample reported various approaches to disclosing their adoptive status and family structure to peers, ranging from rare to reactive to proactive, building on prior work focusing on recalled disclosure practices among adults with LG parents (Goldberg, 2007; Leddy et al., 2012) as well as limited work on adopted individuals with LG parents in middle childhood (Farr et al., 2016). The developmental context of adolescence means that individuals have more control and autonomy related to disclosure of both their adoptive status and family structure than those in middle childhood (Farr et al., 2016). In turn, participants often engaged in selective forms of disclosure, seemingly

related to concerns about both privacy and peer reactions, which are more central considerations in adolescence. Yet an approach of general nondisclosure was rare, and seemingly easier to engage in the context of adoption rather than family structure, insomuch as the former is less likely to be raised in conversation amongst peers—assuming that individuals share physical similarities (most significantly race) with their parents. Participants who generally did not disclose their adoptive status were largely cis White boys with White parents, who were perhaps unlikely to be immediately recognized as adopted by their peers, and may also have a lesser need to disclose amid gender differences in peer relationships—that is, girls are more likely to disclose personal information to peers than boys (Rose & Rudolph, 2006).

Many participants endorsed a strategy of prompted (or reactive) disclosure, whereby they generally did not volunteer information about their adoption or family structure, but shared (and did not lie by omission) "if it came up." They disclosed knowing that they might encounter microaggressions from peers—which were more common, albeit less intense, in relation to adoption than family structure or parents' sexuality. Despite being situated within a more tolerant cohort than prior generations (Parker & Igielnik, 2020), this generation of adolescent adoptees (Gen-Z) continue to face stigmatization based on a lack of societal familiarity with adoption (Garber & Grotevant, 2015), although significantly, the type of adoption microaggressions that they encounter as teenagers may be more subtle and mundane than those they face in middle childhood (e.g., teasing; Soares et al., 2017).

With respect to their two mom/two dad families specifically, some participants shared that they preferred to share more selectively with trusted peers, consistent with prior work (Cody et al., 2017; Gianino et al., 2009; Leddy et al., 2012; Messina & Brodzinsky, 2019). Yet in contrast to prior work (e.g., Kuvalanka et al., 2014), participants rarely cited prior negative reactions by peers as priming their current guarded approach. This may reflect the contemporary landscape of LGBTQ+ parenting in the US: many of our participants resided in urban areas of the Northeast and West Coast, which are known for being relatively LGBTQ+ friendly (Human Rights Campaign, 2022; Movement Advancement Project, 2023), even accounting for the current backlash vis a vis LGBTQ+ rights (Bump, 2023). It is also possible that our participants downplayed their exposure to negative responses amidst societal pressure to adapt a normalizing discourse in relation to having LGBTQ+ parents—the latter of which may be reflected in their tendency to "come out" to peers by foregrounding their parents' gender ("I have two moms/two dads") rather than their sexuality ("I have gay parents"). By minimizing the significance of their parents' sexuality, they may have avoided the "taint of difference" associated with LGBTQ+ families (Clarke & Demetriou,

2016). "Normalizing" is also a strategy used by adopted children as a means of reducing vulnerability to stigma (i.e., we are just like other families; Colaner & Horstman, 2021).

For some participants, their adoption (and family structure) was "unavoidable": that is, being a different race than their parents cued peers to discern various elements of their family structure. Consistent with prior work, teenagers of color with White LGBTQ+ parents experienced a lack of privacy and were vulnerable to intrusions and at times unwanted disclosures related to their family structure and family building route (Cody et al., 2017; Gianino et al., 2009). For some participants, coming out about their adoption also meant coming out about their parents, insomuch as lying or evading was undesirable and/or too complex. Such individuals lack the privacy and discretion that those who are the same race as their adopted parents often enjoy (Docan-Morgan, 2010; Gianino et al., 2009). For a White teen boy with two White moms, for example, biological continuity might be inferred by outsiders, and he might be "read" by peers as related to one mother and not the other, and approached in ways that allow him to come out about his same-sex parents but not his adoption (e.g., confirming that he does have two moms and leaving it at that). A Black teen boy with two White dads may be more readily recognized, and queried, as a transracial adoptee with gay parents.

Some participants proactively disclosed to peers about their adoption and/or family structure, which seemed to stem from a mixture of pride (Burand et al., 2023) and a desire to avoid unnecessary exposure to stigmatizing comments or reactions—as well as, possibly, an awareness that their peers very well might meet their parents someday and be able to ascertain their sexuality and family building route, reflecting prior work documenting how pragmatic concerns may influence disclosure decisions (Clarke & Demetriou, 2016; Goldberg, 2007). Interestingly, some participants explicitly identified that they proactively disclosed despite prior encounters with microaggressions, speaking to the reality that exposure to stigma does not always lead to secrecy and/or hiding. Rather, it may confirm for some teenagers their need or desire to be open about different elements of their background and identity, in order to live as authentically as possible (Goldberg, 2007).

When it came to disclosing their own SOGI identities to peers, most adolescents in this sample were already out, citing accepting school climates and peers who were also LGBTQ+ as reasons why they felt secure sharing this information. However, some participants experienced more pushback for certain aspects of their identity (e.g., gender) than others (e.g., sexual orientation, adoptive status). This aligns with national trends where, although the number of people identifying as trans or nonbinary has increased, public acceptance has not kept up (Parker et al., 2022).

More complicated were parent reactions to participants' disclosure of SOGI identities. Many parents were described as immediately supportive and accepting. Teenagers with same-sex parents in particular appreciated their parents' affirmation, validation, and support, as well as their existing relationship to the queer community vis a vis their parents (Kuvalanka & Goldberg, 2009; Stone et al., 2022). However, some parents—including LG parents— reacted negatively, particularly when the teen came out as bisexual, asexual, or genderfluid. This somewhat mirrors prior work suggesting that older generations of parents, including LG parents, may struggle with their children's endorsement of "new" or less familiar sexual and gender identities (Kuvalanka & Goldberg, 2009; McCurdy et al., 2023). Kuvalanka and Goldberg (2009) studied LGBTQ+ young adults with LB mothers and found that some participants recalled less supportive responses to their coming out. Some mothers worried about outsiders "blaming" them for their children's queer identity, and a few had a limited understanding of gender identity and reacted with confusion to disclosure of a trans identity. Such negative reactions by parents, regardless of their SOGI, can have a detrimental effect on children, undermining identity development and well-being (Bosse et al., 2022; Hanna-Walker et al., 2023).

Limitations

Our study contains a number of limitations. First, we conducted in-depth interviews with adopted adolescents about a number of highly sensitive issues. In turn, it is possible that some participants may have been reluctant to disclose personal details such as bullying; therefore, our reports surrounding microaggressions, for example, might not fully reflect the range and intensity of peer experiences. Second, our sample is disproportionately from urban and suburban areas in more LGBTQ+-friendly areas of the United States. It is very likely that in rural and/or more politically conservative areas, teenagers may have reported more antagonism related to having two moms or two dads—and possibly their adoption and multiracial family structure as well. Third, we did not focus on the intersection of racial and adoption microaggressions per se, which are salient to many adoptees (White et al., 2022), because it was beyond the scope of our study. Future work can expand on our findings to focus on and explore these particular intersections.

Implications

This study has implications for therapists and other professionals who work with adolescents and families. It provides insight into the experiences of

adopted teenagers, including those with LGBTQ+ parents, who must navigate if, when, how, and to whom to share details about themselves and their families. Such disclosures may allow teenagers to express themselves authentically, build closeness in relationships, and enable them to feel fully "seen"—yet they also carry the risk of negative responses and rejection (Bosse et al., 2022; Hanna-Walker et al., 2023). At a time when teenagers often wish to fit in with their peers, and are highly sensitive to ways in which their differences may make them stand out in unwanted ways (Spears Brown & Bigler, 2005), they are navigating visible and invisible ways that they and their families differ from dominant normative family configurations (Messina & Brodzinsky, 2019). Therapists and other professionals seek to engage children about how to handle and respond to questions about background and/or family structure, as well as how to navigate stigma, in school and from peers. Further, clinicians who work with adopted teenagers should be cognizant that their experiences navigating disclosure of their identities and background may also be impacted by their emotional, social, and cognitive functioning (Spears Brown & Bigler, 2005). Some of our participants had other challenges that may have intersected with their experiences sharing about their adoption and family structure, such that teenagers who were already socially victimized (e.g., due to mental health challenges or other forms of "difference" such as gender identity or expression) may have been especially vulnerable to mistreatment about their adoption or family structure.

This work also has implications for future research. Longitudinal work is needed to explore how experiences of disclosure and microaggressions shift across key developmental periods. For example, What will happen as Gen-Z moves further into emerging adulthood? How do young adult and adult adoptees continue to develop and refine privacy rules (Horstman et al., 2017) surrounding disclosure of their adoptive and LGBTQ+ family statuses? Future work can also explore how adoptive families' approach to talking about adoption (e.g., their communicative openness and conversation orientation; Colaner & Horstman, 2021) impact adolescents' approaches to disclosure. Future work is also needed to capture the rapidly changing and highly disparate (i.e., across state lines) policy landscape and social climate surrounding LGBTQ+ issues. A third area of research concerns how LGBTQ+ adopted children disclose their SOGI identities to birth family members, who may play a key role in validating or undermining their sense of self as they navigate their intersecting identities—for example, as LGBTQ+ people, adopted people, people of color, and people with LGBTQ+ parents.

Conclusion

This study advances our understanding of how contemporary adopted teenagers in diverse families and with diverse identities themselves navigate disclosure surrounding such identities. It makes a particular contribution to the limited literature on the "second generation" (i.e., LGBTQ+ individuals with LGBTQ+ parents; Kuvalanka & Munroe, 2020; McCurdy et al., 2023), illuminating what SOGI identity disclosure to peers and parents can look like for Gen-Z teenagers in the current sociohistorical context. Through an integrated approach that incorporated sexual stigma (Herek, 2016), microaggression (Baden, 2016), and communication privacy management (Petronio, 2002) frameworks, we examined how identities intersect in complex ways and shape teenagers' disclosure decisions, building on the limited work in this area (Cody et al., 2017; Gianino et al., 2009; Messina & Brodzinsky, 2019). Our findings highlight the spectrum of adolescents' disclosure practices and the factors that they weigh as they decide if and how to disclose (e.g., perceived safety, established trust). Further, our work echoes and extends earlier work on perceptions of LGBTQ+- and adoption-related microaggressions (e.g., Baden, 2016; Farr et al., 2016). Our research reveals insights into adopted teenagers' stigma experiences and disclosure practices around adoption, family structure, and SOGI identities, which can inform future areas for research as Gen-Z adolescents enter young adulthood and beyond.

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