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Published online: 17 Feb 2017.

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ABSTRACT

Little research has examined the friendships of lesbian parents, especially within the context of children's schools. This study of 40 lesbian adoptive parents (20 couples) focused on their relationships with other parents in the school community and how sexual orientation, race, and class dynamics impacted these relationships. Half of the participants described friendships with parents at the school, sometimes in spite of demographic differences, whereas others felt disconnected due to these differences. Outside of school, most participants reported friendships with other lesbian/gay parents. Parents who felt less connected to other parents at school tended to describe more lesbian/gay parent connections. Findings highlight the impact of life stage and context in shaping friendship patterns among lesbian parents.

Friendships are an important source of social support, which, in turn, is associated with higher levels of individual well-being (Carmichael, Reis, & Duberstein, 2015), life satisfaction (Huxhold, Miche, & Schüz, 2013), and improved ability to cope with stress (Lee & Goldstein, 2016). Notably, friendships tend to fluctuate across the life course (Field, 1999; Hartup & Stevens, 1999; Pahl & Pevalin, 2005), especially as people transition from one life course stage to another, such that people tend to form relationships with others who are in a similar stage (Kalmijn, 2012). The transition to parenthood in particular prompts changes in heterosexual parents' friendships, including who they spend time with, consider themselves close to, seek support from, and feel "in sync" with (Bost, Cox, Burchinal, & Payne, 2002). Indeed, research on heterosexual parents indicates that contact with friends tends to diminish following the transition to parenthood (Carberry & Buhrmester, 1998; Gameiro, Boivin, Canavarro, Moura-Ramos, & Soares, 2010; Wrzus, Hänel, Wagner, & Neyer, 2013). Couples may also restructure their friendship networks once they become parents, such that they spend less time with non-parents and become closer to couples with young children (Cronenwett, 1985; Drentea &

Moren-Cross, 2005; Hancock, Cunningham, Lawrence, Zarb, & Zubrick, 2015; Parry, Glover, & Mulcahy, 2013).

There is also evidence that, as their children grow older and begin to attend school, heterosexual parents' friendships become increasingly "local," with many parents forming friendships with neighbors and others who live close by (Ishii-Kunz & Seccombe, 1989; Nelson, Kushlev, & Lyubomirsky, 2014), and overall, enjoying more social connections than non-parents (Kalmijn, 2012; Nelson et al., 2014). This increased social integration suggests that children act as socializing agents by creating opportunities for parents to meet others who live close by, and creating the need to participate in multiple social networks (e.g., neighborhood, school) that are likely to be comprised of other parents (Ishii-Kunz & Seccombe, 1989; Kalmijn, 2012; Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2003). In sum, there is evidence that heterosexual adults experience lasting changes in their social networks and friendships when they become parents—although remarkably, little research has explored heterosexual parents' friendships (see Nelson et al., 2014).

Likewise, very little research has examined how lesbians' friendships change when they become parents, or the nature and type of friendships that they engage in as their children grow older. Such work is important, given that: (a) lesbians, by virtue of their sexual orientation, represent a (stigmatized) minority in society, and potentially in the school setting (Goldberg, 2010); and (b) homophily (i.e., the notion that individuals tend to associate and bond with others who are similar to them in major demographic characteristics) plays a strong role in structuring friendships (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001). Further, because parents tend to be friends with neighbors and other local parents, and because neighborhoods tend to be made up of people who are similar to one another in regard to racial, ethnic, religious, and class affiliations, parents' friendships are often characterized by substantial homophily (McPherson et al., 2001; Wellman, Wong, Tindal, & Nazer, 1997). Given these realities, unknown but of interest are lesbian parents' experiences forming relationships with other parents in the school community (where they are likely minorities, at least in terms of sexual orientation) and, also, their connections to lesbian- and gay- (LG) parent families more generally, insomuch as both opportunity and choice may shape their efforts to build relationships with others who share their minority status (Baerveldt, Van Duijn, Vermeij, & Van Hemert, 2004; McPherson et al., 2001). For smaller (minority) groups, opportunities to socialize with those who share their minority status may be limited, leading to less homophily relative to the larger (majority) group. Indeed, Cross (1990) found this to be true for Black mothers, such that they formed more cross-race friendships than White mothers. For lesbians, the transition to parenthood entails pressure to engage in parenting communities where they are very likely in the minority (e.g., schools), which may or may not be accompanied or offset by involvement in communities where they are in the majority (i.e., LGBTQ communities, and LGBTQ parenting communities specifically).

There are several important exceptions to the general lack of research on lesbian mothers' friendships. In a study of lesbian couples becoming parents for the first time, Goldberg (2006) found that, shortly after they had become parents, lesbian mothers reported receiving less social support from their friends, often because their friends, who were single lesbians without children, no longer had similar lives. In their study of planned lesbian families, Gartrell and colleagues (2000) found that most (76%) mothers of five-year-old children were actively involved in the lesbian community and said that they socialized mainly with LG-parent families. Notably, later follow-ups (i.e., when children were 10 years old) indicated that the composition of the mothers' friend groups had changed, such that they socialized more with parents than non-parents and with more heterosexual-parent families than they had previously. In fact, at this later time point, only 13% of parents reported that they mostly socialized with other LG-parent families, and they reported that their friendship groups more closely represented who their children were friends with (Gartrell, Rodas, Deck, Peyser, & Banks, 2006; Gartrell, Peyser, & Bos, 2012).

Some similar themes (i.e., of parents as navigating parenthood amidst increasing distance from non-parent and LGBTQ friends and communities, and increasing friendships within the dominant heterosexual parent community) have also been documented in a few qualitative studies of gay fathers. Lewin (2009) noted that some men described having lost friendships once they became parents, in part because their old friends could not get used to the constraints that parenting imposed on their social life. In other cases, though, men reported that friendships with gay friends were maintained, despite the divergent nature of their social worlds. In a study of the transition to parenthood among gay adoptive fathers, Goldberg (2012) found that gay men often described shifts in their friendships upon becoming parents, whereby they saw non-parents less, and found themselves cultivating existing or new relationships with heterosexual friends. Such changes reflected their new status as members of the (largely heteronormative) "parenthood culture," as well as the greater salience of their parenthood identity as compared to their sexual identity (see also Lewin, 1993).

Research on lesbian parents' relationships with the other parents at their children's schools, which are likely to be salient in their daily lives, is particularly scarce. Research suggests that lesbian parents are generally fairly involved in their children's schools (Goldberg & Smith, 2014a, 2014b), which inevitably involves contact with other—primarily heterosexual—parents. In turn, lesbian parents are more likely than heterosexual parents to perceive other parents in the school community as unwelcoming and rejecting (Goldberg & Smith, 2014a, 2014b). Yet, no research has explored in depth lesbian parents' relationships with other parents at their children's schools. This is significant, given that many parents have extensive contact with their children's schools during early school years (Powell, Son, File, & Froiland, 2012) and parents often play a major role in orchestrating their children's social lives and activities when their

children are young (Ladd & Pettit, 2002), which inevitably involves contact, communication, and connection with other parents. Furthermore, lesbian couples are more likely to adopt than heterosexual couples (Gates, 2013), particularly children of color (Goldberg, 2009), resulting in multiple potential differences from the heterosexual parents at their children's schools, who are more often than not biologically related to their children and of the same race.

The current study focuses on lesbian adoptive mothers of young children ($n = 40$: 20 couples) with attention to (a) their sense of connection to and friendships with other parents; and (b) how sexual orientation, race, and class dynamics influence these relationships. Given that lesbian adoptive parents will likely be surrounded primarily by heterosexual biological parents within the context of their children's schools, we also specifically address the degree to which parents described maintaining, or seeking out, friendships with other LG-parent families.

In approaching this study, we draw from life course and intersectional perspectives. A life course perspective (Elder, 1994, 1998) emphasizes the influence of time on individual development and life transitions, as well as the role of the larger social context, in shaping individual lives (Elder, 1994; Umberson, Pudrovska, & Reczek, 2010). Throughout various life course transitions (e.g., becoming a parent, a child's transition to school), individuals re-examine and potentially restructure their societal roles and social networks (Elder, 1998). In turn, their experiences across the life course, including the development and maintenance of social networks, are ultimately shaped by social categories (e.g., sexual minority status, social class; Goldberg, 2010) and contextual factors (e.g., geographic location; Umberson et al., 2010), as well as the opportunities and constraints posed by specific life course transitions; for example, becoming a parent, and then having a school-aged child, both expand and limit the nature of one's social network (Kalmijn, 2012).

An intersectionality perspective recognizes that sexual orientation may intersect with other social locations to shape parents' experiences of and relationships with each other (Cole, 2009; Parent, DeBlaere, & Moradi, 2013). Social categories (e.g., sexual orientation, gender, race, social class) depend on one another for meaning: they inform and interact with one other, shaping how individuals experience their world (Cole, 2009). As an example, sexual minority, working-class parents may feel particularly out of place in relation to, and disconnected from, other parents and teachers at their children's schools, in part because of their own negative histories of schooling and lower educational attainment levels (Nixon, 2011). Research has generally not explored how LG parents' experiences as "other" may be magnified or offset by racial or class statuses—or whether and how they bridge racial, class, and sexual orientation divides with other parents.

Method

Description of the sample

Data come from 40 parents (20 couples) who participated in individual, in-depth interviews about their experiences and perceptions related to their children's

schools, including other parents. We present descriptives for the sample in Table 1. As Table 1 indicates, the lesbian mothers in the study lived primarily on the East and West Coasts, in urban environments. Most were White, whereas most of their children were of color. Most children were in preschool or kindergarten at the time that the women were interviewed, and half attended public (as opposed to private) schools.

According to Gates, Badgett, Macomber, and Chambers (2007), who provide national data from the 2000 Census on female adoptive same-sex couples, the average family income for female couples was $102,331; in our sample, couples reported a similar average income of $116,150 ($SD$ = $46,158). Adoptive parents in female couples at the national level were 77% White; our sample included more White parents (90%). Likewise, national data showed that at least a college degree was reported by 59% of parents in female couples; our sample was more educated:

Table 1. Demographics of the sample (N = 40 women, 20 couples).

	M (SD) OR % OF N = 40
URBANICITY	
RURAL/SUBURBAN	25%
URBAN	75%
REGION	
NORTHEAST	40%
SOUTH	10%
MIDWEST	5%
WEST	45%
FAMILY INCOME	$116,150 ($46,158)
EDUCATION*	4.28 (1.11)
WORK STATUS**	
FT-FT	58%
FT-PT	21%
FT-SAH	16%
SAH-SAH	5%
PARENT RACE (% WHITE)	90%
CHILD AGE	5.52 (1.61)
CHILD GENDER	
BOY	43%
GIRL	57%
CHILD RACE	
% WHITE/NOT OF COLOR	20%
% OF COLOR INCLUDING MULTIRACIAL/BIRACIAL	80%
CHILD GRADE	
PRESCHOOL	45%
KINDERGARTEN	35%
1ST GRADE	10%
2ND-5TH GRADE	10%
TYPE OF SCHOOL	
PUBLIC	50%
PRIVATE	50%
TYPE OF ADOPTION	
PRIVATE DOMESTIC	60%
PUBLIC DOMESTIC	20%
INTERNATIONAL	20%

Note: *Education was measured on a scale of 1–6 (1 = *less than high school education*, 2 = *high school diploma*, 3 = *associate's degree/some college*, 4 = *bachelor's degree*, 5 = *master's degree*, and 6 = *PhD/MD/JD*).
**FT-FT = both parents work full time; FT-PT = one parent works full time, one parent works part time; FT-SAH = one parent works full time, one parent stays at home; SAH-SAH = both parents stay at home.

92.5% had at least a college degree. Nationally, 52% of adopted children of female same-sex couples were White; our sample included fewer White children (20%).

Recruitment and participant selection

Inclusion criteria for the larger study from which this sample was drawn were: (a) couples must be adopting their first child; and (b) both partners must be becoming parents for the first time. Couples were recruited through adoption agencies and interviewed during the pre-adoptive period (i.e., while they were waiting for a child placement) and 3–4 months post-adoptive placement.

Couples who participated in this study of the transition to parenthood were re-contacted five years post-adoption for a follow-up. Both partners in each couple completed questionnaires; a subsample was invited to be interviewed about experiences with their children's schools. In identifying invitees, effort was made to ensure diversity in participant profiles (e.g., in child race, geographic region). Data are drawn from the five-year post-adoption interviews.

Procedure and data analysis

Participants took part in a 1–1.5 hour telephone interview with the principal investigator or a graduate student. Interviews were transcribed and de-identified; pseudonyms were used. The interview questions that were used in our analysis included the following: (a) How connected do you feel to your child's school?; (b) Tell me about your experiences with other parents; (c) Do you socialize with families that you have met through your child's school?; (d) Do you socialize with other lesbian/gay parent families?; (e) Do you socialize with other adoptive families? Probes (e.g., explain, tell me about that) were used to encourage elaboration of responses.

Participants' responses were transcribed and examined using thematic analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Our analysis focused on parents' descriptions of their relationships with other parents, and was informed by intersectional and life course frameworks, whereby we attended to the intersection of gender, sexual orientation, and other social locations in parents' responses, as well as attending to parents' invocations of the role of time and context in shaping their interpersonal connections.

To develop themes, we used a process of analytic triangulation, whereby each of the four authors coded the data. This ensures that multiple interpretations are considered, enhancing the credibility of the analysis (Patton, 2002). The coders, who constitute a diverse group (e.g., regarding sexual orientation and parenting status), discussed our social positioning and the possible influence of our biases during coding. We engaged in an iterative process of coding that involved a continual back and forth between the data and our analysis. Once we had formed clearly articulated codes, we applied focused coding, using the most significant codes to

sort the data. These codes, which are more conceptual and selective, became the basis for the "themes" developed in our analysis.

Results

Strong or positive connections to other parents in the school community

Half of the women in the sample ($n = 20$; including eight couples plus four individual women) described relatively positive connections with the other parents at their children's schools, who were described as "warm and welcoming," "pretty inviting," and "a good community." These participants felt accepted by other parents and had formed "nice relationships" with them. As Jennifer stated, "We've been reasonably lucky, in that at every school we've made some decent connections with parents and this year [child]—she's just made some wonderful friends whose parents we actually also really like and get along with." Most of these women, though, acknowledged variability across the parent community, such that "some are friendlier than others." Participants also noted that while other parents were pleasant, they themselves—as lesbian parents of adopted children, who were often of color—were "not the typical [school] family." In turn, they felt "accepted" by other parents, but had not necessarily experienced "total integration and complete bonding" with other families.

Some of these parents ($n = 11$; four couples plus three individual women) specifically described having formed friendships with other school parents, which were mainly initiated because of their children's friendships and, in turn, child-requested playdates and get-togethers. In a typical scenario, their child became friends with another child, and they themselves began to socialize with and develop a relationship with that child's parent(s), upon finding out that they "really gelled" and had "similar values in common." As Sara described, one of the friends she had made was "a mom of a girl that [child] had talked about a lot. [The mom said], 'Oh, she talks about [child] a lot too!' and I said, 'Oh, we should get them together,' and she gave me her phone number." Indeed, the women's active participation in their children's social lives (Ladd & Pettit, 2002) often led to expansions in the women's own social circles. Kim explained, "Jake's two best friends in the class are just adorable little twin girls. We've gotten to be quite friendly with them, and their parents are great." Kelly stated, "The children get together for playdates, and we all go on picnics, or they'll come here, or we'll go there."

Bridging differences

Several parents ($n = 8$; three couples plus two individual women) specifically described instances where their children's friendships prompted them to bridge social class, racial, ethnic, and religious differences between themselves and other parents. These women were sometimes surprised to form positive connections (although not necessarily friendships) with parents who differed so significantly from them—and who they sometimes expected to have negative reactions to their

families because of their sexual orientation and their two-mom family status. Angie explained that her partner had "reached out really hard to the Haitian mom of [child's] first best friend…. We're from very different worlds. She's from the housing project down the street and I feel like the parents—we just really love [the mother]. We just don't understand each other very much, but kind of love each other." Kim shared her initial concerns about her son's friend's mother, who, she noticed "had rosary beads hanging from her rearview mirror… and is from Columbia," leading her to assume that she was "probably uncomfortable with us. But we've become friendly and she's very, very nice. She lives around the corner from us. She's very Catholic but she's been really nice to us and her son comes over here and plays…. And she's always asking how [partner] is." Tracy described a similar situation:

> The first girl [daughter] wanted to invite over happened to be from India. I thought, "I wonder how this is going to go over; are her parents going to be okay?" I was so worried, and the mom came with her daughter and was just the kindest, most unbelievable—just great, very warm. And her little girls kept asking, "Why does [daughter] have two moms? Where is her dad?" and I finally said, "You know what, we're not going to talk about this anymore," because we had talked about it a lot. And she said, "Well my mom said it's okay if somebody has two moms, it's okay." And I was like, "Exactly, it's okay!"

Thus, in several cases, women had expected a negative, even homophobic, response from other parents, based on attributions related to their immigrant status, ethnicity, religion, and social class, but found that their sexuality was not a salient or problematic issue for these parents.

Negative or weak connections to other parents in the school community

The other half of the participants ($n = 20$; eight couples, plus four individual women) described feelings of disconnection from other parents within the school community. They felt left out, "invisible and anxious," and "uncomfortable" with the other parents, who did not "welcome [them] with open arms," leaving them disappointed with the lack of connection: "I just never really connected with anyone… which is a shame." Many women articulated their perceptions of the reasons for such disconnection. Some women mentioned multiple barriers to connection.

Sexual orientation

Perceptions or fears of rejection by other parents based on sexual orientation were named by some parents ($n = 6$: two couples, two other women) as inhibiting connection. They described having avoided interacting with other parents, or drawing attention to their sexual orientation, because of perceptions of or anxiety about encountering heterosexist stereotypes or rejection. Emily confided, "I do feel like there's a good ole' boy network here… the people are—like, the straight people kind of stick together and don't like to go outside of their bubble." Brittany avoided interactions with families out of fear of being "rejected": "I don't see a positive

representation of LGBTQ families [at school]." Shannon, who described her child's school as "politically conservative," acknowledged that their family was "different in more ways than one…. I know that being gay is a piece of that." In turn, Shannon shared that "the only friends we have at the school is the other lesbian, two-mom family." Her partner, Lori, expressed similar sentiments: "I don't feel like… socially, like I fit in…. I wish we were more mirrored." Thus, in a school community of mostly heterosexual-parent families with "conservative values," Shannon and Lori developed the strongest connection to a family who more closely "mirrored" their own.

Social class

Fifteen lesbian mothers (five couples, plus five additional women) identified social class differences as prompting a sense of disconnection from other parents, such that they felt out of place because they were not as wealthy as the other parents. As Stacy stated, "[It's] the socioeconomic values of this community. [It's] very, very… upscale. Obviously a lot of those people act… like they're in a higher station. When I deal with people who have that sort of attitude, it turns me off. It makes me not want to socialize with them." Likewise, Erin said, "It's a private school, and we are—like, a lot of them have a lot of money, and we don't, and so… we have a different lifestyle. [Daughter] socializes with them, but we don't, really." Her partner, Rita, agreed, asserting that the class and financial differences between them and other parents created a sense of distance and "discomfort," which interfered with their willingness or desire to foster social relationships with those families: "We have school relationships with parents… playdates and stuff with our kids, but we usually just drop them off… we wouldn't stay." Similarly, Wendy noted that most of the other families at her daughter's schools lived in a wealthier area of the community than they did, leading to a sense of distance from these parents: "I'm not trying to say it's like deliberate rejection by any means, but…." Wendy went on to say that she would consider inviting other families over only if she had "time to get our house in better shape."

For five of these women (one couple, plus three individual women), a sense of alienation and discomfort emerged as a function of the intersection of social class, work status, and sexual orientation. These women, all of whom worked full-time, noted that the parent community was primarily affluent heterosexual couples in which the mother stayed home and the father worked; in turn, they experienced a sense of alienation in relation to other parents because of their unique status as dual-earner, "not wealthy," and lesbian parents. Emily explained how, to her shock, a heterosexual mother announced at a PTA meeting that "'all the husbands will do the work [of building], and the women can sell the tickets.' It was just like, *wow*." Rita similarly perceived the parent community to be dominated by wealthy heterosexual couples with stay-at-home mothers. In turn, she "didn't want to do the PTA because it was such a different class of people that I felt I'd be uncomfortable."

Race/ethnicity

For seven lesbian mothers (two couples, plus three individual women), all of whom were White and who had adopted children of color, a sense of disconnection from other parents arose from intersections among race/ethnicity, social class, and sexuality, whereby they perceived or anticipated a lack of acceptance from other parents due to the multiple differences between them. Rachel perceived a "divide between the White parents and the non-White parents" that was difficult to navigate because of her complicated status as a White lesbian mother of a Latino son. For Monica, being one of "two White moms" of an African American child at a mostly African American school was "uncomfortable" and created "a lot of anxiety" about how other parents were responding to her. Alice shared her experience of trying to develop a relationship with the mother of a friend of her daughter:

> She's lovely, her children are lovely. She just never gave us the time of day. I think my own racism comes up, too, because this is a largely African American school and African American family. I think I get a little bit more worried about homophobia from people in lower classes and from people who are Black. It stung because I thought, "You're a great family, we'd love to know you," but after two times reaching out, I said, "Okay, I'm done."

Within-couple discrepancies in sense of connection

Four of the women who described positive connections to the other parents at their children's school had partners who described weak or negative connections. It is notable that, within a couple, two women could have such different perspectives of the parent community. In two of these four cases, the couple was separated/divorced; thus, these couples were presumably spending a lot of time apart and perhaps developing different types of relationships with families. In one couple, one partner worked significantly more hours than the other parent; in turn, one partner was described as more connected to and engaged with the parent community, because of her greater ability to attend school events, birthday parties, and other opportunities for socialization.

For another couple, Danielle and Jill, both differences in work hours and gender expression contributed to the discrepancy in feelings of connectedness to the parent community. Whereas Danielle was a member of the PTA and "volunteer[ed] weekly" in their child's classroom, Jill reported that she did not volunteer due to work obligations. In addition, Jill noted that whereas "Danielle has talked about how she feels welcomed by [other parents at the school], how they all have friended her on Facebook," she herself felt "left out." She noted that at "[school] drop off and pick up, they hardly talk to me." She attributed this social distance to her less conventional gender expression: "I think they are uncomfortable with the fact that I'm not a traditional female. Sometimes when you are outside the norm of gender expression, [how] society defines females to look like women, you get ostracized."

Relationships with other lesbian/gay-parent families

Thus, within the context of the school setting, some lesbian mothers reported feeling out of place or unable to connect with other parents for reasons that often, at least indirectly, related to their sexual orientation. Outside of that setting, some parents described strong connections with other LG parents, while others described limited contact with LG-parent families, in some cases because of lack of access, but in other cases because it was simply not a priority.

Strong connection to LG-parent family communities

Slightly more than half of the women ($n = 26$; 13 couples) asserted that they regularly socialized with LG-parent families. Notably, of these 26 women, 15 were among the 20 who reported weak connections to school parent communities. Thus, those with weak connections to parents at school were disproportionately represented amongst those with strong linkages to LG-parent families. For some ($n = 3$ couples), friendships with other LG parents pre-dated having children; they had not specifically sought them out because they had children (and in fact, all of these friends had become parents after they did). In a few cases ($n = 2$ couples), friendships with other LG-parent families were initiated through school or neighborhood connections, and ultimately sustained when both children and parents "hit it off." Thus, these families met other LG-parent families in ways that felt "natural" and "convenient… we didn't do anything special to meet other families like ours."

In other cases ($n = 8$ families), relationships with other LG-parent families were initially formed through, and fostered via, formal LGBTQ parenting groups, including Rainbow Families, LGBTQ parenting meet-up groups, LGBTQ adoption groups, and neighborhood LGBTQ groups. "We are in a club… with like 50 families in it. We usually have a potluck, a get-together, once a month, and twice in the summer we go camping," stated Patty. Notably, even when LGBTQ parenthood groups were not specifically targeted at or for adoptive families, parents were often "lucky" to find that many of the parents in the group had adopted, thereby facilitating shared experiences and connections for their families based on multiple characteristics. Melanie shared, "The other adoptive families that we know by and large are through [gay parenting groups]; there's just a lot of adoption among queer families. So that's one thing that I appreciated about [gay parenting group] especially."

Notably, amongst those participants who said that they had met most of their LG-parent family friends through groups, most said that, although they typically maintained these friendships, they were less involved in the groups now than in the past. This was in part due to distance (i.e., "we are in the suburbs, the groups meet in the city"; "we don't live in the gay part of town"); changes in the group's composition, such as the fact that most of the group's current families had younger children or that many current members were "wealthy gay men… with huge

houses," and their own busy lives and schedules (i.e., the reality that their children's lives and preferred friendships took priority). Thus, consistent with life course theory (Elder, 1994, 1998), participants' social lives and networks shifted in response to both personal and contextual factors.

Weak or distant connection to LG-parent family communities

Some women (i.e., 14 women; 7 couples) described few relationships and little socializing with other LG-parent families. In explaining the absence of connections with other LG-parent families, some of these women invoked the important role of regional and neighborhood contexts in shaping LGBTQ social networks (Nash & Gorman-Murray, 2015). For example, members of five couples noted that there were few LG parents in their communities and neighborhoods. As Heidi mused, "We don't socialize with other [LG-parent families] because we don't live in the… part of town where a lot of the gay families live. We're more on the outskirts; we're not… in that scene." In several cases, the absence of a formalized, organized LGBTQ parenting group (one couple) or disappointment with existing LGBTQ parenting groups (e.g., because of group demographics or disorganization; two couples) were highlighted as barriers to forming connections to other LG-parent families.

In addition to citing the absence of LG-parent families in their own neighborhoods and communities, some of these women, as well as several additional women ($n = 5$), acknowledged that forming friendships with other LG-parent families was simply not a primary concern for them; in turn, their lack of effort to cultivate such relationships was ultimately a factor in their limited socialization with such families. Indeed, most of the women who lacked meaningful relationships with other LG-parent families commented that forming friendships of this type was not a priority insomuch as (a) their child seemed "fine" without these connections, and (b) they preferred to form friendships based on natural connections over seeking out or "pushing" friendships with families simply because they were LG-parent headed. As Cheryl noted, "It would be great if it happens naturally, but [we have] settled into our… network [so] it doesn't seem quite as important. If it suddenly becomes important to her, we would go out of our way…but I think naturally is better." Cheryl also reflected that such connections seemed "more important" when her daughter was young: "When things were new, and the baby was new, I would have said I really want her to have contact with other families with gay and lesbian parents… but now [we have made friends] and it seems less important." Thus, fostering these connections was not currently a concern, but parents were often open to potential (child-driven) changes in the future. The shifts in perceived importance of LG-parent family connections when parenting an infant child versus an early school-age child reflect how life course transitions contribute to reshaping social networks (Elder, 1998).

Of note is that, of the 14 women who espoused weak connections to LG-parent communities, nine had strong connections to school parent communities. As Sonia

noted, "[Connecting with other LG-parent families] doesn't really seem that important. We've got some friends who have kids, so we've more so focused on just hanging out with the people that we know, that we've met through [school]." Among the five women who espoused weak connections to both LG-parent communities and school parent communities, two cited work- and time-related barriers to friendship building and socializing ("Jane and I, we hardly [go on] dates and we don't hang out with other couples much… we're so busy with work and all that"), two women noted that they primarily socialized with friends that they had known pre-parenthood (who were mixed in terms of parenting status and sexual orientation), and one woman said that their family primarily socialized with families they knew through church.

Discussion

The current study is one of only a few (Gartrell et al., 2006, 2012; Goldberg, 2006) to examine lesbian mothers' friendships, and also fills a gap in the literature in that it explores lesbian mothers' relationships to the school community specifically—which, during this particular life stage, is likely to be a salient context for socialization and camaraderie, or lack thereof (Elder, 1998; Ladd & Pettit, 2002). Our findings reveal that lesbian mothers in our sample described their relationships with other parents as impacted by sexual orientation, race, and class differences and dynamics, highlighting the multiple intersecting identities that sexual minority (and often transracially) adoptive parents navigate in relation to the parent community (Cole, 2009). Aware of the multiple ways in which they deviate from family norms, they sometimes relied on stereotypes (e.g., of African American people as having negative views of homosexuality) in navigating social relationships with other parents, or avoided interactions with other parents altogether. Yet, what were barriers to connection for some parents were not barriers for others. Because of friendships between their children, some parents formed unexpectedly positive relationships with parents who appeared to differ from them in seemingly marked, and often multiple, ways.

Interestingly, connecting with other parents was experienced as particularly difficult when parents perceived themselves as of a lower class status. Perhaps, even when not explicitly stated, occupying two marginalized statuses (in terms of sexual orientation and social class) created an especially marked sense of social distance from other parents (Cole, 2009; Nixon, 2011). Further, in cases where the parent community was perceived as largely made up of politically conservative, upper-class, heterosexual-parent families with traditional division of labor arrangements, parents reported a distinct lack of comfort within the school community. Thus, in many cases, it was not simply class or sexual orientation differences that contributed to a sense of alienation from other parents; rather, it was a constellation of interrelated factors that led the women to perceive other parents as "other."

Our study found that some parents described socializing with other LG-parent families, whom they often met through organized groups. Often, though, parents described few opportunities to meet LG-parent families, due to geographic and contextual factors. Notably, though, parents who lacked contact with LG-parent families did not tend to express negative emotions—beyond mild disappointment—about the status quo. Many emphasized that they preferred to structure their friendships and social time based on who they were "naturally" drawn towards, thereby developing authentic friendships with individuals who did not necessarily share their sexual orientation. They felt uncomfortable seeking out or attempting to orchestrate friendships with other families specifically and solely because of one shared aspect of their family structure. Indeed, many women with weak connections to LG parents had strong relationships to school parent communities; this may have fueled their perception of LG-parent friendships as inessential during their own, and their children's, current life stage (Elder, 1998). These findings are consistent with, and extend, prior research, suggesting that LG parents' parental identities may become more salient or central than their sexual identities as their children grow (Goldberg, 2012; Lewin, 1993), thus shaping parents' friendship building (i.e., they seek out individuals with whom they share similar experiences and characteristics based in part on life stage and child age; Elder, 1998; McPherson et al., 2001). At the same time, parents with weaker connections to the school community were more likely to seek out or maintain relationships with other LG parents, who share both demographic and life stage characteristics (i.e., sexual identity, child age, and often adoptive parent status; Kalmijn, 2012; McPherson et al., 2001). These findings nuance and provide additional insight into Gartrell et al.'s (2000, 2006, 2012) observations of changes in lesbian mothers' friendship networks (i.e., mothers of 10-year-olds socialized more with heterosexual parent families, and less with LG-parent families)—likely because (a) their friendships were increasingly shaped by their children's friendships, and (b) the diminishing prioritization of parent sexual orientation as a criterion or highly valued characteristic for friendship building (McPherson et al., 2001). Overall, these data highlight how the role, function, and perceived importance of meeting and socializing with other LG-parent families may shift as children grow older.

This study has a number of limitations. The sample was small, predominantly White, and most were well-educated and fairly affluent (although notably, there was variability in financial status, and a number of parents clearly perceived themselves as less well-off than the majority of their counterparts at their children's schools). Many parents had the privilege of selecting where their child attended school, which meant that they could choose the community their family would be a part of—a privilege that many parents do not have. We also only examined parent perspectives at one time point, when most parents' children were in preschool or kindergarten, which is a time of transition for many parents. Parents whose children have been part of a school community for many years may have stronger

friendships with other parents than those whose children have only been in school for a short time. Additionally, we did not assess a number of important factors that may have been significant in shaping parents' current involvement in and approach to both lesbian/gay and school communities, including their pre-parenthood level of involvement in LGBTQ communities and overall outness in their lives and communities. Similarly, we did not examine parents' pre-adoptive attitudes toward racial diversity or their comfort positioning themselves in relation to communities of color. For White parents who adopted children of color, these previously held beliefs and experiences may have impacted their ability to engage with other parents who mirrored their children's own racial identities.

Despite these limitations, this study makes several important contributions. It builds on the limited existing work on lesbian parent friendships (e.g., Gartrell et al., 2012) as well as the limited work on lesbian parents' relationships to their children's schools (Goldberg & Smith, 2014a, 2014b). It reveals how parents' sexual orientation intersects with their social class and race/ethnicity to shape their interactions and friendships with other parents. It also shows diversity in parents' perspectives on the importance of interacting with other LG-parent families, perspectives that, to some degree, appear to be informed by their existing friendships, including those formed through school connections. Finally, it underscores the significance of life stage and context in shaping friendship patterns among sexual minority parents, thus building and expanding upon prior work (Gartrell et al., 2006, 2012; Goldberg, 2006, 2012). These findings are relevant to practitioners who wish to support LG-parent families in garnering diverse and meaningful forms of social support, as well as school officials and community organizations that wish to engage LG-parent families and help them to create community in their lives. They also have implications for practitioners and community organizations that seek to strengthen friendships and community building among parents in general. Lesbian adoptive families' presence and involvement in school communities can benefit heterosexual, biological parent families by destabilizing heteronormativity and calling attention to the ways in which diverse families represent important, contributing members of schools, communities, and broader society.

Funding

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