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Parent-Child Conversations About Legal Inequalities in Gay- and Lesbian-Parent Families in Florida

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ABSTRACT

Due to legal restrictions on same-sex relationships and parenting, same-sex parents have the added responsibility of teaching their children how to function in a heteronormative society where their family status is devalued and, in some places, discriminated against through legislation. The current study uses qualitative methods to explore the perspectives of 22 same-sex adoptive parents regarding how they discuss legal discrimination with their children (age range = seven months to 18 years; $M =$ six years, 10 months). Eight parents (36%) reported talking to their children; the remainder ($n = 14$; 64%) reported that they did not engage in conversations, typically due to their children's age. Participants who engaged in discussions with their children named a variety of reasons for doing so, some of which are consistent with the racial socialization literature: namely, preparation for bias and fostering pride. Several themes emerged that appear to be unique to same-sex adoptive parents. For example, some parents described using the discussions to ignite their children's interest in political or social activism. This study takes a first step in highlighting the reasons why same-sex parents engage their children in discussion about legal discrimination and point to areas for future research.

KEYWORDS

Adoption; GLB; heterosexism; same-sex families; same-sex parenting

Introduction

Despite the overwhelming evidence of successful parenting by gay and lesbian (GL) couples and the increasing societal acceptance of sexual minorities (Pew Research Center, 2013), some negative attitudes about GL parenting remain. Opponents continue to make unsubstantiated claims, such as that GL couples are more likely to abuse their children (see Crawford, McLeod, Zamboni, & Jordan, 1999), fail to provide role models of the other sex (see Goldberg & Allen, 2007), and encourage inappropriate gender and sexual identities (see Goldberg, 2010). In sum, opponents argue that the sexual orientation of GL parents is detrimental to children (Wardle, 2006). This argument is used by policy makers to secure antigay legislation that

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prevents adequate legal recognition and rights for GL parents (Lind, 2004). GL parents are therefore faced with raising their families in a heteronormative society where their family status is devalued and, in some places, discriminated against through legislation.

Racial and ethnic minorities represent another minority in society that faces discrimination. Racial- and ethnic-minority parents often seek to socialize their children regarding their race; racial socialization processes may include talking about discrimination (Hughes, Rodriguez, Smith, Johnson, Stevenson, & Spicer, 2006). It is possible that GL parents may similarly use conversations to educate their children about antigay discrimination. Some research has begun to explore how GL parents talk to their children about disclosure of family identity (Suter, 2014; Suter & Strasser, 2013) as well as societal homophobia (Gartrell, Banks, Reed, Hamilton, Rodas, & Deck, 2000). However, no work has examined the discourse within GL families about discrimination or legal inequalities, which could offer insight into how GL parents navigate discrimination with their children. The current study uses data from 22 GL parents, who were living in Florida at the time of the gay adoption ban, to explore this issue.

Theoretical perspective

The current study draws from three theoretical frameworks. Meyer's minority stress framework takes into consideration the impact of stress and stigma on socially stigmatized and marginalized groups of people due to one's status as a minority (Meyer, 2003; 2011). According to this framework, heterosexism and homophobia are experienced as additional stresses by sexual minorities, which may result from the experience of prejudice, expectations of rejection, or internalized homophobia. The underlying assumptions of the minority stress theory are that such stress is unique to the stigmatized group and is experienced at a chronic level due to the ways in which the stigma is embedded socially and culturally. The embedded-based nature of the stigma results in discrimination by means of social ideals and through larger social institutions (Meyer, 2003).

Minority stress theory highlights the stigma and stress experienced by sexual minorities as a function of legal discrimination specifically. GL couples experience an additional and constant source of stress when they experience legal discrimination in the denial of the right to marry or the right to adopt. This is especially true for those parents who are denied the right to adopt their partner's biological child or for those who are fostering children without the option to legally adopt. Thus, Meyer's minority stress theory provides a framework to examine the extent to which GL adoptive parents are having conversations about legal inequalities with their children, and why. For example, of interest is whether parents seek to discuss legal discrimination with their children in part to manage their own (and/or their children's) stress resulting from these inequalities. Relatedly, some GL parents may also be motivated by their understanding of the stress their children may face due to their minority family structure (Meyer, Ouellette, Haile, & McFarlane, 2011).

Second, we draw on the Family Adoption Communication model (FAC; Grotevant & McRoy, 1998; Wrobel, Kohler, Grotevant, & McRoy, 2003), which is a framework that conceptualizes family communication about adoption-related topics as a dynamic process. This framework emphasizes both child development and family context as important factors in guiding the nature and dynamics of family communication about complex identity issues (e.g., adoption, minority family structure). That is, the FAC model acknowledges that children's information needs vary depending on their developmental stage. Thus, the model suggests that parents may modify the style and content of conversations to suit their children's developmental level when discussing sensitive topics. For example, parents' decisions to withhold adoption-related information are often made with consideration of age, such that parents report wanting to wait until an age at which they perceive their child is "ready" to hear such information (Wrobel, Kohler, Grotevant, & McRoy, 1998). Furthermore, the FAC model considers various factors that may influence family communication, including parents' own comfort or discomfort with a given sensitive topic as well as the particularities of the family context (Wrobel et al., 2003).

Finally, this study also draws upon Boykin and Toms' (1985) triple quandary theory of racial socialization. Although the focus of this study is not on race, this theory offers a useful parallel for considering how families incorporate the concept of discrimination into their family discourse. There are three "agendas" that influence the ways in which African American parents socialize their children. The *mainstream social context* refers to the pursuit of the "American Dream" (i.e., a higher education degree and middle-class socioeconomic status). The *Black sociocultural context* refers to the cultural aspects of African Americans that are linked to, or have been influenced by, West African tradition (e.g., spirituality, oral traditions), even though the link is not necessarily explicitly stated. The *minority sociocultural context* refers to the implicit cultural conditioning of modes and styles of behavior, which are modeled by adults. Previous studies suggest that there is evidence for the influence of racial socialization on various child outcomes (e.g., children who receive more racial socialization show more academic interest, higher grades, and more positive in-group attitudes; Neblett, Philip, Cogburn, & Sellers, 2006).

The triple quandary theory offers a framework for understanding the content and purpose of racial socialization. Boykin and Toms (1985) describe the threefold challenges that African American parents come up against in the context of these competing agendas: preparation to function in mainstream life, preparation to deal with racism and discrimination, and fostering cultural pride. GL parents face a parallel predicament in which they are similarly faced with the tasks of preparing their children to function in mainstream (i.e., heteronormative) society, preparing them to deal with homophobia and discrimination, and fostering cultural pride (in the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer—GLBTQ—community and in their minority family structure). A comparison to the racial socialization of African American and other racial minority groups is, at best, simply parallel. However, the triple quandary theory is useful for the current study because it provides a

framework for understanding how parents may teach their children about the climate of heterosexism and the legal inequalities that their families face.

Institutionalized heterosexism and the legal system

Heterosexism is widespread throughout U.S. society and can manifest in individual, community, and cultural contexts, but can also be experienced in institutional contexts. It creates social, economic, and legal issues for GL individuals (Shapiro, 2013). Particularly salient for GL-parent families are the legal inequities created as a result of the institutional heterosexism in the form of legal restrictions on same-sex marriage and adoption (Lind, 2004). Although the Supreme Court overturned the Defense of Marriage Act in 2013, many states still have same-sex marriage bans and other restrictions on same-sex relationships (Human Rights Campaign, 2015).

Additionally, GL couples face heterosexism in the form of legal restrictions on fostering and adopting children, as well as limited recognition of their parental status (Human Rights Campaign, 2012). Some states place restrictions on GL couples who want to jointly adopt children and allow just one partner to adopt as a single parent—leaving the child with only one legal parent and the second parent without any legal rights or ties to the child they raise (Federle, 2005). Approximately half of U.S. states allow legal “second-parent adoptions,” where the same-sex partner can legally adopt his or her partner’s child (Human Rights Campaign, 2012). Without the right to adopt, GL-parent families may experience anxiety and stress. For example, one study of GL parents highlighted that second-parent adoptions eased concerns about legal protections for their children, such as the question of custody if the legal parent were to die (Connolly, 2002). Likewise, some studies of GL parents who have pursued second-parent adoptions provide evidence for the positive impact of providing legal recognition for both parents in these families (Goldberg, Moyer, Weber, & Shapiro, 2013). Hequembourg and Farrell (1999), for example, found that lesbian mothers who were able to adopt their partner’s biological child via second-parent adoption described legal and symbolic benefits, such as being more accepted by their partner’s family of origin.

The current study aims to capture the perspectives of GL adoptive parents navigating an uncharted legal context in the wake of one state’s gay adoption ban. Florida has a long history of anti-GLBT legislation, and is particularly known for Anita Bryant’s homophobic “Save the Children” campaign in the 1970s. From 1977 to 2010, Florida explicitly banned adoption by anyone who identified as gay or lesbian—including public and private adoptions, as well as second-parent adoptions (Shapiro, 2013). Although banned from adopting, GL singles and couples were allowed to be temporary foster parents but could not gain status as permanent legal parents (Sioco, 2009). Then, in 2010, the Florida gay adoption ban was lifted. With this historical context in mind, we focus on *why* these parents discussed institutionalized heterosexism (i.e., legal discrimination) with their children. Since this study was conducted in 2012, directly following the repeal of the Florida gay

adoption ban, we were able to capture parents' experiences during a time of recent change in legislation. This important historical event provided a unique opportunity to sample parents who had experienced this dramatic legal shift and therefore could speak to their experiences both before and after living with this particular form of legal discrimination. Florida's political circumstance—where (at the time) same-sex marriage was not legal and adoption by same-sex parents was only recently made legal—provided a context in which parents were possibly discussing these issues with their children.

Exploring such parent-child conversations is important inasmuch as prior work indicates that parent-child communication in heterosexual-parent families may help children adjust more easily to stressful family events (Gazendam-Donofrio et al., 2009). Furthermore, little is known about the extent to which GL parents discuss inequalities and, if they do, why they feel that such conversations are important to their families. The recent accelerated progress of the GL rights movement has not eliminated the legal and social disparities that continue to impact the GLBTQ community more broadly; some areas of the country continue to introduce and defend antigay legislation (Human Rights Campaign, 2015). Thus, parent-child conversations may be necessary as a means to foster resilience and educate children about overt and covert forms of discrimination that they may encounter as a result of their family structure.

Discussing discrimination with children

Compared to more “traditional” families, diverse families (e.g., GL families, multi-racial families, adoptive families) depend more heavily on family communication to develop and maintain identity (Galvin, 2006). Transracial adoptive parents, for example, have been found to use carefully selected language to offer identity-affirming responses to outsiders' insensitive questions. Parents' responses also changed over time, as a function of their children's developmental level (Suter, 2008; Suter & Ballard, 2009). GL families—many of which are also adoptive families—are similarly tasked with the responsibility of modeling responses to intrusive questions and discriminatory events, as well as using these experiences (and conversations about them) to teach their children how to function in a heteronormative society (Human Rights Campaign, 2012).

There is a small but limited literature on discussions about homophobia within GL-parent families. Communication on these topics tends to be explored more broadly and usually focuses on conversations about disclosure of parental sexual orientation (Suter, 2014; Suter & Strasser, 2013). However, recent findings suggest that communication specifically around homophobia may serve to bolster resilience in GL families (Suter, 2014). Breshears (2010, 2011) found that, similar to Suter's findings on adoptive families, lesbian mothers' discussion of the underlying homophobia in outsiders' comments might serve as a platform to build family identity. Relatedly, Gartrell and colleagues (2000) examined a sample of 150

lesbian mothers and found that all participants expressed concern about the impact of homophobia on their children. Most mothers reported that they had attempted to prepare their children by discussing different types of families, highlighting the importance of diversity, and role-playing responses to homophobic comments. Children whose parents prepared them for homophobic encounters were, according to their parents, better able to cope with adversity, suggesting that children may benefit from parental preparation for homophobia (Gartrell et al., 2000). To the extent that GL parents engage in conversations about legal inequalities with their children, this may enhance children's ability to cope with stigma related to their family structure (Breshears, 2011).

The research on discussions about racism within racial-minority families represents a parallel literature that is worth addressing. The racial socialization literature explores the ways in which racial-minority parents transmit general information regarding race to their children, including preparation for bias (Hughes, 2003; Hughes et al., 2006; Thornton, Chatters, Taylor, & Allen, 1990). One study, for example, found that about two thirds of African American parents endorsed doing or saying things to show their children "what it means to be Black" (Thornton et al., 1990). They reported providing messages about "mainstream" values (e.g., good citizenship), racial pride (e.g., racial self-acceptance), and/or racial obstacles (e.g., for career opportunities).

Reviews of the literature have found that few parents overall spontaneously emphasize discussions about discrimination in open-ended questions about racial socialization (Hughes et al., 2006); however, studies that utilize in-depth interview methods often report that participants do engage in discussions about racial discrimination with their children, which they explain by emphasizing that such discrimination exists, and they wish to teach their children to cope with it. The fact that this theme does not emerge unless it is explicitly probed for suggests that racial discrimination may be perceived as less salient compared to other race-related topics for some racial-minority parents, or the topic may simply be seen as uncomfortable to discuss with researchers (Hughes et al., 2006).

While studies of the experiences of racial socialization and discrimination may in some ways parallel the experiences of GL parents in the sense that both groups experience discrimination that may warrant discussions with children, there are unique aspects of GL parents' experiences that make discussions of institutionalized GLBQ-related discrimination qualitatively different from those about race-related discrimination. GL-parent families encounter institutionalized discrimination that restricts the legal recognition of their families. Therefore, the conversations that GL parents may have with their children likely include this additional layer of complexity—the fact that not only does such discrimination against GL-parent families exist, but that it is legally enforced in some places. Another notable issue with this comparison is that racial minorities cannot hide their minority status in the same way that GL individuals and families can (in some instances). Thus, the conversations that GL parents have with their children may differ from those racial-minority parents have because of GL individuals' "invisible" minority status.

This exploratory study seeks to address a gap in the literature by examining the following research questions about parental motivation to approach this topic with their children and who initiates these conversations. Of specific interest is (1) To what extent are GL-adoptive parents having conversations about legal inequalities? (2) What are parents' motivations for engaging, or not engaging, in such conversations? and (3) Who is initiating these conversations?

Method

Participant recruitment

Participants were recruited using e-mail and electronic mailing list announcements for “GLBQ (gay, lesbian, bisexual, and queer) parents who reside in Florida and have been living there since before 2008” to participate in a study designed to help understand “how the gay adoption ban, as well as the lifting of the ban, has affected the lives of GLBQ parents and families in Florida.” Participants were required to live in Florida, identify as GLBQ, and have completed some form of adoption (public, private, international, or second parent). We purposefully sought to recruit parents with a variety of experiences, including parents who obtained second-parent adoptions of their partner's biological children; parents who adopted through the child welfare system in Florida; parents who adopted through private domestic adoption agencies; and parents who adopted internationally. This wide range of circumstances provided the opportunity to include the voices of those GLB parents who had experience with some form of adoption—including second-parent adoption. Electronic mailing lists were obtained from Equality Florida (an organization that pursues equal rights for GLBTQ Florida residents) as well as from attorneys who serve the GLBTQ community. Professional and personal contacts in Florida were also used to disseminate study information.

Description of the Sample

Participants were 22 parents—15 women and seven men—who ranged in age from 28 to 59 ($M = 41.73$, $SD = 9.07$; see Table 1 for complete demographic information). Twenty of the participants became parents in the context of their current

Table 1. Sample demographics.

	Total Sample ($N = 22$) <i>M, SD, range, or n, %</i>	Women ($n = 15$) <i>M, SD,</i> <i>range, or n, %</i>	Men ($n = 7$) <i>M, SD, range, or n, %</i>
Demographics			
Personal Income (\$)	\$84,000 (\$66,945, \$0–\$300,000)	\$68,786 (\$40,141, \$0–\$150,000)	\$115,714 (\$98,666, \$12,000–\$300,000)
Age (Years)	41.73 (9.07, 28–59)	42.07 (9.42, 28–59)	41.00 (8.93, 31–57)
Relationship Length (Years)	9.47 (6.12, 0–30)	9.10 (6.68, 0–30)	10.29 (5.11, 5.50–19.50)
Participant Race (% White)	18 (82%)	13 (87%)	5 (71%)
Child Race (% White)	18 (82%)	17 (77%)	5 (45%)
Number of Children	33	22	11

same-sex relationship; two female participants had become parents in the context of previous same-sex relationships that had since ended. All participants were residents of Florida (one woman had recently moved to another state).

Although participants employed various methods to build their families (Table 2), all participants in the study reported having completed (or being in the process of completing) some type of adoption (i.e., “traditional” adoption where neither parent is biologically related and/or a second-parent adoption where one partner adopts his or her partner’s biological child).

Just over half of the sample (55%, all women) reported pursuing parenthood using donor insemination (DI) and subsequent second-parent adoptions by the nonbiological, nonlegal partner. Specifically, nine mothers reported pursuing DI before the ban was lifted, and three reported waiting until after the ban. All but one of these women reported that the nonbiological mother completed second-parent adoption after the ban was lifted; one woman had separated from her partner and did not pursue the second-parent adoption. Lesbian couples who started families via DI while the ban was in effect could not share equal parenting rights—the nonbiological mother was legally the equivalent of a stranger without the ability to complete a second-parent adoption. This undoubtedly influenced decisions about whether to pursue DI while the ban was in effect.

Eight participants (36%, seven men and one woman) pursued traditional adoption—either international, private domestic, or public domestic. One of these men completed an international adoption while the Florida adoption ban was still in effect (for which he had to present himself as a straight, single man). Three of these participants (all men) pursued adoption by fostering their children while the ban was in effect and pursuing adoption after the ban was lifted. The other four (three

Table 2. Family building routes.

	Total Sample (<i>N</i> = 22)	Women (<i>n</i> = 15)	Men (<i>n</i> = 7)
Became parents via donor insemination <i>before</i> the ban was lifted	9 (41%)	9 (60%)	—
Biological mothers	2	2	—
Nonbiological mothers	7	7	—
Became parents via donor insemination <i>after</i> the ban was lifted	3 (14%)	3 (20%)	—
Biological mothers	2	2	—
Nonbiological mothers	1	1	—
Became parents via adoption <i>before</i> the ban was lifted	4 (18%)	0	4 (57%)
Public domestic adoption ^a	3	0	3
Private domestic adoption	0	0	0
International adoption ^b	1	0	1
Became parents via adoption <i>after</i> the ban was lifted	4 (18%)	1 (7%)	3 (43%)
Public domestic adoption	3	1	2
Private domestic adoption	1	0	1
International adoption	0	0	0
Became legal guardians <i>before</i> the ban was lifted	1 (4.5%)	1 (7%)	0
Adopted in another state <i>before</i> the ban was lifted	1 (4.5%)	1 (7%)	0

Note. DI = donor insemination.

^a The three male participants who fostered their children pre-ban ultimately adopted them post-ban.

^b The participant who adopted internationally pre-ban also pursued a private domestic adoption post-ban.

men and one woman) waited until after the ban was lifted before pursuing private or public adoptions.

The two remaining participants became parents by other means. One participant became a parent through gaining legal guardianship of her niece; neither she nor her partner had pursued an adoption because parental rights had not yet been terminated. Lastly, while the ban was in effect one woman and her partner moved to another state to file for a joint private domestic adoption since Florida was obligated to recognize adoptions from other states by GL parents (Shapiro, 2013). After the ban was lifted, they returned to Florida and were in the process of completing another adoption for a second child.

The number of children in each family ranged from one to three. Children's ages ranged from seven months to 18 years ($M =$ six years, 10 months). Parent-child discussions were held mainly with the eldest child in most cases. See [Table 3](#) for the age and number of children in each family, as well as detailed information about the type(s) of adoption pursued by each family.

Procedure

Interested participants contacted the second author for study information. One partner per couple was interviewed because we did not seek to recruit couples. There were no requirements for which parent participated in the interview. Participants completed a semi-structured interview over the phone (due to geographic distance) with the second author or with one of three trained graduate research assistants. The graduate assistants completed a multistep training process of (a) reading over the interview protocol to become familiar with the interview; (b) sitting in on at least one interview conducted by a trained graduate research assistant or the second author; (c) conducting a mock interview with a trained assistant; and (d) receiving feedback from a trained assistant or the second author. Interviews lasted 45 to 60 minutes; all were completed during the summer of 2012. Interviews were transcribed and pseudonyms were assigned.

Data analysis process

To examine the patterns of responses in the transcripts, we used a thematic analysis to allow for the creation of an organized coding system of the emerging themes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Braun & Clarke, 2006). The empirical literature as well as our theoretical framework informed the analysis. Both authors engaged in coding of the interviews in a process of analytic triangulation to ensure consistency and trustworthiness. This process requires that multiple researchers analyze the data to ensure that multiple interpretations are considered (Goldberg & Allen, 2015; Patton, 2002). The transcripts were first examined using line-by-line analysis for initial categories to ensure thorough examination of each participant's set of responses. Subsequent coding progressed to searching for common patterns across interview transcripts (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). In weekly coding meetings, the two

Table 3. Family adoption details.

ID#	Parent Sex	Adoption Type	Age of Child(ren)
1	M	Participant completed two public domestic adoptions; 2nd-parent adoption by partner not completed	4 & 17
2	M	Participant completed two public domestic adoptions; partner completed two 2nd parent adoptions	14 & 15
3	F	Participant completed 2nd-parent adoption of partner's two bio children; Participant adopted 3rd child private domestic & partner did 2nd-parent adoption	10, 17, & 18
4	F	Participant has legally established relationship with ex-partner's bio son; Ex-partner did not complete 2nd-parent adoption for participant's bio child	5 & 11
5	M	Private domestic; adopted as couple	8 months
6	F	Partner's bio child; partner completed 2nd-parent adoption	3
7	F	Participant completed 2nd-parent adoption of partner's bio child	2
8	F	Participant completed 2nd-parent adoption of partner's bio child	6 & 6
9	M	Two public domestic adoptions; partner did 2nd-parent adoption of oldest; Participant did 2nd-parent adoption of youngest	2 & 4
10	F	Participant completed 2nd-parent adoption of partner's two bio children; Partner completed 2nd-parent adoption of participant's bio child	2, 3, & 9
11	F	In process of completing 2nd-parent adoption of partner's bio child	6
12	M	Participant adopted internationally & partner completed 2nd-parent adoption; Completed private domestic adoption as couple of younger child	2 & 5
13	F	Participant completed 2nd-parent adoption of partner's bio child	14
14	F	Participant carried partner's egg; Partner completed 2nd-parent adoption	7 months
15	F	Participant's bio child; partner completed 2nd-parent adoption	8 months
16	F	Participant completed 2nd-parent adoption of partner's bio child	4
17	F	Participant's bio children; Partner completed two 2nd-parent adoptions	2 & 2
18	M	Public domestic adoption; Participant in process of completing 2nd-parent adoption	21 months
19	F	Participant completed public domestic adoption; Considering 2nd-parent adoption by partner (child is 18)	18
20	M	Participant completed public domestic adoption; Partner currently pursuing 2nd-parent adoption	18
21	F	Participant is legal guardian for niece; considering pursuing adoption jointly.	2
22	F	Public domestic adoption jointly in different state	21 months

authors discussed emerging codes and any potential differences in coding throughout the data analysis process. Inconsistencies in coding were discussed until consensus was reached. The final coding scheme was established after agreement was reached among all the independently coded data.

Initially, for the coding of responses to the question of whether parents were having any conversations with their children, two main themes emerged: parents who were having conversations with their children and those who were not. Subcodes were developed to examine participants' explanations as to why they were not

talking to their children (Patton, 2002). The majority of participants who reported not engaging in conversations with their children, for example, said that their children were too young. Thus, “age-related reasons” became a subcode under the larger code of “not having conversations.” After the specific coding scheme was created, focused coding was applied to the data, which involves organizing the codes into larger themes that connect different codes. Focused coding also includes reviewing the codes to eliminate less useful ones, as well as subdividing any codes that have a larger number of responses. New codes were added as new constructs emerged, and the codes were refined and sometimes collapsed throughout the process. For example, when examining the themes of why parents engaged in conversation, the codes of “in order to reassure the child of their permanence in the family” and “instilling pride in the family” were collapsed into a broader code of “child-centered reasons” (i.e., reasons that directly benefited the child). The finalized coding scheme was reapplied to the data until all data were accounted for with the codes. All transcripts were read through four more times and analyzed again. Once the themes were developed, they were examined along several specific dimensions (e.g., child age, parent gender, type of adoption, transracial vs. inracial adoption) to identify any possible markers that would distinguish differences among the participants. The findings are presented in line with our research questions.

Results

First, the results are discussed in terms of whether or not participants reported talking to their children about legal inequalities. Next, the parents who did engage in conversations are analyzed, including their motivations for discussions and who initiated these discussions. Lastly, those parents who reported not engaging in any conversations are considered, including their reasons for this and their plans for any future discussions.

To what extent are parents talking to their children about legal inequalities?

Eight participants (three men and five women; 36% of the sample) stated that they talked to their children about the Florida gay adoption ban and other legal inequalities that impact the GLBQT community in general (e.g., marriage inequality). All eight participants had at least one child between the ages of nine and 18 ($M = 11.5$), but some had younger children as well. In contrast, 14 participants (two men and 12 women) stated that they had not yet talked to their children about the Florida gay adoption ban or other legal inequalities; these children had ages ranging from seven months to six years ($M = 3$).

It is interesting to note that almost all participants who stated that they had conversations with their children about legal inequities reported having conversations about both the Florida adoption ban *and* more general legal inequalities. Only one parent reported that she had discussions with her teenage son about general legal inequalities

but did *not* discuss the Florida adoption ban specifically. Hannah, a mother who had completed a second-parent adoption for her partner's biological 14-year-old son, explained how nothing changed in his day-to-day life before and after the ban: "He didn't know [gay adoption in Florida] was banned... nothing is different in his life, not one single ounce is different in his life." Hannah perceived the conversations about broader inequalities to be more salient to her and her family since her son was not aware of any dramatic change in his life in relation to the Florida adoption ban.

What are parents' motivations for engaging in conversation?

Of interest was how parents explained why they did or did not engage in such conversations. Four main themes were identified: motivation by the desire to encourage social and/or political activism; motivation by a desire to instill pride; motivation to prepare children for stigma/discrimination; and motivation to reassure their children about their permanence. Of the eight parents who reported that they had had discussions with their children about the adoption ban and more general legal inequalities, five parents (three men and two women) described their motivations to engage in conversation as related to the perceived importance of being socially and politically active. This theme was characterized by parents' emphasis on being a visible social presence in society and/or engaging in more purposeful and intentional activism to work toward changing discriminatory practices in U.S. society. Sasha, a mother of a nine-year-old son and two toddler-age daughters, described how she emphasized to her son the importance of actively working to create social change because of the inequalities that their family faced. She described telling him, "Keep working at it, and showing people that you are okay, and you're not different, and you do deserve to be treated fair. And then if you keep telling people around you, eventually everybody will start turning around." Parents who described social or political activism as a motivation for their parent-child discussions implied the possibility for change. In turn, they encouraged their children to see, and work toward, this change as well.

Two participants (one man and one woman) reported that they used these conversations to instill pride in their children. These participants expressed a wish for their children to be proud of their diverse family, to value the GLBQ culture, and/or to develop comfort in disclosing the status of their minority family structure. Vivian, mother of five- and 11-year-old sons, described, "I always made a point to take Jamie to any pride events... and talked to him about his family to instill a sense of pride." Marcus described his conversations about being proud of his family and his 18-year-old son's resulting pride: "He was already a straight ally, so it was an easy conversation... He has on two earrings right now that are the gay-pride flag that he's been wearing for the last two weeks. He's now very vocal about saying, 'I have two dads.'" Marcus's message serves his son by illustrating the importance of being confident and proud of his family. The desire to raise children who are confident with their (minority) family structure is analogous to the ways in which racial-minority parents report

the importance of instilling racial pride (Boykin & Toms, 1985). Furthermore, these parents may be partially motivated by their knowledge of the stress their children may experience due to their family structure (Meyer et al., 2011).

Two parents (both women) reported that their conversations were guided by the need to prepare their children for stigma and discrimination due to their family structure. This theme was characterized by conversations that were reported to involve age-appropriate explanations of current discriminatory laws, how other people may have different (and sometime harmful) ideas about family, and the possibility of being treated differently because of this. These participants aimed to explain the legal discrimination to their children in a factual manner (“We explain to him how the laws are”), with attention to the root of those laws (“Some people have different views”) and their consequences (i.e., negative impacts upon their family). Thus, by providing basic information about discrimination within the context of parent-child conversations, they sought to (age-appropriately) socialize their children in the mainstream cultural context such that they would be prepared for homophobia and related stigma and/or discrimination (Boykin & Toms, 1985).

Finally, two participants (one man and one woman) described that they engaged in such conversations about legal inequities to reassure their children about their permanence in the family. This theme was characterized by parents’ description of using conversations to help their children understand how their status as a foster-to-adopt child had changed—given that same-sex parents had not been able previously to legally adopt, but were now able to after the lifting of the ban. This motivation was unique to their status as same-sex adoptive parents and was not analogous to any part of the socialization process for racial-minority families. Carl, a father to a 17-year-old son and a four-year-old daughter, used the conversations as a means to reassure his son of their newly afforded protections, who had been adopted from the child welfare system: “I assured Charlie up, down, and sideways when we got the guardianship that he was our boy and that he was gonna be with us forever because the laws had changed.” In this case, the conversations about legal inequalities may have functioned as a powerful means of alleviating the stress associated with being part of a GL-parent family that was not previously deemed “legal.”

Who is initiating the conversations?

When considering who reported engaging in parent-child conversations, it is useful to consider who is initiating these conversations, inasmuch as parents’ initiation of such conversations may represent one indicator of the perceived importance of such discussions. All eight parents who described engaging in conversations with their children (three men, five women) reported that they initiated at least some of those conversations. Seven parents reported that their children also initiated some of the conversations. Only one parent reported that their child did not initiate any conversations. These eight parents all had at least one child over the age of nine. Five of these eight parents (three men, two women) had at least one teenager. Older children were more

likely than younger children to initiate conversations. These older children were likely more aware of both the Florida adoption ban and other broader legal inequalities and thus were more emotionally and intellectually capable of initiating some of the conversations. Vivian, a mother to five- and 11-year-old sons, said about her older son: “He initiates sometimes. A lot of times it’ll be something that he hears if we’re listening to NPR [National Public Radio] on the radio in the car or if he sees something online he’ll ask me about it.” Similarly, Marcus, a father to an 18-year-old son, described, “It is usually us [initiating], but sometimes he will see something on Facebook that will get him started.” The children who were initiating these conversations likely recognized the importance of these topics, namely, the ways in which institutionalized heterosexism creates additional stress for their families (Meyer, 2003).

What are parents’ motivations for not talking to their children?

Fourteen parents reportedly did not engage in any discussions with their children about the Florida gay adoption ban or more general legal inequalities. Among these 14 participants, one theme emerged for all but one parent: Parents perceived their children as “too young.” Indeed, the average age of these parents’ children was three years old, and 13 parents had children under the age of six. As Jacklyn, a mother of two-year-old twins described, “We haven’t gotten to [the legal inequalities] yet! We’re just now stuck on what’s a ‘daddy.’” Thus, Jacklyn highlights how, at her sons’ age, there were other more basic issues to discuss besides legal inequities, such as the basic elements of their family structure. Several parents explained how they had started to introduce conversations about general issues of difference and diversity, but had not broached the issue of discrimination (legal or otherwise). For example, Marco, a father to two sons ages two and four, explained, “They’re a little young. We talk about adoption and we talk about different races and being different but we haven’t gotten into the legal bit of it.” Similarly, Tom, a father of a two-year-old daughter and five-year-old son, stated, “We don’t talk to him about legal inequities; we do have the conversations with him about his family structure as opposed to other family structures. And he gets it, and that prepares him for the questions that he gets from his peers.” As may be expected, these parents’ slow introduction of such topics was appropriately tailored to their children’s developmental and cognitive levels (Wrobel et al., 2003).

Therese, the mother of a four-year-old son, provided an interesting alternative explanation for why she did not have such conversations with her child. Therese explained how she chose not to engage in these conversations so she can “... keep him in that little happy bubble... call me like, an idealist or very naïve but I’m hoping the laws will unravel quick enough that I won’t have to tell my son that we’re little second-class citizens.” Therese’s rationale for sheltering her son appears motivated by a desire to protect him from the stress of realizing that his family may face such legal inequalities simply due to their family structure (Meyer et al., 2011).

Future plans for conversations

Of those parents who were not yet engaging in conversation ostensibly because of their child's young age, 11 (out of 14) were asked about future conversations and reported that they planned on having such conversations in the future. The three remaining participants did not indicate whether or not they planned to discuss these topics in the future. Several of the same themes emerged as those participants who already had such conversations, namely, to instill pride in their children ($n = 5$) and preparation/warning for potential bias and stigma ($n = 3$).

Molly, the mother of a six-year-old son, explained how she planned to address the issue when her son was older: "From his standpoint, being the age that he is, he has no idea, and nor do I want him to, honestly.... As... he gets a little bit older and maybe he gets to understand some things differently... we can sit down and have the conversation... but that will all come in time." When discussing future plans, a few parents mentioned their hopes for a more equitable future and how that may impact the need for such conversations. Such an optimistic outlook may have been due, in part, to the fact that they had not yet engaged in the conversations. These parents' sentiments echoed those of Therese, the mother described earlier who purposefully chose not to have these conversations with her four-year-old son because she hoped the laws would change. Sharon, a mother to six-year-old twins, poignantly described, "We are not uncomfortable with the discussions or topics, it is just our need to let them be kids as long as possible without the stress that adulthood brings. These topics can cause anxiety in kids. Look what it does to us as adults." In Sharon's case, her personal experience with this stressful topic may have influenced her decision not to engage in conversation with her child (Wrobel et al., 2003). Similarly, Brad, a father to a five-year-old son and a two-year-old daughter, said hopefully, "Perhaps there will be fewer issues to discuss by the time my kids are old enough to have these conversations." Sharon's and Brad's statements illustrate their recognition of the potential for minority stress to trickle down to their children (Meyer et al., 2011).

Discussion

The developmental context of children emerged as a defining feature of parent-child conversations. Participants who reported talking to their children about the Florida adoption ban and/or more general legal inequalities had children who were, on average, older and thus more likely to understand the repercussions of such legislation. Most of these children were adolescents; thus, their emotional and intellectual understanding of legal inequalities was more sophisticated, which likely helped facilitate the depth of these conversations. This finding can be understood in the context of the FAC model, which emphasizes that children's cognitive capabilities are an important actor in parent-child conversations about sensitive topics (Wrobel et al., 2003).

GL parents described a variety of motivations for talking to and teaching their children about legal inequalities, some of which are consistent with Boykin and Toms's (1985) triple quandary theory of racial socialization. The main themes that emerged were desire to encourage social/political activism, instill pride, prepare children for stigma/discrimination, and reassure permanence. Interestingly, and seemingly unique to GL adoptive parents, most parents used the discussions to ignite their children's interest in being politically or socially active. Same-sex parent families represent a unique context (Wrobel et al., 2003) in which political and social activism are important and valued parts of the community (Jones & Voss, 2006; Knauer, 2012). In this sense, these parents used the conversations as a tool to socialize their children in the minority sociocultural context (Boykin & Toms, 1985) of the GLBQ culture and to highlight the importance of creating change and fighting to transform the political environment.

Similar to the ways in which racial-minority parents work to instill pride in their children's racial background and prepare them for racial discrimination (Boykin & Toms, 1985), some parents used discussions to teach their children to be confident about their minority family structure and prepare their children for antigay stigma and discrimination. These parents may be partly motivated by their awareness of the stress their children may experience due to their nontraditional family structure (Meyer et al., 2011), and may aim to counter such stress by instilling pride to function as a buffer against the negative psychological effects of stigma. This finding aligns with recent work by Breshears (2010, 2011, 2014) and Gartrell and colleagues (2000), which found that parent-child conversations about homophobic comments might serve as an avenue to bolster family identity in lesbian-parent families.

Participants who used these conversations to reassure their children about their permanence once the ban was lifted were also foster-to-adopt families. Thus, these parents' conversations regarding legal inequities—and the changes in the law—were seemingly aimed at minimizing children's anxiety about permanence in their family (due to the fact that GL parents could not adopt the children they were fostering when the gay adoption ban was in effect). Indeed, these families faced multiple intersecting layers of insecurity and stress under the ban (Meyer et al., 2011). In turn, their status as GL foster-to-adopt families necessitated conversations that addressed both the basic facts of legal inequities, as well as how the recent change in legislation had resulted in a (positive) and stress-relieving change in their family status.

All parents who talked to their children reported that the parents initiated conversations, which highlights the way in which this topic is a significant and personal issue for these parents, and is consistent with Gartrell et al.'s (2000) finding that *all* of the lesbian mothers in the sample reported discussing homophobia with their children. Despite the progress in marriage rights, the GLBTQ community still lacks legal protection in many areas of their lives, which can lead to a heightened sense of political awareness (Knauer, 2012). The fact that these parents all initiated some conversations may reflect a politicized consciousness about the significance

of legal inequities in their own lives and therefore in the lives of their families (Goldberg, 2012; Knauer, 2012). Moreover, the fact that children were also initiating and actively participating in these conversations highlights their awareness of these issues—namely, that they were members of a stigmatized, minority family structure (Meyer, 1995). Notably, too, older children had access to certain media outlets (e.g., radio, Facebook), which sometimes led to their initiation. The social media and increasing access to other technology will likely continue to play an integral role in youths' awareness of such legal inequalities (Pew Research Center, 2013, March). Additionally, children's interest in this topic may reflect GL parents' political consciousness being absorbed by their children (Knauer, 2012).

The majority of participants who were choosing not to engage in these conversations had young children. In turn, most stated that they planned to engage in discussions in the future, highlighting that, similar to those who did engage in conversations, this topic of conversation is perceived as important and personal. When discussing their plans for the future, these parents reported similar motivations and intentions as the parents who were already discussing legal inequalities with their children, including preparation for bias/discrimination and fostering pride (Boykin & Toms, 1985). These parents also discussed additional motivations of context and developmental considerations. For example, children were, on average, younger; conversations were planned for the future (Wrobel et al., 2003). Their descriptions tended to be more optimistic, likely, in part, due to the fact that these parents had not yet started these conversations with their children. In the participants' descriptions of their future conversations, a few parents expressed their hope for a more equitable world, which may influence the parents' perceived need to engage in such conversations with their children.

Limitations

A key limitation was that the study design allowed only for individuals to be interviewed, not couples. Particularly because of the wide variety of circumstances for family building routes, participants' partners may have had additional or unique perspectives and concerns. Thus, the findings may have been richer and more comprehensive if both members of each couple had been included. Future examination of this topic should strive to include both members of same-sex couples to offer a more complete representation of their experiences (Goldberg, 2010).

The wide variation in children's ages was also a limiting factor. Since many participants had very young children, most participants reported that their children were too young for such conversations and thus the parents could only speculate about future discussions. A sample with older children may provide greater insight into how and why these conversations emerge. Another limitation was that the participants were mostly White and middle-class. Exploring this topic with a more diverse sample of parents may provide insight into potential differences based on race or socioeconomic status. Examination of such intersectionality would likely produce rich and useful data. For example, it is possible that racial- minority GL parents must

balance an additional layer of complexity by navigating concerns about socialization regarding racism and socialization of their sexual-minority family status.

A final limitation is the fact that conversations about legal inequities were only one of a number of foci of the larger study from which these data are drawn. In turn, some participants' responses to the questions that probed legal inequities lacked depth. Future research that explores more in depth the issue of GL parent-child conversations about minority status and legal discrimination is needed. For example, future work can go beyond parent motivation to explore in detail what these conversations look like. Interviewing children about their experiences of talking about legal inequalities would add a rich contribution to the literature by offering a voice to the children on the receiving end of this communication.

Implications

These findings have several implications for clinicians, other professionals who work with GL families, and GL families themselves. First, professionals who work with GL families should be aware that there are various reasons why parents may engage their children in such conversations, and that these motivations will vary depending on the parent's agenda (e.g., concerns about the mainstream context or minority sociocultural context; Boykin, 1986). A parent who discusses inequalities in the context of fostering pride, for example, may be more motivated by the minority sociocultural context (i.e., the GLBTQ community). A parent who initiates a conversation in the context of preparation for discrimination may be more motivated by preparing his or her child for the mainstream (i.e., heteronormative) context. Second, professionals working with GL families should be aware of the various levels of discrimination that these families face in local, state, and institutionalized contexts. Regardless of whether such discrimination is legal, understanding of the importance of these conversations may help shed light on the GL-parent family experience. Clinicians and other professionals should be mindful of the importance of this topic of conversation for GL parents. Living in a sociopolitical context that is constantly defining and redefining the rights and legal protections available to these families is stressful (Meyer et al., 2011). Therefore, these types of conversations may be a common aspect of socialization for children of GL-parent families. Lastly, GL parents who are contemplating if and when to begin such conversations with their children may benefit from the knowledge that the children in this sample were interested enough to be initiating some of the conversations themselves.

Conclusions

This exploratory study provides preliminary insights into the reasons why GL adoptive parents engage, or do not engage, their children in discussions about legal inequalities, thereby expanding our understanding of how these families teach and talk about discrimination with their children. These parents' narratives reveal a range of motivations for talking about legal inequities, some of which are parallel to the racial socialization literature, and some of which are seemingly unique to

GL parents. These data also highlight the awareness and interest of the children in this family dialogue, as they also initiate some of the conversations, demonstrating a political awareness like their parents (Knauer, 2012).

A unique strength of this study was the unique sociopolitical environment. We are living in a time of tremendous legal instability, where GLBTQ rights and protections may be here today and gone tomorrow. Even as GLBTQ rights advance, discriminatory legislation continues to be introduced, resulting in sudden and drastic changes in legal protections. Amidst a constantly fluctuating legal context, scholars have unique opportunities to study the effects of legal and sociopolitical change on individual and family outcomes. Scholars should capitalize on state-specific legal changes to explore how GL families adapt and adjust, as well as how GL individuals and couples talk about such changes with their children.

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