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Parental Naming Practices in Same-Sex Adoptive Families

Objective: To explore the ways in which same-sex adoptive parents navigate the process of determining what terms their children will use to address them (i.e., parent names).
Background: Parent names are markers of familial relationships and identity. Different-sex parents are linguistically privileged in that their parent names are widely recognizable, easily distinguishable between each parent, and usually assigned by default as opposed to chosen, whereas parents in same-sex couples must go through a deliberate process of choosing parent names. Little is known about the naming process for same-sex parents.
Method: This qualitative analysis was designed to explore 40 same-sex adoptive parent couples' approaches to parent naming (20 gay couples, 20 lesbian couples).
Results: Most couples collaboratively selected parallel names (e.g., "Daddy" and "Papa"). Participants drew on traditional mother and father derivatives, as well as their cultural backgrounds and naming trends within queer family communities. Families who adopted older children navigated unique issues.
Conclusion: This study adds to the literatures on same-sex parenting, adoptive parenting, and naming. Families highlighted the perceived importance of parallel names and collaborative naming processes; the consideration of cultural backgrounds and other same-sex parent families in naming; and naming challenges related to child age, the gender binary, and stigma.
Implications: Results shed light on various sources and considerations that may shape parent naming, which can inform the work of therapists and other providers who work with same-sex parent families, particularly during the transition to parenthood.

As social beings, people build a sense of self through relationships, which are often constructed via symbolic terms such as parent names (Finch, 2008). These names are often more than just labels and tools of organization; they are symbols that mark and display core relationships (Finch, 2008). One hallmark of becoming a parent is choosing a name for one's child(ren); although there are exceptions, including when parents adopt older children, who have already been named (cf. Firmin, Pugh, Markham, Sohn, & Gentry, 2017). Whereas the child naming process is understood as universal, the intentional and deliberate process of parent naming, also referred to as parental designation (Petit, Julien, & Chamberland, 2017) or parental referent or term selection (Bergen, Suter, & Daas, 2006; Colonna, 2013), that occurs in same-sex families (Bergen et al., 2006) is understudied.

Families with different-sex parents are linguistically privileged in that their parent names are recognizable, easily distinguishable between parents, and typically assigned by default as opposed to chosen. The most exciting moment

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in linguistic development, as told by sitcoms, movies, and dominant constructions of family, is a child's first utterance of *Mama* or *Dada*, which is often encouraged by the eager parents. Although the terms *Mom* and *Dad* are ingrained in our cultural understanding of family, such language—and the heterosexual, two-parent family structure that it implies—has long been insufficient for encompassing diverse family forms, such as families with two mothers or two fathers and parents who do not identify within the confines of the mother–father binary (Padavic & Butterfield, 2011; Petit et al., 2017). For parents with more than one mother or father, choosing parent names is an intentional and collaborative process with implications for parental and familial identity, yet little research has examined this topic (cf. Colonna, 2013). The present study was designed to partially address that gap in the literature by examining parent naming experiences in 40 same-sex adoptive families.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

The present study is guided by social constructionist and queer theories. Social constructionist theory asserts that families are constructed socially and become familial entities through actions and language (Holstein & Gubrium, 1999; Oswald, Blume, & Marks, 2005). Through this lens, families can be understood as interpretive, moving parts, rather than as static objects (Holstein & Gubrium, 1999). This view challenges dominant assumptions of family as defined by biological and legal ties (Oswald et al., 2005). A social constructionist view of same-sex family parent naming asserts that this process, which is informed largely by societal discourses, is a way of creating meaningful parental and familial identities. In turn, social constructionist views of family allow for any domestic or partnership reality to be viewed as familial, regardless of biological or legal ties or of parent names used (Holstein & Gubrium, 1999).

Queer theory calls for the deconstruction of exclusionary binary logic that has been responsible for systems of heteronormativity and gender normativity (Oswald et al., 2005). Queer theory posits that binaries such as male versus female or real families versus so-called illegitimate families are socially constructed and should be deconstructed to allow for recognition of complex and diverse families (Oswald, Kuvalanka, Blume, & Berkowitz, 2009). Through the lens of queer theory, families can be viewed as structures that are brought into being via social interactions, relationships, and family roles and identities (e.g., that of parent or family), regardless of gender identity.

Who Is a "Real" Family? Language, Roles, and Identity

Family is arguably the most central of all organizing institutions in society (Holstein & Gubrium, 1999). The language used to describe family, *kinship linguistics*, provides tools to order and organize familial relationships, as well as language to discuss families (Finch, 2008). Such language most often doubles as both a name and a social category. For instance, the term *Mom* is a social category—a parent role typically operated by a female-identifying parent—and it is also a personal and intimate kinship term used to address mothers directly. One often refers to kin using names (e.g., Mom) or terms (e.g., brother) that carry shared meaning and are thus recognizable and readily understood by outsiders who have no connection to the family members being described. When individuals refer to their parent by a name that deviates from Mom or Dad, and thus departs from traditional understandings of family, others may not recognize their familial relationships via these kinship terms, which may contribute to confusion and invalidation of key family relationships.

Easily recognizable kinship terms are intertwined with ideologies regarding what constitutes family. Hegemonic ideals of the standard North American family (SNAF; Smith, 1993) state that the model family occurs within a marriage between a man and a woman in which the mother is the primary caregiver, the father is a breadwinner, and the children are biologically conceived (Smith, 1993). The SNAF ideology, although a social construct rather than a lived reality for many families, guides family discourse as well as policy, and, despite an increase in the prevalence of research on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer families, largely guides the field of family research as well.

Because of the pervasiveness of SNAF, same-sex parent families may not be recognized as families in public—a tendency that may be especially pronounced for adoptive families, whose members are often dissimilar physically

or racially (Kreider & Lofquist, 2014). Amid this reality, a multiracial adoptive lesbian-mother family, for example, might choose to draw on gendered family discourses in naming, such as *Mommy* and *Mama*, to ensure that their parent and family statuses are immediately recognized. Alternatively, this family may not be influenced by a need for public validation and thus select names that are not derived from the traditional name of *mother*. From a social constructionist perspective, the use of intentional parent names and family surnames (Patterson & Farr, 2017; Pilcher, 2017) represents one way for parents and children to engage in the process of "doing family" (Almack, 2005; Finch, 2008).

Lesbian-Mother Families and Naming

Much of the research on lesbian-mother families has focused on families formed through donor insemination (Biblarz & Savci, 2010). In this context, parents are often distinguished by who is the biological versus nonbiological mother (Gabb, 2005), and the traditional mother terms (e.g., *Mom* or *Mommy*) are typically taken on by the biological mother (Bergen et al., 2006; Brown & Perlesz, 2008; Gabb, 2005). Additionally, children most often are given the last name of the biological mother (Patterson & Farr, 2017), reflecting the primacy of biological motherhood in society at large (Gabb, 2005). Further, biological lesbian mothers may also take on greater domestic responsibility, possibly due to the role expectations associated with biological motherhood (see Goldberg, 2013).

In one of the few studies to examine same-sex parents' naming practices explicitly, Colonna (2013) interviewed 22 lesbian-mother families formed via donor insemination. Parents' term selection process was largely guided by three main themes involving the cultivation of parent–child relationship, strengthening of parental identity, and hopes of public recognition. Colonna found that some nonbiological mothers tended to avoid choosing certain names such as Mommy or Mom due to their close connection to primary and maternal (childbearing) motherhood. Ten of 22 couples derived one of their two parent names based on what they called their own mother, or they chose a term that resonated with their own ethnic or cultural background. Some parents' decisions were informed by what other lesbian or gay (LG) family friends did or by children's books

about same-sex parent families (Colonna, 2013). These families thus drew on fellow LG-parent family pioneers as well as literary representations of LG parenthood in choosing parent names.

Insights into parent naming also come from a study by Sunderland and McGlashan (2012), which analyzed differences between "two-mum and two-dad" families as portrayed in children's picture books. They found that out of 13 two-mum picture books, the most commonly used linguistic formula was Categorization + Nomination; for example: *Mama Katie* or *Mommy Rachel*. In most of the children's books analyzed in this study, the parent names were equal or fell under the same linguistic formula, speaking to an equal sharing of parental status and identities (i.e., equal coparenting; Sunderland & McGlashan, 2012).

Other research also suggests that a preference for egalitarianism may underlie same-sex parent families' naming choices (Bergen et al., 2006; Patterson & Farr, 2017). Bergen et al. (2006) interviewed 16 lesbian-mother families formed via donor insemination and found that 12 out of 16 lesbian co-mothers used parallel address terms—that is, parallel derivative forms of *mother* (e.g., *Mommy* and *Mama*), identical derivative forms distinguished by each parent's first name or initial (e.g., *Mama Kate* or *Mama T*), or a derivative form in English for the biological mother and a derivative of mother from another language or culture for the nonbiological mother. Parallel address terms were used out of a desire to (a) construct equal parenting identities in the eyes of the child, (b) help solidify parental identity for the nonbiological mother, or both.

The notion that a parent's gender identity (e.g., woman) will align with a particular parental role (e.g., mother) and supposedly corresponding parental identifier (e.g., Mommy) is challenged by some work. For example, some of the nonbiological mothers in Gabb's (2005) study of 21 lesbian-mother families identified more as fathers than as mothers. And in Padavic and Butterfield's (2011) study of 17 lesbian coparents, one third of the female-identified participants embraced the role and identity of fathers, thus participating in the parental binary while also queering it. Six participants identified as *mathers*, a term coined by these six participants who intended to have a parental identity that was distinguished from (and potentially combines) those of mother and father.

Linguistically, this term queers the functions and boundaries of these names and roles, providing a way out of the heteronormative familial discourse that can constrict possibilities within same-sex parent families.

Thus, the literature on lesbian-mother families formed through insemination provides important background for discussing parent naming practices in other same-sex family contexts. Notably, much of the research on lesbian-mother families has focused on families formed through donor insemination (Biblarz & Savci, 2010), with work on naming practices in these families showing that derivatives of *mother* are used more often by biological mothers, whereas nonbiological mothers sometimes identify with *mathers* or fathers and prefer corresponding parental titles. Little is known about naming practices in (a) gay-father families in general or (b) lesbian-mother families formed through adoption, where neither parent shares a biological connection to their child(ren).

Gay-Father Families and Naming

Given that being a gay man has been widely seen as inconsistent with fathering (Armesto & Shapiro, 2011), it is unsurprising that gay men have been largely left out of parent naming analyses, with the exception of one study on characters in children's books. Sunderland and McGlashan's (2012) analysis of nine two-dad children's books revealed that only five out of 18 fathers were referred to as *Dads* and eight were referred to with Nomination (e.g., Eric and Martin). Thus, gay fathering is, at least in these picture books, implied as invalid (i.e., gay-parent families are pseudofamilies). The fact that the gay fathers in these children's picture books are rarely named *Dad* implies that they are less fatherly than lesbian mothers are motherly; indeed, lesbians were referred to as *Mom* in 24 of 26 books reviewed about two-mom families. In naming these fathers *Eric*, *Martin*, or *Uncle*, the authors of these books convey a message about these men's roles as well—that is, that they are not so-called real fathers.

Finally, a study by Schacher, Auerbach, and Silverstein (2005) of 21 gay fathers, most of whom adopted their children, documented that, like the "mathers" interviewed by Padavic and Butterfield (2011), men described ways in which their parenting embodied traditional characteristics of both mothers and fathers, thus problematizing gender-role distinctions and the binary concepts of Mom and Dad. In this way, their narratives challenged the concept of gendered parenting, which provides an important backdrop for exploring gay fathers' parental naming processes and term selection, which may or may not line up with traditional gendered parental identifiers.

In sum, the literature on parent naming largely excludes gay-father families, with the exception of analysis of families depicted in children's books. The present study is the first to analyze parent naming among two-dad families, with implications for understanding how gay fathers navigate their parental identity in a largely invalidating cultural context.

Adoptive Families and Naming

In addition to the complexities of parent naming for same-sex parents already discussed, the adoptive context introduces additional complexities and considerations in naming. Little work has examined naming in adoptive families, with existing work touching on the importance that families may bestow on renaming an adopted child (Firmin et al., 2017) and how different-sex and same-sex adoptive families choose a last name for their children (Patterson & Farr, 2017). Same-sex adoptive parents often reported extensive discussion about last name choice. A desire for egalitarianism often figured into naming decisions, alongside practical and legal factors relevant to the adoptive context, such as choosing one partner's last name because that partner was formalizing the adoption first (Patterson & Farr, 2017).

Choosing parent names may be especially complicated for adoptive parents, who balance considerations about what they will be called alongside the reality that all adopted children came from another set of parents. In turn, the process of deciding on parent names may be especially salient or complex for families with ongoing relationships with birth parents or whose children join the family at an older age and thus already know birth or foster parents as "Mom" or "Dad." Although no known published empirical work has examined parent naming in adoptive families, some research suggests that adoptive parents may feel competitive with birth parents over parent names and roles or consider a birth mother who refers to herself as "the mother" to be overstepping boundaries

(Goldberg, Kinkler, Richardson, & Downing, 2011), signaling potential conflicts or negotiations related to parent names. Additionally, one informal survey of adopted children and adults found that birth mothers were most frequently referred to by their first names but also frequently called some derivative of mother, such as *birth mom*, *tummy mommy*, *China mom*, or even just *mom* or *mommy* (Davenport, 2014). Similarly, several blogs and discussion boards have been initiated by parents who adopted older children who pose questions such as "How long did your child take to call you mom or dad?" (e.g., Adoptive Families Editorial Team, n.d.; EdyDedd, 2011; Jen, 2011). Such questions, posed to a community of adoptive parents, signify the importance that adoptive parents may place on how their children refer to them and the challenges of navigating names within the adoption triad of children, birth parents, and adoptive parents.

The Present Study

The present study was designed to explore how LG-parent families formed through adoption navigate the process of parent naming. Because this is the first study to examine this topic, we pose the following exploratory research questions:

1. What names do parents in same-sex adoptive families use?
2. What does the process of choosing a name look like for same-sex adoptive parents?
   a. How do parents discuss and reach an agreement on names?
3. What sources do parents draw on to generate parent name possibilities?
4. What challenges or considerations do parents experience in choosing a name?

Method

Data Collection

The data were derived from a larger longitudinal study focused on the transition to adoptive parenthood for lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples. For the purpose of this study, data from 80 participants (40 couples) were analyzed. Participant recruitment occurred between 2005 and 2013, and inclusion criteria were as follows: Parents had to be in coupled relationships (single parents were excluded), and both parents had to be adopting together for the first time. Adoption agencies across the United States were contacted and asked to disseminate information about the study. Effort was made to include agencies in states with high percentages of LG people based on U.S. Census data. Interviews were conducted by the principal investigator and trained graduate students at several phases, including before placement and several time points after adoptions were finalized. Data for the present study were drawn from the second assessment point, which took place approximately 3 months after children were placed. At this time point, most parents had moved from theoretical ideas about what children might call them to the reality of using parent names with their children. Members of each couple were interviewed separately via telephone. See Goldberg, Downing, and Sauck (2007) for additional information about recruitment and procedures.

Participants

Of the 40 participating couples (80 individuals) in the sample, all of whom were first-time adoptive parents, 20 were gay male couples, and 20 couples were lesbian couples. The sample was primarily non-Hispanic White ($n = 70$), but four participants identified as African American, three as Latinx, one as Southeast Asian, and one as Native American, with one nonresponder. Mean annual family income was substantially lower for lesbian-mother families ($M = \$103,871$, $SD = \$44,123$, $Mdn = \$85,500$) than for gay-parent families ($M = \$182,730$, $SD = \$125,141$, $Mdn = \$158,000$) who participated in this study, $t(38) = -2.74$, $p = .009$, $d = 0.84$. Compared with national data from the 2000 U.S. census on same-sex couples who adopted children, our sample included more White parents (90% White mothers and 85% White fathers, compared with 77% and 61% nationally; Gates, Badgett, Macomber, & Chambers, 2007). Although not directly comparable because our income data were collected 5 or more years after the 2000 census and not adjusted for inflation, it is notable that family income for two-mother families was similar, whereas two-father families in our sample were much more affluent than the mean of \$102,508 among two-father families in the 2000 U.S. census data (Gates et al., 2007).

At the time of placement, most ($n = 16$) children were newborn, 14 were younger than

1 year, and the remaining children were 3, 4, 6, 8, 9, 11, and 12 years of age ($M = 21.3$, $SD = 39.0$, $Mdn = 0.8$ months). Participants adopted children who were White ($n = 15$), multiracial ($n = 10$), African American ($n = 8$), Latino or Hispanic ($n = 5$), and Vietnamese ($n = 2$); in turn, most families in the sample were multiracial. Twenty-two couples adopted a male child, 15 couples adopted a female child, and six couples adopted a male and female sibling group. Couples pursued adoption in a variety of ways: 18 adoptions were private, domestic, and open (in which birth parents and adoptive parents meet and exchange information); 15 adoptions were public and domestic (i.e., from foster care); four adoptions were international; and three adoptions were private, domestic, and closed (in which birth parents and adoptive parents do not exchange identifying information). More detailed parent and family demographic characteristics are available in Table 1.

Data Analysis

Responses to the following open-ended questions were coded and analyzed by the first author using thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2014): (a) What does (or will) your call you and your partner? (b) How did you decide on these names? These questions were part of a semistructured interview. Trained undergraduate and graduate students transcribed the interviews verbatim. Identifying information about participants was removed.

To develop codes, the first author engaged in line-by-line open coding of participants' responses to the preceding questions. The first author attended to *what* and *how often* terms were reported, as well as how often couples employed parallel terms. *How* the process of parent naming varied for couples in the sample was also of interest, as were the sources parents drew on in generating parent names. In addition, particular attention was paid to complexities and challenges reported by individuals or couples when deciding on names. This process allowed the development of initial codes, such as "salience of gender as a factor in name choice," that described the issues parents noted in relation to the binary and gendered nature of parent naming systems. After initial codes were developed, the first author drew on social constructionist and queer theories and the existing literature to guide, strengthen, refine,

and develop already-established codes. Drawing from a social constructionist perspective (Holstein & Gubrium, 1999; Oswald et al., 2005), the data were further coded for themes related to parental and familial identity construction and how these informed and were informed by naming choices, as well as negotiation between partners in choosing parent names. Drawing from queer theory, the first author attended to ways in which couples navigated heteronormative and gender normative discourses in regard to parent names and roles and how LG adoptive parents may have (un)intentionally queered heterosexual parent naming traditions (Oswald et al., 2009). Through this process, the first author read and reread responses multiple times and organized the data based on key themes.

Next, we identified key themes related to chosen names, the naming decision-making process, and complexities or challenges in the naming process. The first author engaged in extensive discussion and repeated review of the transcripts to determine which themes were the most important in these data. Throughout this process, the second and third authors, who were highly familiar with the data, reviewed themes and discussed the development of codes with the first author. This process culminated in the identification of three overarching thematic categories: the process of parent naming, sources participants used to derive names, and challenges or complexities participants encountered in relation to naming. However, over time, codes were rearranged, reorganized, and made more specific. For example, the code "language development, which described expectations that parent names would change as children developed verbal skills, eventually became "flexible process, open to change in parent names." Thus, we achieved greater focus, specificity, and nuance in our coding process over time. The final coding scheme was established once we had verified agreement across the three authors regarding all major themes and subcodes. The second author independently applied the final coding scheme to the data, and the two coders discussed and resolved any discrepancies in coding.

Results

We first describe the names chosen by parents in the sample, then explore the collaborative process of deliberate naming. Next, we describe the sources parents drew on when generating

Table 1. *Demographic Characteristics of Participants and Their Families*

Characteristic	Overall (N = 40 couples)		Lesbian-parent families (n = 20 couples)		Gay-parent families (n = 20 couples)	
	n	*%*	*n*	*%*	*n*	*%*
Race or ethnicity (of parents)[a]						
African American	4	5.0	2	5.0	2	5.0
Latinx	3	3.8	1	2.5	2	5.0
Native American	1	1.3	1	2.5	0	0.0
Southeast Asian	1	1.3	0	0.0	1	2.5
White	70	87.5	36	90.0	34	85.0
Parent had bachelor's degree[a]	62	78.8	34	85.0	28	72.5
Type of adoption						
Public and domestic	15	37.5	8	40.0	7	35.0
Private, domestic, and open	18	45.0	9	45.0	9	45.0
Private, domestic, and closed	3	7.5	1	5.0	2	10.0
International	4	10.0	2	10.0	2	10.0
Child gender						
Boy	22	55.0	10	50.0	12	57.5
Girl	15	37.5	7	35.0	8	42.5
Boy and girl siblings	3	7.5	3	15.0	0	0.0
Child age at adoption						
<1 year	30	75.0	15	75.0	15	75.0
3–6 years	6	15.0	4	20.0	2	10.0
8–12 years	4	10.0	1	5.0	3	15.0
Family racial/ethnic composition						
White parents, ethnic minority child	18	45.0	11	55.0	7	30.0
White parents, White child	12	30.0	4	20.0	8	40.0
White parent, ethnic minority parent, ethnic minority child	8	20.0	4	20.0	4	20.0
White parent, ethnic minority parent, White child	2	5.0	1	5.0	1	5.0
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Household income (annual)	$143,301	$101,323	$103,871	$44,123	$182,730	$125,141

Note. [a]One gay father did not provide a response.

potential names, including cultural background, other LG-parent families, and traditional mother and father terms. Finally, we describe the complexities and challenges reported by participants related to having adopted older children, the gendered nature of traditional parent names, and the impact of anticipated stigma on the naming process. These themes are summarized in Table 2. All names are pseudonyms.

What Names Do Same-Sex Adoptive Parents Use?

Gay fathers most frequently chose *Daddy* as their parent name, and 12 (60%) gay-father families used the combination *Daddy* and *Papa*. Lesbian mothers most often chose *Mom* or *Mommy*, and 11 (55%) lesbian-mother families

used the combination *Mama* and *Mommy*. Such combinations are examples of parallel names (Bergen et al., 2006), which were used by 33 of 40 couples. Exceptions to parallel naming included three families who had not yet decided on names, one lesbian couple who used an original parent name combination (*Mama* and *Momsy*), one lesbian couple who used *Mom* and a first name, and two couples whose children called them by first names.

The Process of Deciding on Parent Names

Overall, there was a strong sentiment of collaborative negotiation in the naming decision-making process for parents in the sample. This often resulted in parallel name structures motivated by egalitarian ideals.

Table 2. *Theme Frequency by Group*

Themes and subthemes	Lesbian parents (*n* = 40)		Gay parents (*n* = 40)		Exemplar quotes
	n	*%*	*n*	*%*	
Process					
Deliberate, definitive	8	20.0	17	42.5	"Martine is pretty adamant about being called Mama."
Flexible, open to change	32	80.0	23	57.5	"Don't you find that kids just make up their own names for parents?"
Sources					
Traditional derivatives	40	100.0	40	100.0	"I don't want him calling me a nickname, you know, I'm his Mom!"
Ethnicity or culture	8	20.0	8	20.0	"I was going to go by 'Baba' because that is Vietnamese for Papa."
Other lesbian or gay parents	12	30.0	12	30.0	"A lot of our friends have done the like the Mama and Meema."
Challenges					
Older children	10	25.0	10	25.0	"She calls us what she wants to call us. Mostly our names."
Managing the gender binary	5	12.5	1	2.5	"She's not a Dad but, you know, it's really been a hard process for her to figure out what name fits her role."
Navigating potential stigma	2	5.0	4	10.0	"I really want to try to avoid doing anything that is going to further set him apart from other kids."

One participant described the process of collaboration:

> Don at one point wanted to be called Papa, and then I think as we got closer, he started seeing everything written with Daddy on it, and he's like, "Oh, I wish I was Daddy." And I said, "Well, it's okay, you can be Daddy." And he said, "Well, what are you going to be?" and I said, "Pop … Andy Warhol was Pop Art, and so I want to be Pop."

This couple, then, easily shifted and accommodated to allow for both partner's preferences, working together to choose their parent names.

In a few cases, parents described making trade-offs in their negotiations, whereby a highly desired (i.e., "traditional") name was traded for some other valued parental experience. For example, Brian and Matteo discussed two noteworthy parenting experiences, one being named *Daddy* and the other, cutting the umbilical cord. Matteo explained: "I think we had negotiated, and I think we decided I would cut the umbilical cord if he could be Dada or Daddy." For these parents, cutting the umbilical cord and being the primary derivative of father, *Dada* and *Daddy*, were both central to the role of "parent" and

thus treated as equivalent. Another couple made a similar bargain. Darryl explained that he and his partner Charlie decided, "I get to be Dad, and because I got to be Dad, Charlie got to have the first last name [in our child's hyphenated last name]."

As exemplified by these couples, some parents espoused a strong preference for a particular name, whereas others viewed naming more flexibly. These two approaches to naming are described next.

Deliberate process, definitive name choices. Twenty-five participants (both members of two lesbian couples plus one member of four couples; both members of five gay couples plus one member of seven couples) described definitive decisions about parental terms, whereby they generally expected their name choices to be final—that is, not to evolve in the future. A gay father, John, said of the naming process, "We thought about it for years." Parent name considerations often began long before children were in the picture. Jess, a lesbian mother, talked about her partner's desires to be called Mama, stating: "Martine is pretty adamant about being

called Mama. And it's funny because she's been talking about that way before adoption." A gay father, Michael, reported, "I told him that if we were going to adopt I was going to be Daddy," indicating the decision to be called Daddy was made before the decision to adopt, and that it was nonnegotiable.

Parents who had strong opinions and preferences surrounding naming typically preferred traditional *Mom* and *Dad* names, rather than alternative, invented names, whereas their partners were often more flexible in their preferences. Thus, the process of arriving at these names was typically described as collaborative and fairly easy.

Flexible process, open to change in parent names. In contrast to the suggestion by many parents that their parent names were permanent, and often determined before parenthood, 52 participants (both members of 14 lesbian couples plus one member of four couples; both members of eight gay couples plus one member of seven couples) believed their parent names could change or evolve over time. For Tony, a gay father who was referring to himself and his partner as *Daddy G* and *Daddy T*, his daughter's ultimate preference was a priority: "Whatever she wants, you know? I don't know. Don't you find that kids just make up their own names for parents? I guess we'll see." With this answer, Tony implied that it was not necessarily for him and his partner to decide what their child will eventually call them. He envisioned his daughter as playing a role in the process and allowed room for her preferences and creativity. Stephanie, a lesbian mother, reflected on her and her partner's experience of naming with a similar sentiment:

> Right now Mel's saying she's Mommy, I'm Mama. But we kind of feel like they're going to come up with their own little whatever … so we thought, "Well, you know what, we're just going to let them call us whatever they want to call us, and that will work."

Stephanie described some of the process of deliberation that they went through but ultimately noted that this process never definitively concluded because they would wait for their children's preferences. Mel shared similar thoughts, stating: "As time goes on they may have their own renditions of things that will just stick, and that's who we'll be."

A sense of flexibility was also evident among parents who acknowledged the inevitability that terms might evolve with the passage of time and as children grew. As Anthony said, "Especially as he gets older, he's not going to call Mark *Dada* for much longer." For Anthony, parent names were not fixed entities, but evolving and shifting according to children's age and preferences. Likewise, a lesbian-mother couple, Maddie and Olivia, saw the natural development of their child's language abilities as a tool that could assist the choice process:

> Yeah, we have discussed it, but I think we are just going to wait and see what evolves, what words that he's using, and if it becomes confusing to him then we'll probably just make up something that we want him to say. Otherwise we are just going to see his normal development and what he calls us.

Sources for Generating Names

Parents drew on several sources in thinking about or creating names. We discuss three major sources named by parents: traditional mother or father derivatives, ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and the choices of other LG parents. Each of these contexts provided parents a structure, backdrop, or paradigm for generating names, and several parents drew from multiple sources (thus codes in this section are not mutually exclusive).

Traditional derivatives (mother and father). In some way or another, *all* couples in the sample drew from traditional heterosexual and gender-normative parent names. This demonstrates their ubiquity in society and language, as well as their strong ties to the social role of "parent." For example, Martine shared, "I don't want him calling me a nickname; you know, I'm his Mom! Which [he is] going to call me!"

Even among those families who asserted a desire to be creative and innovative with their names, potentially queering naming practices, traditional parent names were inevitably salient in their naming process. For example, even creative parent names such as *Momsy* were linguistically similar to traditional mother derivatives such as *Mommy* or *Mummy*. Demonstrating the necessity of navigating traditional names even if one chose to depart from them, when the interviewer asked one father about choosing between

"dads, daddies, papas, fathers," the participant reflected:

> We're having to think about everything in the path of having a child, and raising a child, and—what kinds of traditions or what parts of our culture do we want to keep? Which ones don't [we]? What do we put in their places?

Ethnicity and culture. Eight couples (four lesbian, four gay) used or considered using a term that resonated with their ethnic or cultural background. This theme includes names that were (a) derived from a participant's ethnicity, (b) relevant due to a particular cultural meaning such as a direct translation, or (c) chosen based on familial relevance or context. As Sam, a gay father who ultimately chose the name *Papa*, explained: "I think someone said to look to your ethnicity and see if there's any kind of name to go with [it]." A few participants chose terms that mean "Mom" in other languages, such as *Mor* (Danish) or *Mia* (Greek). For Henry, his rural upbringing and the names that were prominent within this subculture—and his own family—played a role in his parent naming process:

> I'm country and I'm from the hillbillies, so I call my Dad *Papa*. So when we were deciding what we were going to do … I was just like, "I will be called Papa." I mean I'll answer to anything, Daddy as well, but it will just make it easier.

Notably, some of these families acknowledged the disadvantage that parent names that deviated farther from traditional (English) mother or father derivatives were less recognizable to others. For example, Lee chose *Ba*, Vietnamese for "father," and remarked, "It's a little bit bad because outside our family, not many people are going to know what Ba means." Thus, culturally derived names (many of which were also traditional mother or father derivatives) provided one possibility for parent names with personal, familial, and cultural meaning—although not necessarily outsider recognition.

Other LG parents. For many couples (six lesbian, six gay), the naming choices and experiences of other pioneering LG parents served as a reference point, illustrating ways of navigating parent naming. Most participants referenced

the parent names of other same-sex couples they knew. For example, one gay father, Nick, described the options he and his partner were familiar with before their naming decision: "There's a lot of Daddy and Poppy or Daddy and Papa, and sometimes there's Daddy Mike and Daddy Nick, but so far [for us], it's Daddy and Papa." For another couple, Jacob and Remy, the easiest solution seemed to be what was most common at the time: "I kinda like Daddy and one of us would have to be Papa and we just talked to a lot of couples and that seemed to be the most common solution." As Jacob, Remy, and others suggested, same-sex couples becoming parents seem to draw on intracommunity information on same-sex parent naming, as well as examples of name paradigms modeled by others within their community.

Challenges and Complexities

Many participants in the sample described challenges or complexities associated with the naming process, often related to deviations from the SNAF prototype in terms of the adoptive context, gender roles, and same-sex parent structure. We address specific challenges related to adopting older children, managing naming in the context of the gender binary, and considering potential stigma during the naming process.

Older children. Ten couples (five lesbian, five gay) discussed the role of having adopted a noninfant child (i.e., older than 1 year) in their naming processes. These parents necessarily accounted for their children's age when discussing their plans and expectations for naming. Additionally, these children came to the home having known other mother and father figures, which could influence both the names parents chose for themselves and the process by which children began using parent names.

Similar to the ways in which parents acknowledged the possibility of shifts in the future based on children's developmental stage and preferences, parents of older children typically approached naming flexibly and with some awareness of their children's early history and unique life circumstances. Children often took time to transition from using first names to more traditional parent names. For example, Jim and Cole's son first called them nicknames, then began to use their first names. Cole shared, "In the last month definitely he has been going to the

first name basis. We are trying to get him to say Daddy Jim and Daddy Cole . . . . I'm sure he is not comfortable calling us Dad yet." Similarly, Randi, who adopted 4-year-old Ella, said, "She calls us what she wants to call us. Mostly our names. She has started to kind of use Mom and Mommy." Notably, Randi and her partner Susan directly linked the use of parent names with Ella's sense of secure belonging in the family:

> Ella said to Susan that her birth mom told her that it was okay to call other people Mom or Mommy because she is going to live with them for a long time. Now we don't really know if this true or not, but this is how she is making sense of it. That's all that matters. She is finding a way to say, it's okay to embrace you as my family. [We're] giving her some space to figure it out and get there on her own timeline.

Randi's statement highlights how continued loyalty to a previous parent can influence children's willingness to use parent names for new caregivers. In turn, these parents tended to allow children to set the pace of the parent naming process, despite many reporting that they felt happy or validated when their child referred to them with traditional parent names.

However, some noninfant children immediately began using traditional parent names. Louise and Deb had been told not to expect an adopted older child to call them *Mommy* or *Mama* or to bond well, yet Louise reported that on the first day they met their daughter Nina, "she turned to me and said, 'Mami?' (which is Spanish for Mommy). And I said, 'Yup.' And she said, 'I can call you that, right?'" Given the unexpected ease of parent name use, Deb expressed concerns: "She calls Louise Mami and calls me Mama, right from the very beginning, which we were ecstatic about, but then we thought 'Oh, god maybe that was a reactive attachment, I mean is that really a good thing?'" Nevertheless, she stated, "it feels good." As these accounts reveal, parent naming is made additionally complicated not just for same-sex parents but for adoptive parents in general, and particularly those who adopt older children.

Managing the gender binary. Another challenge related to naming concerned the need to navigate the gender binary. One gay male participant and members of four lesbian couples explicitly spoke to discomfort or lack of ease related to connotations associated with gendered

parental identifiers, which informed their naming choices. Maria shared how her partner Ellen's difficulty identifying with the "Mom" role influenced their name selection process:

> She's had a lot of just thinking about … what it means to be a mom. She's not a dad but, you know, it's really been a hard process for her to figure out what name fits her role . . . . And in our relationship I never ever felt like the wife. I really felt like that was weird because I'm the girl so I must be. And Ellen has always kind of, I don't know. I just feel like terms are so, so hard.

Maria's response captures the difficult experience of feeling outside of the socially constructed binaries of wife/husband or mother/father, and the struggle to navigate the reality that there are typically two default naming choices from which a parent can choose. Because parent names are so closely linked to the roles they are ascribed to, choosing a parent name is challenging for those parents who feel that they do not match either the mother or father role. At the time of her interview, Ellen had not yet decided on her parent name.

In another example, Patricia discussed initially choosing *Papi* (meaning *father* in Spanish), then switching to a more gender-normative choice. She explained:

> I was like, "Oh my God. What if our daughter or whatever gets lost in the store and is like, 'I can't find my Papi,'" and then I'm like, "Oh, I'm her Papi." They're going to be like, "Yeah right. You're trying to abduct this child." And I was like, "Oh, I can't be called that."

Patricia's experience illustrates how the binary gender system of parent names can complicate naming choices and discourage gender-atypical naming approaches.

Navigating potential stigma. A final challenge encountered in the naming process was related to the specter of stigma. Six parents (four gay, two lesbian) discussed ways that stigma or concern about social recognition influenced their naming choices or process. Notably, all participants who endorsed this theme were part of multiracial families; however, they did not explicitly discuss the specific role of multiracial family status in their experiences of stigma. Sam, for example, who chose to be called Papa, discussed his concern that a creative parent name would further stigmatize and set apart their child.

People come up with some pretty interesting names. I had one friend wanting [my son] to call me something kind of babyish. I really want to try to avoid doing anything that is going to further set him apart from other kids. I want him to have as normal a life as possible and calling me something really out of the ordinary … I just didn't want to do that. If "Papa" or "Daddy" is something that most kids use, then that's kind of where we wanted to move.

As two White fathers raising a Vietnamese child, Sam and his partner were aware of their own deviations from SNAF—and his desire to minimize the ways in which his son experienced his family as different from other families—which motivated their name selection to be Papa and Daddy, as opposed to something more creative and inventive.

Similarly, George, who was going by Daddy G, reflected on his experience confronting stigma related to gay fathering and adoption:

My mother asked what Ronnie is going to call us, and my stepfather said, "I think she should call you guys uncles." And I said, "Well, that would be dumb and stupid," because we're not. That's the icing on an adoptive child's [experience] . . . . I thought about that and got kind of angry … because biology means so much to them and also [they question], "How can two gay men be fathers to a little girl?"

George's quote sheds light on the reality that many people still regard traditional parent names as reserved for so-called traditional (i.e., heterosexual, two-parent) families. As George recounts, the only available option in the mind of his stepfather was uncle, which is a term that refers to a fundamentally different role from that of a father. These examples highlight various potential stigmas relating to the multiple, intersecting identities of participants and their families (including gender and sexuality, the adoptive context, and multiracial family status), and how they shaped and informed parents' naming choices—in terms of what names they ultimately moved toward, and away from.

Discussion

No research has examined naming in the context of same-sex adoptive families. In turn, this study nuances and extends existing work on the intersections among LG parenting, adoptive parenting, and naming. Findings emphasize the perceived importance of parallel naming practices and collaborative naming processes, the consideration of cultural background and other LG families in parent naming, and the naming challenges encountered by same-sex adoptive parents.

Consistent with previous literature (Bergen et al. 2006; Sunderland & McGlashan, 2012), parallel naming was prominent among parents in the sample and provided a way for families to construct their family identity as one in which both parents are on equal footing. The negotiations and trade-offs that parents describe call to mind research on how same-sex female couples divide child care, housework, and paid work such that partners may specialize in different areas of labor, yet arrangements are regarded as equitable and satisfactory (Downing & Goldberg, 2011). This study, then, adds to understanding of the variety of ways that same-sex parents actively negotiate and construct their familial identities, guided or informed by the value placed on egalitarianism.

Many parents in this sample took an open, flexible approach to parent naming, viewing their names as impermanent—or rather, as growing or changing with the child. As noted by many parents and as discussed by Colonna (2013), parent names may shift or evolve with time, in that as children grow older, they may no longer wish to call their parent "Dada" or "Mama." Other parents, however, expressed strong, definitive preferences for traditional mother or father derivatives, emphasizing the cultural power of these terms in constructing parental and familial identity (Almack, 2005).

Indeed, the vast majority of parents chose to be referred to with traditional mother or father derivatives. In previous literature, certain derivatives of *mother* have been more closely linked to biological maternity (Brown & Perlesz, 2008; Colonna, 2013; Gabb, 2005). Thus, the commonality of such names in our sample, in which there were no biological hierarchies between parents, suggest that these terms are closely tied to motherhood in general, and not solely biological motherhood. Moreover, the frequency of traditional father derivatives among male same-sex parents is noteworthy, given that gay fathers have routinely been denied traditional parent names in children's books (Sunderland & McGlashlan, 2012). The present study, then, provides evidence that gay fathers do choose traditional father derivatives, despite societal questioning

and invalidating of the parental potential of gay men.

Although parents using traditional mother and father derivatives could be seen as falling back on or drawing from gendered, heteronormative language, in using these terms, same-sex parent families queer their function and establish their familial identity as valid and recognizable. These familiar terms, as these parents' naming practices implicitly assert, do not belong to heteronormative parents but to parents in general. Further, their usage by same-sex parents upends binary concepts of mother and father as existing only as a package deal (Oswald et al., 2005).

Alongside traditional mother and father terms, participants drew on cultural and ethnic backgrounds and examples of pioneering same-sex families who had already gone through the naming process, echoing findings from Colonna (2013). Name choices and options that circulate among same-sex parent communities provide tools for these queer families to construct both a meaningful familial identity and personal identity, which may be particularly important in the face of challenges such as creating an integrated familial identity with older adopted children or navigating the potential for multiple stigmas related to families' multiracial, adoptive, or same-sex parent statuses.

The adopted children of the parents in this sample ranged from newborn to 12 years of age, and thus parents' narratives revealed a range of perspectives on the role of child age in naming, with implications for adoptive families beyond the same-sex parent context. From a social constructionist perspective, a family who adopts an older child might expect family identity formation to take longer than with younger adoptees (Holstein & Gubrium, 1999). Family identity formation may also be nonlinear because the shift from old family to new family requires emotional adjustments as well as language adjustments; names used for birth or foster family members may now be used to refer to new and unfamiliar family members, and children may also be navigating conflicting loyalties between previous and current families (Leathers, 2003). Also, given that birth parents may not always have relinquished custody during the early phase of the foster-to-adopt process (Goldberg, Moyer, Kinkler, & Richardson, 2012), other alternatives to traditional parent names—such as first names—may seem desirable, with the understanding that name choices

may shift as children grow older, especially when they feel more settled in the family and more attached to their adoptive parents. Parents' efforts to assist their children with gradually adjusting their concepts of who is "Mom" or "Dad" can be understood as helping to solidify these parent–child relationships. Through a queer theoretical lens, these parents can be seen as rewriting the script of how families come to be, to know one another, and to name their familial relationships.

Other challenges described by parents related to the binary gender structure of parent names and experiences or expectations of stigma due to families' deviations from the SNAF prototype. Some parents struggled to find parent names that fit due to the binary system of mother and father parent names. Others, particularly gay men, discussed ways their families were or could be marginalized, reflecting research suggesting that gay men in particular may meet resistance or pushback regarding their decision to become parents (Goldberg, 2012). Some parents responded to these experiences by adhering to traditional parent names, which may have the effect of reinforcing their parental identity and encouraging public recognition of their familial relationships. Notably, concerns about public recognition were only mentioned by members of multiracial families, yet none of these parents explicitly connected their multiracial family status to parent naming in the context of public recognition. That is, they did not comment on the ways in which they might be even less likely to be recognized as a family because of racial differences within the family, and how this, in addition to their adoptive and same-sex parent status, led them to pursue traditional and easily recognizable parental names. And yet awareness of this reality may indeed have implicitly shaped their naming decisions.

Implications for Family Practitioners

Our findings hold many implications for therapists, family life educators, health care providers, and other professionals who interface with same-sex parent families before, during, and after parents make decisions about parent names. As our findings highlight, same-sex parent families both draw on and innovate traditional or known parental address terms, but they also draw creatively from other sources, such as their cultural or ethnic background and

the norms of their queer communities. Anecdotes in other research highlight the need for affirming family practitioners; in one case cited by Padavic and Butterfield (2011), a physician allegedly told a parent "that in his medical opinion, referring to myself as a mather was harmful to our daughter. This put me into a tailspin about whether I was messing up our daughter" (p. 181). Professionals should work to support and honor the names that parents choose for themselves and assist them in becoming familiar with the range of naming options and possibilities that exist, especially for those who may have trouble developing or choosing names that work for them and their families—for example, parents who do not feel that traditionally gendered parent names fit their experience. Additionally, our study shows how traditional mother or father derivatives are privileged and may be preferred, which may lead to parental conflict or inequalities in parental recognition, although no participants in the present study identified this as a source of tension per se. Professionals can help to open the dialogue to discuss challenges related to parent naming (including choosing a name, concerns about recognition of the parent–child relationship, and adopting older children who refer to them by first names) and share resources to facilitate the naming process.

Our findings also hold implications for scholars in communications, family science, gender studies, psychology, human development, and related fields, in that they highlight how a process such as parent naming both reflects and contributes to the parental and familial identities that same-sex adoptive families establish for themselves. Finally, our findings challenge institutions to reconsider documentation and forms that refer to a *mother* and *father*. Our findings suggest that the term *parent* is more appropriate, given its gender-inclusive nature.

Limitations, Key Contributions, and Directions for Future Research

A key limitation of this study lies in that participants were mostly White (81%) and affluent. Research with more racially and culturally diverse samples might reveal differences in parent naming practices—for example, more names derived from ethnicity or culture. Also, a large portion of the participants in this sample relied on or drew from the experiences of their same-sex parent friends. This theme may not be as prominent among same-sex families who are isolated from larger queer family communities.

Despite these limitations, our research makes a number of key contributions, which hold implications for future work. As no research has yet focused on parent naming among adoptive families, a novel contribution of the present study was to provide insight into how adoptive families considered parent naming when adopting older children who had previous caregivers they may have called *Mom* or *Dad*. Future work should build on these findings to explore in greater depth how adoptive families refer to, or name, birth family members (e.g., *birth mom* or *Mama Susan*) and how such practices may shift over time. It would be useful to study what circumstances (e.g., level of contact with birth family, gender of adoptive parents, age of child at time of adoption) affect the way in which adoptive families refer to their child's birth parents and how the names used for birth parents relate to the family's conceptualization of birth parents' roles in children's lives (Goldberg et al., 2011). For example, the extent to which heterosexual, lesbian, and gay male adoptive parents have similar or different experiences with parent naming is largely unknown, although blog posts suggest the transition between first names and parent names when adopting older children may be similar across parents of diverse sexual orientations and relationship configurations (Adoptive Families Editorial Team, n.d.; EdyDedd; 2011; Jen, 2011). Additionally, future work should consider, from the child's perspective, what it is like to have more than one Mommy or Daddy, given that these terms have been more commonly used for the naming of two parents, rather than for the labeling of a more complex and larger parent structure.

Another contribution of this study lies in that the formation of adoptive families and the practice of parent naming depend on the child(ren)'s age at the time of adoption. Parents in the sample who adopted older children presented more fluid views on parent names, speaking, perhaps, to a broader parenting approach that is necessarily more flexible and adaptive, amid the recognition that their child is coming to them with prior experiences and relationships.

Because the literature on gay father's naming practices is especially scarce and the identity of the gay father has been and continues to be problematized, it is important to consider

gay fathers' experiences with parent naming. The results from this study lay important groundwork for future research, highlighting that gay men do use traditional father derivatives, possibly reflecting the additional effort they must invest to construct their parental identities against a backdrop of stigma and invalidation. More work is needed that explores the actual experiences of gay fathers, including how gay fathers and their children construct their familial identities in response to popular depictions of gay parenthood and navigate the (relatively limited) representations of two-dad families in media and children's books. Additionally, future work should consider parent naming in same-sex adoptive families from the perspectives of the children in these families.

Some individuals in the sample had difficulty identifying with the particular roles of "mother" or "father," highlighting the potentially restrictive binary nature of these role identities—and also the socially constructed nature of these roles. Future work should build on these findings to assess in greater depth how the social structure of parenting roles informs parent naming.

Finally, our findings call attention to the fact that queer communities are establishing their own naming traditions and trends. Indeed, although same-sex parents must go through an intentional and sometimes lengthy process of designating parent names, this process is often aided by naming traditions established by pioneering same-sex families. As the literature base on parent naming in same-sex parent families grows, perhaps novel naming practices will continue to proliferate alongside continued "queering" of traditional naming practices.

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