

Voices of the Adult Children from Lesbian/Gay Parent Families

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Abstract

The voices of adult children from lesbian and gay parent homes are missing from the literature. This qualitative study begins to fill that gap. Participants reflect on their childhood relationships and experiences, family and community influences, and the impact of these factors on their lives. Gender roles, experiences with oppression, and the need to work against oppression for marginalized groups were discussed. Despite transitional pain, the vast majority of participants assert that there are overall benefits to growing up within a family with a lesbian/gay parent. The findings inform social workers working with lesbian and gay individuals, families, and communities.

Key words: Lesbian/gay families; children; development; gender roles; resilience

Families with lesbian and gay parents are neither new nor uncommon. It is just that these families have been *hidden* because heterosexist assumptions create an environment of invisibility. While it is difficult to acquire definitive numbers, it has been estimated that there are anywhere from 6 to 14 million people in the United States (U.S.) with lesbian or gay parents (Bozett, 1989; Johnson & O'Connor, 2002). Based on the common assumption that family environment influences the development of children, the question of how children are affected by growing up with a lesbian or gay parent arises (Patterson, 1995).

Social workers, practicing from the person-in-environment framework, have long recognized that the culture and environment in which children grow up has a powerful influence. Families influence children in multiple ways, including through their structure. In fact, studies have shown that ultimate responsibility for a child, not gender, is what creates a mother (McMahon, 1995; Risman, 1995). Single parent families may have some unexpected benefits, especially for boys (Hite, 1994). "Boys who grow up with 'only' their mother... experience less pressure to demonstrate contempt for things 'feminine', and for the non-aggressive parts of themselves" (p. 374).

"Far from making a boy act in 'girl-like' ways, a loving mother actually plays an integral role in helping a boy develop his masculinity—the self-esteem and strength of character he needs to feel confident in his own masculine self" (Pollack, 1998, p. 81). The lesbian or gay parent family presents a family structure alternative to the two-parent male/female model. Because household tasks as well as parenting tasks cannot be divided along gender lines, the children from lesbian/gay parent homes learn that these are not gendered activities. In these families, neither power nor nurturing is gendered, even if there is not equality between the parents. Wright (1998), in her study of lesbian stepfamilies, found that participants believed they were capable of both mothering and fathering their children. "Tasks that are often divided on the basis of gender in heterosexual families are assigned [in lesbian step families] based on preference, ability, or time." (p. 112). Based on the findings from their study on gay fathers, Bigner and Jacobsen (1989) "suggest that gay fathers may be more androgynous than nongay fathers in their parenting orientation" (p. 184). They propose that gay fathers may be more expressive in their roles, taking on functions traditionally labeled as "mothering".

To this day, there remain major gaps in the literature about lesbian and gay parent families. Studies conducted in the early 1980s through the 1990s focused on evaluating the differences between heterosexual and lesbian/gay families, finding few differences (Bozett, 1989; Golombok, Spencer, & Rutter, 1983; Kirkpatrick, Smith, & Roy, 1981). As lesbians and gay men have become more empowered and visible, research has taken a powerful turn from examining the differences with heterosexual families to identifying the similarities. More research is occurring that looks specifically at lesbian [and gay] families (Mercier & Harold, 2007). An increasing number of scholars are looking at issues such as work (Mercier, 2007), adoption (Ryan & Whitlock, 2007), activism and empowerment (Jones & Voss, 2008), and the impact of heterosexism (Anderson & Holliday, 2007). Recent studies find that children from homes with lesbian and/or gay parents are doing as well as (Meezan & Rauch, 2005) or better than (Gartrell & Bos, 2010) other children. Gartrell and Bos found that children from lesbian parent homes had social and developmental scores similar to those of other children. Further, they found them to be less likely to exhibit behavioral difficulties and more likely to fare better than other children academically and on measures of self-esteem.

Children who grow up in lesbian and gay parent homes offer a voice that can expand our knowledge. These children may participate in the lesbian/gay "community" and often know and interact with other persons who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) and attend LGBT events. What is the impact of this environment on the adults who grew up in it? As Riddle & Arguelles (1981) posit, because children in gay homes are alternative models of individualizing roles in the home, they have potential to embrace alternatives to sex-role socialization. Wright (1998) found that the lesbian parents in her study used the opportunity of being in a lesbian parent family to help their children make connections to other oppressed individuals and groups. This acceptance of diversity, in conjunction with a positive experience of growing up in a lesbian/gay community, has created a group of young adults who feel a strong connection to LGBT culture, even if they identify as heterosexuals. Children are "exposed to the concept of cultural and individual diversity as positive rather than threatening" (Riddle & Arguelles, 1981, p. 53). Abigail Garner (2000), who grew up with gay fathers, has a website with a column entitled "A Place at the Table" that addresses the "culturally queer/erotically straight" identity. There is a new generation of heterosexual adults who have clearly conquered the mountains of heterosexism and homophobia!

Patterson (1996) found that lesbian parent families challenged sex role stereotypes, providing children with a more flexible model of sex roles. Sullivan (2004), in their study of co-parenting lesbian mothers found that the division of labor in the home was not based on gender roles. Further, the vast majority of participant couples worked to divide responsibilities equitably. Slater (1995) explains, "While many heterosexual couples are also working to redistribute power and responsibility within their relationships, lesbians are operating from much farther outside the traditional model" (p. 48). Bozett's (1989) summary of the research on gay fathers includes this finding:

In comparison to heterosexual fathers, it appears that sexual orientation is related to espoused paternal attitudes: (a) gay fathers are more endorsing of paternal nurturance, (b) gay fathers are somewhat less traditional in their overall paternal attitudes, (c) gay fathers have a substantial investment in the paternal role, and (d) gay fathers assess themselves more positively in their performance of the paternal role (p. 154).

Felicia Park-Rogers is the founder of COLAGE (Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere), a national organization with chapters across the U.S. She believes that the gift that these children have to offer is that they see their families as different. Children raised with a gay or lesbian parent recognize that their family is different.

They are neither better nor worse, just different (Taylor, 2000). According to Park-Rogers, “We are often times more open minded, more compassionate and understanding about dealing with difference and discrimination” (p. 26). Within the structure of lesbian and gay parent homes we can see the broadening of the definition of family and gender roles. This structure can break the limitations and expectations for an exclusively biological family. Copper (1987) identified this question, does the daughter in a family with a lesbian parent, who sees women exchange power, learn a different way of being female. Does she learn not to relinquish space to males?

Further, lesbian and gay parent family structures broaden the scope beyond the nuclear family structure to be more inclusive of *chosen family*. Chosen family includes individuals who are not connected with the parents and children through kinship ties (Dalton & Bielby, 2000). The lesbian or gay parent family appears to be more inclusive of stepparent and co-parent figures. This opens these families up to more diverse experiences particularly with child rearing.

Through this study, the researchers attempted to give voice to children who spent at least half of their childhood living with a lesbian or gay parent. The goal was to explore with them as they reflected on their experiences and their perception of the impact of growing up in a home with a lesbian or gay parent. This is a voice that is absent in the literature. While there is much speculation about the impact of growing up with a lesbian/gay parent, the voice of this population has rarely been heard.

1. Methods

This was an exploratory study that used narrative and life history reflection to gather data on the experiences, feelings, and attitudes of adult children who had grown up with a lesbian or gay parent. Individual, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 19 adult children from lesbian and gay parent families. The interview process engaged a retrospective reflection by the participant on her/his life (Denzin, 1989). The interviews followed an open-ended semi-structured interview guide, empowering the participants to move into areas of significance in their life and development. The semi-structured interview guide included questions on specific topics, such as: demographics, family history and relationships; influences and transitions; and, beliefs and attitudes about gender roles and lesbian/gay families. Data was also gathered on biographical history, sequences, and outlook emphasizing self, experience, context (Fisher, 1991), and relationships (Bertaux, 1981). Each participant was interviewed by a trained researcher either in-person or by phone. The interviews lasted from 1 to 2 hours. Confidentiality was explained and consent granted.

Because of the difficulty accessing this population, a snowball sampling method was used to identify participants. Initial participants were recruited through referrals from professional colleagues. While the number of gay parent families included was small, the data did not deviate from the data gathered from lesbian parent families. Consequently, the data from lesbian and gay parent families was combined. Likewise, differences in themes was not found based on gender of the participant.

For accuracy during data analysis, all interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. Each interview transcript was coded using the constant comparative method to identify and examine themes (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Miles & Huberman, 1984; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Using this method, all interviews were read, and reread, highlighting responses to the questions and identifying other themes that emerged. To insure the reliability of the findings, two evaluators coded each interview. Themes reviewed in this article were identified by both evaluators. As a theme was identified in an interview, other interviews were examined for the theme, looking for differences and similarities in responses. The interviews were then organized by the comments made that related to these themes. The data was further examined to determine if any of the demographic variables were related to the themes.

1.1 The Participants

The 19 participants ranged in age from 18-40 years of age. Ten men and nine women were included in the study. The vast majority of participants (89%) were white; one was Latina and another bi-racial Native American. The participants identified as Christian, Jewish, or non-religious. The vast majority (85%) identify as heterosexual. None identified as lesbian or gay; one identified as “queer.” Two did not want to categorize themselves and felt the freedom to explore relationships based on interest. Participants were from urban and rural environments and were from all regions of the U.S. Participant self-reflection on the economic circumstances of the family indicates that economic diversity exists in the sample.

Some of the participants reported experiences of extreme poverty during portions of their childhood; but, they had all lived in middle class (ranging from working to lower to middle to professional) homes for the majority of their lives. Each of the 19 participants spent more than half of their childhood in a home with at least one lesbian or gay parent. The amount of time a participant lived with a lesbian or gay parent and/or co-parent varied. Three participants were born into a home with two lesbian parents; four had a parent who lived in a same sex relationship before the child's (participant's) third birthday; and, the remaining 12 lived in homes with a parent who identified as lesbian or gay during a significant portion of the participant's childhood, beginning before their 10th birthday. All but two of the participants were biological children of at least one of the lesbian/gay parents; the other two were adopted.

2. Findings

Several important themes emerged that are discussed and described in this article: family and community relationships and influences, gender role expectations and attitudes, and the politics of difference. In these interviews, participants discussed family/community relationships and the effect of anti-gay bias on their lives, including teasing and other children not being allowed to visit in their [the participants] homes. Gender role expectations and attitudes, as a theme, involved an examination of the way gender roles were constructed in their family of origin and how they felt this effected gender roles in their adult relationships. Finally, the politics of difference theme involved the exploration of the participants' attitudes towards and advocacy in confronting the oppression of LGBT and other oppressed populations. None of the income/class, ethnoracial, gender, or age dimensions was related to participant reflection on the themes.

2.1 Family/Community Relationships and Influences

Family and community relationships had an important impact on how participants felt about having a lesbian or gay parent(s). While all of the participants indicated they maintained a close and loving relationship with their lesbian or gay parent, several issues influenced the experience of growing up with a lesbian or gay parent. As the participants highlighted, family and community actions could be hurtful. One participant reflected on an incident when her father, who was not gay, made a negative comment about her mother who is lesbian.

Well I remember one specific time when he [my father] was around, my brother and I were both there, and he made some sort of comment. I don't know exactly what it was, but I knew everybody looked and laughed at it. I didn't laugh...it really hurt.

The way other families treated participants was also an important subtheme in the narratives. As noted by one participant,

I had heard that their parents said things. One little girl wasn't allowed to hang around with me because of my mother. Her parents told my good friend back then, and told her mother that they should be careful if she was going to hang around with me because of what my mother was like.

Peer influences could also be hurtful and impact the participant's feelings about having a gay or lesbian parent, as noted by one participant, "it really did not take on negative connotations for me whatsoever until peers found out and they responded negatively. The impact was hurtful and some of the memories are still painful." Negative reactions, or fear of negative reactions, led to many participants' being keenly aware of the risk of revealing their parents' sexual orientation, and led to a sense of maintaining privacy for the family:

Whenever I have discussed my parents being lesbian it is certainly a risk...It was really hard for me to make friends [in high school], and allow myself to feel comfortable enough to tell them about growing up in a lesbian family. The fear of being an outsider drove me to not telling all of my friends. Throughout high school, and even today a lot of my friends don't know.

For almost all of the participants, however, the longer-term effect was one of appreciation and growth. Participants discussed moving from discomfort to acceptance and appreciation as they matured. As framed by a couple of participants,

Growing up ...more than anything, I wanted to be normal...I don't feel that way anymore...I think that no matter what, everybody is different in their own way, and everybody has stuff to deal with, and just think that you're loved at home, and that's what counts. And then by college or somewhere in the college period of time hopefully you realize the difference is a hopeful thing, and it is easier. You are able to see the positive impact of having a parent who made choices that made their life true. How that was good for you and for the world.

The majority of the participants talked about being proud of having a family that is different, making statements such as, “So, as I got older and...more confident...I was proud of having a gay parent...so overall...I was totally comfortable with acknowledging a parent who is gay.” As one participant stated, “I totally have learned to create, build, and maintain a really great community around myself.” Another expressed similar feelings,

Now that I am older, community is really important to me. When I make a decision now, I don't just make a decision on my own. Its more like let me run that by a committee of people. I get input from all these different people, and I realize that is the way I was raised.

Several participants were raised in supportive, gay affirming communities. These participants were buffered from the negative impact of anti-gay bias. While the number is small, the two participants who were raised in a lesbian or gay home that provided a political context to help them analyze negative experiences report not being traumatized by these negative experiences while it was occurring. These participants seemed to internalize the affirming values of community in which they were raised. This finding merits further research.

2.2 Gender Role Expectations and Attitudes

Per the interview guide, each participant discussed gender roles in the home. For the vast majority of the participants, exposure to diverse gender roles and the negotiation of responsibilities was seen as having lasting affects:

I think in different ways she has exposed me to women...and then again like growing up in the community of women, I see women who have had all different kinds of jobs from being an athlete to a secretary.

One participant stated, “I was exposed to diverse gender roles” while another said, “I think the difference was that they negotiated them [roles].” A third participant expanded,

It was very important for them to negotiate those roles in ways that they both felt comfortable. They talked about them and did not base on assumptions what they should or shouldn't do because of their gender, but because of what they wanted to do, and what they were good at.

The majority of participants discussed an open and aware attitude toward gender roles with the vast majority of the men describing themselves as sensitive and affectionate. For example, one man stated, “I am a hands-on, touchy, feely, a give hugs and kisses kind of man” while another said, “For me being the sensitive sort of guy, I can have the best of both worlds.”

The women discussed the freedom to be themselves in dress, activities, and attitudes. Within their adult homes, roles may be divided by “traditional” models, but the process of negotiation is a thoughtful one. As, Morgan stated, “Women and men have pretty interchangeable roles, and certainly ... I was as a young kid, very athletic, and very active. My mom was always like you're a gender bender.” Participants who had children or were considering having children reflected on the importance of raising their children to move outside constraining gender roles. “I would say it is okay to cry...it is okay for girls to be tough...I would want my son to be emotional.” One participant, on the other hand stated,

Affecting gender roles... yes [I do feel different from my peers], but not as much as I wish I would...I think gender roles are so engrained in the culture that it is not just about what goes on in your house...people still end up taking on roles.

Many of the participants concurred, but went on to talk about ways they move beyond gender roles and expectations. One participant first commented that he did not feel like he was different from his peers in terms of roles, but, as he talked on he commented, “...I would say I am more expressive than most men around me.”

2.3 The Politics of Difference

When participants were queried regarding the ways in which growing up in a lesbian home impacted their life, they generally responded about the strengths they gained. “I think in general it has made me a lot more open,” “[I am] more aware of people's feelings,” “more accepting of the way people are” and, “I notice the way people are treated.” Most participants described themselves as “lucky,” “hopeful,” and more open-minded and aware as a result of growing up with a lesbian/gay parent. All of the participants maintain close family ties and some reflected on the importance of protecting the rights of lesbian and gay partners. Some mentioned the importance of marriage while one expressed a preference for civil unions.

I think that marriage is a holy sacrament. Its for a man and a woman...I wouldn't oppose it [civil unions] necessarily...Obviously if two people have been together for a long time and one dies the other person should get the things, but I think you can do that in a will.

Several participants described their experiences with oppression. As noted earlier, some were targeted for harassment in school by their peers, some felt isolated, and others noted an awareness of growing up in a home that was sometimes questioned by community members. Despite these struggles, most described a sense of pride in their families and who they have become as a result of their experiences.

The experience of growing up as *different* "opened my eyes to things other people don't see." Quotes reflect the belief by some of the participants that they are more open "to love and respect all people no matter what their race, culture, religion, or sexual orientation." One participant stated,

...I am more open-minded [from youth raised in a heterosexual home]. The door to my brain has been opened to be more loving to all people and all creatures. That is one thing that is a pretty high priority in terms of the upbringing of kids in lesbian, gay, bi, transgender families. You must learn to love and respect all people no matter what race, culture, religion, or sexual orientation.

As another participant stated:

I would definitely stick up for the gay and lesbian community because I don't think it is any different than anything else. To me, people are people, and differences in people are the spice of life. Why should anyone condemn them for being different?

When asked how the participants would describe LGBT people and their culture to someone who is straight, respondents addressed the positive.

I would describe them as people. People who are different in the terms of who they love. They are no different other than that. They are still people and human beings and they still have feelings. They still have love and do the best they can. That is what everyone I think is trying to do, or most people.

The vast majority of participants readily acknowledged that their experiences as children of lesbian/gay parents created a political awareness and a commitment to advocating for positive change.

- ...a left leaning politic and I hope for an inclusive world, but somehow more supportive of the whole diversity of human existence.
- I am certainly more political than a lot of my peers. It comes from the realization that the person is political.
- and ...more confident...political,...more liberal minded, more concerned with rights, being gay, women, race rights, I'm definitely a political person...
- I feel more connected when I see the treatment of members of other marginalized groups.
- ...but I think, it makes you a lot more...you know, being a person who is oppressed ..., makes you a lot more aware of the other kinds of minorities in society.

Many of the participants felt passionate about respecting and defending the rights of all marginalized groups. They noted that they think they are observant when those around them are experiencing differential treatment. They expressed political awareness coupled with the need to take action. As one male participant expressed, "I mean, the biggest impact it has had is my inability to turn a blind eye to injustice." According to another participant,

If you are living the kind of pretend average American life, it is easy to let others be oppressed or turn a blind eye to the inequities in the culture. It is hard to do that when you are sort of attached to a group that is discriminated against and looked down upon...I have never been able to see the world as black and white. I always see everything as gray, and it certainly has both its pluses and minuses.

3. Conclusion and Implications

Childhood is a time of learning from a range of experiences, some of them stressful. This study of adult children of lesbian/gay parents offers some insight into the lives of this population. While the exploratory nature, small sample size, and the use of convenience sampling result in limitations, there are themes and trends that emerged that are worthy of further exploration.

The voice of these adult children highlights their struggles, the benefits from their perspective, and their views on what it means to be different. Children from lesbian and gay parent families live in homes where household tasks and relationships are not gendered activities. Examining and evaluating this experience provides an opportunity for understanding alternative gender roles and child rearing practices. Their unique experience and resulting worldview can provide us with new knowledge, which may be helpful in expanding our understanding of families and difference. Having a parent who was open about being lesbian/gay and able to discuss the “politics” of being different was a major buffering mechanism for the child. This context provided the child with an environment where it was “safe” to discuss and try to make sense of incidences of discrimination/isolation, both direct and indirect. These families tried to provide a context for understanding why these incidents occurred. Living in a gay affirming community also buffered the impact of anti-gay bias by creating a support network of diverse families and parents in daily activities such as school, sports, parties, and visits to the homes of peers.

All of the participants maintain strong and caring connections with their lesbian/gay parent(s) and the overwhelming majority felt that growing up with a lesbian/gay parent impacted them positively. Having a lesbian/gay parent provided many opportunities for children to focus beyond the immediate and empathize with the experiences of children and adults who are marginalized. The participants report that their childhood experiences impact the choices they make in adult relationships, politics, and a sense of connection to the impact of oppression on all marginalized groups. They also report a sense that they are more aware of difference and issues of oppression than their peers.

I think it opened my eyes to things other people don't see. I am lucky to have had that and it probably helped to make me what I am. I find myself...that I go out of my way to make friends with the person that is standing in the corner or someone who is shy. ...maybe it was because of how I was brought up that I don't want anyone else to be uncomfortable as I had been growing up.

The vast majority feel they are more politically aware and willing to take a stand in resistance to oppression. Further, the majority of the participants are active allies in trying to work against the marginalization of other oppressed groups.

But, in terms of who I choose as friends, it would absolutely be people who are willing to look at the complications in the world and work to affect some kind of change or at least not to live within a rigid definition of what this culture offers you in life choices.

Family and community support were significant factors in buffering anti-gay bias.

At the same time, in better understanding the lives and experiences of these participants, practitioners can begin to recognize the barriers lesbian and gay parent families encounter on a daily basis due to socially heteronormative understandings of family structures. As social workers and advocates we can provide leadership in recognizing and working to dismantle the barriers found in the laws and policies that negatively impact families.

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