"My Wife’s Pregnant, We’re Gonna Have a Baby!" “Oh, Tell Her Congratulations!”

Same-Sex Couples’ Desires for Support in Parenting

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Abstract

Same-sex couples with children face a variety of challenges in raising children. The literature does not examine the parenting challenges that couples face and how such challenges affect the lives of their families. What challenges do same-sex couples face in raising their children? How do legal challenges affect same-sex parents and their families? Using data drawn from qualitative interviews with same-sex parents in 2015, I highlight some parenting challenges that same-sex couples still face, despite and within the recent legalization of same-sex marriage. Findings suggest that same-sex parents continue to face challenges even with the legalization of same-sex marriage; however, the severity of these challenges may decrease over time. While this study is limited by the lack of diversity in the sample, participants in this study infer the need for a broad awareness of parenting challenges that same-sex couples continue to face.

Key Words: same-sex marriage, lesbian, gay, LGBT, parenting, families, legal

Introduction

The past few decades have brought significant changes to the family as an institution. Considering these changes, there also been an increase in acceptance of gay and lesbian couples who have children. Children are brought into the lives of gay and lesbian couples in many ways with most using artificial insemination (AI), other assistive reproductive technologies (ART), or adoption (Mallon, 2008b; Patterson and Riskind, 2010). In addition, many gay and lesbian parents face challenges in their efforts to raise their children. Some of these challenges are similar to what other parents would face such as trying to get their child to eat vegetables or trying to retain a positive image of themselves as a parent when they
feel like they are anything but. However, there are also many challenges that gay and lesbian parents face that other families are not accustomed to or are not aware of. For instance, gay and lesbian parents face challenges regarding legal matters such as adoption or parentage rights. As parents, they also face challenges in navigating social roles such as when one lesbian partner carries a child and the other partner does not. The legalization of same-sex marriage can help alleviate or reduce the severity of some of these challenges; however, society may be slow to catch up about awareness of these challenges and or gay and lesbian parents can still face stigma from the wider society.

In this study, I sought to understand how same-sex couples engage in parenting behaviors and processes, within the context of the recent legalization of same-sex marriage. Specifically, I ask: what are some parenting challenges that same-sex couples face in raising their children? How do legal challenges affect families headed by same-sex parents? What effect does same-sex marriage have on families? Exploring the challenges that same-sex parents face and how the legalization of same-sex marriage can affect same-sex families is important because it pushes our understanding of how families react to challenges and adapt to change. I offer insight about some of the limitations of this study, including a discussion of the difficulty in achieving an ideal, diverse sample. Lastly, I speculate what could be done in future research to ensure a more representative sample.

**Literature Review**

**Alternative Families**

There are many variations of family forms. Those who do not fit the “traditional” model of the family are considered alternative families. Same-sex couples and parents are the subject of many debates about alternative families in recent years. Webb (2005) argues that with the dramatic changes in families over the past twenty years, the notion of a “one size fits all” family mentality is losing some credibility. Modern families may involve relatives or parents with different sexual orientations (Webb, 2005). However, because society is fixated on the notion of the “traditional” family, wider institutions in society continue to reinforce traditional assumptions and family relations. In turn, this makes it very difficult for gay or lesbian families to gain acceptance, and this is partially because many institutions in society have failed to adapt to the ever-changing structure of family. According to Juel (1993), “The same-sex couple is perhaps perceived as the most threatening non-traditional family arrangement” (Juel, 1993, p. 318).

Giddens (2000) argues that, according to anthropological surveys, homosexuality is tolerated in many cultures, but attitudes in the Western world tend to be more extreme than other societies. According to Burkholder and Burbank (2012), “About 1% of all households are headed by same-sex couples. Of this number, 19.4% reported having children” (Burkholder and Burbank, 2012, p.13). The number of households that are headed by same-sex couples may only represent one percent of the population, but this trend is increasing, as are liberal attitudes among U.S. citizens. According to Burkholder and Burbank, “47% of
Same-Sex Couples’ Desires for Support in Parenting

Americans favor gay marriage compared with 43% who are opposed” (Burkholder and Burbank, 2012, p.13). However, even with an increase in acceptance, gay marriage is still a topic that is heated for many Americans. Some scholars point out that there are religious and cultural bases that influence Americans to stand against gay marriage (Juel, 1993). Attitudes from a slow changing population are reflected in the wider society thereby making it more difficult for couples to gain acceptance of their families and acknowledgement of the challenges that they face. This also makes it more difficult for them to negotiate their roles within their families and communities.

In the case of same-sex parents, the notion of role making and role taking can be applied as well (Williams, 2002). Same-sex parents try to change or reshape more traditional gender roles within the context of new social norms. They attempt to reshape the traditional gender roles but it hasn’t always been possible, as there are societal constraints such as the lack of government support, inconsistency within the enforcement of laws, etc., that impede their ability to shape their role within their family and within the wider community.

Family Dynamics

Stacey and Biblarz (2001) note that there are some scholars who oppose gay and lesbian parenting for several reasons. Some scholars argue that gay and lesbian parents expose their children to the risk of being homosexual themselves, as well as making them more likely to suffer confusion over their gender and sexual identity (Stacey and Biblarz, 2001). Moreover, it is argued that homosexual parents are more likely to, “Molest their own children and children in these types of families are more likely to lose a parent to AIDS, substance abuse, suicide, and suffer from higher levels of depression” (Stacey and Biblarz, 2001, p.161). Same-sex couples are portrayed as unstable and more likely to separate than heterosexual couples.

Nevertheless, one of the most powerful arguments that some scholars make against same-sex parenting is the social stigma of having a same-sex parent. Stigma “ostracizes children and hinders their relationships with peers” (Stacey and Biblarz, 2001, p.161). The definition of family that is used to compare families to other families is based on the notion of heterosexuality and the social order. Nearly every family in the United States is compared to and judged against the conception of the “traditional” family. Gay and lesbian parent families are judged and compared to this standard as well. However, with the ever-changing nature of American society, there are very few families that fit the model of the traditional family anymore.

In important ways, the way we describe the “functioning” social order impacts how we define adaptive or deviant individuals, responses, etc. One of the models of group relations is assimilation. In the case of same-sex parents and homosexuality, the wider society culturally dominates same-sex parents as heterosexuality is the dominant practice. Full assimilation occurs when the new or once different members of society are indistinguishable from the dominant culture, whether the dominant and subordinate cultures choose to assimilate or not. In the case of same-sex parents, full assimilation to the dominant culture...
occurs when same-sex parenting is widely accepted socially and legally, whether the dominant culture wants same-sex parenting to become a dominant group practice or not. Once same-sex parents are accepted legally and socially, such parenting becomes an accepted practice among the dominant culture.

Gay and lesbian-headed families are just one of many family types that continue to increase in popularity amongst Americans. In the case of same-sex parent families, families rapidly become more prevalent with the passing of legislation allowing same-sex couples to marry. With backward socialization, young people are successful in “queering” the family (Cohler, 2005). Backward socialization has a significant impact on how gay and lesbian parents socialize their children about family life. Hence, there has been a decline in the prevalence of traditional families. It is possible that traditional families, as seen in the nineteen-fifties, are likely to become the minority while non-traditional families, such as gay and lesbian headed families, gain popularity.

Legal Challenges Same-Sex Parents Face

Same-Sex Marriage

Same-sex marriage is an important topic of discussion for many same-sex parents. The literature argues that same-sex parents face a variety of legal challenges regarding marriage and gaining equality under the law (Nicol and Smith, 2008; Kubasek, Glass, and Cook, 2011; Riggle, Rostosky, and Prather, 2006). One of the challenges that same-sex couples face is being denied the right to apply for a marriage license. Nicol and Smith (2008, p. 679) describe a couple who went to the clerk’s office to apply for a marriage license and the clerk, “laughed at them, asking if their request was a prank.” Because of such resistance, couples resulted to commitment ceremonies that allowed them to marry on their own terms (Nicol and Smith, 2008; Kubasek, Glass, and Cook, 2011; Riggle, Rostosky, and Prather, 2006). Couples felt that marrying outside of the law was a way for them to contribute to the public changing of social attitudes surrounding same-sex marriage.

Additionally, same-sex couples who are not legally able to marry are often denied a plethora of federal benefits and protections that would help not only themselves, but their children as well (Kubasek, Glass, and Cook, 2011; Riggle, Rostosky, and Prather, 2006). Benefits and protections such as social security and immigration protections can have a significant impact on the lives of same-sex couples and families. Social security assistance programs often base their benefits and eligibility on marital status and those who are legally married have access to, “their own and their living and deceased partner’s benefits” (Kubasek, Glass, and Cook, 2011, p. 968). Even for those same-sex couples that were legally allowed to marry in their state, they are not covered under the federal benefits that heterosexual couples would normally be covered under (Shulman, Gotta, and Green, 2012).

Denying these benefits can have detrimental consequences for same-sex couples and their family in the process of making sure that they are properly taken care of. Riggle, Rostosky, and Prather discuss how same-sex couples have to set up their own legal paperwork for advanced planning or end of life planning.
because since they are not legally recognized as married. If one partner passes away suddenly, they have no access to the deceased partner’s benefits, even if the couple had been together for many years. If a couple has children and the one partner had their name on the adopted children’s paperwork or if the biological parent passed away, the other partner has no legal right to those children unless they file additional paperwork with a lawyer such as a will or living will (Riggle, Rostosky, and Prather, 2006). In the process of filing the legal paperwork, some same-sex couples may encounter legal advisors that are not “gay-affirmative” which can also be a hindrance to taking the legal precautions to ensure they are properly covered in the face of an emergency (Riggle, Rostosky, and Prather, 2006, p. 774). Not having the proper legal precautions set up could have significant effects on not only the parents, but the children in the family as well. Families could be broken up or endure a substantial amount of stress which can then affect the overall family functioning in gay and lesbian parent households. Kubasek, Glass, and Cook (2011) and Riggle, Rostosky, and Prather (2006) argue that a lack of change in policies could lead to stress due to vulnerabilities which can then effect relationship quality between parents. Shulman, Gotta, and Green (2012) argue that a change in policies would provide same-sex couples and their families a sense of security knowing that they are protected under the law.

Even with the legalization of same-sex marriage, some same-sex families still face institutional discrimination. Kandaswamy (2008) argues that same-sex marriage rights are not fully granted to same-sex families that are non-white. The fight for same-sex marriage is a political demand that was started by, “a group of relatively privileged (white, professional, and urban) gay and lesbian couples” (Kandaswamy, 2008, p. 714). Rights that are granted through marriage and other institutions will mostly benefit those that are white and that the demand for marriage equality reproduces racial inequality and a system of racial hierarchy. Kandaswamy also argues that gay and lesbian people of color may benefit from the legalization of marriage as individuals; however, simply utilizing marriage to gain access to certain rights supports larger structures of racial inequality (Kandaswamy, 2008). In short, even with the legalization of same-sex marriage, white gay and lesbian couples will primarily benefit while those couples who are non-white will still face institutional discrimination regarding the rights and benefits of marriage because of their race. This is a challenge that is not explored in detail in the literature but is a challenge that needs to be brought to light so that we may understand the experiences of same-sex parents and families at a deeper level, particularly for same-sex families of color.

Legal Rights and Parenting

There are a plethora of legal challenges that same-sex parents face in raising children. Rivers (2010) discusses a multitude of child custody cases of gay and lesbian parents. There is one example where a lesbian woman was trying to get custody of her five-year-old daughter and the judge granted custody to her ex-husband on the grounds of the mother’s lesbianism (Rivers, 2010). The judge deemed that, “the homosexuality of plaintiff as a matter of law constitutes her not a fit or proper person to have the care, custody and control of… the minor child of
If a gay or lesbian person requests custody from a heterosexual parent, there is a risk that the gay or lesbian person will not be granted custody of their own child and thus because of their sexual orientation, their child may go to an ex-spouse or go into foster care. Coogan (2013); Sroka (2013); Forman (2006); and Perlesz and McNair (2004) argue that there are many challenges that same-sex parents face regarding parentage rights and parental equality. Inequality in parentage rights is rampant as heterosexual parents with children are treated in a more equal manner than same-sex parents.

Coogan describes a scenario where a heterosexual couple conceived a child through in vitro fertilization (IVF) and later divorces. The father is not biologically related to the child but still has legal strategies that can be used for his case. According to Coogan, a father could, “petition a family court (likely as part of the divorce proceedings) for custody and visitation rights so that he can continue to be a parent to his young daughter” (Coogan, 2013, p. 868). From that point, what typically occurs is that a family judge will determine what is best for the child. This is a scenario that would not occur if the couple was gay or lesbian. In the case of a lesbian couple, the partner who carried the child would be granted custody since many jurisdictions do not legalize second parent adoption (Sroka, 2013). In the beginning stages of creating a family, same-sex couples face the responsibility of discussing what will happen if the couple separates and there are children involved. This is a discussion that may occur in other types of family structures as well. But, for same-sex couples, the discussion is particularly important as there are outcomes that are more severe and are based on a facet of their identity whereas their heterosexual counterparts have an experience with child custody that is different.

**Challenges within Parenting Practices**

To my knowledge, there is no literature in existence that discusses some of the parenting challenges that same-sex couples face in relation to parenting practices. There is not any literature that discusses how same-sex parents talk about the media with their children or discusses how they talk about marriage with their children. Additionally, there is no research that addresses how same-sex couples navigate a society that is very different from that of their parents. This research is vital to challenging other scholars to examine such parenting challenges and is important in bringing to light a body of literature that did not exist before. These challenges will aid in not only helping us understand same-sex family processes, but also aid in supporting a reconceptualization of families and family processes.

**Theoretical Framework**

I used the theoretical underpinnings of Erving Goffman to analyze responses from the participant interviews. Specifically, I use Erving Goffman’s dramaturgical approach through Allan (2013) to explain the conceptualization of parenting and family behaviors among same-sex couples with children. Social interactions, both large and small scale, are analyzed with the analogy of the stage, as if it were a theatrical performance (Allan, 2013). People are performers
who are concerned with how they present themselves to an audience. People in social interactions change or manipulate social cues around them to control how they communicate their “self” to others (Allan, 2013, p.61). In turn, the audience, or society internalizes such a performance or presentation of self and makes judgments based on how the actor, or person in society, performs or carries him or herself. Allan (2013) refers to Goffman’s phenomenon as impression management, which is applicable to same-sex parents. Growing up, children watch and internalize the behaviors of their parents, which can be interpreted through dramaturgy as a performance. As children watch such a performance, they make decisions and judgments about their parents “character,” as one would when watching a theatrical performance. Children grow up with an internalized perspective of their parent’s behaviors and this, in turn, is carried throughout adulthood. They can then make their own decisions about norms and values based on their parent’s performance. This is also a process that occurs not only in same-sex families, but also in other family forms, including traditional heterosexual couple families and even in other areas of society. Norms and values are rejected and or accepted based on performances from parents and the performances of others around them.

In addition, each person has a different performance or role for various social situations. For example, same-sex parents may give a performance that is different when they are at work with co-workers, than a performance with their own children. Peers or coworkers can also choose to accept or reject the performance of others. They can choose to reject or accept norms and values that others present in their performances. When couples were asked if they felt their parents reflected the “traditional” conception of the family, they reflected on the performances of their parents over the course of their lifetime. In their own family, same-sex couples reflect on the performance of their parents and then how as parents themselves, they adjust their own behaviors or performance for their own children. Simply, parents influence children; children learn those ideas which are then solidified as an adult, which then are reinforced when those adults have children. This cycle then continues with their own children making judgments on their performance as same-sex parents. As family forms change and adapt to the society around them, and vice versa, there will be new norms and values created, and norms and values that are molded to fit the needs of their family. The family as we know it today is in a state of transition, from the notion of one family form to a social world with many different family forms. This is also true regarding the values and norms that families accept or reject. With the development of different family forms comes the molding and reshaping of previous norms and values to create a continuum of norms rather than a stringent set of norms and values.

Methods

This study is aimed at exploring the ways in which same-sex parents navigate raising their children in the modern society of today. Specifically, I examine the parenting challenges that they face as well as some legal considerations that they must consider as they build and care for their families. To achieve this, I conducted a study that was qualitative and phenomenological in
methodological approach. By the term qualitative I imply that I am seeking to understand the in-depth knowledge of the why or how in the lived experiences of same-sex parents rather than using methodology that quantifies what I am studying. Regarding the term phenomenological, I imply that I describe the lived experiences of same-sex couples through their narratives of their lives (Creswell, 2014). For this study, I chose to use individual, in-depth interviews because the topics covered in the interviews were sensitive and responses were individually based. I also chose to use individual, in-depth interviews because I needed to hear their voices and observe their body language, emotions, and the environment in which they live to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences as parents. Administering an interview with same-sex parents allows me to collect rich data and develop a deep understanding of gay and lesbian parents. Moreover, a face-to-face interview allows me to gain more in-depth data than, for example, conducting a telephone interview.

**Recruitment Strategies: Successes and Limitations**

The interviews were administered to seven same-sex parent couples that resided in the Southeastern Michigan area. Partners were interviewed together and interviews were completed within a six-month period from September 2014 through February of 2015. The recruitment goal was twenty couples; however, I faced difficulty in securing interviews. My sample included mostly white, lesbian women, except for one couple where one of the partners identified as Hispanic. This lack of sample diversity is attributed to a few factors. Because I used primarily snowball sampling, the couples I recruited often connected me with other couples that they knew, which often mean newly recruited couples were of the same racial-ethnic and class backgrounds of other couples. In addition, within one of my recruitment areas, most self-identified lesbian women are known to be white and therefore it was more likely that they also referred me to other same-race couples in that area. Another explanation is that, within the black community, revealing one’s sexual orientation is sometimes detrimental and looked down upon (Moore, 2011). As a result, black lesbian women may tend to keep their identities hidden more often and, thus, it is more difficult to recruit from this community. They are not as visible as women who identify as white lesbians, especially within the communities from which I recruited. My identity as a white woman also was and could be a potential barrier in recruiting from places where black lesbians might congregate.

Nancy Mezey (2008) reflects on this same difficulty in her study with lesbian women. “In addition to the problem of recruiting working-class lesbians, I found there were significant barriers between me and Black lesbian communities” (Mezey, 2008, pp. 37). As a white researcher, Mezey found that there was a great racial divide between the white and black lesbian women in the community where she recruited participants. In her effort to gain access to the black lesbian community, she contacted support groups that were meant for black lesbian women only. However, she found that these group meetings were cancelled without her knowledge. Mezey’s identity as a white, lesbian researcher most likely influenced her ability to recruit due to the racial divide. Thus, recruiting
black lesbian women was very difficult in Mezey’s research. However, Moore (2011) gained access to the black lesbian community in a few different ways. First, Moore is a black woman and so she could get access to the black lesbian community much easier than Mezey because she was able to relate to her participants on a racial level (2011, pp. 236). In addition, Moore gained access to the black lesbian community by frequenting events where her desired participants hung out. As a black woman, she had entry into the black lesbian community and thus could meet possible participants before she began her research.

Perhaps in the future, I could recruit by focusing on different cities or known LGBTQ communities. By sampling from different communities, I may be able to get the diverse pool of participants that I need. Once I have entry into these different communities, then I could more easily utilize snowball sampling to help obtain the diverse sample. I could also obtain a more diverse sample by spending time at spaces and events that are LGBTQ and family friendly. I could attend a series of pride festivals in different communities or, frequent businesses that are LGBTQ friendly such as LGBTQ bookstores. Frequenting these types of establishments could also aid in expanding my recruitment tool kit.

Nonetheless, I still used different recruitment methods to secure the sample that I used for the current study. Two participants responded to the flyer for my study. The remaining five participants were recruited using snowball sampling methods. An initial email was sent out to the directors of the centers, Affirmations and PFLAG, to introduce myself as well as a general overview of the research being conducted. The directors were asked if they would be interested in having, or even, considering their community members participation in such research. If so, I asked if they would be willing to circulate a recruitment flyer for this research throughout their organization. Upon IRB approval, the paper flyer was posted at a local LGBT center in the Southeastern Michigan area. The flyer had key information such as: the purpose of the research, who is eligible to participate, involvement of the participants, any risks of participating in this research, that participation is voluntary, and where and how I could be contacted if they were interested in participating in my research. Those who were interested contacted me to indicate their participation. The participant and I then arranged a time for the interview to occur, discussed the research, and answered any questions that they had.

**Sampling Criteria**

The study population consisted of same-sex parents who had at least one child and lived in the Southeastern Michigan area. Nonprobability purposive sampling methods were used to gather the population sample initially, followed by snowball sampling. The parents had to self-identify as gay or lesbian and have at least one child under the age of eighteen years old, whether through adoption, artificial insemination, or other means. I chose to include parents with at least one child under eighteen because parents of younger children would hypothetically be impacted by more recent societal constraints more directly than parents who have children over the age of eighteen. I also chose to be open in terms of how the parents brought children into their lives because I knew that children can come
into a family through a variety of ways. Keeping this open would also assist me in gaining a diverse pool of participants. I did not want to turn away parents that had children from a previous marriage or relationship. I wanted to keep my criteria open to foster a diverse sample pool.

**Data Collection**

Interviews took place at the home of the participant for confidentiality purposes and to make the participant more comfortable. In addition, I gained insight into the environment in which their families live. I arrived at the home of the participant, and participants voluntarily signed a consent form to indicate that they understand the risks of the research and their involvement in the research. Participants also consented to be recorded using an audio recorder. I also explained that if there are any children in the home, I was not to interview them as per Human Subjects review regulations.

There were twenty-one interview questions that participants were asked. Interviews ranged from an hour to an hour and a half in length. Questions covered a variety of topics including; their own family background (structure, family dynamics, dominant family values), their process of coming out and its effects on family relationships, and their relationship with their partner (when and how they met, how long they have known each other, how long they have been together, how long they have been living together). Interview questions also asked about their children (how many, genders, ages, how long lived together as a family), thoughts from their family of origin and society that they considered when deciding to become parents, the extent that being LGBT influences their parenting (enlighten them to issues, values or rights that they may not otherwise think about), negative media portrayals and what they would say to their children about these portrayals, and how they would address same-sex marriage with their children given that it was not legal at the time of the interview. Finally, I asked the partners about who they turn to for social support besides each other, and about any lessons they have learned about life being LGBT. I asked a wide range of questions to paint a more accurate picture of what their lives were like.

Generally, the interviews went well. Participants were very open and eager to share their lives as parents with me. After the interviews, they often talked with me for an hour or more about other topics and introduced me to other members of their family. Many said that they, “could have talked all day” about their experiences and often joked that I was going to run out of space or that they would need the entire space on the recorder for their interview. The questions that asked how they would talk to their children about certain topics were the most difficult for them to answer as most couples had children under the age of five and were not at that stage yet with their children. For those who did have children that were old enough, these questions were also a little bit more difficult. Overall, other than having difficulty with securing interviews, interviews were easy to conduct and they provided me with a copious amount of rich data. Hence, this research allowed me to collect data from gay or lesbian parents in a way that fostered much deeper and more valuable data than other social research methods.
Data Analysis

Regarding data analysis, I took detailed notes to collect valuable information pertinent to the study. The participant interviews took place and data was collected and recorded for further analyzing. Responses that were open-ended were coded prior to analyzing the data. The responses from the interviews were compiled and then analyzed through the analytical framework of Erving Goffman. General patterns and sub-themes were identified in the responses from parents. Data was then used to arrive at a deeper understanding of same-sex couple parenting.

Moreover, given the limited diversity of my sample, I was not able to analyze the data with a strong emphasis on intersectionality, as I originally was hoping to do. With a more diverse sample, I could make stronger analytic comparisons across varied subgroups of same sex couples. Instead, and because of the limitations in my sample, I focus on the multi-faceted identity of each parent and compare the ways in which their identities weave together to inform their experiences as parents and lesbian women. I argue that, although most of my sample is racially white, there are still important implications that arise out of the data. Especially because I could interview couples (dyads) and not just individual parents, I propose that there are useful data that come from this study.

Limitations and Contributions

Given the methodology of this research, there were a few other limitations that may have affected the outcome of the study as well. As mentioned in some of the previous studies, since the sample was gathered using non-probability sampling methods, I cannot generalize the findings to all gay or lesbian parents. Moreover, because the interview featured same-sex parents from the southeastern Michigan area, I cannot overgeneralize the results. Because of the nature of this research topic, some participants may not have responded truthfully to face-to-face interview questions as compared to a telephone interview. During interview research, there was a risk that the participant possibly would give responses that they thought the interviewer would want to hear versus what is truthful of the life or lifestyle. Lastly, a weakness of this study was that I was not able to achieve the initial response goal of twenty participants and thus, the sample of seven couples was not as representative as the initial goal sample would have been. The sample that I acquired was mostly white and thus, I could not dive as deeply into intersectionality as I originally planned.

Nevertheless, this study contributes to the wider body of literature in numerous ways. To my knowledge, there is no research that has been done regarding challenges that same-sex parents face in raising children. For example, I have seen very little research that has addressed how same-sex parents navigate teaching their children about other families or how they have those “tough” conversations with their children about sexuality and or the media. In addition, I have not seen other research that focuses on how same-sex parents negotiate or define their roles as parents, particularly when one parent carries a child and one does not.
There are some demographic characteristics about the couples that are important to highlight. I first highlight information about the gender and race of the partners followed by demographic information regarding the children. All seven of the same-sex couples that I interviewed were women. In six of the seven couples that I interviewed, both partners were white. There was one couple where one partner was Hispanic and the other partner was white. This couple resided in a neighborhood that was lower to middle class with smaller, older homes and both parents also held at least a Master’s degree. Regarding religious affiliation, the white parent identified herself as Jewish whereas the other parent identified herself as Catholic. In comparison to the other families, this couple was one of two couples to have two children, whereas the other couples had one child. From examining table 1, one can also note that five out of the seven couples had one child, whereas two out of the seven couples had two children. The age of the children ranged from six months to twelve years, with all but one child being under the age of three years. Six of the seven couples began their family by using In vitro fertilization.

One couple began their family by using adoption as a means of bringing a child into their home. The couple that chose adoption as their path to parenthood both identified themselves as white and both held at least a Master’s degree. This
couple also resided in an upper-middle class to upper class neighborhood with larger, older homes. In comparison to the other couples, they also had the oldest child in the group, twelve years old, versus the six months old to three years old children’s age range of the other couples. Lastly, it is interesting to note that six of the seven couples had sons with one couple that had a daughter. The couple that had the only girl child in the group lived in a middle-class neighborhood with smaller, older homes. This couple also both had Associate’s degrees with one parent working in Sales and the other parent working in law enforcement. This is the only couple in the group where one parent’s family of origin does not support their family structure. The other couples had parents that were mostly or completely supportive of their family structure.

I now highlight some demographic information regarding the educational attainment and occupation of the partners. All partners in each of the seven couples had at least an Associate’s degree. Two of the partners had an Associate’s degree, five partners had a Bachelor’s degree, and seven of the partners had a Master’s degree or higher. With that being mentioned, seven of the fourteen partners had a Master’s degree or higher. The occupations of the partners varied and ranged from professor to stay at home parent to web administrator. Two of the fourteen partners were a full-time stay at home parent. Thus, most of the partners were engaged in the work force on a full-time basis. The two couples where one parent stayed at home argued that the choice to stay at home was decision that was made together as a couple and that the decision was made with the child’s best interest in mind.

Raising Children

In thinking about how to raise their own children, couples took into consideration what their own upbringing and family of origin was like. One of the most frequently mentioned thoughts by four out of seven couples was the idea of spending time together as a family and or eating together as a family. One partner noted: “Yeah, family dinner was something that, I think because it is the one traditional [thing] that I have from growing up. It is something that I hold of value.” This parent lived in an upper-middle class community and worked as Test Engineer for an organization. Her partner earned a Ph.D. and works as a professor at a university. In her family, her partner carried and birthed their seventeen-month old son after using IVF. Regarding religious affiliation, this couple took a broad approach to religion that enforced doing the right thing for the sake of doing the right thing versus doing the right thing because God said so. Another partner from a different couple argued that: “I always hated it growing up but, apparently it is important that we make him eat dinner, like every meal that we can together. Yeah, to try and keep it kind of close, keep our family close.”

This partner was a stay-at-home parent with a Bachelor’s degree. Her partner birthed the child after they used IVF, she worked as a Curriculum specialist after earning her M.A. In comparing the two couples that are quoted here about family dinner, in each couple the partner with the highest educational attainment birthed the child. This couple also lived in a middle-class community in a neighborhood with older homes that were close to one another. Some felt that
they did not have the time eating together as a family when they were growing up, and thus it was something that they wanted to share and experience with their children. Others did have the experience of eating together as a family when growing up and so in this sense, it was something that they enjoyed and wanted to continue with their own children.

Acceptance from family members was also another important thought that six out of seven couples shared. They wanted their family to accept and love the family that they were going to create. One couple argued: “Yeah, I mean because each of us had one [child], we were concerned about whether or not the family would be as accepting of the one that we didn’t birth ourselves. I know that was a big concern…” This couple is the only couple out of the entire sample where one parent was not white. They also both hold advanced graduate degrees, both Master’s degrees, and both work full-time. This couple is also divided regarding religious affiliation, one Catholic and one Jewish. Regarding bringing children into their lives, this is the only couple where each parent carried a child in the context of their relationship. They each shared the role of being the “other” parent while one partner carried the child.

Religious beliefs were also another frequently mentioned thought among four of the seven couples. Some debated how they wanted to orient their children to religion. One couple stated: “Religiously, that was a HUGE concern. I am Jewish and she is Catholic so we had to talk about that…” In some cases, each parent grew up with varying religious backgrounds. On the other hand, some couples had shared similar religious perspectives. In other couples, there was one partner who was religious and one who was not. One partner said:

Um, but I know like before we got married, before we got pregnant, we had had extensive conversations about the religious aspect because I come from religious background, her mom was very religious and she is not religious. So, what would that look like before we got in too deep with anything? We both decided you know, that we really wanted to raise our child or children to do the right thing because it’s the right thing and not out of fear of eternity. Like, if you don’t do this you’re going to go to hell.

The individual quoted above is part of one of the two couples within the highest educational attainment, and the parent with the highest educational level within the couple birthed the child. In these cases, the parent that chose to carry the child had the job that provided a higher income, and thus, they did not want to not be able to support their family. For those who thought about religion, most couples tended to steer their children toward a perspective that emphasized doing what was right over the idea that they needed to do something because God required them to or else they would go to Hell. There were a few couples that wanted to steer their children toward a specific religious philosophy and or religious way of life. One couple argued: “We had to talk about which direction religiously that we would go and how we would work that into the system.” This couple is the only couple in the sample to have a white and a non-white parent. They also were divided about their own religious philosophies as a couple. One identified as Jewish while the other parent identified as Catholic.
In addition, some couples argued that it was important to have children who are biologically related to each other (i.e., using the same sperm donor). The following quote draws from the one couple in the sample that was racially diverse. The way in which they decided to birth the children was different from the other couples. Other couples tended to either adopt or have one parent birth all the children. Both parents were also the “other” parent at one point during their relationship while the other parent carried the child. They explained their thoughts related to having children:

When we started thinking about having children, we thought about how many we were going to have and it was important that we each had one. And, they are biologically related from the same donor. So that was kind of a must for us that they were biologically related. Um, so they have that commonality between them.

Some parents also wanted to play an active role in their children’s lives by exposing children to information about other peoples’ struggles and/or experiences. They wanted their children to be aware of struggles that other people face and be sensitive to that in their interactions with others and the world around them. The following quote is drawn from a couple where both parents had college degrees and were both working full-time. They also were the couple in the sample that had the youngest child at the time of the interview, a six-month-old boy. Regarding their own upbringing as children, they had drastically different experiences related to their family structure and dynamics. In the following quote, one of these parents talks about their thoughts in thinking about their own child’s upbringing and what they hope to teach them:

I want him to understand that there are people and I feel like I grew up and I went to a very Republican school and I feel like I grew up very sheltered of other people. Like, not everyone was lucky enough to grow up in a situation like I did. So I want to expose him to other people’s struggles and how can he help in other people’s struggles.

A few couples also shared their perspectives about parenting dynamics within a same-sex family. These couples suggested that there may be different dynamics between same-sex parents than between heterosexual partners. For example, one couple talked about the separation that was felt by one partner when the other partner carried the pregnancy and vice versa. This couple is the only couple in the sample where one parent was not white and they both carried a child in the context of their relationship. One partner who did not carry the pregnancy at a specific time argued:

I helped make him but I didn’t know anything about him. He was growing in her and I didn’t have that support. With a father you’re like that’s mine, he’s growing in there for me and it’s like I helped him get in there but I don’t know anything. You know, and then when she was pregnant even though we went through it when I was pregnant, even though we had been through it before, she had never been on that side so she experienced that same separation because she was like you’re growing and you’re loving
and you’re doing all the stuff and here I am, I feel separated from you. So, there is no support in that way.

This finding is confirmed in research by Booker and Dodd (2008). Booker and Dodd discussed how parents go from a two-person family to a three-person family, and how those changes brought differences in parenting dynamics: “When one mother is doing the bulk of the nurturing (perhaps staying at home or breastfeeding), the other parent may feel left out” (Booker and Dodd 2008, p. 191). And while there is a significant amount of support for heterosexual parents who are going through these challenging times, not as much support exists for same-sex parents. Specifically, participants in my study indicated that there were not nearly as many same-sex couples with children as heterosexual couples and, thus, at times they feel isolated and cannot work out these feelings with others in similar situations.

**Being Parents**

Couples had many thoughts as they were preparing to raise their children. One of the most important thoughts shared by couples was deciding where to live. Some were looking for areas that reflected diversity (racial and otherwise), so that their children would be exposed to diverse types of people. Some also placed importance on finding an area to live where there were other same-sex families that they could relate to and go to the same school with. In the following excerpt, one couple talked about their experience with thinking about where to live. This couple both had college degrees and worked full-time. They also had the youngest child in the sample, a six-month old boy. In thinking about experiences with where they lived as children, both parents came from neighborhoods that were more conservative and mostly white. One of the parents added:

> Actually, we have been having conversations about where to live. You know, do we live in a bubble where everybody likes everybody and there are other same-sex couples raising kids, or do we live somewhere where we might be the token gay couple, family, and he might not see other families that look like him? You know, because there are certain like things that we want in a community. But you’re not really sure how people are going to respond.

The next quote draws from the only couple in the sample where both parents birthed a child within the context of their same relationship. They also were the only couple to have a parent that is non-white and Catholic while the other parent was white and Jewish. Both parents have advanced graduate degrees and live in a large, lower-middle class to middle class neighborhood. In this couple, one partner had a nuclear family structure while the other had parents that divorced when the partner was a child. The parent that grew up in a nuclear family structure responded in a comparable way to the previous couple:

> We were together for a long time before we had children and so we talked about where we were going to live. We bought this house with the intention of this is where we would start a family because of the friendly
neighborhood. It really limits us in some ways because we love [City Name], but we would like to live in a larger home [and] we are sacrificing a social culture for space. And those are the things; we kind of involved ourselves in a certain neighborhood. Those are definitely things that were factored in.

In these quotes, couples talked about having to sacrifice more living space for a smaller living space to live in a culture that is more accepting of same-sex families. These quotes make it very clear that the friendliness of the parenting environment is important for same-sex couples as they make decisions to become parents and expand their family. Where a couple decides to raise their family can affect how that family interacts with the society around them and, in turn, affect the socialization process of the children in the household (and the ease at which adults can parent). Those living in a culture and space that seems more liberal can socialize their children in a way that is representative of that culture (and therefore, they feel as if they belong), in comparison to those who live in a culture and space that is not same-sex family-friendly.

As mentioned previously, there are several legal and societal challenges that same-sex couples face today (Smith, 2010; Juel, 1993; Mallon, 2008). Some of these challenges include challenges that they face within their child’s school. Some suggested that they were fearful of how their child’s school would respond to their family form. Because a child’s school is influential as a socialization agent, in molding and shaping their pupils’ knowledge of acceptable family forms, parents knew that the school environment was important. If a school portrays same-sex families in a positive light, the child will most likely hold a positive portrayal of same-sex families. If the school portrays same-sex families in a negative way, then that can be passed onto children (and later to their peers and family) through social interaction. How the child is socialized to different family forms can influence how they interact with their own families and how they perceive family forms as an adult. It may also affect children’s self-esteem and same-sex parents’ abilities to parent easily or comfortably. Fedewa and Clark (2009) argue that same-sex parents often fear negative consequences for both themselves and their child and are not sure how their child’s teacher will react to their families (p. 316). Fedewa and Clark (2009) propose that same-sex families sometimes face school environments that are not sensitive to family diversity, and that this can be a major concern for same-sex couples.

School curricula are heavily based on the notion of the nuclear family and are a challenge for same-sex parents today (Fedewa and Clark, 2009). One couple decided to approach such a challenge by making sure that both partners had the same last name. That way, there would be no challenges getting a child out of school because the two parents had different last names. Within this couple, one parent grew up in a nuclear family structure while the other parent had parents that divorced when she was a child. They also were one of two couples where the parent with the highest educational attainment carried the child. This couple was also one of two couples that faced some form of backlash from their families of
origin about their own family structure that they have created. The partner that had divorced parents as a child explained:

When we got married it was very important to me that we had same last names so that we have a family last name. We kind of dodge issues later where I show up and my name is [name3] and I am picking up my son. It might not have any issues or it could delay issues if I take him to the hospital. Like I am [name15] where hopefully we wouldn’t see any bias issues with that where if [name13] went, she wouldn’t have any issues. Where if we had different names, then people might think differently or hesitate even with blended families today, a lot of people have different names and we didn’t want to. I didn’t want to take that risk.

There was also some anxiety about interactions with their children’s school. Specifically, there was anxiety about how their child’s teacher and other school personnel would react. The following quote features one of the two couples in the sample that faced backlash from their family. They also were the only couple in the sample to have a girl child. Both parents have Associate’s degrees and work full-time, one in Sales and other in Law Enforcement. One of the parents had parents that divorced while they were a child while the other parent grew up in a nuclear family structure. The partner that had parents that divorced birthed their child and was the most concerned about school interactions. She explained her feelings about interactions with their child’s school:

You know, even before I was pregnant with her I, you know, I hoped that, I feared elementary school and teacher conferences and then us introducing ourselves and seeing how the teacher is going to react and if there are other parents, you know, that they might feel a certain way, they don’t agree. You know, how other kids will be towards it so I don’t, let it ruin us not having a family. It’s scary, to think about it but, yeah, you think about it all the time, you know, but times are changing…

As children, we are socialized to the idea that children should have a mother and a father, married and with the same last name, and this is reflected throughout educational institutions (Fedewa and Clark, 2009).

When a same-sex couple enrolls their child at a school, they are unaware as to how their family will be perceived since they do not represent the nuclear, heterosexual family. Having the same last name is one strategy that offers same-sex couples protection against rejection from their children’s school. Same-sex parents feel as if they will be less likely to be questioned if they have the same name as their children. Thus, the ideal of the nuclear family still lurks within contemporary society despite changes in family structure types.

Discussion

This research examined some of the challenges that same-sex couples face in their efforts to raise their children. Challenges were found to fit within a couple of themes. One theme is that same-sex parents faced challenges related to legal matters. Parents had a challenging time securing proper legal protections for their
family because their family form was not recognized under the federal law. The following quote features a couple where both partners grew up in a nuclear family structure. The parent that has a Master’s degree works full-time while the parent with a Bachelor’s degree stayed at home to take care of their three-year-old son. When I visited this couple, they were pregnant with a daughter that was due a couple of months later. The parent with the Master’s degree was the parent that carried both children. The parent who stayed at home and did not birth the children talked about their family’s experience with legal protections and adoption: “Well, we moved out of the [state] after she had our son so we both would have rights and could adopt him. We actually moved our family for a year, got him adopted and then came back.”

Another couple talked about their experience with challenges related to power of attorney and care of the children if something were to happen to the partner that birthed the children. This couple also had a family arrangement where one parent worked full-time while the other parent stayed at home with the children. Both parents also had college degrees. Out of the entire sample, this couple was one of two couples that had two children. Both children are boys and are ages one and two. The parent that works full-time birthed both children. This was the only couple in the sample where one of the parents had military service. Religion was an important part of this family. Spending time together as a family as also important to both parents. They talk about their experiences with power of attorney and the importance of establishing this type of legal protection for their family:

The fact that we can’t get married, the fact that the kids are technically not mine. I am very aware and very passionate and much more angered about these issues than I was before the kids. Um, I mean before we had the kids, we probably got power of attorney for both of us for health care. You know, just in case they had an issue with me being in the delivery room or any other issues or if anything happened with her. I know what she wants and I am not going to let other people in her family make the decision when I know, we know what we want. I have legal guardianship of the boys but I am still well aware of that fact that if something happened to her, yeah. Somebody can take the boys.

Moreover, parents also faced challenges surrounding parenting behaviors and practices. Most parents expressed difficulty, for example, in negotiating parental roles within their family and teaching their children about those roles. Norma Williams (2002) discusses the notion of role taking and role making and in the case of same-sex parents, molding and reshaping parental roles to make them fit better within their own family is a daily part of their lives as parents.

Looking forward, the literature has suggested that despite the legalization of same-sex marriage, same-sex couples and their children will continue to face such challenges. Specifically, there are many examples that I have discussed where same-sex parents are not getting the support or acknowledgement that they need to be fully accepted by the wider society. This lack of support can range from overt, public displays to subtle, hidden displays that the public would
generally not notice. One couple talked about their experience with the lack of support. This couple faced backlash from family about their family structure. The parent that carried the child in this couple has a Ph.D. and grew up in a nuclear family structure. They have one son who was seventeen months old at the time of the interview. The partner that did not carry the child argued that when she told her co-workers that her wife was pregnant, they told her to say congratulations to her wife for them. She stated:

I am out at work and when, at that time, I was at a different job and I told them, “My wife’s pregnant, we’re gonna have a baby! They were like, “Oh, tell her congratulations!” So, there was that bias type prejudice of not really accepting us as a couple or not necessarily accepting but recognizing that we are a couple and couples have children together.

The participant realizes the subtle ways in which the public does not necessarily acknowledge and or recognize that they are a couple and can have children together. As parents, they want to raise their children in a supportive environment and to do that successfully, they need this acknowledgement or acceptance when thinking about how to raise their own children and build their families.

**Conclusion**

There are a few important findings in this research related to same-sex couples and their experiences as parents. There were many thoughts they considered in their decision to become parents such as: their own family upbringing, having children that are biologically related (i.e. a sperm donor), where to live, etc. Couples also talked about some of the challenges that they face as same-sex parents. Some of these challenges include: legal challenges such as with power of attorney, both parents having legal rights to the children; parental challenges such as negotiating parental roles when one parent gives birth to the children and one does not, gaining acceptance from their children’s school, etc. Overall, one of the major findings in this research is that same-sex parents, despite the legalization of same-sex marriage, are not gaining the acceptance or acknowledgement from the wider society that they need in their process to raise children in a supportive environment.

These findings contribute to the wider body of literature on same-sex parenting in a few diverse ways. Most importantly, this research has contributed to the body of literature in that, to my knowledge, there is little to no research that specifically discusses some of the parenting challenges that same-sex couples face such as trying to navigate parent roles when one parent births the children and one does not. It also contributes to the wider body of literature in that my findings highlight that same-sex parents are not getting the support from the wider society they desire when they are thinking about how to raise children and become parents. These findings are also confirmed through the existing literature. Booker and Dodd (2009) discussed some of the changes in family dynamics that take place when same-sex couples have children. Smith (2010), Juel (1993), and Mallon (2008) suggest that there is a plethora of societal and legal challenges that same-sex couples face and that is also found to be true in this research. Lastly,
Fedewa and Clark (2009) found that same-sex couples often face many challenges about gaining acceptance from their children’s school. I also found this to be true, especially in interactions with school personnel and teachers.

In looking at the sample that I drew from, there are a few patterns that are important to reflect on. There was only one couple within the sample where both mothers carried a child in the context of their relationship. This couple also was the only couple within the sample to have a white and a non-white parent and have two competing religious ideologies between the parents. In all the other couples, the parents were white and one parent was responsible for carrying the children in the family. There were also two couples where one parent stayed home and cared for the children instead of working outside of the home. In these couples, the parents made the decision to stay home based on two main reasons. First, they struggled with finding high-quality child care. Second, cost was also a significant factor because the cost of childcare was not beneficial in comparison to the income that the stay at home parent made. More broadly speaking, there were two clear distinctions within the sample that are also important to note. There are parents that grew up in a nuclear family setting and those that had parents that divorced while they were children. Among the parents that grew up with parents that divorced, there was more of a concern for legitimizing their family through various means. Legitimizing included steps such as legal protections for their family and children, making sure all children and parents have the same last name, having proper paperwork signed through the children’s school or doctor, etc. Another important trend to take note of is that in the two couples that experienced backlash from their families, the partner that experienced the backlash directly from their own family of origin was the parent who did not carry the child.

Taking these patterns into consideration, it is important to note that there are differences among the couples about their own upbringing as a child, racial identity, educational attainment, income, etc. In terms of racial identity, there are differences surrounding how racial groups think about motherhood and the process that they take to become mothers. In the only couple that had a white and a non-white parent, there was an emphasis on the physical component of carrying and birthing a child. It was important to them that both parents had an opportunity to engage in the physical labor of carrying and birthing a child, the physical connection between mother and child. Thus, the experiences of motherhood among lesbian women can vary significantly depending on facets of identity that they possess. It is important that, as scholars, we think about the intersectionality of parenthood in a broad fashion, especially when studying parents that have many intersecting identities that shape and influence their behaviors and decision making.

Unfortunately, there are some limitations that may have impacted the data collection process. Since the sample was gathered using non-probability sampling methods, I cannot generalize the findings to all gay or lesbian parents. The interview featured same-sex parents from the southeastern Michigan area and so I cannot overgeneralize the findings. There is also a risk that, because of the nature of this research topic, some participants may not have responded truthfully to
face-to-face interview questions. A major weakness of this study was that I was not able to achieve the initial response goal of twenty participants and thus, the sample of seven couples was not as representative as the initial goal sample would have been. Because my sample was comprised of mostly white women, I was not able to dive as deeply into my discussion of intersectionality as originally planned. In the future, I could address the lack of diversity in my sample by drawing from a few known LGBTQ communities rather than focusing on one and by spending time in places where I can reach the LGBTQ population that are not as visible in the mainstream LGBTQ community. For example, I could spend time at LGBTQ family events, organizations that are LGBTQ friendly, LGBTQ parent support groups, etc. Finding parents using these strategies would allow me to not only gather a sample that is racially diverse, but perhaps also a sample that is diverse on other axes of identity such as age, income, educational attainment, occupation, etc.

Again, there are a few ways that these findings contribute to the wider body of literature on same-sex parenting. To my knowledge, there is no research that specifically discusses the parenting challenges that same-couples face in relation to negotiating parenting roles and perhaps having those “tough” conversations with their children about media, sexuality, etc. However, the most important contribution that this research brings is that same-sex parents want to raise their children in a supportive environment and they have a desire to have support from the wider society in their thinking about how they are going to raise their children and become parents.

Finally, there are several ways to extend this research. It would be interesting to examine same-sex parents of color to see how their experiences with parenting and interactions with the wider society may differ based on their racial identity. Another way to expand upon this research would be to examine gay couples specifically to see how their gender impacts their experiences as parents. Future research could also study both single and couple LGBTQ parents to see how parenting strategies and behaviors may differ or similar to single and coupled heterosexual parents. It would be fascinating to study lesbian mothers that gave birth to their children in the context of an LGBTQ relationship to examine how these couples negotiate the role of a parent that does not carry the child within a couple.

References


