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Sexual minority women and parenthood: Perceptions of friendship among childfree and new parents

Kyle A. Simon, Samantha L. Tornello, and Henny M. W. Bos

ABSTRACT

Many individuals experience shifts in their friendship networks after becoming parents. The current study investigated the narratives of how a sample of sixty-six sexual minority women, most of whom do not yet have children but who expect to be parents in the future, perceive the changes in friendship networks following becoming parents. A thematic analysis uncovered three themes: (1) *general expectations surrounding future parenthood and friendships*; (2) *changes in lifestyle and priorities*; and (3) *LGBTQ+ community attachment*. Further, the theme of *general expectations surrounding future parenthood and friendships* was largely represented among lesbian and queer women, while the theme of *changes in lifestyle and priorities* was predominately represented among lesbian women, and finally, the theme of *LGBTQ+ community attachment* was shared among all sexual minority women in our sample across different sexual identities. We discuss the diversity of shared and non-shared narratives among sexual minority women, the intentionality in how friendship during parenthood is perceived, as well as why some themes were particularly prevalent among women with specific sexual identities.

KEYWORDS

LGBTQ+ friendship; lesbian women; transition to parenthood

During the transition to parenthood, parents' friendship networks change with new identities and role constraints. Changes include relying more on family members (e.g., parents) than friends (Bost, Cox, Burchinal, & Payne, 2002) and becoming friends with others who are also raising children (Goldberg, Frost, Manley, & Black, 2018). Due to factors such as time constraints or differing lifestyles (e.g., new parents often do not go out at night; Gato, Santos, & Fontaine, 2017), previous friendships may not be sustainable after having a child—particularly friendships with childfree individuals (Wrzus, Hänel, Wagner, & Neyer, 2013). There are differences, however, in how people emphasize and engage with friendships, particularly among lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and additional sexual and gender minority identified individuals (LGBTQ+; Dewaele, Cox, van den Berghe, & Vincke, 2011; Galupo & Gonzalez, 2013). LGBTQ+ friendships, as compared to those among cisgender heterosexual

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individuals, are characterized by “families of choice” (i.e., friendship networks that function as family, often to compensate for lack of familial support; Arseneau & Fassinger, 2006; de Vries & Megathlin, 2009). Further, sexual minority women (and other LGBTQ+ individuals) may rely more on other sexual minority friends for social and emotional support, whereas heterosexual people may rely more on family members for these forms of support (Baiocco et al., 2014; Frost, Meyer, & Schwartz, 2016). Nuanced differences in perceptions of friendships also exist among LGBTQ+ people. Sexual minority women engage in friendships differently than do sexual minority men (Nardi & Sherrod, 1994; Stanley, 2002; Weinstock, 2000, 2004), as do lesbian women when compared with bisexual women (Galupo, 2007a; Weinstock, 2006). Thus, contemporary research is needed on friendships among lesbian women in the context of future parenthood (Weinstock & Rothblum, 2018).

One consideration in the study of friendships among sexual minority women who are transitioning to parenthood is homophily (i.e., people are more likely to form relationships with others who are like them; Logan, 2013). Homophily research among sexual minority individuals has produced mixed findings, with some work reporting that bisexual individuals are more similar to heterosexual than LG individuals in friendships (i.e., bisexual people are more likely to have friends who are heterosexual compared to LG people who have primarily LGB friends; Galupo, 2007a), while other research has suggested that bisexual individuals are distinct from heterosexual individuals (i.e., bisexual people report more cross-orientation, cross-sex, and cross-race friendships as compared to heterosexual individuals; Galupo, 2009). It may be that intersections of sexual orientation and gender identity (e.g., bisexual women are perceived as heterosexual when partnered with men, yet perceived as lesbian when partnered with women; Galupo, 2007b) are qualifiers for the nuances in friendships among sexual minority women as compared to cisgender heterosexual individuals.

Considerations of families of choice and homophily can both be understood within a life course theoretical framework (Elder, 1998). Life course theory focuses on individual development over time and how people experience life transitions, such as becoming a parent. Life course theory acknowledges the major shifts in importance of relationships over time, such as how familial and family of choice relationships are valued (David-Barrett et al., 2016; Thomeer, Paine, & Bryant, 2018). Research finds that friendship networks decrease during the transition to parenthood and after becoming parents (Wrzus et al., 2013). Thus, across this transition, sexual minority women must navigate the possibility of a limited LGBTQ+ friendship network and an expansion of their social circle to friendships with other parents (Kalmijn, 2012). With this major shift over

the life course, and given their unique friendship relationships as compared to those of heterosexual women (Goldberg 2006; Goldberg et al., 2018), it is unclear how lesbian women perceive and experience the transition to parenthood. Further, another perspective suggests that sexual minority identities, at least among gay fathers, are often “sidelined” during the transition to parenthood in an effort to accommodate an increasingly relevant identity as a parent (Goldberg, 2012). Thus, it is unclear whether lesbian women experience similar pressures to be a parent first and lesbian second (versus being both parent and lesbian equally), as well as whether and how lesbian women may preemptively address this concern before becoming a parent. Broadly then, given the importance of a shared cultural history (e.g., attachment to the LGBTQ+ community; Costa & Bidell, 2017; Logan, 2013), as well as the practical and shared experiences of parenthood (e.g., new lifestyle changes; Bost et al., 2002), how do sexual minority women navigate these life transitions?

Current study

Using a sample of sixty-six sexual minority women from the Intended Parent Study (IPS; Simon, Tornello, Farr, & Bos, 2018), we investigated how friendships are perceived when envisioning becoming a parent. Given research showing that friendship networks decrease across the transition to parenthood, we were interested in understanding whether sexual minority women imagine a decrease in numbers of their LGBTQ+ friends when considering future parenthood. Further, we were interested in understanding whether participants’ narratives would be characterized by noticeable distinctions among sexual minority women (e.g., lesbian women as compared to bisexual and pansexual women). However, given the various mixed findings on women’s friendships and homophily across the lifespan (Galupo, 2007a, 2007b, 2009; Goldberg et al., 2018), we did not make an *a priori* hypothesis for our first question. We did anticipate differences among sexual minority women, but we did not specify which exact differences, given the dearth of information on how sexual minority women perceive friendships during and following the transition to parenthood.

Method

Participants

This study consisted of sixty-six sexual minority women or lesbian participants who completed the second wave of the Intended Parent Study (IPS; Simon et al., 2018). The IPS was conducted to learn more about individuals who do not yet have children but want to become a parent in the future.

Therefore, the focus of the IPS was on people's parenting intentions, expectations of parenthood, and couple dynamics, across all sexual orientations and gender identities. The goal of the study is to follow participants from family planning to parenthood with participant follow-ups every 1–2 years. To be included in this study, participants needed to identify as a sexual minority woman (i.e., lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, etc.) or as a lesbian individual (e.g., a gender nonbinary lesbian participant would be included), be over the age of 18, reside in the United States, and be either childfree ($n = 52$) or a new parent ($n = 14$). Of the 179 total participants who completed the follow-up survey (wave 2 of the IPS), those who currently resided outside the US ($n = 19$) and did not self-identify as lesbian ($n = 57$) or as a sexual minority female ($n = 37$) were removed. Due to the qualitative nature of this study, we did not remove participants who had partners who also completed the survey ($n = 4$ individuals in two couples). This resulted in a final sample of sixty-six participants who resided in the US and identified as sexual minority women or lesbian individuals.

Participants were, on average, 30 years of age ($SD = 5.82$). Most participants self-identified as White/European American (86.4%), had earned a Bachelor's degree or higher (75.7%), were generally middle-class ($M = \$81,798.36$, $SD = \$43,815.68$), and worked full-time in paid employment ($M = 37.89$ hours per week). Sexual identity varied across the sample, with about half of the sample identifying as lesbian (42.4%) or pansexual/bisexual (28.8%), and fewer identifying as queer (16.7%), gay (3.0%), or another or multiple minority sexual identities (15.2%). In terms of gender identity, two participants did not identify as women (i.e., gender nonconforming and nonbinary), but did identify as lesbian. While these individuals do not have the same experiences as those who identify as women, they would share experiences about identifying as lesbian. Thus, we chose to retain these two participants in our analyses. More than half of the sample had a legally recognized marriage (57.6%). The next two most frequent relationship statuses were being in a committed relationship (18.2%) and single (13.7%). Additional relationship statuses included being engaged (4.5%), divorced (3.0%), and in non-monogamous relationships (3.0%).

Procedure

In the IPS (Simon et al., 2018), participants were recruited through advertisements geared for adults thinking about possible future parenthood. These ads were posted on social media pages of family planning and LGBTQ+ groups. To participate in the first wave of the Intended Parent Study, individuals had to be childfree at the time of initial data collection and at least 18 years of age. If interested, participants contacted the

Principal Investigator (PI; second author) via email. If eligible, the PI emailed a personalized link to the participant to access the study's consent form. After consenting, individuals completed a series of surveys about future family creation, thoughts about future parenthood, and demographic information about themselves and their partners (if applicable). At the end of the initial survey, participants provided their contact information if they had interest in possibly taking part in follow-up surveys (84.1% of participants from wave 1 provided contact information). Approximately two years ($M = 1.96$; $SD = 0.15$) after initial survey completion (i.e., wave 1), a follow-up survey was distributed to those who had consented to participating in additional surveys (37% response rate; wave 2). Participants were again sent a personalized link via email to access the second survey consent form and, if they agreed to participate, the follow-up survey. Due to the measures of interest being collected only at wave 2, all information included in this report comes from the second wave of data collection.

Measures

Following demographic questions along with other measures, participants received two open-ended questions assessing perceived friendship changes. First, participants were asked, "Do you anticipate your friend group shifting as a result of becoming a parent?" Next, participants were asked, "Do you anticipate that this shift may be greater among your friends who identify within the LGBTQ+ community?" As this was an online survey, participants responded to these questions in text boxes (with no word limit).

Thematic coding

All narratives provided by participants were coded for emerging themes through an inductive approach (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Initial open coding (e.g., segmenting data into meaningful short phrases; Braun & Clarke, 2006) was conducted by the first author, which resulted in several different themes. Three undergraduate research assistants and the first author subsequently worked together to come to consensus about the presence of themes via complete coding (e.g., compiling all meaningful codes; Braun & Clarke, 2013). The four coders met weekly to resolve disagreements until consensus was reached. Finally, an independent coder (i.e., another undergraduate research assistant) met with the first author to calculate reliability statistics¹ for the presence or absence of each theme.² All coders were initially unaware of participant sexual and gender identities. To ensure a comprehensive examination of the data, the coding team was diverse in held identities (Goldberg & Allen, 2015). For example, the first author is queer, multiracial, and a first-generation American. Further, identities represented

among the coding team included being cisgender, nonbinary, female, queer, bisexual, heterosexual, White, and Latina.

Results

Coding led to three overarching themes: (1) *general expectations surrounding future parenthood and friendships*; (2) *changes in lifestyles and priorities*; and (3) *LGBTQ+ community attachment*.

General expectations surrounding future parenthood and friendships

Participants reported typical expectations of parenthood such that number of friendships would likely decrease due to having more time constraints as parents. There were also narratives that reflected that the number of friendships would not decrease because the majority of participants' friends were either also transitioning to parenthood or already parents themselves. The acknowledgement of spending time with other parents and having homophily in friendships related to parenthood are likely to be common themes among individuals transitioning to parenthood, regardless of sexual or gender identity. We also found that lesbian women ($n = 13$) and queer women ($n = 7$) described these narratives proportionately more than other sexual identities (e.g., bisexual and pansexual; $n = 10$). In the following, we detail participant responses that reflect no changes during the transition to parenthood and no perceived loss of friendships due to parenthood. While narratives from lesbian and queer women were more frequent than other groups (e.g., bisexual), these two quotes from bisexual women were especially representative in portraying this theme.

Most of my friends, queer or not, have kids (Bisexual, cisgender woman, 36 years old).

We have friends (coupled and single) who are pursuing a variety of paths towards parenthood, some because of gender and some because of preference (e.g., a hetero couple who would prefer to adopt)... (Bisexual, cisgender woman, 35 years old).

Changes in lifestyle and priorities

Another theme represented by participants was related to the lifestyle changes that occur as a result of parenthood. Participants noted that, once they became parents, they would be unable to go to as many social activities (e.g., game nights), and that this would lead to some difficulties in maintaining friendships. Additional narratives characterizing this theme reflected struggle with losing what participants perceived to be an important cultural lifestyle as part of the LGBTQ+ community (e.g., bar culture). This theme was especially

well-represented among lesbian ($n = 12$) individuals as compared to bisexual/pansexual ($n = 7$) and queer women ($n = 4$). In the following, we detail two responses that reflect the experiences of lifestyle and priority changes and the resulting struggle surrounding sexual minority identity:

I [think] my circle of friends would change. We wouldn't be [going] out as much, no bar scene. I think our group of friends we would choose to have [around] us would probably be more responsible (Lesbian, cisgender woman, 35 years old).

It is much harder to go out or stay out later. Our schedules mean we have to be home earlier to put the kid to bed... I tended to do drinks or board games with my queer friends, at night... (Pansexual, cisgender woman, 30 years old).

LGBTQ + community attachment

Represented by this theme of *LGBTQ + community attachment* were narratives about LGBTQ + parent community seeking (e.g., meeting other sexual minority mothers), acceptance by family and community (e.g., childfree friends becoming actively involved in the participant's transition to parenthood), activism (e.g., being intentionally visible as a sexual minority parent), and dissonance (e.g., the fear that choosing one pathway to parenthood, such as donor insemination, would create a rift in friendship with other sexual minority women who chose a different pathway to parenthood, such as adoption). Participants noted concerns about losing their connection to the LGBTQ + community beyond social activities at night, and as such, discussed ways in which they could maintain this connection. Further, participants reported how difficult it could be to find friends who were also LGBTQ + identified (especially LGBTQ + parents), as well as how these friendships (if secured) would help to maintain their connection to the LGBTQ + community. Finally, participants expressed themes of activism as they considered the importance of becoming parents (e.g., following the U.S. Supreme Court decision about same-sex marriage equality in June 2015), but also feelings of dissonance about how parenthood might be perceived as heteronormative (e.g., wanting a biological connection to their child). We also found that participants from one sexual identity (e.g., lesbian, bisexual) were not more likely to report these experiences than were other identity groups. That is, there were no noticeable differences among expressed narratives from lesbian ($n = 13$), bisexual and pansexual ($n = 11$), and queer ($n = 4$) women. In the following, we detail responses from participants that reflect this overarching theme:

I anticipate I will be among the first of my queer friends to have a child, so yes. However, retaining that community as a part of my intimate circle is important so I imagine I would work very hard to maintain them as best as possible. However, I don't [feel] that shift would come because of my taking on an identity as a mother. All

of my friends now know how important parenthood is to me and are very supportive (Lesbian cisgender woman, 26 years old).

I have no idea. I think LGBTQ+ people take parenting very seriously, as it is a right long fought-for and still often contested. It doesn't just happen accidentally, at least not nearly as often as with cisgender straight people. I'm not sure how this [would affect] a shift. Perhaps they would be more self-aware; perhaps they might pour themselves fully into parenthood and allow their lives and friendships to be dramatically altered (Lesbian, nonbinary, 24 years old).

Since marriage equality made it legal to get legally married in Alaska, our two lesbian couple friends and us have all married our partners and started discussing children. We are all in our late 30s or early 40s. All of the couples are two career couples w[h]ere each has worked hard to have a career... our relationships will be affected by how successfully we can get beyond how being [able to] reproduce at all will affect our lives and how much we adopt society's convention that passing on one's genes makes us biologically justified (Lesbian, cisgender woman, 44 years old).

Discussion

These findings highlight the diverse opinions and experiences of sexual minority women related to the perceived effects of the transition to parenthood on friendship networks. We found that there were noticeable differences among the sexual minority women in our sample such that themes of *general expectations surrounding future parenthood and friendships* and *changes in lifestyles and priorities* were prominently represented by lesbian women followed by queer women. However, it did not seem as if one particular theme was especially represented by bisexual and pansexual women (who collectively represented the second largest sexual identity group in the sample); rather, they seemed to express all of the themes equally. That is, the narratives of bisexual and pansexual women in our sample, as compared to the other sexual identity groups, equally represented all three major themes, rather than being predominately represented by one theme.

We found that participants expressed some concerns about a greater loss of LGBTQ+ friends and LGBTQ+ culture following the transition to parenthood; yet another theme that emerged across the sample was clear intentionality to ensure maintenance of attachment to the LGBTQ+ community. Women among all sexual identity groups expressed both these concerns and this intentionality. Thus, we found mixed support for our hypotheses such that sexual minority women did report concerns about losing LGBTQ+ friendships, but there was also intentionality expressed to ensure that the loss of friendships did not occur. Further, we found that there were differences among sexual minority women for only two of our three themes. We next expand on the nuances among sexual

identity groups in our sample related to these three themes, including the role of intentionality in protecting sexual minority women from the loss of LGBTQ+ friendships following the transition to parenthood.

When considering *general expectations surrounding future parenthood and friendships*, it is interesting to note that lesbian (and queer) women were especially likely to describe this theme. Life course theory suggests that as people transition to parenthood, the saliency of familial relationships increases over non-familial friendships (Elder, 1994; Thomeer et al., 2018). However, for sexual minority women who often rely on social support from friends (Frost et al., 2016), a change in the salience of familial relationships may especially impact social support. That is, if social support for sexual minority women is greater from friends than from family, a decrease in friendships during the transition to parenthood could be especially detrimental. Thus, sexual minority women are likely to feel concerned about this aspect of the transition to parenthood. Lesbian women, however, have been found to be particularly proactive in discussing future life plans related to discrimination or support from family members in considering legal protections and end-of-life care (Thomeer, Donnelly, Reczek, & Umberson, 2017). It may be that lesbian women also discuss broader expectations of future parenthood in the context of possible changes in support or discrimination from family members more than do other GBT+ identified individuals. To the best of our knowledge, there is also no research addressing how queer-identified people perceive and navigate *general expectations surrounding future parenthood and friendships*. While a more targeted and robust interpretation of queer women's experiences is outside the scope of this study, these preliminary results provide foundation for future research on the experiences of queer women.

Lesbian women were the dominant sexual identity group to describe the theme of *changes in lifestyles and priorities*. This may be best understood from previous research about lesbian women and parenthood considering the perceived loss of friendship networks and a lifestyle commonly believed to be an integral part of lesbian culture (e.g., bar culture; Logan, 2013). Indeed, substantial evidence indicates that, especially for lesbian women, lesbian bars have played a pivotal role in establishing public community spaces where lesbian women could congregate (Faderman, 1991; Gruskin, Byrne, Kools, & Altschuler, 2006). It seems that even with increasing visibility and additional public spaces for sexual minority women (e.g., community centers), bars may continue to play an important cultural role for lesbian women. Documenting the continued importance of LGBTQ+ cultural lifestyles among lesbian women in this contemporary sample is a relevant contribution to the literature on sexual minority women's friendships and research on the transition to parenthood.

We found that *LGBTQ+ community attachment* as a theme was formed through a combination of LGBTQ+ parent community seeking, interest in acceptance from other parents (as opposed to one's own parents) and the surrounding community, activism, and dissonance. Broadly, *LGBTQ+ community attachment* can be seen as the intentionality related to maintaining one's identity beyond solely engaging in social activities. For example, future parents described the struggle of ensuring that losing LGBTQ+ friends did not come as a result of taking on the identity of a mother. This struggle may be further exacerbated by heteronormative societal pressures to choose pathways to parenthood that involve having a biological relationship to one's child. Research has found that sexual minority women of color may be more intentional about pathways to parenthood as compared to White sexual minority and heterosexual women (e.g., donor insemination choices; Karpman, Ruppel, & Torres, 2018). Sexual minority women may also be more intentional than heterosexual women about their reasons for parenthood (e.g., spending more time thinking about why someone becomes a parent, considering factors such as identity versus self-fulfillment or happiness; Bos, van Balen, & van den Boom, 2003). Thus, one interpretation could be that sexual minority women's intentionality in maintaining their relationship to their LGBTQ+ community is a related domain in which sexual minority women show proactive approaches to parenthood. This knowledge represents a contribution to the literature on sexual minority women's friendships during the transition to parenthood.

We also found that the theme of *LGBTQ+ community attachment* did not largely characterize one specific sexual identity group. Rather, regardless of sexual identity, participants expressed the importance of maintaining their connection to the LGBTQ+ community. It may be that sexual minority women are commonly concerned with continuing homophily in having LGBTQ+ friendships, even if these friendships are cross-orientation (e.g., lesbian and bisexual women being friends), given their broader shared cultural identity (i.e., being LGBTQ+). Indeed, the literature has demonstrated that, in addition to the emphasis of social support among LGBTQ+ families of choice (Frost et al., 2016), LGBTQ+ people are more likely to report more cross-orientation friendships as compared to cisgender heterosexual individuals (Galupo, 2009). Further, while same-sex couple parents are becoming increasingly visible in society, stigma is still present for same-sex couple parents and their children (Farr, Crain, Oakley, Cashen, & Garber, 2016). Ensuring access to communities with whom individuals can share their experiences may be important for all participants in our sample.

Finally, while the voices of lesbian and queer women were especially prominent among two of the themes, the three themes did not seem to especially

characterize bisexual and pansexual women. Instead, bisexual and pansexual women expressed each of these themes equally. To our knowledge, there is little work on the friendships of bisexual and pansexual women during the transition to parenthood, as well as research on bisexuality more broadly (Ross & Dobinson, 2013). Thus, future work should consider more directly investigating the experiences of bisexual and pansexual women in various contexts, including the transition to parenthood and friendships.

Like any study, this work comes with limitations. Recruitment for this sample targeted childfree adults who were thinking about becoming parents in the future, which simultaneously represents a strength and a limitation. Participants who are thinking about future parenthood may be more proactive in the consideration of all aspects of future parenthood compared to those who want to become parents but do not currently intend to do so. However, this also means that we were able to gain insight about the experiences of sexual minority women as they become parents among a sample that is likely more proactive during this transition. A longitudinal perspective that includes the perceptions of friendships during the transition to parenthood and the changes that occur would also shed further light on sexual minority women's experiences. In addition to exploring these narratives among different and diverse samples, such as among racial-ethnic minorities as well as via quantitative analyses, may provide further evidence as to the presence of these themes. Finally, two areas of research are outside of the scope of this study but are important areas for future work. Specifically, little to no research has focused on single lesbian individuals or sexual minority women who are transitioning to parenthood, as the majority of research has focused on same-gender couples (Costa & Bidell, 2017; Riskind & Tornello, 2017). Additionally, investigating the experiences of queer women's narratives is an important area of future work, given the absence of research specifically on queer women.

Conclusions and implications

This research contributes to the foundation of knowledge on sexual minority women's friendships (Weinstock & Rothblum, 2018), specifically their perceived changes in friendships during the transition to parenthood. As individuals shift and develop over their life span, understanding possible stability and change in social support has implications for understanding outcomes related to sexual minority women's psychological adjustment and health (Thomeer et al., 2018). By developing a greater understanding of the perceptions of friendships prior to the transition to parenthood, we may be able to better support sexual minority women during a stressful life

transition, ultimately leading to healthier and happier future parents (Cao, Mills-Koonce, Wood, & Fine, 2016).

Notes

1. We calculated reliability using Cohen's kappa, given dichotomous code data from two coders (final independent coder and first author; McHugh, 2012).
2. There were eight initial themes, which were collapsed into three overarching themes. The first seven were: *No changes in future parenthood* ($k = 1.00$), *lifestyle or priority changes* ($k = .85$), *spending time with other parents* ($k = .73$), *dissonance* ($k = .74$), *acceptance by parents/community* ($k = .69$), *perceived cultural divide* ($k = .84$), and *activism* ($k = 1.00$). The eighth theme, *no changes in friendships because friends were also parents*, was removed and recoded into the first overarching theme, *general expectations surrounding future parenthood and friendships*. This first theme also included *spending time with other parents*. The second theme, *changes in lifestyles and priorities*, included *perceived cultural divide* as well as *lifestyle or priority changes*. The final theme, *LGBTQ+ community attachment*, included *dissonance*, *acceptance by parents/community*, and *activism*.

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