

FAMILY COMMUNICATION ABOUT SEX:
A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF GAY AND LESBIAN PARENTS'
PARENT-CHILD SEX COMMUNICATION

by

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FAMILY COMMUNICATION ABOUT SEX:
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University of Nebraska, 2016

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As the number of same-sex parents creating families and raising children rises, the stigma surrounding parent-child sex communication (PCSC) remains constant. Parents serve as one of the primary sources of information regarding sex and sexuality to their children; however, gay and lesbian parent-child sex communication remains largely unstudied. Framed within grounded theory, the primary goal of this study is to investigate how gay and lesbian parents navigate and enact parent-child sex communication with their children. Through 22 in-depth interviews with gay and lesbian parents who have directly communicated about sex and sexuality with their children, the following four research questions were addressed: 1) How do same-sex parents understand and enact PCSC? 2) What topics and discourses are inherent within gay and lesbian parent PCSC? 3) How, if at all, do gay and lesbian parents discuss sexual orientation during PCSC? 4) How, if at all, do gay and lesbian parents converse with each other in preparation for PCSC? Participants discussed their experiences engaging in and enacting PCSC with their children providing a unique standpoint in gay and lesbian specific PCSC. Discussion of the findings are discussed in relation to the similarities of gay and lesbian specific PCSC and extant literature regarding heterosexual parent PCSC, the unique experiences of gay and lesbian parents during PCSC, and finally how gay and lesbian parent PCSC can further inform all PCSC research. Directions for future research are also addressed.

Keywords: Gay and Lesbian Parents, Parent Child Sex Communication, Sex Education

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family – in every sense of the definition.

PREVIEW

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PREVIEW

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Chapter One: Rationale for Study

The 2010 United States Census indicates that more than 111,000 households consist of children raised by same-sex guardians; resulting in over 220,000 biological, adopted, or step children under the age of 18 being raised by two same-sex parents (Gates, 2013). As many as six million American adults and children, or 2% of the total United States population, have at least one LGBT parent. A specific statistic regarding how many gay and lesbian headed families are within the United States is difficult to come by. Lambert (2005) explains many gay and lesbian parents do not officially disclose their sexual identity for fear they could lose custody or legal rights regarding their children as a result of their sexual orientation. However, broad estimates regarding the number of gay and lesbian families indicate the range of children being raised by gay or lesbian parents could be as high as 14 million (Patterson, 1995).

The majority of research on gay and lesbian parenting has focused predominantly on coparenting with heterosexual parents (e.g., Farr & Patterson, 2013), attitudes towards gay parenting (e.g., Pennington & Knight, 2011), and implications of gay and lesbian parenting on child's well-being (e.g. Goldberg & Smith, 2013; Reed, 2013; Vargas, Miller, & Chamberlain, 2012). The topics of research inquiry are broadening regarding gay and lesbian parenting. Yet, there are still numerous areas on LGBT parenting that are receiving minimal attention from family scholars compared to inquiries on opposite-sex parenting. One of these areas—and the focus of this proposal—is the nature of sexual communication gay and lesbian parents have with their children, as this focus of research remains wildly understudied.

All parents, regardless of sexual orientation, serve as one of the most constant and reoccurring sources of information for children regarding sex and sexual activity. The relationship between parents and children functions as a pivotal focal point for research regarding communication about sex. Parent's conversations with children regarding sex communication serves as a primary factor in children's understanding of sex, delaying of sexual debut, and a reduced risk that children will engage in risky sexual behavior (Guilamo-Ramos et al., 2012; Silk & Romero, 2014). Current research, however, has not focused specifically on how lesbian and gay parents approach sex communication with their children, as the majority of focus has been on heterosexual cross-sex parents and their children. As the number of children being raised by at least one LGBT parent continues to increase, the research surrounding sex communication has failed to highlight this growing population. Therefore, our understanding of the types of communication and messages surrounding parent-child sex communication does not currently account for any potential unique dynamics of gay and lesbian parenting.

Families, and specifically parents, serve as a critical part of a child's sexual education and the development of their sexual health (L'Engle & Jackson, 2008). In a nationwide survey, almost half of young adults surveyed indicated their parents were viewed as the most influential factor in their sexual education and decision-making (National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 2007). Beyond pragmatic sexual education, parent-child communication about sex offers parents the opportunity to convey information as well as moral beliefs, values, and expectations related to sexual behavior, activities, and identity (Jerman & Constantine, 2010). Parent-child sex communication provides many benefits to parent-child relationships, children's

participated risky sexual behavior, number of participants, and safe sex practices (Guilamo-Ramos et al., 2012). However, despite consistent findings indicating parents' communication with children regarding sexual activity and sexual education can benefit both parents, children, and responsible sexual activity, conversations surrounding the topic of sex, sexuality, and sexual activity can be extremely difficult to initiate.

Lack of knowledge, communicative skill, embarrassment, convenient timing, and confidence level are all factors that can hinder the initiation and process of parent-child sex communication (PCSC) (Elliot, 2010; Wilson, Dalberth, Koo, & Gard, 2010). For the purpose of this study, PCSC refers to any communication occurring between a parent and a child regarding sex, sexual orientation, or sexuality. Although many parents may want to communicate with their children about sex and sexuality, parents are often at a loss for how and when to begin and what specifically to say during these conversations. Research indicates that because of embarrassment and difficulty initiating these conversations, many parents rely on having the 'sex talk' with their children during a single planned conversation, rather than relying on multiple instances of communication regarding sex and relationships over time which can be a more comprehensive and effective approach to parent-child sex communication (Chia Chen Chen & Thompson, 2007; Martino et al., 2008).

Although the existing research consistently supports the claim that parents serve as a critical component in their children's sexual education, that parents can influence their child's sexual activity, and that parent-child sex communication heavily influences the sexual risks and sexual debut of their children, this research fails to identify how parent-child sex communication is specific and unique to gay and lesbian parents.

Current research regarding gay and lesbian families continues to grow; however, few scholars have investigated parent-child communication outside of parent's disclosure of homosexuality (Bozett, 1980; Clay, 1990). Bresearchs (2010) states "aspects of parental and family identity need to be discussed in these families in ways that differ from traditional families" (p. 80).

Scholarly work over the past three decades concludes children of gay and lesbian families do not differ from children raised in heterosexual-parented households in regard to sexual, emotional, social, and cognitive development (Tasker, 2005). Although research supports the positive health and wellbeing of children raised in homosexual-parented households, there is little research investigating how the communication acts between these same-sex parents and their children are unique. The majority of existing research regarding homosexuality and family identity focuses on the differences between these families and heterosexually headed households (Vyncke, Julien, Jodoin, & Jouvin, 2011).

Researchers investigating gay and lesbian families often do so by comparing these families to the existing research surrounding heterosexual family norms (Patterson, 2000). This form of comparative research does shed investigative light on the representation and commonalities of gay and lesbian headed families; however, comparing these unique family forms to heterosexual families ignores the nuances and specificities experienced by gay and lesbian families, thus limiting the scope of research (Lambert, 2005). Moreover, beyond simply limiting the scope of research, several scholars argue that the continued comparison of gay and lesbian headed families to heterosexual-headed families continues to promote heterocentricism and homophobia in

our research as well as our societal culture (Savin-Williams & Esterberg, 2000; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). Because gay and lesbian parents simultaneously serve as a foundational figure in their children's sexual education and development, while potentially experiencing unique discourse related to their family structure, research must investigate how these same-sex parents navigate sex related conversations with their children.

The majority of existing research surrounding parent-child sex communication assumes both parents and children to be heterosexual based on the nature of questions, populations studied, or by the exclusion of non-heterosexual specific topics. By focusing this research specifically on same-sex parents and their navigation with their children through sex related conversations, we can broaden our understanding of what types of conversations are occurring within the broad scope of family structures in our culture. Furthermore, we can begin to stake a claim within our research that PCSC is not solely a heteronormative conversation, but a vastly complicated and under-researched field of inquiry in relation to sexual orientation and family composition. By expanding our understanding of PCSC and those engaging in it, we can get a better picture of sexual communication as it occurs between all types of families, parents, children, and people, rather than focusing on such a narrow aspect of a complex phenomenon.

Sociohistoric Context of Gay and Lesbian Parents

In order to comprehend the nuances of same-sex parents' parent-child sex communication, it is critical to first understand the social and historic context in which these conversations take place. Within the United States, gay and lesbian individuals have experienced a long and deeply rooted history of oppression during their fight for equality. Gay and lesbian headed families, similarly, may be faced with additional

hardships relating to negative outside opinion of homosexuality and family structure. King and Black (1999) found negative perceptions of lesbian and gay parenting may be apparent in the population of the United States at large. Herek and Garnets (2007) propose that although the larger social attitudes within the United States are changing and adapting to be more accepting of gay and lesbian parents, these individuals and their family units are still a widely stigmatized population. Similar to opinions about other oppressed and marginalized groups, these opinions are often not a product of personal experience, but rather a result of social and cultural transmission of stereotypes (Gillis, 1998). These stereotypes have been historically embedded in the research and conversations regarding gay men and lesbian women. Previous to 1974, the American Psychiatric Association had included homosexuality in the list of mental disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 1974). Although there is no reliable research indicating that homosexuality itself negatively affects psychological functioning, the social construct of these stereotypes, along with systematic oppression and discrimination itself, can cause an individual distress (Cochran, 2001; Meyer, 2003). In addition, children of gay and lesbian headed households are not immune to the social prejudices and opinions regarding homosexuality. Telingator and Patterson (2008) found children of gay and lesbian parents often hear discriminatory or anti-gay messages in their daily lives.

As a result of this discriminatory communication, researchers have investigated how the general public opinion and attitudes within the United States about the morality of homosexuality has changed throughout time. Loftus (2001) states the American population's attitudes regarding homosexuality became briefly more liberal than in

previous years during 1973-1976, but was then followed by a fourteen-year stretch of more conservative attitudes from 1976-1990, and finally shifted toward a more liberal stance regarding homosexuality again between 1990 and 2001. Loftus suggests these findings are a result of the demographic changes within the United States as well as cultural and ideology shifts, stating this may be a result of increased education. Herek and Capitanio (1995) found individuals with higher education levels are more liberal in their attitudes regarding homosexuality. Thus, an increased acceptance towards homosexuals as well as more liberal ideology may be the result of increased education levels among general populations.

As Telingater and Patterson (2008) indicated, children of gay and lesbian parents hear discriminatory language and anti-homosexual messages every day. The comments and anti-gay conversations may be rooted within the long battled history of gay rights marriage within the United States. The issue of legalization of same-sex marriages has been a long and contested debate within the United States, but regained significant traction and visibility in the social conversation in response to the *Goodrich v. Department of Public Health* (2003), which officially legalized same-sex marriages in the state of Massachusetts. Public responses, largely led by the conservative religious voters, resulted in 11 states: Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, Michigan, Mississippi, Montana, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, and Utah, to vote through amendments prohibiting same-sex marriages in their states in the 2004 November elections (Olson, Cadge, & Harrison, 2006). That same year, Congress reviewed resolutions intending to amend the U.S. Constitution to include only heterosexual couples as eligible for marriage recognition. In July of 2004, the United States Senate rejected the Federal Marriage

Amendment, although many voters and activists continued to push for the Amendment in the following years (Liu & Macedo, 2005).

Then, in June of 2013, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in the case of *United States v. Windsor* that section 3 of the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), which President Clinton put into place in 1996, was unconstitutional as it defined marriage and marital rights to be solely between a man and a woman. The Supreme Court based their decision on the grounds that DOMA violated the Fifth Amendment of the United States Constitution (Gaynor & Blessett, 2014). Two years later, in June of 2015, the U.S. Supreme Court decided on a 5-4 decision that all 50 states must recognize same-sex marriages as legal, allowing gays and lesbians to marry and obtain federal recognition and legal benefits (Chappell, 2015). In addition, large strides have been made in the legislation regarding gay and lesbian individuals and couples adopting children.

Same-sex couples or homosexual individuals are currently allowed to adopt from private and gay-friendly adoption agencies. However, adopting from foster systems and individual state agencies is difficult. Individual states with adoption laws that allow adoption or fostering of children only by husband and wife limit the ability of single people and unmarried couples, regardless of sexual orientation, as well as homosexual couples to adopt or foster children from state foster systems. Prior to the 2013 Supreme Court decision making gay and lesbian marriages legal in all 50 states, there were 13 states that explicitly prohibited same-sex marriages: Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Michigan, Mississippi, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, Tennessee, and Texas. Of these 13 states, all but Arkansas and Tennessee

possessed additional laws making it illegal for same-sex partners to adopt foster children jointly (Beitsch, 2015).

In early 2016, a federal judge lifted the last remaining ban on gay parental adoption in Mississippi making adoption for gay and lesbian parents legal in all 50 states (Reilly, 2016). Large strides were made in regard to legislation of gay and lesbian individuals and family rights during the process of this project. It is important to note that although joint adoption from the state foster system is now legal across the United States, it was not legal for many states and participants during the time frame in which they were developing families. And while legal equality for same-sex families is starting to take shape one law at a time, many gay and lesbian individuals and couples continue face additional discriminations, social injustices, and legal obligations. These social, historical, and legal implications placed on gay and lesbian individuals create a significant lens in which to view, research, and begin to understand these unique experiences.

Understanding the social, legal, and historical obstacles facing gay and lesbian parents can influence our understanding of how gay and lesbian parents discuss sex education with their children. Enacting PCSC in tandem with the everyday nuances of being a gay or lesbian parent can create an environment in which ideologies of sex as well as sexuality can be discussed. Gay and lesbian PCSC is a distinct avenue in which to comprehend how, if at all, the current social climate allows parents to navigate topics of morality, liberalism, understanding, or oppressions unique to their lived experiences.

While this particular study focuses on communication between parents and their children regarding sexual communication, it is first important to understand the larger

networks of sex communication within American School systems. Previous research has shown that the vast majority of American parents want sex education to be taught in public school systems (Janus & Janus, 1993; Kenney, Guardado, & Brown, 1989). McKay, Pietrusiak, and Holowaty (1998) found that 95% of parents surveyed supported sex education within public schools. As the majority of parents are advocating for sex education within schools, it is vital to understand the nuances and inconsistencies within American public school sex education as part of the larger comprehensive sex education conversation.

Sex and sex education in American school systems. A majority of children may experience communication and education regarding sex from peers, family, and teachers or educational classes. Education and schooling environments are strongly linked to the developmental factors of the students inhabiting them. Ringeisen, Henderson and Hoagwood (2003) suggest schooling environments can affect mental health, self-concept, academic achievement, as well as the ability to form and maintain personal relationships. Although currently the United States public school sex education has been widely criticized for ignoring the unique experiences and health concerns of lesbian, gay, and bisexual students by privileging a heteronormative teaching criteria (Elia & Eliason, 2010; Wilson & Wiley, 2009), these heteronormative teaching practices also disproportionately hinder students from homosexually-headed households, regardless of the student's sexual orientation. By continuing a heteronormative approach towards sex education and disallowing or discouraging discussions of homosexuality, students are not only deprived of a comprehensive sex education, but are also receiving heteronormative messages regarding family structure.