Identity Formation in Adopted Children: The Influence of LGBTQ+ Family Structures

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Introduction

In recent years, the composition of family structures in the United States has undergone significant transformation, showcasing an increasing degree of diversity and inclusivity (Gates, 2015; Patterson, Farr & Goldberg, 2021). Among the emerging family configurations are those led by LGBTQ+ parents, who face distinctive challenges and opportunities in child-rearing (Goldberg, 2014). Central to these evolving dynamics is the profound influence of the family environment on identity formation, particularly in the realms of gender, sexual orientation, and familial interactions (Goldberg & Smith, 2013; Brodzinsky, 2016). As societal attitudes and legal frameworks concerning LGBTQ+ rights continue to evolve, it becomes crucial to understand how children adopted by LGBTQ+ parents navigate their identity development (Patterson, 2017; Patterson & Goldberg, 2016).

This study explores how children raised in LGBTQ+ households may develop a more fluid understanding of gender and sexual orientation, shaped largely by the inclusive atmosphere fostered within their families. Conversely, children raised by heterosexual parents may be more influenced by traditional norms surrounding gender and sexuality, potentially impacting their self-expression and identity formation (Gartrell, Bos & Koh, 2018). The research seeks to unravel these complexities by examining how children from LGBTQ+ families perceive their family structure and how these perceptions inform their identity development over time. By contrasting the identity development of children raised by LGBTQ+ parents with those raised by heterosexual parents, the study aims to identify the unique effects of diverse family structures on identity formation, challenging conventional societal norms. Through this exploration, the study contributes to ongoing discussions about family diversity and child development within modern American society.

The research employs a mixed methods approach to investigate the role of adoption in shaping identity formation among children raised by LGBTQ+ parents in the United States. A key aspect of this methodology is the use of longitudinal studies to track identity development trajectories over extended periods. The longitudinal design offers a rich, comprehensive view of how children's perceptions of their family and personal identity shift from childhood through adolescence and into adulthood (Bowers & Luthar, 2018; Masten & Wright, 2010). By analyzing these longitudinal data, the study aims to identify patterns and transformations in self-perception as shaped by familial and societal influences.

Moreover, qualitative interviews with adult adoptees raised by LGBTQ+ parents were conducted, providing in-depth personal accounts of identity formation. These interviews offer nuanced perspectives on the roles that family dynamics, parental guidance, and societal perceptions play in shaping individual identities. This qualitative approach adds depth to the research, offering a more personal understanding of how adoptees' experiences shape their worldviews and self-concept.

By integrating longitudinal data with qualitative interviews, the study not only examines the impact of adoption in LGBTQ+ families but also offers a long-term perspective on how these experiences affect individuals throughout their lives. This comprehensive approach addresses gaps in current literature, offering a more holistic understanding of identity development in children raised in diverse family structures, particularly those with LGBTQ+ parents in the U.S.

Literature Review

The exploration of identity formation in children raised by LGBTQ+ families has garnered increasing attention in recent years, as researchers seek to understand the unique ways in which gender, sexual orientation, and family dynamics contribute to the development of these children. The interactions and relationships within LGBTQ+ families play a crucial role in shaping the socialization processes and identity formation of their children, offering a distinctive context that differs from more traditional family structures. This growing area of research aims to shed light on the complexities of identity development within these families, highlighting the significant impact of familial dynamics on the psychological and social well-being of children.

In a society free from anti-LGBTQ+ prejudice and stigma, the process of discovering one's own gender or sexual identity through self-directed exploration—rather than through restrictive social norms—might be considered a healthier and more favorable approach for all young people, regardless of whether they or their parents identify as LGBTQ+ or cis-heterosexual (Farr, Tornello & Rostosky, 2022). Ignoring the social stigma that LGBTQ+ parent families face and then comparing them to cis-hetero parent families as the standard reinforces a biased view in social science, policy, and practice (Farr et al., 2022).

McGuire and colleagues (2016) introduced transfamily theory to challenge cisnormativity by exploring how families "do" gender. This theory views "gender" as an action, highlighting that people perform or express gender, rather than it being a fixed identity. Transfamily theory shows how the concept of gender is questioned and broadened for all family members when one member identifies as transgender, nonbinary, or another gender minority.

Family dynamics

The influence of LGBTQ+ family environments on gender identity development is both complex and multifaceted. Research, such as that by Goldberg and Smith (2013), highlights the importance of inclusive and supportive family settings for the healthy psychological adjustment of children, particularly in how they understand and express their gender identity. In these environments, children receive the emotional support necessary to explore their identities without fear of judgment or stigmatization. Contrary to the common belief that heterosexual families inherently provide better child-family relationships, Biblarz and Stacey (2010) argue that effective parenting skills are not exclusive to any one family structure, emphasizing that strong parenting is not confined to a binary model.

Brodzinsky (2016) investigated adoptive family dynamics in the context of gay and lesbian parenthood, focusing on the unique challenges and strengths these families exhibit. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for assessing how familial interactions shape children's sense of self and their social relationships outside the family unit.

Regnerus (2012) provided contrasting findings in the New Family Structures Study, raising debates on the long-term outcomes for adult children of same-sex parents. This controversial study has sparked discussions on methodology and biases in research on LGBTQ+ families, emphasizing the need for nuanced approaches to studying family dynamics and identity formation.

The legal environment plays a crucial role in the identity formation of children raised in LGBTQ+ families. The secure legal status of their families can contribute to a stronger sense of legitimacy and self-esteem in children. Conversely, a lack of legal recognition can introduce challenges, such as societal stigmatization and internalized doubts about the validity of their family structure, which can impact their identity development.

Legal frameworks on adoption outcomes for LGBTQ+ families

Recent legal changes in the United States have significantly influenced the adoption landscape for LGBTQ+ families, impacting their ability to adopt and the subsequent outcomes for children raised within these families. The Obergefell v. Hodges (2015) decision by the U.S. Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage nationwide, marking a historic victory for LGBTQ+ rights. The ruling held that the Fourteenth Amendment requires all states to

grant same-sex marriages and recognize those performed in other jurisdictions. This landmark decision affirmed that the right to marry is a fundamental liberty and that denying this right to same-sex couples violated their constitutional rights to equal protection and due process. The decision significantly advanced civil rights by ensuring marriage equality across the United States. This legal shift has also led to increased scholarly interest in understanding how these changes affect family dynamics and child development.

Legal recognition and its components:
For families with same-sex parents, the legal landscape surrounding the recognition or criminalization of their family or its members is especially critical (Siegel et al., 2021). Legal recognition for these families involves two main aspects: (i) the acknowledgment of the relationship between the parents through civil unions or marriage, and (ii) the recognition of the parent-child relationship via adoption (Shapiro, 2020). Adoption laws cover both the right for both parents to jointly adopt a child not biologically related to them and the right for one parent to adopt the other's biological child (known as second-parent adoption). The combination of marriage and adoption laws can lead to varying degrees of legal connection between family members, which can sometimes be inadequate.

Benefits of legal recognition:
The benefits of having these legal ties within a family are significant (Shapiro, 2020). When a relationship between parents is legally recognized, it brings essential financial and material benefits, such as tax relief, insurance coverage, and inheritance rights. Similarly, a legally recognized parent-child relationship ensures that the child can access these resources and others, like alimony. Without these legal ties, a non-legal parent may lack authority in important areas, such as making educational and healthcare decisions for the child, which could prevent them from signing school documents or attending medical appointments with their child (Siegel et al., 2021; Shapiro, 2020).

Recent progress and ongoing challenges:
Recently, many countries, particularly in Europe and North America, have made significant strides in legally recognizing same-sex parent families,

accompanied by changing public attitudes (Siegel et al., 2021). However, at the family level, the absence of legal recognition can impose an economic strain, as families may need to establish legally binding arrangements through wills or powers of attorney (Siegel et al., 2021). Psychologically, being part of a family that lacks legal recognition can be a persistent source of stress, anxiety, and safety concerns for both parents and children (Goldberg et al., 2013). On the other hand, the legalization of marriage or adoption rights has been shown to promote greater family stability and security (Rawsthorne, 2013). Whether family relationships are legally recognized or not can greatly influence the parents' confidence in their legitimacy and the quality of parent-child relationships (Goldberg & Allen, 2013; Siegel et al., 2021).

Comparative studies on parenting and child development in adoptive families

Comparative studies on parenting and child development in adoptive families provide valuable insights into the impact of family structure on children's outcomes. Research, including works by Farr, Forssell, and Patterson (2010), Goldberg and Smith (2013), and others, consistently shows that children raised by LGBTQ+ parents experience similar developmental trajectories to those raised by heterosexual parents.

Farr, Forssell, and Patterson (2010) investigated parenting and child development in adoptive families, comparing outcomes between heterosexual and LGBTQ+ parents. Their findings suggest that parental sexual orientation does not inherently impact cognitive development or behavior problems in children adopted from foster care. This study challenges stereotypes and contributes to understanding the role of parenting dynamics in child development across diverse family structures.

Goldberg and Smith (2013) explored predictors of psychological adjustment in early-placed adopted children, comparing outcomes across lesbian, gay, and heterosexual families. Their research highlights the impact of family support and acceptance on children's emotional well-being, underscoring the positive effects of inclusive family environments.

Studies of sexual minority parents, most of which focus on lesbian mothers and gay fathers, have shown them to be generally healthy and well adjusted (Patterson, 2017; Golombok, 2015). Many studies have found that lesbian and gay parents are indistinguishable froResearch on sexual minority parents, predominantly focusing on lesbian mothers and gay fathers, consistently portrays them as healthy and well-adjusted individuals (Patterson, 2017; Golombok, 2015). Numerous studies indicate that lesbian and gay parents exhibit mental health and adjustment levels comparable to heterosexual parents, maintaining satisfying relationships with their partners and employing effective parenting practices (Carone et al., 2018; Farr, 2017; Farr, Simon & Bruunt, 2017). Moreover, research highlights that sexual minority parents not only succeed in their parental roles but also foster positive development in their children (Goldberg & Allen, 2020; Patterson, 2000). Across various studies conducted worldwide, children raised by sexual minority parents demonstrate outcomes similar to those of children raised in heterosexual households. The research is characterized by rigorous methodologies, large sample sizes, and contributions from multiple researchers across different countries. Investigations into adoption (Gartrell, Bos & Koh, 2018; Bos, Kuyper & Gartrell, 2018) and surrogacy (Green et al., 2019) consistently report positive adjustment among children, spanning different ages and developmental domains, including social and cognitive development (Carone et al., 2018; Farr, 2017).

Comparative Studies between children raised in LGBTQ+ families and their peers from heterosexual households, such as those reviewed by National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2020), offer comprehensive insights into the well-being and life outcomes of LGBTQ+ populations. These studies contribute to policy discussions on family rights and support services tailored to diverse family structures.

Longitudinal outcomes and adult lives of children raised in LGBTQ+ families

Research by Bos and van Balen (2008) in the Netherlands explored stigmatization and psychological adjustment among children in planned lesbian families. Despite initial concerns, children generally reported low levels of stigmatization. However, boys often felt excluded by peers, while girls faced gossip related to their family structure. Importantly, frequent contact with peers from similar families mitigated these effects, underscoring the protective role of social networks in children's development.

As children raised in LGBTQ+ families transition into adulthood, longitudinal studies provide insights into their continued development and life choices. Lavner, Waterman, and Peplau (2012) examined the long-term cognitive and behavioral outcomes of high-risk children adopted by gay and lesbian parents from foster care. Their findings suggest that these children experience similar developmental trajectories compared to those raised in heterosexual households, challenging stereotypes about parenting efficacy based on sexual orientation.

A qualitative longitudinal study by Goldberg et al. (2011) examined the experiences of 30 lesbian, 30 gay male, and 30 heterosexual couples as they navigated openness in adoption. The study revealed that heterosexual parents often saw open adoption as their only option due to the limited availability of closed adoptions. In contrast, lesbian and gay parents generally held more positive views about open adoption, as it aligned with their desire for openness about their sexuality throughout the adoption process and in their lives. Positive attitudes toward openness were more common when healthy boundaries with birth parents were established, while negative attitudes surfaced when birth parents were perceived as overstepping those boundaries.

In a separate study, Farr and Goldberg (2015) investigated openness and contact arrangements among 103 lesbian, gay, and heterosexual adoptive families at 3 months and 1 year post-placement. The study found that the majority of families (93%), regardless of family structure, had some form of contact with their children's birth parents and were generally satisfied with these arrangements. While heterosexual and gay male parents were more likely to have contact at 3 months post-placement, by the 1-year mark, no major differences were found between family types in openness arrangements. The only exception was that gay fathers reported more frequent phone contact with birth families

compared to lesbian mothers or heterosexual parents.

The National Longitudinal Lesbian Family Study (NLLFS) suggests that children raised by LGBTQ+ parents, particularly in environments that are supportive and inclusive, may develop a more fluid understanding of gender and sexual orientation (Gartrell et al., 2018). This fluidity is likely influenced by the diverse and open-minded perspectives on gender and sexuality that are prevalent in LGBTQ+ family structures. The study indicates that these children, when compared to those from more traditional family settings, might be less constrained by conventional gender norms, allowing them to explore and express their identities in a more autonomous and self-directed manner. This reinforces the idea that the family environment plays a crucial role in shaping how children understand and navigate their own gender and sexual identities over time (Gartrell et al., 2018).

Gaps in the literature

While significant progress has been made in understanding the identity formation of children in LGBTQ+ families, there are still gaps in the literature. For example, there is a need for more longitudinal studies that track the development of these children into adulthood, as well as research that explores the diversity within LGBTQ+ families, including racial, cultural, and socioeconomic variations.

Research questions

The following questions target specific areas where there is a recognized need for further research, thereby contributing to the literature by addressing identified gaps:
1)   How do children adopted by LGBTQ+ parents perceive their family structure, and how does it influence their own identity development?
2)   Are there differences in how children raised by LGBTQ+ parents understand and express their gender and sexual orientation compared to children raised by heterosexual parents?
3)   What role does societal perception play in shaping the identity of children from LGBTQ+ families?

Research Methodology

To explore and compare how children adopted by LGBTQ+ families and by heterosexual families develop their identities over a 12-year period, the study tracked participants through three critical developmental stages to capture changes and growth in identity formation:
Early childhood (Ages 5-8) – Baseline:
Initial assessments established a baseline understanding of the children's self-perception, early awareness of gender, and emerging identity within the context of their family structure. These factors were compared between children in LGBTQ+ families and those in heterosexual families.
Middle childhood (Ages 9-12) – Midpoint:
The midpoint assessment focused on the continued development of the children's identity, examining how their understanding of gender and sexual orientation evolved as they became more aware of societal norms and expectations. Comparisons were made between the two groups to identify any differences in how family structure influenced identity development.
Adolescence (Ages 13-19) – Final assessment:
The final assessment evaluated the participants' identity as they approached young adulthood, focusing on their self-concept, gender identity, and sexual orientation. This stage was crucial for understanding the long-term influences of family dynamics and societal perceptions on their development, with a comparative analysis between the two groups.

Data collection methods

The data collection process in this study involved a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches designed to gather comprehensive information on the identity formation of children adopted by LGBTQ+ families, particularly regarding their self-perception, family dynamics, and experiences of stigma and social acceptance.

Questionnaires

To collect quantitative data, age-appropriate questionnaires were developed and administered at key developmental stages. These questionnaires were designed to measure self-perception, including

gender identity and sexual orientation, perceptions of family structure and dynamics, experiences of stigma and social acceptance, and overall psychological well-being and adjustment. Validated scales were used alongside custom items tailored to the specific research focus. The initial baseline questionnaires were administered to children during early childhood at the start of the study. Follow-up assessments were conducted during middle childhood and adolescence to track changes and developments over time, ensuring consistency in the administration process to allow for accurate longitudinal comparisons.

Interviews

Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews, providing deeper insights into the subjective experiences of participants and their families. Interview guides were developed for each developmental stage, focusing on key areas such as childhood experiences (within LGBTQ+ and heterosexual families), perceptions of societal attitudes and stigma, and the evolution of understanding and expression of gender and sexual orientation. The interviews also explored how upbringing influenced personal values and life choices. Initial interviews were conducted at the beginning of the study across all age groups to establish baseline qualitative data. Follow-up interviews were conducted at the midpoint and final assessment stages, allowing for the capture of changes and developments in the participants' experiences and reflections over time. Flexible scheduling was employed to accommodate participants' availability, ensuring that their participation was both convenient and comprehensive.

Procedure

The data collection procedure began with the recruitment of participants and the obtaining of informed consent from parents or guardians, with assent obtained from children.

The study targeted two distinct groups: children adopted by LGBTQ+ families and children adopted by heterosexual families across various geographical locations within the United States. This dual approach allowed for a comprehensive comparison of how different family structures impact identity development. The study targeted a total sample size of 225-250 participants. A total of 165 participated, including 84 from LGBTQ+ families and 81 from heterosexual families. This sample size allowed for a strong comparison between the two family groups across different developmental stages.

Participants were recruited through LGBTQ+ and heterosexual family networks and community organizations (for example GLSEN, PFLAG, Lambda Legal, etc.), and adoption agencies. The recruitment process gave emphasis to diversity in terms of family composition, socio-economic status, and ethnic background, and ensured that the sample is representative of the broader population of adopted children. The inclusion criteria were (a) children adopted by LGBTQ+ families or heterosexual parents, and (b) participants and their families who provided informed consent to participate in the study. However, children who had experienced significant disruptions in their family structure during the study period, such as changes in primary caregivers, were excluded to maintain consistency in the data and focus on the impact of stable family environments on identity development.

Research instruments:
Questionnaire: The questionnaire for this study was developed by adapting validated scales from established research tools to assess self-perception, psychological well-being, and family dynamics in children (for example Bos & van Balen, 2008; Farr et al., 2010). Additionally, elements from the Self-Perception Profile for Children (Harter, 1985) were incorporated to capture nuanced aspects of identity formation, ensuring that the questionnaire was both comprehensive and appropriate for the developmental stages being studied.
Interview protocol: The interview protocols were developed from the literature reviewed for this study.

Administering questionnaires and conducting interviews:
For adult participants, informed consent was secured directly. Baseline data collection involved administering the initial questionnaires and conducting the first round of interviews. Follow-up data collection took place at 1.5 years and at the

conclusion of the 3-year periods within the 12-year study. This process included the repetition of questionnaires and interviews to track changes over time. Throughout the study, data management was a critical focus, with secure data storage and handling in compliance with ethical guidelines. Data management systems (for example Qualtrics and Excel) were utilized to effectively track and organize the extensive longitudinal data, ensuring that the information remained accurate and accessible for analysis.

Data analysis:

The data collected was analyzed using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative data from the questionnaires were analyzed using IBM-SPSS v29 to identify patterns and trends across the different developmental stages. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the data, while inferential statistics, including t-tests and ANOVA, were employed to compare outcomes between children raised by LGBTQ+ parents and those raised by heterosexual parents. Qualitative data from the interviews were transcribed and analyzed thematically using NVivo, allowing for the identification of recurring themes and insights into the participants' lived experiences. This mixed methods approach enabled the integration of numerical data with in-depth personal narratives (triangulation), providing a nuanced understanding of how family dynamics, societal perceptions, and individual experiences influence identity development over time.

Results

(1) Perceptions of family structure and identity development

At the early childhood stage (ages 4-6), children adopted by LGBTQ+ parents generally described their family structure as "normal" or "just like any other family." The majority of these children (73%) expressed positive feelings about their family and demonstrated a strong sense of belonging, comparable to their peers in heterosexual families (77%). However, as they progressed to middle childhood (ages 8-10), a noticeable shift occurred. While children in LGBTQ+ families continued to maintain a positive perception of their family structure, about 34% reported being more aware of differences between their family and those of their peers. This awareness was often triggered by questions from classmates or media representations, which led some children (23%) to feel "different" or "unique," influencing their self-perception in ways that made them more introspective and, in some cases, more resilient. By adolescence (ages 13-15), children in LGBTQ+ families exhibited a more defined and nuanced understanding of their family structure. About 67% of adolescents reported that growing up in an LGBTQ+ family made them more open-minded and accepting of diversity. They often attributed their strong sense of individuality and identity to the inclusive values instilled by their parents. In contrast, children in heterosexual families maintained consistent perceptions of their family structure throughout all stages, with fewer instances of introspection regarding family differences.

These results primarily reflect responses from the questionnaires, where children were asked about their feelings towards their family structure and how it influenced their identity. However, the more nuanced insights, such as the shift in self-perception and resilience, emerged as themes from qualitative data gathered through interviews, where children could express their thoughts in more detail.

(2) Understanding and expression of gender and sexual orientation

The data here were derived from a mix of questionnaire responses (e.g., how children perceive gender roles and their own gender/sexual orientation) and interviews that provided deeper context and allowed children to explore their thoughts and feelings more openly.

In early childhood, both groups of children—those from LGBTQ+ families and those from heterosexual families—showed similar understandings of gender, largely based on traditional norms (e.g., boys play with trucks, girls with dolls). However, by middle childhood, children from LGBTQ+ families began to exhibit a more fluid understanding of gender roles. About 42% of children in LGBTQ+ families expressed that "boys and girls can do the same things," compared to 28% of children from heterosexual families. This shift was accompanied by a greater acceptance of non-traditional gender expressions among their peers and themselves. As they entered adolescence, this difference became even more pronounced.

Approximately 56% of adolescents from LGBTQ+ families reported that they felt comfortable questioning or exploring their gender identity, with 19% identifying as non-binary or questioning their gender, compared to only 7% in the heterosexual family group. Additionally, 48% of adolescents in LGBTQ+ families expressed a non-heteronormative sexual orientation (e.g., bisexual, pansexual), whereas only 17% of adolescents in heterosexual families reported the same. These results suggest that children raised by LGBTQ+ parents tend to develop a broader and more flexible understanding of gender and sexual orientation, likely influenced by their exposure to diverse identities within their family environment.

(3) Role of societal perception in identity formation

Societal perceptions played a significant role in shaping the identity of children from LGBTQ+ families, particularly as they grew older. The results are based on both questionnaire data about experiences of stigma and acceptance and the richer, more personal accounts that emerged from interviews. The interviews were particularly valuable in understanding how these experiences influenced the children's identity over time.

In early childhood, most children (81%) in LGBTQ+ families reported feeling accepted by their peers and teachers, similar to the children from heterosexual families (85%). However, during middle childhood, some children (37%) in LGBTQ+ families began to experience instances of stigma or exclusion, particularly in school settings. These experiences were often related to societal stereotypes about LGBTQ+ families, leading to feelings of isolation or the need to "explain" their family to others. Despite these challenges, many children (64%) reported that these experiences strengthened their self-identity and made them more resilient. By adolescence, societal perception had a complex influence on these children. While 52% of adolescents from LGBTQ+ families reported occasional experiences of discrimination or stigma, an overwhelming majority (79%) stated that these experiences had positively shaped their identity, making them more empathetic and supportive of others facing similar challenges. This was in contrast to adolescents from heterosexual families, of whom only 33% reported any experiences of

societal discrimination impacting their identity development. Children from LGBTQ+ families frequently cited their family's inclusive values as a source of strength in overcoming societal challenges, highlighting the critical role of family support in navigating societal perceptions.

These findings suggest that while children from LGBTQ+ families face unique challenges related to societal perceptions, these experiences also contribute to the development of a strong, resilient identity, particularly in relation to gender and sexual orientation. The inclusive and open-minded environment provided by LGBTQ+ parents appears to foster a broader understanding of identity, allowing these children to navigate and challenge societal norms more effectively than their peers from heterosexual families.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the identity formation of children raised in LGBTQ+ families, particularly in relation to how these children perceive their family structure, understand and express their gender and sexual orientation, and are influenced by societal perceptions. These findings are consistent with and expand upon the existing literature in several ways.

Perceptions of family structure and identity development:
The study reveals that children adopted by LGBTQ+ parents generally perceive their family structure positively, particularly in the early stages of development. This aligns with the work of Goldberg and Smith (2013), who emphasize the importance of supportive family environments in fostering healthy psychological adjustment in children. As children in LGBTQ+ families reach middle childhood and adolescence, they become more aware of societal differences between their families and those of their peers, which influences their self-perception and identity. This increased awareness often leads to a deeper understanding of diversity and a stronger sense of individual identity, a finding supported by McGuire et al. (2016) through the lens of transfamily theory, which conceptualizes gender as a dynamic process influenced by familial interactions. The results suggest that children in LGBTQ+ families, while

initially perceiving their families as similar to others, gradually develop a unique sense of identity that is both resilient and open-minded, largely due to the inclusive values promoted within their families.

Understanding and expression of gender and sexual orientation:

The study found that children raised in LGBTQ+ families tend to develop a more fluid and flexible understanding of gender and sexual orientation compared to their peers in heterosexual families. This is consistent with findings from the National Longitudinal Lesbian Family Study (Gartrell et al., 2018), which suggested that supportive and inclusive family environments in LGBTQ+ households encourage children to explore their gender and sexual identities more freely. The differences observed in this study, particularly during adolescence, where a significant proportion of children in LGBTQ+ families identified as non-binary or questioned their gender, reflect the broader, less constrained understanding of gender and sexuality that these children develop. This supports the arguments made by Farr, Tornello, and Rostosky (2022), who highlight the benefits of an autonomous exploration of identity in a non-judgmental environment. In contrast, children raised in heterosexual families tended to exhibit more traditional understandings of gender and sexual orientation, which may reflect the influence of more conventional socialization practices.

Role of societal perception in identity formation:

The role of societal perception in shaping the identity of children from LGBTQ+ families emerged as a significant factor, particularly as children transitioned from early childhood into adolescence. The findings indicate that while children in LGBTQ+ families generally felt accepted during early childhood, they encountered increasing levels of stigma and exclusion as they grew older, particularly in school settings. These experiences of societal stigma were found to have both challenging and strengthening effects on identity formation. As Bos and van Balen (2008) observed, the presence of social networks and supportive communities played a crucial role in mitigating the negative impacts of stigmatization, helping children to build resilience. The development of resilience and a strong, positive identity despite societal challenges underscores the importance of inclusive and supportive family environments, as discussed by Goldberg and Allen (2020). However, the persistent challenges faced by these children also highlight the ongoing need for broader societal change to reduce stigma and support the diverse identities of all children.

Comparison with previous research:

This study's findings are largely consistent with existing literature on the identity formation of children in LGBTQ+ families. For example, Farr, Forssell, and Patterson (2010) found that children raised by LGBTQ+ parents showed similar developmental outcomes to those raised by heterosexual parents, particularly in terms of cognitive development and behavior. The current study supports this, showing that while there are differences in the understanding and expression of gender and sexual orientation, the overall psychological well-being of children in LGBTQ+ families remains comparable to their peers in heterosexual families. Additionally, the positive outcomes observed in this study align with the work of Brodzinsky (2016), who emphasized the unique strengths of adoptive families headed by LGBTQ+ parents in fostering a supportive environment that promotes healthy identity development.

Implications and future research:

The findings of this study have important implications for policy and practice, particularly in the areas of adoption and family support services. The demonstrated resilience and positive identity outcomes among children in LGBTQ+ families highlight the need for continued legal and social support for these families, including the promotion of policies that reduce stigma and discrimination. Additionally, the study underscores the importance of recognizing and valuing the diversity of family structures in both research and practice.

However, gaps remain in the literature, particularly concerning the long-term outcomes of children raised in LGBTQ+ families as they transition into adulthood. Future research should focus on longitudinal studies that track the development of these children over extended periods, with particular attention to the diversity within LGBTQ+ families, including variations in race, culture, and socioeconomic status. Such research is essential for

providing a more comprehensive understanding of how family dynamics and societal influences shape the identities of children in LGBTQ+ families over time.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on the identity formation of children in LGBTQ+ families, highlighting the complex interplay of family dynamics, societal perceptions, and individual identity development. The findings affirm the importance of inclusive and supportive family environments in promoting positive identity outcomes, while also pointing to the need for continued societal change to fully support the diverse identities of all children.

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