#

# Family and School Interview: LGTBQ Families

# Gina Laura Ciani

# Lehigh University

# TLT 404: Diversity

# Dr. Hammond

Family and School Interview: LGBTQ Families

On an invited visit to a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and queer (LGBTQ) friendly church; a co-interviewer and I had the opportunity to talk to some families with same sex parents or a parent who recently ‘came out.’ These families represented a minority demographic in American schools that is often overlooked: those with people who are LGTBQ members of the family unit. They are often underserved in that there are both intentionally and unintentionally discriminated against through errors such as inattention to non-normative families. For example, teachers often refer to parents as mom and dad or grandma and grandpa, which leave out the possibility of mom and mom or dad and dad. Some school environments (often religious in nature) teach that same sex relationships are not acceptable; meanwhile, the norm for teachers and parents to participate in male/female partnerships identifies a difference between the target student’s parents and other adults in his or her world. In these ways, LGTBQ families are forced to live with inequalities or discrepancies that are often not understood and ignorantly criticized.

Fortunately, our discussions with the LGTBQ families were in the safety of a welcoming environment which praised the differences of these families while respecting their varying levels of comfort with expressing their sexual identities. We extensively spoke with three families: two with two mothers (one where the children spoke as well) and one where the mother recently came out to her three older children after a divorce from her husband. The talks happened during a post-service socialization time with coffee and snacks or in the church library and lasted between 15 minutes and slightly over an hour. All talks occurred following a Sunday service in which both interviewers and all interviewees were in attendance and were conducted on informal, conversational terms.

**Interview Summary**

**Students**

 During the visit to the LGTBQ friendly church, we had the opportunity to speak with one of the children of a lesbian couple and observe their other child. While talking with their son, a middle school student, we found out that in elementary school he didn’t encounter any problems with having two mothers; however, as a middle school student he was subject to some bullying and discrimination. He went on to say that his biggest qualm with having two moms was that he was the only man in the house. Combined with his sister, he expressed that there was simply too many girls in his life. While he was talking, male mentors at the church were eager to give him a pat on the back and let him know they were around, but he seemed to just want a male advocate with him at home to speak to up for him during boy issues.

 As we continued the conversation, the student revealed that he only told other students about his moms when prompted. He mentioned that he was hesitant to bring up his parents in natural conversations unless he was explicitly prompted to do so. He said that he avoided talking to others about his parents not because he was embarrassed, but because he didn’t want to highlight that he was different—it was easier to be the same as others. Although he refrained from discussing his parental composition, the student seemed like a happy child who was comfortable with his parents. He was simply at an age where differences were not something to be appreciated among peers regardless of their particularities.

**Parents**

We got to talk to three very different sets of parents during our visit: one mom who had children with an ex-husband and who was now living with a partner, one set of two moms who had their children together, and one mother who recently came out to her three older children after an unrelated divorce. The first conversation was with the mother living with a partner, called Mary here for confidentiality purposes. Mary had two children, an older daughter and younger son, with her ex-husband and was now raising those children with her lesbian partner. The woman’s daughter was a college freshman and her son was in high school. Mary told us that she was very close with her daughter and was still struggling with her being away at college although they talked quite frequently. She was also very close to her son, and did almost everything for both children and attributed this strong parental presence to her Puerto Rican roots. She talked lovingly about her partner who encouraged her to let her kids go a little bit to develop their independence and said she was trying to do just that. Mary said that she loved her partner and was very happy about how well her kids got along with her partner and vice versa. Overall, Mary was very happy with the relationship of this new family unit.

 Mary told us about challenges for her family, but had very little bad things to say. She said that her children dealt with very little, if any, bullying and that most of their teachers and friends’ parents were fine with the fact that she was a lesbian. She was a very good mother and was seen as such foremost. She said her children were extremely supportive of her lesbian identity and called it “cool.” She went on to discuss that she and her partner were considering having another child so that her partner could experience the joy of having a baby. She seemed very insistent that being a parent was one of the joys in life that everyone should experience and wanted to give her partner that joy as well.

 The next mothers we spoke with were spoken to separately. We spoke to the previously mentioned boy’s mother, Susan for confidentiality, while her son was present and his other mother, or OMA (other mother available), called Cathy here, with his younger sister present. When talking to Susan, she talked about how her son was unhappy with how he was treated for having two mothers in middle school. She said this wasn’t at all the case in elementary school and that kids just got mean in middle school. She attributed much of this malice to her son’s peers’ parents as they were likely the ones that taught their children that having two mothers was not acceptable. She seemed to concur with many of the concerns and feeling noted by her son as discussed previously. She added that having their children was not very difficult, but that she had heard about some challenging experiences with other parents in the congregation.

 Next, we talked with her spouse, Cathy for confidentiality, while their daughter was present. Cathy was happy to talk with us. She described how she had children with her husband over 20 years ago and got divorced and lived with Susan who helped raise her older children (in high school at the time). Susan and Cathy were together for nearly 20 years when they decided to have children. They purchased five vials of sperm and hoped for the best. They got pregnant with their son on the third vial. When their son was around 4 years old, Susan wanted another child and so they decide to try the last vials of sperm and got pregnant with their daughter on the last one. Cathy talked about how she didn’t really want to have children again since she was getting older, but wanted Susan to be able to have the true motherhood experience. So, they had children again and after the first she really did not expect to have more children, but now they had a lovely son and daughter with which she was incredibly happy.

 Cathy went on to talk about their concerns as mothers when having a son. Cathy wanted to make sure their son could have all the male-based experiences that other boys could have, so while they were pregnant she did some investigation. She found that most places would let her attend as the father for father-son functions. The mothers also wanted their son to be allowed to participate in the Boy Scouts of America (BSA). Cathy contacted the BSA knowing their history with anti-homosexual relationships and found that feeling to be very location based. She was allowed to be a scout leader without hesitation, but not any official positions due to the Catholic nature of the group. She admitted that she was happy that she was not welcome to the other positions because it made it so that she wasn’t pressured to be more involved than she wanted to be like the male parents were. Undoubtedly, Cathy and Susan were and are prepared and proper parents.

 The conversation with Cathy continued towards family and school relationships. She said that she didn’t usually feel as though the schools treated her poorly based on her sexual identity. Nonetheless, when we asked her about advice for teachers when two moms come in for a parent conference she began to cry. It seemed that the fact that we as future educators cared enough to ask was emotionally provocative for Cathy. She said that we should just know how scared they are and how hard coming in was for them. This was a very meaningful statement: just know that they are scared and coming in to talk anyway. The conversation with Cathy was meaningful and very informative, but this line was the most profound.

 Finally, we had a short opportunity to talk to a mother who had recently come out to her children after an unrelated divorce. One conversation with her eldest son was easy and happened naturally. In fact, the confession happened in reciprocal. The son started the conversation in order to come out to his mother and she couldn’t help but give him the same level on honesty and come out to him. She expressed that she felt so relieved after doing this and from that time planned to tell her other children about her sexual identity. She worked with a therapist for some time to prepare her for a conversation with her daughters. It seemed she was very nervous and expected the worst. When she finally came out to her daughters she told them that if she dates again after the divorce it would be with women. She recounted that her daughters were very supportive and seemed proud of her in many ways. Again, she felt as though a weight was lifted from her and she didn’t need to be almost sneaking around her daughters any longer.

 A great example of this freeness that coming out to her children provided was told in a simple anecdote. She often read the gay and lesbian version of the NY Times and saw an interesting article that she wanted to show her daughter. She was able to just flip the screen and not worry that her daughter might notice which version of the NY Times she was reading. She said this really made her understand how liberated she felt. To continue this freeness, the woman made sure her daughters closest friends’ parents also knew what was going on, so that her daughters would not have to use discretion when talking about their mom and that she needn’t worry about who knew and who did not.

**Interview Reflection**

With theses interviews, I both learned and had my beliefs confirmed. As far as the quality of parenting by LGBTQ parents, these interviews confirmed my belief and coincided with literature indicating that LGBTQ parents are equal or superior to heterosexual parents (Short, Riggs, Perlesz, Brown, & Cane, 2007; Patterson, 2005; Millbank, 2003). The LGBTQ parents displayed more attentive natures to their children’s wellbeing and mental health at school than many parents express; furthermore, the parents took preventative measures in some cases to make sure their children would have access to the same social networks that children of heterosexual couples have. Clearly, LGBTQ parents go above the basic level of needs required to be a parent. In fact, Chan, Raboy and Paterson (1998) suggested that this parenting success is related to the lower level of conflict and stress in many homosexual households often resulting from the high level of pre-planning and preparedness these couples display when arranging for families. It makes sense to see such results because the roadblocks to parenting for LGBTQ couples are many, such as in vitro fertilization, sperm donation, adoption, and surrogacy. Moreover, these challenges make homosexual couples highly involved in a necessary planning process for childrearing which is longer than that of most heterosexual couples.

I was surprised to learn how understanding people acted towards LGBTQ couples and parents. Specifically, I was shocked that the one lesbian mother was able to become involved in her son’s BSA troop despite the large amount of media surrounding the homosexual-unwelcome by that organization. I thought how well she said she was received was slightly unreliable, but people often do not agree with the policies of their organizations and make better judgments. Moreover, she talked about answering questions about homosexuality from other parents during a camping trip for the BSA troop and said she was happy to answer their questions and give them real answers. I cannot imagine being in the same position, but I feel that in a similar position I would feel happy to share at first and then frustrated with ignorance after a while. Perhaps being a highly involved member of the LGBTQ community left this woman with a feeling of advocacy, so that answering endless questions did not seem annoying. Nevertheless, it is hard to understand that sentiment as an unrelated party. Based on our experience talking to this woman, she was happy and excited to discuss what it was like to be a lesbian parent for quite some time and would have spoken longer if her daughter didn’t want lunch. This seems an indicator that she was truly happy to share the BSA fathers, and I hope I could emulate her patience and devotion to advocacy in my own life.

The most pressing and profound response during the interviews was when Cathy said to just know how scared parents are when LGBTQ parents come in for a parent-teacher conference. I would never consider that these parents are scared at all. I would think of these parents as brave and so used to dealing with hardship that they almost wore a layer of armor that protected them from the world. That sentiment is not only unrealistic, but completely inaccurate based on this interview experience. When a teacher sees her students for the first time, she knows they are scared and timid and eases them into activities and participation by using community building games to enhance their comfort level. I need to consider these elements of parents, LGBTQ or not, in teacher conferences and make a welcoming environment that takes the ‘outsider’ feeling away from the moment my students’ parents walk in the door.

**Implications for Teacher and School Practice**

As a result of my interview and reflection, I will do my best to develop a classroom that is open to all family constructions rather than hetero-normative in nature. When referring to parents, I will do my best to simply refer to parents as a general term or say moms, dads, mom and dad, grandpa and grandma and so forth. This should make students think of same sex parents as one of many normative options for parental compositions of their peers.

I will also make teacher-parent conferences inviting experiences where all parents feel welcomed from the start. I will try to highlight similarities rather than differences by talking about the parents’ children’s experiences in my classroom rather than reflecting on how the students have different family cultures. Rather than highlighting differences we will celebrate them as a whole and treat differences as something to be thankful for in regards to cultural and diversity learning without drawing attention to specific differences among parents or students. During one-on-one conferences, I will be careful to treat all parents as insiders rather than outsiders and promote an inclusive parent-school community. I will greet parents equally and warmly and try not to create ideas of what I expect students’ parents to be like before actually meeting them. These efforts will likely make visits by parents less stressful and provide for an open level of communication between the parents and myself with regards to their child.

Finally, I will do my best to advocate for this kind of inclusion. I can suggest that all teachers and school personal avoid hetero-normative language when referring to parental units. I can provide for parent and me opportunities rather than specifically mommy or daddy and me. Similarly, I can encourage the school and community programs to function in the same matter by both leading by example and explicitly encouraging the individuals involved to do so. I can also listen to students in the class to make sure no bullying or ridiculing is occurring. When I hear unkind comments, I can use these as learning opportunities where I can educate students about differences (without singling out students as much as possible) that they will experience. By knowing about differences and how they are beneficial to the students’ experiences in life, the students may treat others in a more kind and thoughtful manner.

**Areas for Future Learning**

Although I had a very informative experience during the interviews, I wish I had time to talk with a homosexual male couple about parenting. I’m curious to know if their experiences and the those of their children are the same or different as that of their lesbian counterparts. I would like to know more about the process of becoming a parent for LGBTQ parents, especially men. Documentaries and anecdotes often note that women can easily buy sperm for insemination, but male parents have a challenge through the need of a surrogate or adoption. Many times surrogates are not legal, such as in Canada, or they are extremely costly. Similarly, adoption is a long and arduous process that is often not available to same sex parents. With these challenges, I want to know more about what methods for child-rearing are available to gay male parents and how they relate in accessibility to the LGBTQ population. I will continue to read and watch documentaries to learn more about this, but hope some continued visits to the church will help me answer these questions.

I’m also very curious about the long-term benefits and challenges to having LGBTQ parents. Many of these families appear more tightly knit than most families or more open in conversation. With these differences in relationships, it will be interesting to see how the families grow together and how they function during the adolescent, teenage, and young adult years. Particularly of interest, is how the parent-child relationship will change during each of these developmental stages and whether or not they will grow closer or further apart in each stage. With comparison to heterosexual parent units, I think that the differences here could be very interesting and lead to a decreased level of criticism towards same sex couples’ child-rearing.

**Conclusion**

My family and school interview provided me with a new, deeper level of understanding with regards to the LGBTQ population. Although I already suspected LGBTQ parents to be better parents, it seems that this is true for many couples and that many couples are simply equal to heterosexual parent units. Nevertheless, the controversy and fear related to the acceptability of LGBTQ parenting is preposterous. LGBTQ parents are simply parents—nothing more, nothing less. They care about their children; love them with all their heart; and want the best for their children. It seems the root of being a parent is the same despite who that person loves: parents just want their children to be happy and healthy. Parents are people who love their children and that is no different for LGBTQ parents.**References**

Chan, R.W., Raboy, B., & Patterson, C.J. (1998). Psychosocial adjustment among children conceived via donor insemination by lesbian and heterosexual mothers. *Child Development, 69*, 443-457.

Millbank, J. (2003). From here to maternity: A review of the research on lesbian and gay families. *Australian Journal of Social Issues, 38*, 541-600.

Patterson, C. (2005). *Lesbian and gay parent and their children: A summary of research findings.* Retrieved from http://www.apa.org/pi/lgbt/resources/parenting-full.pdf

Short, E., Riggs, D., Perlesz, A., Brown, R., & Kane, G. (2007). *Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) parented families: A literature review prepared for the Australian Psychological Society.* Retrieved from http://www.ilga-europe.org/content/download/12802/ 77133/fi...amilies-Lit-ReviewAPS.pdf