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Factors associated with relationship dissolution and post-dissolution adjustment among lesbian adoptive couples

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ABSTRACT

Same-sex adoptive couples are increasingly visible, yet few studies have addressed relationship stability and dissolution among these couples. In this study, using a theoretical framework based on Investment Models and Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation Theory, factors associated with dissolution and post-dissolution adjustment among 27 lesbian adoptive couples were examined across two points. At Wave 1, all 27 couples were together; children were on average 3 years old. Results revealed that nearly one third broke up over 5 years (between Waves 1 and 2). Factors related to shorter relationship length and undermining coparenting at Wave 1 distinguished women who later broke up versus stayed together. Worse mental health at Wave 2 characterized women in dissolved rather than sustained relationships, even with comparable individual adjustment at Wave 1. Weaker parenting alliance and greater dissatisfaction with childcare divisions were reported by women no longer with their partners at Wave 2 as compared with those in enduring partnerships. This research has implications for understanding lesbian relationship dynamics and associations with individual adjustment.

KEYWORDS

Lesbian women; adoptive couples; relationship dissolution; coparenting; mental health

With expanding rights and growing visibility of same-sex parent families, including increasing numbers of adoptive lesbian and gay parents, more research has focused on same-sex couples who adopt children (Brodzinsky & Pertman, 2011). Few studies have specifically explored processes contributing to relationship endurance or dissolution among same-sex couples with children, particularly adopted children. Recent research, however, suggests that lesbian parenting couples may be at risk for relationship dissolution as compared with heterosexual or gay parenting couples (e.g., Goldberg, Moyer, Black, & Henry, 2014). Thus, examining factors related to enduring couple relationships among lesbian parents is imperative for understanding lesbian relationships and associations with individual

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adjustment. This longitudinal study of lesbian couples with young adopted children is an investigation of factors associated with dissolution at an earlier time point and post-dissolution outcomes 5 years later.

Lesbian relationships: At risk for dissolution?

Research clearly indicates that lesbian women are capable of developing strong emotional and romantic attachments, and they do so in ways similar to gay and heterosexual couples (Farr, Forssell, & Patterson, 2010a, 2010b; Fingerhut & Peplau, 2013). Women in lesbian couples report the maintenance of satisfying committed partnerships; the same factors that predict relationship satisfaction for heterosexual couples also do so for lesbian (and gay) couples (Gottman et al., 2003; Kurdek, 2004). For lesbian couples, as with other couples, greater relationship satisfaction increases likelihood of relationship endurance (Kurdek, 1998, 2005).

Lesbian couples, however, may be at risk for dissolution. Evidence from over 3,400 married or "registered" (i.e., legal union) Norwegian couples revealed that female same-sex couples were more divorce-prone than other-sex and male same-sex couples (Wiik, Seierstad, & Noack, 2014). In the United States, Gottman and colleagues (2003) found that among 40 same-sex couples, 7 lesbian couples and only 1 gay couple broke up over a 12-year period. In their longitudinal study of lesbian women with children via donor insemination, 40 of the original 73 couples (55%) were no longer together when children were 17 years old (Gartrell, Bos, Peyser, Deck, & Rodas, 2011). With data from two large population studies in the United Kingdom, tracking participants from 1974 to 2004, Lau (2012) discovered that lesbian cohabiting couples were five times more likely to experience dissolution than were heterosexual cohabiting couples. In a smaller sample of lesbian mothers in the United Kingdom, 6 of 13 cohabiting lesbian couples (46%) had separated between the time their children were preschool age and age 12 (MacCallum & Golombok, 2004). In contrast, a recent study of 190 adoptive lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples revealed no significant differences in relationship dissolution rates across a 5-year period (Goldberg & Garcia, 2015). Thus, addressing unique dynamics underlying the success and lowering the dissolution risk of lesbian unions is essential.

Many studies have been conducted on relationship dissolution among heterosexual couples, demonstrating that declines in relationship satisfaction, lack of emotional involvement, financial conflict, issues with intimacy or communication, perceived unfairness in divisions of family labor, and poor mental health are among factors most detrimental to couple relationship stability (Amato, 2010; Frisco & Williams, 2003; Ogolsky, Lloyd, & Cate, 2013). Interestingly, studies about heterosexual relationship dissolution indicate some gender differences in "his and her divorce"—women appear more likely to initiate breakup than men, even when the couple has children (Amato & Previti, 2003; Kalmijn & Poortman, 2006). These findings may indicate why couples comprised of two women,

including those with children, may have greater propensity toward "her and her 'divorce'" (Goldberg et al., 2014, p. 2). Few studies, however, have examined lesbian relationship dissolution, particularly among lesbian parents.

Theoretical framework

Investment models

Social exchange theories have been used to study romantic relationships, primarily among heterosexual couples, with the central idea being that individuals partner with people who provide more rewards than costs. Social exchange views were extended by Kelley and Thibaut's (1978) theory of interdependence based on a central construct of dependence. Dependence on relationships is characterized by the degree to which relationship outcomes are valued. Satisfaction and comparison level of alternatives contribute to dependency. Building from social exchange and interdependence theories, Rusbult (1980) developed the Investment Model, positing that investment in a relationship would also promote dependence, over and above satisfaction and quality of alternatives alone. Rusbult also argued that greater dependence, fostered by satisfaction, investment, and few alternatives, facilitates greater commitment to the relationship. The Investment Model has been widely used and empirically validated—a meta-analysis of 52 studies demonstrated that relationship commitment (among other- and same-sex couples in dating, cohabiting, and married relationships) was strongly associated with the three components of Rusbult's model (investments, satisfaction, and quality of alternatives) (Le & Agnew, 2003). Furthermore, commitment is strongly predictive of relationship stability, at least among heterosexual couples (Le, Dove, Agnew, Korn, & Mutso, 2010). Some studies testing the Investment Model have specifically targeted same-sex couple relationships. One example is the work of Beals, Impett, and Peplau (2002) who studied 301 lesbian couples and found that all three components of Rusbult's model significantly predicted commitment—most notably satisfaction.

Vulnerability-stress-adaptation framework

Another guiding framework for understanding couple relationship quality and stability over time is the Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation (VSA) framework, which highlights the social exchanges between individuals in the couple as well as within the broader social context (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). Within this framework, enduring vulnerabilities can be defined as personality, experiential, demographic, or historical characteristics that individuals contribute to their couple relationship in stable and enduring ways. Stressful events can be described as developmental transitions or circumstances (chronic or acute) that couples (or individuals within the couple) encounter. Adaptive processes include the interactions between partners and involve how individuals and couples respond to and treat one another. Enduring vulnerabilities, stressful events, and adaptive

processes all contribute to couple relationship quality. According to the VSA framework, vulnerabilities, stressors, and adaptive processes should be simultaneously considered as impacting relationship stability over time via relationship quality (Karney & Bradbury, 1995).

Using the Investment Model and VSA frameworks to guide the specific research questions and variables of interest, this study examined factors associated with relationship dissolution among lesbian adoptive couples, as well as outcomes for those women in dissolved versus enduring relationships across a 5-year period. According to Rusbult's Investment Model, commitment and satisfaction are intertwined in influencing relationship stability over time (Rusbult, 1980). Aligning these aspects of Rusbult's Investment Model with the VSA framework, vulnerabilities contributing to relationship stability were operationalized for this study as shorter length of relationship, as well as greater individual and partner mental health symptoms. Stressors were operationalized as dissatisfaction with family labor divisions and low levels of couple relationship adjustment (including satisfaction). Finally, according to the VSA framework, adaptations were operationalized as observations of supportive coparenting and perceptions of stronger parenting alliance. What we know about each of these areas of interest (vulnerabilities, stressors, and adaptive processes) among lesbian relationships—both as correlates and sequelae of relationship dissolution—is reviewed next.

Vulnerabilities: Shorter length of couple relationship

Some research with lesbian and gay couples has suggested that being together fewer years is related to greater risk of relationship dissolution. Kurdek's (2005) review of lesbian and gay relationships (generally participants without children) indicated that the more years couples were together, the less likely they were to break up. Specifically among lesbian parenting couples who pursued donor insemination, Gartrell and colleagues (2011) found that women who were together more years by the time they had children were more likely to stay together than those who had been together for less time.

Vulnerabilities: Poor individual and partner adjustment

Mental health concerns can present challenges to couple relationships and also result from relationship dissolution among heterosexual couples (e.g., Amato, 2010). Among same-sex couples, including lesbian adoptive couples, partners' depression, emotional issues, or substance abuse can result in relationship quality decline and/or dissolution (Goldberg et al., 2014; Goldberg, Smith, & Kashy, 2010; Kurdek, 1991). As divorce is considerably stressful, heterosexual adults often show deflated mental health post-dissolution (Amato, 2010). Lesbian and gay adults also experience emotional disruption post-dissolution (Kurdek, 1997), including lesbian mothers specifically (Allen, 2007).

Stressors: Low levels of couple relationship adjustment

Commonly studied aspects of relationship adjustment among lesbian couples are satisfaction, communication, and intimacy (e.g., Kurdek, 1997). Among cohabiting lesbian and gay couples, Gottman and colleagues (2003) found that partners were less likely to break up over a 12-year period when they reported greater satisfaction and were observed expressing more positive and fewer negative emotions. Similarly, high conflict and less positive problem solving have been found to characterize lesbian couple relationships that later dissolved (Kurdek, 2004). Lesbian coparents who used donor insemination have noted communication problems, particularly about parenting, as contributors to dissolution (Turteltaub, 2002). Among 190 lesbian, gay, and heterosexual adoptive couples, Goldberg and Garcia (2015) found that those who reported low levels of relationship "maintenance" behaviors (i.e., behaviors that promote desired relationship qualities, such as high levels of communication) were more at risk of later dissolution than those couples with more moderate levels of relationship maintenance. Both emotional and physical aspects of intimacy also influence lesbian couple stability. Among lesbian couples using donor insemination, reasons for dissolution cited retrospectively by participants included growing apart, emotional unavailability, incompatibility, infrequent sex, and infidelity (Gartrell, Deck, Rodas, Peyser, & Banks, 2006). Similar factors have been reported among lesbian adoptive couples who have separated (Goldberg et al., 2014).

Stressors: Dissatisfaction with dividing family labor

With and without children, lesbian couples tend to divide household tasks more equally than heterosexual couples; those with children share childcare tasks more so than do heterosexual couples (e.g., Farr & Patterson, 2013; Kurdek, 2005). Similarly, lesbian couples demonstrate higher levels of equality, which is linked with relationship endurance, than do married heterosexual couples (Fingerhut & Peplau, 2013; Kurdek, 1998). Among lesbian parenting couples, egalitarian childrearing is connected with greater relationship satisfaction (e.g., Gartrell et al., 2006). As lesbian couples may particularly emphasize egalitarian values (e.g., Goldberg, 2013), discrepancies in labor divisions may be problematic. Lesbian adoptive mothers have specifically identified inequities in childcare divisions as a reason for dissolution (Goldberg et al., 2014).

Adaptive processes: Supportive coparenting and strong parenting alliance

The transition to biological and adoptive parenthood generates considerable relationship strain, with declines in relationship quality demonstrated among lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples, particularly among women (Goldberg et al., 2010; Pacey, 2004). This is aligned with findings about women's greater likelihood to initiate divorce as compared with men (e.g., Kalmijn & Poortman, 2006). Parenting

disagreements can erode relationships, as has been found among lesbian couples with children through donor insemination or adoption (Gartrell et al., 2006; Goldberg et al., 2014; Turteltaub, 2002). In the only published study specifically examining lesbian adoptive couples' relationship dissolution, Goldberg and colleagues (2014) found that parenting disagreements and tensions were reported by participants as contributing to relationship deterioration. Thus, while lesbian couples with children may experience risks for relationship disruption, supportive coparenting and parenting alliance may be particularly relevant to relationship stability over time.

The current study: Aims and hypotheses

This study had two primary aims in examining lesbian adoptive couples over a 5-year period at two time points (Waves 1 and 2, when children were preschool-age and school-age, respectively). The first aim was to explore factors at Wave 1 associated with future relationship dissolution by Wave 2. At the first time point (Wave 1), and consistent with the VSA framework, I expected greater vulnerabilities (i.e., fewer years together, greater mental health symptoms; Amato, 2010; Gartrell et al., 2011; Goldberg et al., 2010), greater stressors (i.e., dissatisfaction with divisions of labor, worse couple relationship adjustment; Frisco & Williams, 2003; Goldberg et al., 2014; Kurdek, 2004), and fewer adaptations (i.e., more undermining coparenting, less supportive coparenting; Gartrell et al., 2006; Gottman et al., 2003) reported by women in couples who later separated than those in relationships that endured. After examining factors associated with relationship dissolution at Wave 1, the second aim of this study was to explore outcomes of dissolution for lesbian coparents at Wave 2. Aligned with predictions from the Investment Model and VSA frameworks, I expected that women in enduring relationships at Wave 2 would be characterized by fewer mental health symptoms (fewer vulnerabilities), greater satisfaction in divisions of labor (fewer stressors), and stronger parenting alliance (greater adaptations) than those women in dissolved relationships. It is important to note that this study is not intended to be a complete test of the Investment and VSA Models, as not all predictive factors are included. For example, "alternatives to the relationship" are not considered, an important component of the Investment Model, and couple communication is not directly assessed as a "maladaptive process" in the VSA Model. Rather, this study draws from these two theoretical frameworks to gain insight about the factors related to lesbian couple relationship dissolution and stability.

Method

Participants

From a larger longitudinal project about lesbian, gay, and heterosexual adoptive parent families (Farr et al., 2010b; Farr & Patterson, 2013), this study involved 27 lesbian couples who participated in two data collection waves, first when children

were preschool-age (M_{age} = 3 years; SD = 1.31) and second when children were school-age (M_{age} = 8 years; SD = 1.65). Participants were recruited via five cooperating adoption agencies across the United States. Families were eligible to participate if they included parenting couples who were both the legal adoptive parents to at least one child who had been placed through private domestic infant adoption and was between 1 and 5 years old at Wave 1. Families were living along the East and West Coasts and in the South.

Table 1 presents sample demographic characteristics. At Waves 1 and 2, parents were in their early and late 40s, respectively. Most were White, well-educated, worked full time, had relatively high income, and had been in long-term relationships at Wave 1. Some couples were interracial; almost half completed transracial adoptions. Target children were more racially diverse than mothers and more likely to be girls than boys. Lesbian mothers had between one and three children. Preliminary analyses (leaving out relationship length, as this was a key variable of interest in the study) revealed that no other demographic variables (listed in Table 1) were related to relationship stability.

Materials

Demographic characteristics

At Wave 1, lesbian coparents reported on a number of demographic characteristics about themselves, their partners, and their children. Specifically, participants noted the number of years that they had been together with their partners. At Wave 2, the same participants reported the status of their relationship with their partners from Wave 1.

Individual adjustment

Individual women's mental health was assessed using the Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI; Derogatis, 1993) at both time points. The BSI is comprised of 53 items measuring symptoms such as depression and anxiety. Participants rate the extent

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of lesbian parents and children.

Variable	Mean (or frequency)	Standard deviation
Parent age, W1 (years)	43.52	5.21
Parent age, W2 (years)	48.85	5.15
Parent race (% White)	80%	
Parent education, W1 (% college/grad degree)	94%	
Parent work status, W1	72%	
Family income, W1 ($)	167,835	76,622
Relationship length, W1 (years)	12.66	4.76
Interracial couples	11%	
Child age, W2 (years)	8.44	1.65
Child sex (% girls)	59%	
Child race (% White)	41%	
Transracial adoptions	48%	
Total children, W1	1.44	.63
Total children, W2	1.62	.57

Note. There were 54 lesbian parents (27 couples) at Wave 1 (W1). Data were available from 26 of these families (n = 47 parents) at Wave 2 (W2).

that each item (e.g., "Feeling tense or keyed up") has bothered them in the last week on a five-point scale (0 = *not at all* to 4 = *extremely*). The mean of all items represents a total individual adjustment score; higher numbers represent worse mental health. Test-retest reliability over a two-week period among 60 non-patient participants was .90, and internal consistency reliability ranged from .78 to .85 across the BSI's nine dimensions among 1002 outpatient participants (Derogatis & Melisaratos, 1983). The sample Cronbach's alpha at Wave 1 for lesbian mothers was .92; for Wave 2, it was .91.

Couple adjustment

To assess relationship adjustment, the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS; Spanier, 1976) was used at both waves. Thirty-two items measure satisfaction, consensus, cohesion, and affection, and are scored from 0 ("Never" / "Always Disagree") to 5 ("All the time" / "Always Agree"). Higher numbers indicate better adjustment. Example items include, "In general, how often do you think that things between you and your partner are going well?" and "Do you and your mate engage in outside interests together?" A total score is the sum of all items. For a large sample in enduring marriages, the mean total score was 114.8 ($SD = 17.8$). For relationships that dissolved, the mean was 70.7 ($SD = 23.8$) (Spanier, 1976). Total scale reliability has been found to be high, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .96 for all items among a sample of 312 participants (Spanier, 1976). Cronbach's alpha for all 32 DAS items at Wave 1 for lesbian mothers was .90; for Wave 2, it was .84.

Divisions of labor

To assess satisfaction with divisions of family labor, Cowan and Cowan's (1990) Who Does What? (WDW) questionnaire, appropriate for couples with young children, was used at both time points. On scales ranging from 1 = *I do it all* to 9 = *my partner/spouse does it all* (5 = *we do it equally*), parents report the frequency they do various tasks ("real" involvement) or would ideally do them ("ideal" involvement). Means on these scales create "real" and "ideal" scores for housework, decision making, and childcare tasks. Discrepancies between "real" and "ideal" scores represent participants' dissatisfaction with current labor divisions; higher numbers represent greater dissatisfaction. Psychometric properties of the WDW have revealed good reliability for the six subscales ("real" and "ideal" scores for housework, decision making, and childcare), ranging from .92 to .99 (Cowan & Cowan, 1992). Sample Cronbach's alphas averaged .83 for "real" items and .66 for "ideal" items for lesbian participants at Wave 1. At Wave 2, the sample alphas for lesbian mothers averaged .80 across "real" items and .68 across "ideal" items.

Observations of coparenting

Supporting and undermining coparenting behaviors were assessed during family interactions at Wave 1, rated from 10 minutes of video-recorded unstructured family play sessions. Designed to assess two dimensions of coparenting during

typical family interactions, the Coparenting Behavior Coding Scale involves a supportive dimension score (the average of four subscale scores: pleasure, cooperation, interactiveness, and warmth) and an undermining dimension score (the average of four subscale scores: displeasure, coldness, anger, and competition) (Schoppe, Mangelsdorf, & Frosch, 2001). Couple-level ratings range from 1 = *very low* to 5 = *very high*. Trained coders focused on couple interactions specifically related to their child or parenting roles. Reliabilities ranged from .84 to .96 (M = .91). For more details, refer to Farr and Patterson (2013).

Parenting alliance

Parents' perceptions of coparenting were assessed at Wave 2 with the Parenting Alliance Inventory (PAI; Abidin & Brunner, 1995). The 20-item PAI measures the degree of commitment and cooperation between couples in their coparenting role. Items are rated from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. Minor wording adjustments were made for use with adoptive and same-sex couples. Example items include: "My child's other parent and I are a good team," and "Before adopting, my child's other parent expressed confidence in my ability to be a good parent." A total score is calculated from all items; higher scores indicate better parenting alliance. The PAI has demonstrated solid psychometric properties, with an alpha reliability of .97 among 512 parents (Abidin & Brunner, 1995). The sample alpha for all 20 items at Wave 2 for lesbian mothers was .91.

Procedure

Participants were initially recruited with letters or e-mails from cooperating adoption agency directors. At Wave 1, parents participated in a videotaped family interaction and completed pen-and-paper questionnaires during home visits. At Wave 2, families were re-contacted and invited to participate. Procedures were nearly identical to Wave 1 except questionnaires were online at Wave 2. Participation was completely voluntary, and no financial incentives were offered. The study was approved by the institutional review boards of the University of Virginia, George Washington University, the University of Massachusetts Amherst, and the University of Kentucky.

Data analytic plan

Preliminary analyses for two-tailed independent samples t tests among our sample revealed satisfactory power (.8) for large effects (d = .8). However, power for moderate effects was .4 and only .1 for small effects. For bivariate correlations, achieved power was high (approximating 1.0) for large effects; for moderate effects, power was .7 and for small effects, power was .2. Thus, adequate power was achieved for detecting large effects but not small or moderate effects in this study. Hierarchical linear modeling (HLM; Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002) was used to account for nested data (parents within couples) by controlling sources of shared variance and data dependency. Using methods similar to previous researchers working with

indistinguishable dyads (i.e., same-sex couples; Goldberg et al., 2010; Kurdek, 1998), the HLM conditional models can be described as:

$$\text{Level 1: } Y_{ij} = \beta_{0j} + e_{ij}$$
$$\text{Level 2: } \beta_{0i} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01}(\text{Together}) + u_{0j}.$$

At Level 1, the outcome variable is Y_{ij}. The random intercepts are represented by the β_{0j} coefficient. The error term is e_{ij}. Level 1 reflects the couple average calculated for each outcome variable. At Level 2, the γ_{01}(Together) coefficient represents the effect of being together (or not) at Wave 2. The u_{0j} coefficient controls for the dependency of partners' data within couples.

Results

Results revealed that 8 of 27 lesbian couples (approximately 30%) broke up between time points. First, vulnerabilities, stressors, and adaptive processes, derived from the Investment Model and VSA frameworks, were examined at Wave 1 as factors associated with couple dissolution. Second, results surrounding post-dissolution adjustment as related to vulnerabilities, stressors, and adaptive processes at Wave 2 are presented. Differences between couples in enduring versus dissolved relationships were explored at Waves 1 and 2 and are presented in Table 2.

Wave 1 factors associated with relationship dissolution

Consistent with my hypothesis that fewer years together would represent a vulnerability for couples according to the Investment Model and VSA frameworks,

Table 2. Differences characterizing lesbian women in enduring versus dissolved relationships.

Variable	Dissolved ($n = 8$ couples) Mean (*SD*)	Enduring ($n = 19$ couples) Mean (*SD*)	*t*(df)	*p*	Effect size (Cohen's *d*)
Wave 1					
Relationship length	9.52 (3.39)	14.00 (4.66)	2.50 (25)	.019	1.10
Mental health symptoms	.62 (.42)	.56 (.30)	.61 (25)	.547	.17
Couple consensus	49.76 (5.26)	50.12 (4.42)	.22 (25)	.826	.08
Couple affection	7.75 (2.82)	8.91 (1.89)	1.46 (25)	.157	.48
Couple satisfaction	37.49 (6.17)	39.75 (3.61)	1.36 (25)	.186	.45
Couple cohesion	16.56 (4.46)	17.58 (4.18)	.65 (.25)	.524	.24
Total couple adjustment	111.56 (14.63)	116.36 (10.76)	1.08 (25)	.292	.37
Dissatisfaction (housework)	.24 (.24)	.19 (.21)	.54 (25)	.591	.07
Dissatisfaction (decisions)	.15 (.27)	.21 (.21)	.79 (25)	.437	.23
Dissatisfaction (childcare)	.22 (.26)	.19 (.18)	.34 (25)	.739	.11
Supportive coparenting	2.93 (.70)	3.19 (.55)	1.27 (24)	.219	.42
Undermining coparenting	1.57 (.51)	1.31 (.29)	2.33 (24)	.024	.87
Wave 2					
Mental health symptoms	.42 (.35)	.25 (.19)	2.04 (21)	.054	.60
Dissatisfaction (childcare)	.31 (.32)	.16 (.13)	2.08 (19)	.052	.62
Parenting alliance	77.25 (7.86)	85.16 (10.21)	2.33 (24)	.024	.87

Note. Analyses involving individual parent reports were conducted using HLM. Couple-level variables were examined with independent samples *t* tests.

results showed that lesbian couples who broke up by Wave 2 had been together significantly less time at Wave 1 than couples who stayed together; this result had a large effect size (Table 2). Contrary to my hypothesis, however, mental health symptoms as a vulnerability did not differ at Wave 1 between women who stayed together and those who did not. Also contrary to expectations, stressors (according to the VSA framework), such as overall couple adjustment (and all DAS subscales—affection, satisfaction, consensus, and cohesion) as well as satisfaction with divisions of labor (housework, decisions, and childcare) did not differ at Wave 1 between women in relationships that lasted and ended. Supporting my hypotheses, adaptive processes—operationalized for this study from the VSA framework as observations of coparenting at Wave 1—revealed a significant and large effect such that couples who ended their relationships showed more undermining behavior than those who stayed together. Supportive coparenting behavior, however, did not differ at Wave 1 among couples who endured versus dissolved.

Wave 2 adjustment post-dissolution

Aligned with expectations, women in enduring relationships at Wave 2 reported marginally significantly better mental health at Wave 2 than did those who experienced relationship dissolution; this was a moderately-sized effect. Also consistent with expectations, women's satisfaction with divisions of childcare labor at Wave 2 was marginally significantly higher among those in enduring than those in dissolved relationships; again, this was a moderate effect. Satisfaction with divisions of decision making and housework tasks were not compared at Wave 2, since women no longer in couple relationships would not be expected to be dividing these aspects of family labor. Finally, as hypothesized, women in enduring relationships reported significantly greater parenting alliance at Wave 2 than those in dissolved relationships; this finding reflected a large effect size.

Discussion

Overall, these results are consistent with research indicating a relatively high rate of dissolution among lesbian couples (e.g., Lau, 2012; MacCallum & Golombok, 2004; Wiik et al., 2014), including those who adopt children (Goldberg & Weber, 2014). This study adds to limited research about lesbian parents' relationship dissolution (Gartrell et al., 2011), especially among lesbian adoptive couples (Goldberg et al., 2014) by using a theoretical perspective that has not yet been applied to similar samples. Within the conceptual framework of Investment Models and VSA theory, the current findings demonstrated that several relationship variables (e.g., relationship length and coparenting behaviors) were associated with later dissolution. As such, these findings highlight factors that contribute to relationship endurance (and could be cultivated) among lesbian adoptive couples. Related to outcomes for women across the 5-year period, and aligned with research among continually married heterosexual couples (Amato, 2010), relationship endurance appeared

marginally significantly related to better mental health. Moreover, stronger parenting alliance was perceived among women in sustained versus dissolved relationships—a finding that may have implications for children's long-term outcomes in these families. Thus, the results offer insights for intervention and clinical support for lesbian women who adopt children together.

Factors associated with relationship dissolution at Wave 1

A number of enduring vulnerabilities and stressors (according to the VSA framework), including mental health concerns, division of labor satisfaction, and couple relationship adjustment reported at Wave 1, did not distinguish the lesbian adoptive couples in this sample who endured or dissolved. As these women intentionally adopted children together, which involved a rigorous screening process (Farr et al., 2010b), it may be that this is a sample with ample resources to cope with possible challenges. It was the case, however, that shorter length of relationship appeared to be a vulnerability to relationship stability: couples who dissolved had been together fewer years than those in enduring relationships. This finding is consistent with some research with lesbian couples (Gartrell et al., 2011) and perhaps signifies the protective impact of long-term relationship investment (Kurdek, 2005), aligned with Rusbult's (1980) Investment Model. While more research about the mechanisms underlying this finding are necessary, a potential implication of this result may relate to the importance of timing considerations for couples in thinking about becoming parents. For instance, those lesbian couples who had been together more years before becoming adoptive parents may have developed more resources and strategies for managing conflict, as well as had more time for adequately preparing for the challenges of becoming parents together.

Undermining coparenting, as a maladaptive process in the VSA framework, appeared particularly toxic for lesbian relationship stability; couples that later broke up demonstrated more negative interactions at Wave 1 than those who stayed together. This finding mirrors Gottman and colleagues' (2003) research that negative affect is predictive of dissolution, and demonstrates the value of observations in understanding lesbian couple functioning. Interestingly, Roisman, Clausell, Holland, Fortuna, and Elieff (2008) found that, in observing same- and other-sex couples, lesbian couples were the most harmonious in resolving conflict. As women are especially attuned to relationship quality (e.g., Kalmijn & Poortman, 2006), this result could suggest that when lesbian women cannot effectively manage conflict, or when disagreements become too difficult, lesbian couples may have a lower threshold for dissolution.

Similar to the current findings, Lavner and Bradbury (2012), in their large study of newlywed couples, found that it was not relationship satisfaction, but levels of negative communication and emotion in the first 4 years of marriage that predicted divorce 10 years later. Relationship satisfaction and positive behaviors in the early years of marriage did not distinguish those couples who stayed married

versus those who later divorced. The results here are consistent with Lavner and Bradbury's findings, since undermining coparenting at the first time point was related to couple dissolution by the second time point, yet relationship satisfaction and supportive coparenting at Wave 1 were unrelated to couple relationship status at Wave 2. Consistent with the VSA framework, the results support that couple relationship stability may be bolstered by adaptive processes such as coparenting behaviors. The accumulation of positive couple interactions, including in parenting roles, may be a powerful contributor not only to couple relationship quality and satisfaction over time, but also in translating to parenting quality and satisfaction. Thus, children's adjustment could be influenced by couple relationship adjustment via its impact on parenting behaviors; future research could explore these possible mediations. Undermining coparenting may be particularly worth considering, since competition between parents in this sample was found to be associated with greater preschool child externalizing problems (Farr & Patterson, 2013). Couples' behaviors can substantially influence children, so coparenting interactions may be crucial to target in parenting interventions.

Post-dissolution adjustment at Wave 2

While satisfaction with family labor divisions did not distinguish those couples at Wave 1 who later broke up versus stayed together, this variable was relevant to post-dissolution adjustment in this sample of lesbian couples. Dissatisfaction with dividing childcare, as a stressor in the VSA framework, was marginally higher among women who had broken up versus stayed together, similar to heterosexual couples (e.g., Frisco & Williams, 2003). While sharing childcare was typical at Wave 1 (Farr & Patterson, 2013), tensions may have arisen if shared parenting expectations were incongruent with parents' realities. Not only were women who broke up less satisfied with childcare arrangements at Wave 2, but they also perceived weaker parenting alliance (an adaptive process in the VSA framework). Even when women are no longer partners, they still parent together, and must handle the challenge of managing relationships with their ex-partner (e.g., Kurdek, 1991). These findings underscore the importance of supporting successful coparenting efforts among women with children together.

One possibility explaining the lack of association between earlier couple adjustment and later dissolution may be challenges with self-report. Women may have wanted to portray their relationships in the best light, or they believed their relationship to be in better condition than it was in actuality. Some couples may have experienced insurmountable relationship changes not apparent at Wave 1. Regardless, women in dissolved relationships had marginally worse mental health than those in enduring relationships at Wave 2. As lesbian women tend to emphasize emotional dynamics related to relationship deterioration (Goldberg et al., 2014), these findings could relate to a heightened sensitivity to growing apart, which has

been found to negatively impact lesbian couple relationships and individual adjustment over time (Gartrell et al., 2006).

Strengths, limitations, and future research directions

While this study is among the first to investigate dynamics of lesbian relationship stability and dissolution, there are limitations. The sample is small and did not have adequate power to detect moderate and small effects. This study also only represents one pathway to parenthood (i.e., private domestic infant adoption), and includes data regarding relatively young children. Research with older children and across longer time periods would be informative. This study was quantitatively based; qualitative research would provide more depth about lesbian couple relationship trajectories and the mechanisms of change in these relationships over time. Finally, this study was an incomplete evaluation of the Investment and VSA Models, given that all conceptual components of each model were not represented in the current analyses. Future research could intentionally involve all predictors proposed by the Investment and VSA Models.

This study also had several strengths. One of few longitudinal studies about lesbian parenting relationships (e.g., Gartrell et al., 2006), it extends findings to lesbian adoptive couples (e.g., Goldberg et al., 2014). Another strength was high sample retention. At Wave 2, contact was made with all 27 original couples; 26 participated in some capacity. Relationship status was known for all couples at Wave 2 and missing data were minimized. A final strength of the study was the inclusion of not only self-report data, but also observational data of couples' interactions, which enhances the study's rigor and generalizability.

Implications for practice

Whether lesbian parents stay in long-lasting couple relationships or not, these results offer practical implications about promoting individual mental health and relationship functioning over time. Understanding that women may be particularly sensitive to relationship quality (e.g., Wiik et al., 2014) is critical for clinicians providing couple therapy for sexual minority (and heterosexual) women. To support lesbian women experiencing the stress of relationship dissolution, clinicians could emphasize possibilities of personal growth, liberation from conflict, and new gratifying relationships (e.g., Goldberg et al., 2014; Turteltaub, 2002). Some lesbian adoptive mothers express positive changes after break-up, including improvements in coparenting post-dissolution (Goldberg et al., 2014). Such findings suggest that mediation or coparenting interventions could help facilitate positive outcomes for parents and children.

The transition to *adoptive* parenthood may present unique challenges to lesbian couple relationships, resulting from stressors such as the level of parenting and adoption preparation the couple receives or difficult child characteristics (e.g., Goldberg & Garcia, 2015). Among heterosexual and same-sex couples who adopt,

parents who feel less prepared to parent an adopted child report higher levels of stress (McKay & Ross, 2010) and are more at risk for relationship dissolution (Goldberg & Garcia, 2015) than those couples who feel more prepared for the adoption. Mooradian, Hock, Jackson, and Timm (2011) found that heterosexual adoptive parents commonly felt that the training they received was more focused on the adoptive placement rather than the impact of the adoption on the couples' relationships. Thus, for all adoptive parents, including lesbian adoptive couples, pre- and post-adoption services would do well to focus on the needs of the new parents in transition as well as the children being placed. Helping prospective adoptive couples understand and prepare for the stresses and challenges that come with becoming parents, and perhaps to more than one adopted child, would likely be buffering to couples' relationship stability across the transition to adoptive parenthood.

Conclusion

Overall, lesbian adoptive couples may be at heightened risk for dissolution. In this study, relationship decline was precipitated by shorter relationship duration and greater undermining interaction. While there were no initial differences in individual adjustment, after breaking up women appeared to have worse mental health than did those in enduring relationships—possibly from the stress of major life changes. Women in dissolved partnerships also appeared less satisfied with childcare divisions and perceived weaker parenting alliance than those in sustained partnerships. In this way, the original hypotheses of the study based on Investment Models and the Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation framework were supported—lower investments (i.e., years together) and maladaptive processes (i.e., undermining coparenting) at Wave 1 were associated with later dissolution, and at Wave 2, greater vulnerabilities (e.g., mental health symptoms), greater stress (i.e., dissatisfaction), and fewer adaptive processes (i.e., parenting alliance) characterized women in dissolved versus enduring relationships. These results can inform professionals in supporting lesbian couples and their families in sustaining healthy and happy relationships over time and across key life transitions, such as couple relationship dissolution.

Notes on contributor

Rachel H. Farr received her Ph.D. in Developmental Psychology from the University of Virginia in 2011. She is an Assistant Professor at the University of Kentucky and was the Rudd Postdoctoral Research Scholar and Research Assistant Professor at the University of Massachusetts Amherst until 2015. Rachel's research focuses on diverse families, particularly those formed through adoption and parented by LGBTQ adults. For nearly a decade, she has conducted a large longitudinal study about how parental sexual orientation impacts child outcomes, parenting, and family dynamics in adoptive families across the United States. The results have informed policy, practice, and law surrounding ongoing controversy about lesbian and gay parenting, including citations in amicus briefs for Supreme Court same-sex marriage cases.

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