



## Introduction to the special issue: Social science perspectives on contemporary lesbian family life, 2009–2019

Rachel H. Farr

To cite this article: Rachel H. Farr (2019) Introduction to the special issue: Social science perspectives on contemporary lesbian family life, 2009–2019, Journal of Lesbian Studies, 23:4, 425–438, DOI: [10.1080/10894160.2019.1635068](https://doi.org/10.1080/10894160.2019.1635068)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10894160.2019.1635068>



Published online: 03 Jul 2019.



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## Introduction to the special issue: Social science perspectives on contemporary lesbian family life, 2009–2019

Rachel H. Farr

Department of Psychology, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY, USA

### ABSTRACT

It has been over ten years since the last special issue regarding lesbian family lives appeared in the *Journal of Lesbian Studies* (volume 12, issue 2–3). In my introduction to this special issue, I offer perspectives on contemporary lesbian family lives from 2009–2019, considering three key questions: (1) What important social and legal changes have occurred over the last decade? (2) What have we learned about lesbian family lives during this time period? (3) What do we still not yet know?

### KEYWORDS

Families of choice; families of origin; lesbian couples; lesbian families; lesbian mothers; lesbian parenthood

### Social and legal changes in lesbian family life

Since 2008, we have seen many shifts in the United States and around the world surrounding the legal rights of and societal attitudes toward lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) individuals, couples, and their children. In the U.S., these changes notably included the legalization of same-sex marriage in June 2015 with the Supreme Court decision for *Obergefell v. Hodges* (see special issue, *Family Court Review*, e.g., Patterson & Ball, 2018, for detailed overview of U.S. laws affecting LGBTQ-parent family life). Many states in the U.S. also offer state-level protections for LGBTQ people, such as laws relating to health and safety, nondiscrimination, and parenting (Movement Advancement Project, 2019). Over the past ten years, other countries have also legalized same-sex marriage and expanded protections for LGBTQ people (International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association, 2019).

Over the past several decades, in the context of shifting sociopolitical and legal climates, demographic changes have characterized lesbian family lives in the U.S. and around the world; there are increased numbers of individuals who openly identify as LGBTQ, become partnered or married, and have children (Gates, 2017; Jones, 2017; Patterson, Riskind, &

Tornello, 2014; Perales & Baxter, 2018). In the 1990s, with expanded access to assisted reproductive technologies (ART) such as donor insemination (and surrogacy), the numbers of lesbian (and gay) parents increased dramatically—a phenomenon often termed the “lesbian baby boom” or “gayby boom” (Clarke, 2008). For the generation(s) following this parenting boom in the context of lesbian identities, expanded options for having children have continued. In the last issue devoted to lesbian family lives in this journal, Mitchell (2008) emphasized the roles of biological (and non-biological) ties among lesbian parent families that had conceived children via donor insemination. In recent years, however, adoptive parenthood has particularly skyrocketed among lesbian (and gay) adults in the U.S. For instance, Gates (2011) reported that the number of lesbian and gay adoptive parents had doubled over a ten-year period. By 2018, same-sex couples were approximately seven times more likely than different-sex couples to adopt children, with this pattern being particularly so among married versus non-married same-sex couples (Goldberg & Conron, 2018). Thus, what can research tell us about lesbian family life as related to these dramatic social and legal changes worldwide?

### **What we have learned from social science research**

In the special issue on lesbian family life published over ten years ago, articles highlighted diverse experiences of gender identity among lesbian mothers (e.g., “femmes in families,” “the masculine principle”) and varying pathways to parenthood, such as ART (Mitchell, 2008). The issue described challenges in lesbian family life, such as those related to aging, partner bereavement, partner infidelity, and intimate partner violence (IPV). Finally, articles showcased different relationships, like those among lesbian mothers and/or lesbian daughters, couples with an age gap, families of choice, and communities of support (e.g., Mitchell, 2008).

Which topics still resonate in this current issue on lesbian family life a decade later, and which issues have emerged anew? Next, I detail three broad themes that have characterized social science research on lesbian family experiences from 2009–2019. The first theme is attention to theory, methodological rigor, context, and intersectionality. The second is diverse considerations of family, coupling and uncoupling, and pathways to parenthood. The final theme is parenting, divisions of family labor, and child development. In describing this literature, it is important to note that many studies have included comparisons to gay and/or heterosexual individuals, with samples predominantly comprised of cisgender participants. Increasingly, there is a growing commitment to study the experiences of additional gender and sexual minorities, such as individuals who are

transgender, non-binary, queer, bisexual, and/or pansexual (Galupo, Mitchell, & Davis, 2015).

### ***Theme 1: Attention to theory, methodological rigor, context, and intersectionality***

The last ten years have reflected an increasing focus on, and recommended usage of, integrated theoretical frameworks in studies about lesbian family life (Farr, Tasker, & Goldberg, 2017; van Eeden-Moorefield, Few-Demo, Benson, Bible, & Lummer, 2017; see special issue on theorizing LGBT-parent families, *Journal of Family Theory and Review*, e.g., Oswald, 2016). These frameworks have included specific paradigms like “hegemonic heteronormativity” in considering queer family theory (Allen & Mendez, 2018) and “queer intimacies” in considering relationship diversity (Hammack, Frost, & Hughes, 2019). Enhanced methodological rigor has also characterized recent research about lesbian women and their families, particularly through the use of mixed-method approaches, large and nationally representative data sets, multiple informants, and longitudinal designs (Fish & Russell, 2018).

In terms of content, scholars have increasingly emphasized intersectionality and the roles of distinct, yet overlapping, identities influencing lesbian family life—such as identities related to race, class, religion, and geography (within the U.S. and internationally; Barrow & Kuvalanka, 2011; Mendez, Holman, Oswald, & Izenstark, 2016; Moore, 2011, 2012; Oswald & Holman, 2013; see special issue on intersectionality among queer families, *Family Relations*, e.g., van Eeden-Moorefield, 2018). Scholars such as Diamond (2017) have posed critical questions for future research on lesbian relationships, specifically querying the roles of expanding and diverse identity labels, previous abuse and other relationship challenges, and legal marriage. Related to this point, many scholars have attended to how particular environmental contexts affect lesbian family life, such as how legal relationship recognition and societal stigma are associated with outcomes for lesbian parents, their children, and their families of origin (Goldberg & Smith, 2011; Patterson, 2013; Riggle, Drabble, Veldhuis, Wootton, & Hughes, 2018).

### ***Theme 2: Diverse considerations of family, coupling and uncoupling, and pathways to parenthood***

Over the preceding decade, scholarship on lesbian family life has continued to explore the question of “who counts” as “family.” Researchers have investigated relationships with families of origin not only at one time point, but across the lifespan and among more racially and ethnically diverse

lesbian samples (Acosta, 2014; Allen & Roberto, 2016; Barrett, Whyte, Comfort, Lyons, & Cramer, 2014). There has also been a focus on relationships with siblings, in addition to parents (Clark, Riggle, Rostosky, Rothblum, & Balsam, 2015; Rothblum, 2011; 2014). Research has dug deeper into “families of choice,” friendships among and between lesbian women, and “women’s communities” among sexual minority women (Galupo & Gonzalez, 2013; Rothblum, 2010; see special issue on lesbian friendships, *Journal of Lesbian Studies*; Weinstock & Rothblum, 2018). Although quantitative research has been relatively sparse regarding lesbian friendships, the concept of social support has received considerable quantitative and qualitative attention among LGBTQ populations, including lesbian women (Snapp, Watson, Russell, Diaz, & Ryan, 2015) and lesbian parents (Goldberg & Smith, 2011; Sumontha, Farr, & Patterson, 2016; Oswald, Routon, McGuire, & Holman, 2018).

As many lesbian women become mothers, there have been numerous studies in the last ten years about their desires and intentions for parenthood, the varied pathways they take to become parents, and the self-efficacy they feel to do so (Goldberg & Sweeney, 2019; Riskind & Patterson, 2010; Riskind, Patterson, & Nosek, 2013; Riskind & Tornello, 2017; Tate, Patterson, & Levy, 2019). Among pathways to parenthood, recent studies have addressed lesbian parent stepfamilies (Moore, 2011; Robitaille & Saint-Jacques, 2009), polyfamilies (i.e., polyamorous relationships and parenting; Hammack et al., 2019; Pallotta-Chiarolli, Haydon, & Hunter, 2013), and families formed through ART (Gartrell, Bos, Peyser, Deck, & Rodas, 2012; Golombok et al., 2018), and different adoption pathways (Farr, 2017; Golombok, Mellish, Jennings, Casey, Tasker, & Lamb, 2014; Lavner, Waterman, & Peplau, 2014). Recent research has also more extensively examined issues related to fertility, peri- and postnatal experiences, and pregnancy loss among lesbian and sexual minority women (Bradford, Ryan, Rothblum, & Honnold, 2013; Craven & Peel, 2010; Flanders, Gibson, Goldberg, & Ross, 2016; Nordqvist, 2015; Peel, 2010; Ross & Goldberg, 2016; Yager, Brennan, Steele, Epstein, & Ross, 2010). Studies in this area have included the experiences of women of color (Blanchfield & Patterson, 2015; Karpman, Ruppel, & Torres, 2018) as well as both birth and non-birth mothers (Abelsohn, Epstein, & Ross, 2013). The transition to and motivations for adoptive parenthood have also been examined among lesbian mothers and couples (Goldberg, Garcia, & Manley, 2018; Goldberg, Kinkler, Moyer, & Weber, 2014; Goldberg & Smith 2009, 2011; Jennings et al., 2014). Among adoptive lesbian parent families, contact with children’s birth relatives (i.e., adoption openness) has been a noteworthy area of study related to expanded and diverse notions of “family” (Brodzinsky & Goldberg, 2016; Farr & Goldberg, 2015; Farr, Ravvina, & Grotevant, 2018).

Among lesbian women with partners or spouses, studies have investigated couple relationship satisfaction, including across cultural contexts and among lesbian women with and without children (Farr, 2017; Farr, Forssell, & Patterson, 2010; Fingerhut & Peplau, 2013; Gotta et al., 2011; Lavner, 2017; Perales & Baxter, 2018). In examining “secrets to success” among lesbian couples in long-lasting relationships (Riggle, Rothblum, Rostosky, Clark, & Balsam, 2016), researchers have specifically explored roles of gender identity (butch, femme, androgynous; Rothblum, Balsam, & Wickham, 2018) as well as sexual satisfaction and frequency (Farr et al., 2010; Paine, Umberson, & Reczek, 2018). Finally, lesbian relationship research has more recently included examination of experiences of dissolution and divorce (Gartrell, Bos, Peyser, Deck, & Rodas, 2011; Goldberg & Romero, 2019; see special issue, *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, e.g., Holley, 2017).

### ***Theme 3: Parenting, divisions of family labor, and child development***

As many lesbian women have children, negotiating parenting roles and divvying family labor are common realities. How do lesbian mothers navigate parenting responsibilities when partners are involved (i.e., coparenting)? Among childrearing demands is the ongoing task of parent-child communication. How do lesbian mothers talk to their children about LGBTQ identities, their “unique” family structure, and other LGBTQ-related topics? What can research tell us about the experiences of children with lesbian mothers at different developmental time points?

Several studies have investigated dynamics of how lesbian mothers negotiate divisions of housework, decision making, and childcare with their partners from both qualitative (Goldberg, 2013) and quantitative perspectives (Brewster, 2017; Farr & Patterson, 2013; Sumontha, Farr, & Patterson, 2017). These studies have generally underscored the likelihood of lesbian couples to share labor relatively equally with one another, dividing tasks in an egalitarian fashion. One creative area of decision making that lesbian parents navigate together is what they will name their children (Patterson & Farr, 2017) and what names children will call them (e.g., “mommy,” “mama,” “maddy,” etc.; Frank, Manley, & Goldberg, in press). Mixed-method research has also generated greater understanding of family functioning and parent-child relationships in lesbian mother families (Bos, van Gelderen, & Gartrell, 2015; Farr, 2017), as well as how lesbian mothers communicate with and socialize their children about family identity (i.e., having lesbian mothers), legal inequalities, disclosure to others, and sexuality (Breshears, 2010; Breshears & Braithwaite, 2014; Cohen & Kuvalanka 2011; Goldberg, Sweeney, Black, & Moyer, 2016; Oakley, Farr, & Scherer, 2017; Ollen & Goldberg, 2016; Wyman Battalen, Farr, Brodzinsky, &

McRoy, 2019). These studies have underscored numerous unique strengths of lesbian mother families in demonstrating their resilience in managing stigma and adversity, as well as their abundant capacities to help their children thrive (Titlestad & Robinson, 2019).

Finally, although research about outcomes for children of lesbian parents is not a new area of study within the last decade, there have been several important research advances during this time on this topic, including the use of nationally representative and large data sets (Bos, Kuyper, & Gartrell, 2018; Calzo et al., 2017; Richards, Rothblum, Beauchaine, & Balsam, 2017), longitudinal designs (Farr, 2017; Goldberg & Garcia, 2016), meta-analyses (Fedewa, Black, & Ahn, 2015), and comprehensive reviews in prominent journals (Patterson, 2017). These studies have also taken place in varying international contexts outside of the U.S., such as in Australia (Crouch, Waters, McNair, Power, & Davis, 2014), Canada (Vyncke, Julien, Jouvin, & Jodoin, 2014), the Netherlands (Bos et al., 2018), and the U.K. (Golombok et al., 2014). Research about lesbian mother families directly from children's perspectives has proliferated, representing developmental stages from middle childhood to adolescence to adulthood, and again showcasing the resilience and unique strengths of children raised by lesbian parents (Cody, Farr, McRoy, Ayers-Lopez, & Ledesma, 2017; Farr, Crain, Oakley, Cashen, & Garber, 2016; Gartrell et al., 2012; Goldberg & Allen, 2013; Kuvalanka, Leslie, & Radina, 2014; Tasker & Granville, 2011). These studies have also highlighted the important role of context for children's development, such as community climate and the effects of stigma (Kuvalanka et al., 2014; Lick, Tornello, Riskind, Schmidt, & Patterson, 2012; van Rijn-van Gelderen, Bos, & Gartrell, 2015; Vyncke et al., 2014). Lastly, this research has included attention to "second-generation" LGBTQ youth who have lesbian and sexual minority mothers (Kuvalanka, Allen, Munroe, Goldberg, & Weiner, 2018; Kuvalanka & Goldberg, 2009).

### **Future research (what we do not yet know)**

In writing this foreword, I had the opportunity to carefully review research conducted on lesbian family lives (also see special issue on advances in lesbian scholarship, *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, e.g., Rothblum, 2012) and also identify areas critical for future study. Important subpopulations remain underrepresented, such as lesbian family experiences among those who identify as transgender, older, low socioeconomic status, and/or people of color, and/or who live in rural areas or countries outside of the U.S. (Fredriksen-Goldsen, Kim, Barkan, Balsam, & Mincer, 2010; Moore, 2011; Oswald & Holman, 2013). Research should directly incorporate intersectional frameworks to address the influences of race, gender, sexuality,



geography, age, and other factors (e.g., Lehavot, Balsam, & Ibrahim-Wells, 2009; van Eeden-Moorefield, 2018). Emerging areas of study related to lesbian family life not covered in this special issue but which warrant further research are topics of IPV and/or other abuse (Balsam, Lehavot, Beadnell, & Circo, 2010; Diamond, 2017; Hardesty, Oswald, Khaw, & Fonseca, 2011), changes in gender and sexual identity labels (i.e., sexual minority women use many terms beyond “lesbian,” like “queer,” “bisexual,” “pansexual,” and others; Galupo et al., 2015; Watson, Wheldon, & Puhl, 2019), and blended or polyamorous families, among others.

## Conclusion

Although not exhaustive of all topics comprising the experiences of “lesbian family lives,” the array of articles in this special issue represent many conceptual and methodological advances in this area of study over the last decade. Collectively, the research highlights strong theoretical frameworks, qualitative and quantitative methodology, cross-cultural contexts (i.e., the U.S., Portugal, and the Netherlands), different participant ages and developmental stages (e.g., participants as childless adults, parents, partners and ex-partners, etc.), divergent perspectives (e.g., lesbian mothers, their adolescent children), varying intimate “family” relationships (e.g., families of origin, friendships, romantic partnerships, parent-child relationships), multiple pathways to parenthood (e.g., adoption, donor insemination, previous heterosexual relationships), and diverse settings (e.g., negotiating school systems, societal and interpersonal stigma, previous experience with children, etc.). In this special issue that follows, a diversity of rich information is presented, painting a more comprehensive and contemporary picture about the realities of lesbian family life today.

## Notes on contributor

**Rachel H. Farr** is an Assistant Professor of Psychology at the University of Kentucky, following the completion of her Ph.D. at the University of Virginia and a postdoc at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Rachel has conducted a large longitudinal study about how parental sexual orientation relates to child, parent, and family outcomes among diverse adoptive families, and the results have been cited in the media as well as in amicus briefs for the U.S. Supreme Court.

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