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BRIEF REPORT

Envisioning Future Parenthood Among Bisexual, Lesbian, and Heterosexual Women

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For many individuals, becoming a parent is an important milestone. The current study examined attitudes and beliefs about parenting among a sample of 196 self-identified bisexual, lesbian, and heterosexual women. Results showed no differences by sexual orientation for women's desires and intentions to have children, their idealization of parenthood, and perceptions of their parental self-efficacy (i.e., their ability to care for a child). In contrast, differences did emerge by sexual orientation in aspects such as partner expectations as well as professional intentions (i.e., wanting a permanent position before becoming a parent). Bisexual women tended to anticipate lower partner support compared to heterosexual women. Lesbian women, however, had a greater preference to work full-time during parenthood and wanted a permanent position before becoming a parent compared to both bisexual and heterosexual women. Implications are discussed of how bisexual women's perceptions of parenthood are both similar to and distinct from lesbian and heterosexual women.

Keywords: bisexuality, lesbian women, sexual orientation, parenting desires and intentions

Parenthood is a highly valued milestone for adults in the United States, and, unsurprisingly, many individuals (independent of their sexual orientation) consider parenthood to be an integral part of adult life (e.g., Riskind & Patterson, 2010). There are between 2 and 3.7 million LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and other gender and sexual minorities) parents with children under the age of 18 in the United States (Gates, 2015). Bisexual and lesbian women make up slightly less than half (48%) of these parents (Gates, 2013). However, current research suggests that there is still a large disparity between bisexual and lesbian women who are parents (48%) compared to heterosexual women who are parents (74%; Stotzer, Herman, & Hasenbush, 2014). With changing social attitudes toward LGBTQ+ people broadly (e.g., marriage for same-sex couples; *Obergefell v. Hodges, 2015*), it is of interest to explore factors that contribute to how bisexual and lesbian women envision future parenthood to help explain this disparity.

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Parenting desires (i.e., expressed wishes or beliefs; Baiocco & Laghi, 2013) and intentions (i.e., explicit planning to become a parent; Lampic, Svanberg, Karlström, & Tydén, 2006) are two major factors in determining whether an individual becomes a parent in the future. Although previous work has shown that lesbian and gay individuals have lower desires to become parents as compared to their heterosexual counterparts (Riskind & Patterson, 2010), for bisexual women, research suggests context-dependent experiences such as partner sex (i.e., bisexual women who are partnered with women have similar desires and intentions as lesbian women; Riskind & Tornello, 2017; Ross, Siegel, Dobinson, Epstein, & Steele, 2012). In addition, research has extensively covered lesbian and gay parenting (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010; Patterson, 2017), but less research has included bisexual individuals (Goldberg, Ross, Manley, & Mohr, 2017; Power et al., 2012; Ross & Dobinson, 2013).

Domains that intersect with perceptions of parenthood such as how one idealizes parenthood, partner expectations (e.g., my partner will help out more with chores following parenthood) and professional intentions (e.g., the decision to work based on financial need or career aspirations) are also relevant during the transition to parenthood, given the high cost of childcare. Although some work has investigated differences between lesbian and heterosexual women's professional intentions (Peplau & Fingerhut, 2004), little work has examined bisexual women's partner expectations or their professional intentions after becoming a parent. Thus, this study seeks to explore how bisexual (B), lesbian (L), and

heterosexual (H) women envision future parenthood through their perceptions of parenthood idealizations, self-efficacy in becoming a parent, partner expectations, and professional and economic considerations.

The Impact of Sexual Orientation on Future Parenthood

Factors such as a history of legal discrimination (*Obergefell v. Hodges*, 2015) and a culture difficult to navigate with children (i.e., childless sexual minority people may perceive parenthood as contradictory to their identity because of the complexity of becoming a parent as a sexual minority individual; Gato, Santos, & Fontaine, 2016) likely contribute to the disparity in parenting numbers between BL and heterosexual women. Related to this is also parental self-efficacy, which can be assessed as either the belief that one can become a parent or be a successful parent (e.g., I believe I have the skills to care for my child). It is likely that if an individual believes that they cannot be a successful parent, they will likely choose not to become one. Previous work has noted that lesbian, gay, and heterosexual individuals report similar levels of perceived self-efficacy in the context of being a successful parent (Berkowitz & Marsiglio, 2007). However, to the best of our knowledge, no work regarding parental self-efficacy has included BLH women together.

In terms of understanding parenting desires and intentions among LH women, using the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth, Riskind and Patterson (2010) found that heterosexual women reported greater parenting desires than lesbian women. However, among those who reported parenting desires, the difference in parenting intentions between LH women was not statistically significant. A follow-up by Riskind and Tornello (2017) involved a more recent (2011–2013) National Survey of Family Growth sample that included bisexual individuals. This study revealed that bisexual women and men's parenting desires and intentions more closely resembled those of heterosexual individuals than they did of lesbian and gay individuals. Thus, more research investigating parenting desires, intentions, and related factors for bisexual and lesbian women is warranted.

Exploring the differences between bisexual and heterosexual women's idealization of future parenthood, in relation to lesbian women, is one way to additionally explore the disparity in parenting rates, desires, and intentions for lesbian women. Some research suggests that becoming parents in the context of a same-sex partnership may require greater planning compared to an opposite sex partnership (Berkowitz & Marsiglio, 2007; Murphy, 2013), which in turn could influence the disparity in parenting numbers. This planning, as well as future parenthood, are likely influenced then by sexual or gender identity (e.g., the ability to carry a child; Stacey, 2006; Kazyak, Park, McQuillan, & Greil, 2016; Tornello & Bos, 2017), couple relationship status and partner gender or sexual identity (e.g., a bisexual woman partnered with a woman may be "counted" as lesbian, such as in Census data tracking only sex of partner rather than sexual identity; Cianciotto, 2005), financial resources (Riskind, Patterson, & Nosek, 2013), and career goals (Badgett, 1995). In sum, it is possible that BL women may envision and idealize parenthood differently from their heterosexual peers.

Professional and Economic Considerations

Given the cost of raising children (Grönlund, 2007), exploring how professional and economic preferences impact future parenthood may also help to explain the differences in parenting numbers between BLH women (Riskind & Tornello, 2017). BL women report a lower income compared to heterosexual and gay male couples (Fisher, Gee, & Looney, 2016). In addition, among BL women, reported income is lower among bisexual than lesbian women, which could influence how these women navigate career, parenting, and financial decisions (Badgett, 1995; Cerf, 2016; Cushing-Daniels, & Yeung, 2009). Thus, delaying parenthood for one's career (Barber, 2001) may be particularly difficult for BL women given financial concerns (Peplau & Fingerhut, 2004).

Compared to heterosexual parents, factors such as being older when becoming a parent (Farr & Patterson, 2013a; Stotzer et al., 2014), greater pressure to be financially stable (Hetherington & Orzek, 1989), and the more frequent pursuit of male-dominated careers (e.g., upper-level management; Wright, 2011) all influence how lesbian women navigate career paths. Given the economic strain on bisexual women (Cerf, 2016), these factors may also impact how they envision future parenthood.

Current Study

With a continued call for research on bisexual parenthood (Ross & Dobinson, 2013), the recent studies reporting on childless bisexual individuals (Riskind & Tornello, 2017), and the distinct parenting experiences that may occur for bisexual mothers (Goldberg, Gartrell, & Gates, 2014; Ross et al., 2012), there is a need to explore additional aspects of future parenthood among sexual minority women including bisexual individuals. Here, we examine additional life transitions as related to desires and intentions of parenthood such as one's idealization of parenthood, their partner expectations during the transition to parenthood, perceived self-efficacy, and changes in professional and financial resources. In terms of professional intentions, given previous work that suggests a difference between LH women (Wright, 2011), we anticipate finding a similar relationship of lesbian women wanting to work more than heterosexual women. However, given that less work has included samples of BLH women together, we make no confirmatory hypotheses regarding the similarities or differences between BLH women in terms of other constructs of interest such as idealization of parenthood, partner expectations, perceived self-efficacy, and financial considerations.

Method

Procedure

Participants were recruited through advertisements posted on family planning and family creation websites, social media groups, and organizations. In addition, targeted paid advertisements appeared on social media (e.g., Facebook) and through search engines (Google.com) for those who were looking for family planning materials or articles related to parenthood. To be eligible to participate, individuals needed to be childless at the time of the study and want a child in the future. If an individual was interested and eligible to participate, they contacted the principal investigator

via e-mail to request a link to the survey, which was available on Qualtrics software. Participants used the link to navigate to the study's consent form. Once individuals agreed to participate, they were then directed to complete a series of questionnaires regarding demographic information and measures about their ideal future family. Those who participated in the study were entered into a raffle to win 1 of 24 $20 Target gift cards. The Institutional Review Board at Penn State approved the study protocols.

Participants

Participants were cisgender women who were currently childless, in couple relationships, and intended to become parents in the future ($N = 196$). One half of the sample identified as heterosexual ($n = 108$) with bisexual ($n = 35$) and lesbian ($n = 53$) women comprising the second half. Participants were, on average, 28 years of age, predominantly White/European American, and well-educated. On average, participants reported a middle-class household income (with a range from $0 to $530,000 annual household income). Participants reported being with their partner for about 5 years, on average (see Table 1). Heterosexual women reported having been with their current partner for significantly longer than lesbian women, $F(2, 192) = 5.06$, $p = .007$ (the length of couple relationships for bisexual women were intermediate between heterosexual and lesbian women). Education, household income, race, and age were similar across sexual orientation (see Table 1). Missing data and small cell sizes precluded specific analyses based on partner sex. Partners of the participants were not included in this sample; thus, analyses did not account for nested data.

Measures

Demographics. Participants answered a series of questions regarding their age, gender, sex assigned at birth, ethnicity and/or race, sexual orientation, and related partner demographic information. See Table 1 for all sample demographic information.

Future parenthood. Participants received two single-item measures broadly assessing desires and intentions of parenthood. Desires were assessed through the question, "How often do you spend thinking about becoming a parent?" with responses on a Likert scale from 0 (*never*) to 3 (*very often*). Parents were also asked to assess their parenting intentions through the question, "What are you willing to give up to have children?" on a Likert scale from 1 (*it doesn't matter whether or not I become a parent*) to 6 (*I will do everything to become a parent*). Higher scores indicated stronger desires and intentions for future parenthood (Van Balen & Trimbos-Kemper, 1995).

Parenting self-efficacy. Participants completed a modified version of the Parenting Sense of Competence Scale (Harwood, McLean, & Durkin, 2007), which measured individuals' self-efficacy in thinking about their role as a future parent. In this version, seven statements were used. The wording was altered in some cases to reflect the experiences of individuals who were currently childless. For example, an original item, "I honestly believe that I have all the skills necessary to be a good mother to my baby." was modified to "I think being a parent is manageable, and any problems are easily solved". Questions were answered using a Likert scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*), with higher total scores indicating greater perceived self-efficacy. This scale had good reliability, with a sample Cronbach's alpha of .84 (subgroup Cronbach's alphas were .85 for bisexual women, .82 for heterosexual women, and .87 for lesbian women).

Partner expectations. Participants completed the Partner Expectations subscale of the Parenting Expectations Measure (Harwood, 2004) to assess participants' future parenthood goals and anticipated roles of their partners. The measure consists of 11 statements, such as "My partner will help out more with household chores" and "I will feel more distant from my partner." Responses were on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 7 (*strongly disagree*), with higher total scores indicating positive partner expectations. This scale had good reliability in our sample with a Cronbach's alpha of .81 (subgroup Cronbach's alphas were .82 for bisexual women, .76 for heterosexual women, and .85 for lesbian women).

Idealization of parenthood. Participants completed the Idealization of Parenthood Scale (Eibach & Mock, 2011), an eight-item scale used to measure beliefs regarding the importance of future parenthood. This scale includes statements such as, "Non-parents are more likely to be depressed than parents" and "It is not difficult for a childless adult to live a truly fulfilling life." All items were based on a Likert scale from −2 (*strongly disagree*) to 2 (*strongly agree*), with higher average scores indicating greater idealization of parenthood. This scale had sufficient reliability with a Cronbach's alpha of .70 (subgroup Cronbach's alphas were .74 for bisexual women, .68 for heterosexual women, and .71 for lesbian women).

Table 1
Demographics of Bisexual, Lesbian, and Heterosexual Women Who Are All Partnered and Childless

Variable	Bisexual ($n = 35$), *M* (*SD*)	Lesbian ($n = 53$), *M* (*SD*)	Heterosexual ($n = 108$), *M* (*SD*)	Total ($n = 196$), *M* (*SD*)	*F* or $\chi^2(df)$	*p*
Age in years	29.28 (5.65)	29.41 (6.46)	27.51 (4.80)	28.03 (5.46)	1.84 (2, 193)	.162
Race (% White)	77.1%	79.2%	85.2%	82.1%	13.59 (10)	.192
Education (% bachelor's and higher)	60.0%	52.8%	74.1%	65.8%	14.92 (14)	.384
Income (in USD)	83,264 (90,452)	69,042 (37,730)	83,457 (53,548)	79,173 (58,395)	1.01 (2, 180)	.367
Length of relationship in years	4.13 (3.21)	4.18 (2.81)	5.48 (3.46)	4.79 (3.28)	5.06 (2, 192)	.007
Partner gender (%)						
Women	37.1%	100%		33.7%		
Men	62.9%		100%	66.3%		

Note. Not all women have the same partner status (e.g., married, civil-union).

Employment and economics. Three individual items were used to measure employment and economic expectations of parenthood. The first item was from the Perceived Life Changes Scale (Lampic et al., 2006), which focuses on individuals' beliefs that parenthood could impact their financial standing, specifically creating a "poorer economy" as a result of parenthood. Participants rated their responses using a Likert scale from 1 (*entirely disagree*) to 5 (*entirely agree*). Higher scores indicated more agreement with the idea of a poorer economy as a result of parenthood. The second item was obtained from the Conditions of Importance for Becoming a Parent Scale (Lampic et al., 2006), specifically the condition, "That I have a permanent position." Responses ranged from 1 (*unimportant*) to 5 (*very important*), with higher scores indicating greater importance of having a permanent position before parenthood. Lastly, participants were asked about their ideal work status after becoming a parent using an item designed for the purposes of this study. The item read as: "Some people feel there are conflicts between working at a job and having children, while others do not feel this way. Which of the three choices do you think you would like the best? Assume that the job is for pay outside the home and you have a child under 10 years of age." The question options were 0 (*not working at all*), 1 (*working a part-time job*), or 2 (*working a full-time job*).

Results

Preliminary analyses suggested that relationship length was significantly associated with parenting desires, $r(195) = .18$, $p = .010$, and idealization of parenthood, $r(182) = .17$, $p = .025$. When considering analyses with these two variables, analyses of covariance were conducted with relationship length as a covariate; for all other tests, analyses of variance were conducted.

Neither parenting desires, $F_{2, 191} = .01$, $p = .987$, nor parenting intentions, $F_{2, 193} = 1.67$, $p = .191$, differed by sexual orientation. Overall, BLH women reported strong desires and intentions for parenthood (see Table 2). Parenting self-efficacy, $F_{2, 169} = .61$, $p = .547$, and idealization of parenthood, $F_{2, 178} = .20$, $p = .82$, also showed no differences by sexual orientation. There was a significant difference in partner expectations by sexual orientation, $F_{2, 169} = 3.40$, $p = .036$, with post hoc tests revealing that bisexual women reported lower partner expectations compared to heterosexual women, $p = .030$, but not compared to lesbian women, $p = .177$. Although bisexual women reported lower partner expectations than heterosexual women, all women generally reported feeling confident about their partners during the transition to parenthood (see Table 2). Finally, our confirmatory hypothesis on professional intentions for lesbian women, that lesbian women would prefer to have a permanent position before parenthood and work full-time, was supported while providing additional information on bisexual women's work preferences. A chi-square analysis revealed a significant relationship between sexual orientation and ideal work status such that lesbian women (51%) were more likely to report wanting to work full-time as compared to bisexual (26%) and heterosexual women (32%), $\chi^2(4, N = 196) = 9.60$, $p = .048$. In addition, lesbian women reported wanting to have permanent employment before parenthood more so than bisexual and lesbian women, $F_{2, 172} = 6.46$, $p = .002$. The belief that becoming a parent would result in poorer individual financial outcomes, however, did not differ by sexual orientation (see Table 2).

Discussion

These findings suggest that women across sexual orientation groups share similar perceived self-efficacy, idealization of parenthood, and perceived changes in financial resources within the context of similar desires and intentions of parenthood. However, within our sample of women who do not yet have children, bisexual women reported lower partner expectations in envisioning the transition to parenthood compared to heterosexual, but not lesbian, women. In addition, lesbian women reported wanting to work full-time and have a permanent position before parenthood more so than bisexual and heterosexual women. The findings here provide initial insights for additional research, in particular for bisexual individuals, with regard to perceptions of future parenthood among sexual minority women.

Table 2
Means, Standard Deviations, and Statistical Information on Perceptions of Parenthood Among Bisexual, Lesbian, and Heterosexual Women

Variable	Bisexual ($n = 35$), *M* (*SD*)	Lesbian ($n = 53$), *M* (*SD*)	Heterosexual ($n = 108$), *M* (*SD*)	*F* or χ^2(*df*)	*p*
What are you willing to give up?[a]	4.40 (1.22)	4.64 (1.08)	4.27 (1.24)	1.67 (2, 193)	.191
How often do you think about becoming a parent?[b]	2.03 (.82)	2.00 (.92)	2.09 (.89)	.01 (2, 191)	.987
Parenting self-efficacy[c]	27.57 (5.54)	27.98 (6.32)	28.71 (5.14)	.61 (2, 179)	.547
Partner expectations[d]	55.07 (8.39)	58.89 (10.32)	59.70 (7.62)	3.4 (2, 691)	.036
Idealization of parenthood[e]	−.53 (.54)	−.60 (.56)	−.52 (.58)	.20 (2, 178)	.818
Perceived life changes—poorer economy[f]	2.59 (.93)	2.31 (1.01)	2.15 (.95)	2.74 (2, 181)	.067
Conditions before parenthood—permanent position[g]	3.41 (1.32)	4.23 (.98)	3.49 (1.35)	6.46 (2, 172)	.002
Ideal work status[h] (% full-time)	25.7%	50.9%	32.4%	9.60 (4)	.048

[a] Higher scores indicate greater willingness to give up items to become a parent (1 = *it doesn't matter whether or not I become a parent* to 6 = *I will do everything to become a parent*). [b] Higher scores indicate greater frequency of thinking about parenthood (0 = *never* to 3 = *very often*). [c] Higher total scores indicate greater perceived self-efficacy (1 = *strongly disagree* to 6 = *strongly agree*; min = 7 to max = 42). [d] Higher total scores indicate more positive partner expectations (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*; min = 11 to max = 77). [e] Higher average scores indicate greater idealization (−2 = *strongly disagree* to + 2 = *strongly agree*). [f] Higher scores indicate greater perceived poorer economy (1 = *disagree* to 5 = *entirely agree*). [g] Higher scores indicate greater importance (1 = *unimportant* to 5 = *very important*). [h] 0 = *not working at all*, 1 = *working a part-time job*, 2 = *working a full-time job*.

Extending previous research on parenting self-efficacy with lesbian and gay parents (Riskind et al., 2013), bisexual women appear to perceive themselves as similarly competent (i.e., self-efficacy) future parents. Given that bisexual and lesbian women face unique challenges such as internalized homophobia (Mezey, 2013) or the risk of being out in public (Mezey, 2008), comparable self-efficacy to heterosexual women showcases bisexual and lesbian women's confidence to become parents in the future while dealing with potential stigma or discrimination. Another possible interpretation is that BL women are aware that their sexual orientation will not negatively influence their parenting abilities. Indeed, research supports the hypothesis that children of lesbian and gay parents show no deficits compared to children of heterosexual parents (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010; Farr, 2017; Moore & Stambolis-Ruhstorfer, 2013).

This study may also be the first to report on bisexual women's partner expectations in envisioning the transition to parenthood. The invisibilizing that bisexual women feel by their partner's sex in the context of their couple relationship (i.e., assumed to be lesbian if with a same-sex partner, or assumed to be heterosexual if with an other-sex partner; Ross et al., 2012; Tasker & Delvoye, 2015; Yager, Brennan, Steele, Epstein, & Ross, 2010). Thus, the pressure to conform and have a sense of belonging (e.g., choosing a monosexual identity; Delvoye & Tasker, 2016) may begin to explain why bisexual women have lower expectations than heterosexual women.

Finally, this may also be one of the first studies to report on how women navigate their professional lives among a sample that simultaneous includes BLH women. This work extends findings on how bisexual women navigate their professional lives while replicating previous work showing that lesbian women report wanting to work full-time as well as having a permanent position before parenthood (Farr & Patterson, 2013b; Peplau & Fingerhut, 2004). It is interesting to find no significant differences in professional intentions between bisexual and lesbian women. Given that bisexual and lesbian women report lower incomes on average compared to other groups (i.e., individuals in heterosexual and gay male couples; Badgett, 1995; Cerf, 2016; Cushing-Daniels & Yeung, 2009), one may intuit that bisexual and lesbian women would report wanting to work more to account for lower incomes. Perhaps it is the case that bisexual and lesbian women anticipate and prepare for the cost of parenthood to account for their lower incomes. Given research suggesting that sexual minority individuals may proactively consider various aspects of parenthood, such as financial considerations, before becoming parents (Brown, Smalling, Groza, & Ryan, 2009; Goldberg et al., 2014; Sabin, Riskind, & Nosek, 2015), it may be the case that preparing for the cost of childcare is simply another way to be proactive.

The way in which the sample was recruited represents both a limitation and a strength. Given that study advertisements asked for individuals who were interested in becoming a parent in the future, it was unsurprising to find no significant differences in parenting desires or intentions among the BLH women recruited. However, no differences by sexual orientation in parenting desires or intentions allowed for the exploration of how these women envision other aspects of future parenthood (e.g., idealization, self-efficacy, partner expectations) without a potential confounding influence of variations in parenting desires and intentions. Future work should consider expanding on this study with larger sample sizes to assess how associations between sexual orientation and future parenthood may be influenced by partner sex. Exploring the additional lived experiences of bisexual women that may influence their future parenthood beyond relationship status (and controlling for partner sex) is another consideration for future research (Ross & Dobinson, 2013). Finally, this study included several single-item measures to assess several constructs (e.g., desires, intentions, work preferences). Future research should consider using multi-item instruments and a more diverse sample.

Conclusion

Our study extends previous work on the desires and intentions of parenthood among BLH women (Riskind & Tornello, 2017) by including additional perspectives on how BLH women envision future parenthood. Overall, our work suggests that BLH women's idealization of parenthood, parental self-efficacy, and perceived economic changes do not differ across sexual orientation. However, partner expectations and professional intentions suggest some differences among lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual women.

These findings have implications for understanding how BL women perceive future parenthood. Moreover, the results provide direction for how research can further explore the disparity in numbers of sexual minority and heterosexual parents. This work is relevant to those who work with intended parents in fertility clinics, adoption agencies, and other organizations that provide information and resources about pathways to parenthood. Given research demonstrating bisexual women's experienced invisibility in health care settings (Ross et al., 2012), these findings further support the need to inform those who work with intended parents about the inclusion of sexual minority populations. Educating those who work with intended parents on bisexual women's distinct perceptions of parenthood could improve the care for these women in planning for and entering parenthood.

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