

# Social Support and Coparenting Among Lesbian, Gay, and Heterosexual Adoptive Parents

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In this study, we examined associations between qualities of families' social contexts and experiences of coparenting. In a sample of 92 adoptive families, we assessed perceived social support among 23 lesbian, 28 gay, and 41 heterosexual adoptive parent families and its association with parents' perceptions of their coparenting alliances. Results showed that parents in same- and other-sex couples reported receiving similar amounts of social support from family, friends, and significant others. Perceived social support was positively associated with stronger coparenting alliance among all family types. Perceived support from family members explained more variance in parenting alliance than did support from friends or significant others. These findings add to knowledge about fundamental family processes and enhance understanding of parenthood among lesbian and gay adoptive couples.

*Keywords:* adoption, coparenting, sexual minority parents, sexual orientation, social support

Do parental sexual orientation and social support affect the experiences of coparenting, and if so, how? Connections to supportive social networks are strongly associated with psychological adjustment and relationship functioning for all couple types (Goldberg & Smith, 2014; Kurdek, 1988). Some investigators have reported differences between members of same-sex and other-sex couples in their perceived support from family members (Kurdek, 1988, 2004), but others have not found such differences (Goldberg & Smith, 2014; Graham & Barnow, 2013). Few studies have examined associations between social support and coparenting behavior among adoptive families, and little is known about whether these associations are similar across lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples with children. Because coparenting has been found to be associated with children's mental health and well-being (Farr & Patterson, 2013), it is important that we better

understand factors that promote healthy coparenting behaviors among diverse families. Previous studies have found that individual factors such as child temperament have been predictive of supportive coparenting behaviors (Dush, Kotila, & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2011), but less is known about ecological factors that may also play a role. Aside from the individual characteristics of its members, the context and environment in which families live may also be relevant to their healthy development. Thus, the present study was designed to examine social support and coparenting among lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples who had adopted children together.

## Social Support Among Lesbian, Gay, and Heterosexual Couples

Social support has been defined as the availability of people within our social networks who provide us with encouragement, comfort, love, and reinforcement of our value and worth within that social system (Cobb, 1976; Sarason, Levine, Basham, & Sarason, 1983). Among couples, connections with supportive friends and family members have been found to be strongly associated with individual mental health and relationship quality. Studies of social support among married heterosexual couples have suggested that better spousal support is associated with lower rates of depression (Coyne & Downey, 1991), a stronger marital relationship, and decreased perceived stress (Dehle, Larsen, & Landers, 2001). These results are consistent with those of other studies that examined support from friends, family, and spouses, which have found strong associations between support and mental health (Huang, Costeines, Kaufman, & Ayala, 2013).

Compared with its role for heterosexual couples, social support may play a more integral role among sexual minority parents because of more frequent encounters with prejudice or discrimi-

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nation (Smith, 2010). The minority stress model suggests that experiences of prejudice, discrimination, and stigma may have negative effects on minority individuals' mental health and well-being (Meyer & Frost, 2013). Because of their sexual orientation, lesbian and gay parents may experience additional forms of stress related to their experiences with homophobia or other forms of discrimination as compared with heterosexual parents (Goldberg & Smith, 2011). These stressors might be in addition to other more common life- and family-related stressors. As such, the need for strong support may be greater for sexual minority parent families than heterosexual parent families.

However, there is disagreement in the literature as to the specific pathways through which social support promotes positive outcomes. Some studies suggest that social support may moderate the association between life stressors and negative outcomes (DeGarmo, Patras, & Eap, 2008) whereas other studies suggest that social support may mediate this association (Respler-Herman, Mowder, Yasik, & Shamah, 2012). Such conflicts in the literature may result from differences in operational definitions of social support. Although some research has focused specifically on support related to child rearing (DeGarmo et al., 2008), other studies have examined general emotional or instrumental types of support (Byrnes & Miller, 2012). Given that studies vary in their operationalization of social support, it is important to consider which aspect of social support is of greatest interest in a particular case. Among same-sex couples, differentiating the source of support (family, friends, or significant other) may further add to our understanding of pathways through which social support promotes beneficial outcomes.

Research comparing sources of social support among lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples has yielded mixed results. In one of the first studies on social support among cohabiting lesbian and gay couples, participants were asked to list people on whom they could rely to support them and their satisfaction with support that they received (Kurdek, 1988). Couples in this sample reported receiving social support more frequently from friends than from family members. This is consistent with the findings of other investigators who found that same-sex couples report receiving less support from their families than do heterosexual couples (Elizur & Mintzer, 2003). However, more recent research with adoptive parents has found no differences between same-sex and other-sex couples in their perceived support from family, friends, and significant others (Goldberg & Smith, 2014). These discrepancies in the literature suggest that more detailed investigation of social support in this particular population of lesbian, gay, and heterosexual adoptive parents is necessary.

Differences in support may be due to strategies used by lesbian and gay individuals to cope with parental rejection, such as turning to friends for support (Weston, 1991). To sustain a sense of family within a social context that stigmatizes same-sex relationships, lesbian and gay individuals may form families of choice, deemphasizing biological kinship and forming stronger social bonds with close, supportive friends (Green & Mitchell, 2008; Weston, 1991). Research suggests that the strategy of creating a family network through intimate ties with friends is common among lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) individuals, particularly those whose families of origin may disapprove of their sexual orientation or gender identity (Oswald, 2002). In this

way, sexual minority individuals may promote their own resilience and thrive under adverse social conditions.

Although lesbian and gay individuals often find means to cope with lack of support from their families of origin, this does not necessarily diminish the significance of family support. In fact, differences in sources of support may affect same-sex couples' intimate relationships and psychological well-being. In Goldberg and Smith's (2014) longitudinal study of parenting stress during early adoptive parenthood, greater support from friends was initially associated with lower parenting stress. However, the strength of this association declined over time. After 2 years, family support was more strongly associated with parenting stress than was support from friends. This seems to suggest that although social support and parenting stress are associated with one another, the exact mechanisms of influence are not yet well understood. In particular, support from families of origin may become more important over time. However, for at least some same-sex couples, there may be a history of alienation from their family of origin (Neville & Henrickson, 2009). This history may reduce individuals' desire to rely on their families for support, even if relationships improve.

In this regard, the association between social support and well-being may vary across couple type. Graham and Barnow (2013) examined the association of social support and well-being among lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples. They found a direct effect of family and friend support on individual well-being. However, there was an interaction effect between family support and sexual orientation. Strong support from family members was associated with higher relationship quality among heterosexual couples but not among lesbian and gay couples. This suggests that the association between social support and parenting may also vary as a function of sexual orientation. However, few studies have examined the association between social support and coparenting behavior, much less how this association may vary across couple types.

### Coparenting Among Lesbian, Gay, and Heterosexual Couples

Coparenting is a shared activity undertaken by adults responsible for the care and upbringing of children (McHale & Irace, 2011; Patterson & Farr, 2011). Effective coparenting requires communication, mutual understanding, and respect between adults, including the ability to support one another's efforts and the capacity to resolve conflicts that arise about the child's best interests (Cohen & Weissman, 1984; Feinberg, 2003; McHale & Irace, 2011). Van Egeren (2003) suggested that coparenting modeled in families of origin may be a significant factor in couples' development of successful coparenting. Past studies on coparenting differentiate it from the broader construct of the couple relationship as a whole. Measures of coparenting are more strongly associated with child behavioral outcomes than are more general measures of the spousal relationship (Abidin & Brunner, 1995; Bearss & Eyberg, 1998; Hock & Mooradian, 2012). However, it is not yet known whether factors that promote positive coparenting among adoptive families and/or same-sex parent families are similar to those in other families.

Parenting alliance is an aspect of coparenting behavior involving the degree of commitment and cooperation between parents in

child-rearing situations (Abidin & Brunner, 1995). The quality of parenting alliance has been found to be associated with child behavioral outcomes (Bearss & Eyberg, 1998) and with parenting stress (Lionetti, Pastore, & Barone, 2015), but no studies have examined its association with different types of social support. Studies have found that stronger parenting alliance is associated with less parenting stress among heterosexual parents in adoptive parent families (Lionetti et al., 2015) and fewer problem behaviors among children in nonadoptive heterosexual parent families (Bearss & Eyberg, 1998). In regards to sexual minority couples, differences in observed coparenting behaviors have been found among lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples with young adopted children (Farr & Patterson, 2013). In this study, observational data were gathered on parents' involvement in an unstructured family play session. Parents' interactions with one another were coded for the degree of undermining and supportive behaviors displayed during this task. Results showed that lesbian couples displayed more supportive coparenting than did gay or heterosexual couples. However, more research is necessary to assess parents' perceptions of their coparenting alliance among these different couple types.

A better understanding of coparenting processes among diverse families may be of particular importance for families formed through adoption or headed by same-sex couples. Compared with lesbian or heterosexual parents, gay men often face more questions about their capabilities as parents (Vinjamuri, 2015) despite research showing that adopted children of gay men do as well or better than children raised by heterosexual parents (Golombok et al., 2014). In addition, limited research exists on coparenting among adoptive parents (Hock & Mooradian, 2012). Despite a growing body of literature on parenting processes among adoptive parents, there is a dearth of studies that have investigated the contribution of supportive social networks (Grotevant & McDermott, 2014). Examining parenting alliance and its association with social support among adoptive and same-sex parents will extend our knowledge of such understudied family systems and of the factors that may promote health and well-being among their individual members.

### Summary and Hypotheses

In summary, the present study examined social support and coparenting, as well as their associations, among lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples with adopted children. Data were gathered on participants' perceived social support from family, friends, and significant others, as well as their perceived parenting alliance with their children's coparent. Our aims were (a) to examine levels of perceived social support from family, friends, and significant others among different couple types and (b) to investigate whether associations between social support and coparenting varied as a function of couple type. On the basis of previous findings, we expected same-sex couples to report less social support from family members and more support from friends than other-sex couples. We expected no differences by couple type in regards to perceived support from significant others. Finally, we expected social support to be positively associated with parenting alliance for all couple types.

We analyzed the data in two different stages. First, we used analyses of variance (ANOVAs) to compare social support and parenting alliance among the three groups of parents. Second, to

test associations between social support and parenting alliance, and in recognition of the nested aspects of our data (i.e., that parents were nested within families), we used hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) techniques.

## Method

### Overview

Data for this study were collected as a part of a longitudinal study of adoptive parent families, which has followed parents and their domestically adopted children in lesbian, gay, and heterosexual parent families (see Farr, *in press*; Farr, Forssell, & Patterson, 2010). Data were collected at two different time points: once when adopted children averaged 3 years old (Wave 1) and again when children averaged 8 years old (Wave 2). Because no comparable measures of social support and coparenting were administered during Wave 1, only data from the second wave of data collection are described here.

### Participants

In Wave 1, 106 families were recruited through five cooperating adoption agencies in the United States chosen on the basis of several criteria. Agencies had to be located in states where openly lesbian and gay couples could legally adopt, and agencies had to have previously placed infants with openly lesbian and gay couples in domestic adoptions. All agencies were private, domestic adoption agencies that worked with birth and adoptive families in finding placements for children. All offered options for openness arrangements.

Families were considered eligible in Wave 1 if both parents were legally recognized as adoptive parents to their adopted children (who were between 1 and 5 years old) and were currently living with them. Families were initially contacted by letter or email from the agency director, asking whether they would be interested in taking part in a study on "child development, parenting, and family relationships in adoptive families." Those who expressed interest were later contacted by a researcher through follow-up phone calls and/or emails requesting participation. For additional demographic information at Wave 1, please see Farr et al. (2010) or Farr and Patterson (2013). After completing Wave 1, parents were debriefed and all signed forms giving permission to recontact them for future opportunities to participate in the research. Approximately 5 years after the initial survey, families were recontacted for participation in Wave 2 data collection. Identical recruitment procedures were used for all families, regardless of parental sexual orientation, in Wave 1 and Wave 2.

The final sample included in our data analysis from Wave 2 consisted of 175 parents representing 92 families (23 lesbian, 28 gay, and 41 heterosexual) with 92 children. In most cases data were collected from both parents in a dyad. However, for nine families, data were missing from one partner. Using full information maximum likelihood (FIML) to correct for missing data, we were able to include data for these participants in the final analyses. Families who did not participate generally cited lack of time, family health challenges, or other family disruptions. In addition, some families could not be reached because their contact information was no longer accurate. Five parents were also excluded from

the final sample because they failed to finish the surveys. Overall, 96 of the original 106 families (91%) participated in Wave 2 data collection in some capacity; however, only 92 families are represented in this particular set of measures. Same-sex couples were more likely to have participated in Wave 2 than other-sex couples,  $\chi^2(106) = 16.71, p < .001$ . Demographic characteristics of the participating families are shown in Table 1. No significant demographic differences between Wave 1 and Wave 2 were observed. Because data were analyzed from Wave 2 only, demographic data are presented for participants at this time point.

Parents' ages ranged from 35 to 64 years ( $M = 47.43$  years,  $SD = 5.57$ ). Eighty-one percent of parents were White/Caucasian; 15% were Black/African American; and the remaining 4% were Latino/Hispanic, Asian American, or multiracial. In addition, 17% were identified as being involved in an interracial couple. Couples were considered interracial if one partner identified as White/Caucasian and one partner identified as a member of a racial/ethnic minority. (No interracial couples in which both members identified as members of different racial/ethnic minority groups were present in this sample.) Ninety percent of parents had received a college degree or higher. Seventy-one percent of parents worked full time and 10% were not employed outside of the home (others worked part-time, were retired, or attending school). On average, families had household incomes above national averages (see Table 1).

All parents were the legal adoptive parents of their children. Children (48 female, 44 male) had been placed as infants, generally at birth or within the first few weeks of life. Children's ages ranged from 5 to 11 years ( $M = 7.89$  years,  $SD = 1.53$ ). Fifty-three percent of children in the sample were transracially adopted. Children were considered transracially adopted when one or both parents in the couple identified as White/Caucasian and the child was identified as a member of a racial/ethnic minority. Children were identified by their parents as 39% White/Caucasian, 30% Black/African American, 26% multiracial/ethnic, and 4% other ethnicities (see Table 1).

Several demographic differences emerged as a function of family type (lesbian, gay, or heterosexual). Using Tukey post hoc tests,

we found that lesbian mothers in Wave 2 ( $M = 48.79, SD = 5.30$ ) were typically older than gay fathers ( $M = 45.73, SD = 5.16$ ), but not significantly different in age from heterosexual parents ( $M = 47.80, SD = 5.75$ ),  $F(2, 172) = 4.02, MSE = 120.36, p = .020$ . In addition, lesbian couples were more likely than the two other couple types to have separated between Wave 1 and Wave 2,  $\chi^2(2) = 16.26, p < .001$ . Seven lesbian couples (30%), two gay couples (7%), and three heterosexual couples (7%) included in our final sample had separated between Wave 1 and Wave 2. For more information about dissolution among this sample, see Farr (in press). Significant differences were also found regarding household income, transracial adoption, and marital status (see Table 1). Gay fathers had the largest total incomes, were more likely to have transracially adopted children, and were less likely to have adopted girls compared with lesbian or heterosexual parents. Heterosexual parents were more likely to be married (93%) than were lesbian mothers (32%) and gay fathers (57%),  $\chi^2(4) = 31.21, p < .001$ . No significant differences were found on parent race, education, work status, or interracial couple status as a function of family type. Analyses revealed no significant associations of age, race, education, or income with parenting alliance or social support.

## Materials

**Social support.** Social support was measured at Wave 2 using the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS; Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 1988), which assesses total perceived social support, as well as subscales for various sources of support (family, friends, and significant other). The MSPSS consists of 12 total items, broken down into three subscales, each consisting of 4 items. The family subscale measures perceived support from family members. This scale includes items such as "My family really tries to help me" or "There is a special person in my life who cares about my feelings." Similar questions were asked for all three subscales, with only the target of the item (i.e., family, friends, significant other) changed. All items were rated on a five-point Likert Scale range from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5

Table 1  
Demographic Information About Families Headed by Lesbian, Gay, and Heterosexual Parents

Demographic	Lesbian mothers ( <i>n</i> = 43)	Gay fathers ( <i>n</i> = 52)	Heterosexual parents ( <i>n</i> = 80)	ANOVA or $\chi^2$ test
Parents ( <i>n</i> = 175)				$F(2, 172)$
Mean age (in years)	49 (5)	46 (5)	48 (6)	$F = 4.02^*$
Race (% White)	79%	87%	79%	$\chi^2 = 9.25$
Education (% college degree or higher)	98%	88%	86%	$\chi^2 = 11.93$
Work status (% full-time)	70%	75%	69%	$\chi^2 = 5.63$
Work status (% stay-at-home parent)	9%	10%	10%	$\chi^2 = 5.63$
Separation between W1 & W2	30%	6%	8%	$\chi^2 = 16.26^{***}$
Mean individual income (\$K)	81 (59)	125 (116)	91 (85)	$F = 3.15^*$
Mean household income (\$K)	164 (89)	245 (150)	169 (83)	$F = 7.80^{***}$
Interracial relationship	15%	27%	13%	$\chi^2 = 4.22$
Transracial adoption	47%	69%	44%	$\chi^2 = 8.37^*$
Child ( <i>n</i> = 92)				
Mean age (in years)	8 (2)	8 (1)	8 (2)	$F = 1.39$
Sex (% girls)	72%	39%	51%	$\chi^2 = 10.78^{**}$
Race (% White)	42%	33%	43%	$\chi^2 = 4.61$

Note. Standard deviations are given in parentheses. W1 = Wave 1, W2 = Wave 2, \$K = thousand dollars.

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

(*strongly disagree*). In the survey, some items were reverse coded such that 1 equated with “strongly disagree” and 5 equated with “strongly agree.” However, for the analysis, items were worded such that none were reverse coded to reduce confusion in the interpretation of the results. A total score was calculated from the sum of all of the subscale scores. For each subscale, scores ranged from 4 to 20 and the total scores ranged from 12 to 60. Higher scores indicate greater perceived social support. For the sample, Cronbach’s  $\alpha$ , a measure of internal reliability, for the total score was .95. By family type,  $\alpha$  coefficients for MSPSS total scores were .95 for lesbian mothers, .96 for gay fathers, and .92 for heterosexual parents. These  $\alpha$ s are similar to those reported by Zimet et al. (1988) in their paper.  $\alpha$ s in their study ranged from .81 to .94.

**Parenting alliance.** Coparenting was assessed at Wave 2 using the Parenting Alliance Inventory (PAI; Abidin & Brunner, 1995), which was designed to measure aspects of couple relationships pertaining to parenthood and child rearing. Cohen and Weissman (1984) operationally defined a sound parenting alliance as a state in which each parent is invested in the child, values the other parent’s involvement in child care, and desire to communicate with one another. Thus, the 20 items on this measure assess the degree of commitment and cooperation between couples in child rearing. Several minor adjustments were made for use with adoptive couples, such as changing wordings from “during pregnancy” to “before adoption.” For each item, members of parenting couples rate their degree of agreement on a five-point Likert Scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Example items include, “My child’s other parent and I are a good team” and “Talking to my child’s other parent about our child is something I look forward to.” A total score is calculated from all 20 items. Scores on the parenting alliance scale ranged from 20 to 100. Higher scores indicate better parenting alliance. Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  for the sample was .95.  $\alpha$ s were .91 for lesbian mothers, .95 for gay fathers, and .96 for heterosexual parents. These  $\alpha$ s were similar to those reported by Abidin and Brunner (1995) in their original paper ( $\alpha = .97$ ). Correlations between parenting alliance and social support are presented in Table 2.

## Procedure

In Wave 2, the original 106 families were recontacted and invited to participate in Wave 2. After they agreed to participate,

a researcher scheduled a home visit. During this home visit, the parents completed various assessments, including online questionnaires and others not relevant to the current study. The social support and parenting alliance questionnaires were completed online at Wave 2. Upon completion of data collection, a researcher debriefed the families about the general and specific aims of the study. The researcher answered any questions the participants had, and the families were thanked for their participation. No financial compensation was offered to the families for their participation in this study. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Boards of the University of Virginia, the University of Massachusetts–Amherst, and the University of Kentucky. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and the researcher obtained written consent from all participating parents.

## Data Analytic Plan

Hierarchical linear modeling (HLM; Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002) was used to account for the nested structure of the data. The two parents in each family were not independent of one another in their individual reports of social support and parenting alliance. In statistical terms, parents were nested within families. Thus, HLM was used to control for sources of shared variance and data dependency within families. One challenge that arises in using HLM among a sample of same-sex and other-sex couples is that the models must account for indistinguishable (i.e., lesbian and gay couples) and distinguishable (i.e., heterosexual couples) dyads (e.g., Goldberg, Smith, & Kashy, 2010). To examine hypotheses regarding associations of family type and couple-level variables (i.e., social support and parenting alliance), we followed the methods of previous researchers working with indistinguishable and distinguishable dyads, particularly lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples (Goldberg et al., 2010; Kurdek, 1998).

In analyses comparing couple types, the conditional models included individual partners (Level 1) nested in couples (Level 2). The intercept at Level 1 represented the outcome variable explained at Level 2. The within-couples model at Level 1 used information from both partners to define one parameter (the intercept) for each couple. As Kurdek (1998) described, this intercept is regarded as a random variable because the couple-level intercepts were derived from a larger population of couple-level intercepts. Level 2 represented the between-couples model comparing the effects of family. Thus, the Level 2 intercept corresponded to

Table 2  
Correlations Among Measures of Social Support and Coparenting

Variable	1	2	a	b	c	3	4	5
1. Parenting Alliance	—							
2. Social Support	-.38***	—						
a. Family	-.39***	.91***	—					
b. Friend	-.25***	.83***	.60***	—				
c. Significant Other	-.34***	.89***	.79***	.57***	—			
3. Child Age	-.03	.05	.03	-.01	.11	—		
4. Parent Age	-.26***	.13	.13	.09	.11	.36***	—	
5. Household Income	.11	.05	.06	.02	.06	-.05	-.10	—

Note. Pearson product moment correlations calculated for all variables. Social support was measured using the MSPSS. All scores were an average score of the two parents within each couple.

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

the mean ratings for gay fathers. This conditional model can be described as Level 1:  $Y_{ij} = \beta_{0j} + e_{ij}$  and Level 2:  $\beta_{0i} = \gamma_{00} + \gamma_{01}(\text{Lesbian}) + \gamma_{02}(\text{Heterosexual}) + u_{0j}$ . In the Level 1 equation, the outcome variable was  $Y_{ij}$ . The random intercepts were represented by the  $\beta_{0j}$  coefficient. The error term was  $e_{ij}$ . Level 1 reflected the average calculated for each outcome variable. At Level 2, the  $\gamma_{01}(\text{Lesbian})$  coefficient represented the “lesbian versus gay effect” whereas  $\gamma_{02}(\text{Heterosexual})$  represented the “heterosexual versus gay effect.” The  $u_{0j}$  coefficient controlled for the dependency of partners’ data within couples. Level 2 reflected a comparison of averages for each of the outcome variables to examine differences by family type.

## Results

Results are presented in three main sections: (a) parent reports of social support, (b) parent reports of parenting alliance, and (c) associations among parenting alliance and social support. All analyses were conducted including and excluding separated couples. No significant differences were found in the association between social support and parenting alliance as a function of separation. Because the process of coparenting is just as important for separated couples, we present analyses that include all families.

### Social Support

Lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples reported similar levels of social support from family, friends, and significant others (see Table 3). On average, parents reported relatively high social support from family ( $M = 17.45$ ,  $SD = 2.87$ ), friends ( $M = 17.58$ ,  $SD = 2.75$ ), and significant others ( $M = 18.26$ ,  $SD = 2.76$ ). A one-way ANOVA comparing social support among lesbian, gay, and heterosexual parents found no significant effects of family type on total social support or on the subscales of social support (family, friends, and significant other), all  $F(2, 172)$  values  $< 1.59$  (see Table 3). Same-sex couples reported as much support from their families of origin and all other sources as did other-sex couples.

In addition, we examined differences in social support among separated and nonseparated couples. We found a significant effect of relationship status on social support from family,  $t(172) = 4.59$ ,  $p < .001$ , and significant others  $t(172) = 4.10$ ,  $p < .001$ . No significant differences were found in support from friends as a function of separation. Separated couples reported significantly

less support from their families ( $M = 14.56$ ,  $SD = 2.85$ ) and significant others ( $M = 15.75$ ,  $SD = 3.55$ ) than did couples who had not dissolved their relationships ( $M = 17.93$ ,  $SD = 1.87$ ;  $M = 18.69$ ,  $SD = 1.69$ ). HLM results were consistent with these findings.

### Parenting Alliance

Lesbian, gay, and heterosexual parents also reported similar perceptions of their parenting alliances (see Table 3). Lesbian mothers ( $M = 82.69$ ,  $SD = 10.02$ ), gay fathers ( $M = 85.65$ ,  $SD = 11.48$ ), and heterosexual parents ( $M = 85.29$ ,  $SD = 13.59$ ) all reported similar levels of parenting alliance. However, separated couples reported significantly weaker parenting alliances ( $M = 76.05$ ,  $SD = 12.63$ ) than did nonseparated couples ( $M = 85.97$ ,  $SD = 11.66$ ),  $t(172) = 3.62$ ,  $p < .001$ . On average, all parents reported relatively strong parenting alliances ( $M = 84.77$ ,  $SD = 12.18$ ). A one-way ANOVA compared parenting alliance among lesbian, gay, and heterosexual parents and found no significant effect of family type on parenting alliance,  $F(2, 172) = 0.85$ ,  $p = .442$  (see Table 3). These findings were consistent with the HLM results in regards to parenting alliance.

### Associations Among Parenting Alliance and Social Support

We conducted HLM analyses to test the associations between parenting alliance and different sources of social support. Four separate models were constructed to predict parenting alliance from social support, including total support, and support from family, friends, and significant others (see Table 4). In addition, we examined couple type as a predictor of parenting alliance. Effect sizes are reported as standardized  $\beta$  estimates because conventional indices of effect size are not available for multilevel models such as HLM (see Peugh, 2010). Note that standardized  $\beta$  estimates are usually smaller, more conservative estimates of  $r$ , which estimate the shared variance between two variables (Ferguson, 2009). To calculate standardized  $\beta$ , scores for the PAI and the MSPSS were standardized (converted to  $z$  scores) before conducting the HLMs. Results revealed that family support,  $t(89) = 2.55$ ,  $\beta_1 = 0.43$ ,  $p = .012$ , and total support,  $t(89) = 2.39$ ,  $\beta_1 = 0.38$ ,  $p = .019$ , were both significantly associated with parents’ reports of parenting alliance. Higher levels of support were associated

Table 3  
Means, Standard Deviations, and Analysis of Variance for Measures of Social Support and Coparenting Among Lesbian, Gay, and Heterosexual Parents

Measures	Parents in lesbian couples ( $n = 43$ )	Parents in gay couples ( $n = 52$ )	Parents in heterosexual couples ( $n = 80$ )	ANOVA $F(2, 172)$
Parenting alliance	82.69 (10.02)	85.65 (11.48)	85.29 (13.59)	$< 1$ ns
Social support	52.42 (8.74)	54.17 (7.65)	53.24 (6.11)	$< 1$ ns
Family	16.79 (3.50)	17.79 (2.73)	17.59 (2.56)	1.59
Friends	17.60 (2.68)	17.83 (3.00)	17.40 (2.62)	$< 1$ ns
Significant other	18.02 (3.72)	18.56 (2.51)	18.25 (2.30)	$< 1$ ns

Note. Standard deviations are given in parentheses. Social support was measured using the MSPSS. All scores were an average score of the two parents within each couple.

Table 4  
HLM Results Predicting Parenting Alliance by Couple Type and Social Support

Variable	Coeff	SE	t	df	p
Intercept	-.02	.14	-0.13	89	.896
Lesbian	-.19	.20	-0.93	89	.356
Heterosexual	.09	.17	0.61	89	.610
Social support – Total	.38	.16	2.39	89	.019
Intercept	-.01	.13	-0.09	89	.933
Lesbian	-.14	.19	-0.69	89	.490
Heterosexual	.02	.17	0.14	89	.887
Social support – Family	.43	.17	2.55	89	.012
Intercept	.05	.16	0.36	89	.731
Lesbian	-.23	.23	-1.00	89	.321
Heterosexual	-.01	.20	-0.05	89	.959
Social support – Friend	.22	.14	1.62	89	.108
Intercept	.01	.14	0.08	89	.940
Lesbian	-.22	.21	-1.04	89	.300
Heterosexual	.04	.18	0.26	89	.795
Social support – Significant Other	.34	.18	1.89	89	.062

Note. Coeff = standardized coefficients.

with better parenting alliance. However, we did not find evidence for a direct effect of support from friends,  $t(89) = 1.62$ ,  $\beta_1 = 0.22$ ,  $p = .108$ , or from significant others,  $t(89) = 1.89$ ,  $\beta_1 = 0.34$ ,  $p = .062$ , on parenting alliance, although support from significant others did approach significance. None of the effects in the model involving couple type were significant, showing that these results did not vary as a function of parental sexual orientation.

## Discussion

This is the first study to examine coparenting processes and sources of social support among a sample of lesbian, gay, and heterosexual adoptive parents. We found that, regardless of sexual orientation, parents in our study reported strong parenting alliances and high levels of social support from family, friends, and significant others. In addition, the associations between social support and parenting alliance were similar for all couple types. Parents who reported receiving more support from their families of origin also reported stronger parenting alliances. However, support from friends and support from significant others were not associated with parents' perceptions of parenting alliance.

Although we cannot infer causality from these cross-sectional data, these results suggest that social environments and supportive coparenting may be strongly linked for lesbian and gay couples, as well as for heterosexual couples, who have adopted children. Although previous studies have found that support from friends was more strongly associated with parenting stress and relationship quality for lesbian and gay couples (Graham & Barnow, 2013; Tornello, Farr, & Patterson 2011), our results suggest that support from families of origin may also be an important factor associated with positive coparenting for lesbian, gay, and heterosexual adoptive couples.

It is worth emphasizing that these results contribute to our knowledge of same-sex and adoptive couples. Gay adoptive fathers reported parenting alliances that were as strong as those of lesbian and heterosexual couples. Given the dearth of knowledge about parenting by gay men (Golombok et al., 2014; Tornello &

Patterson, 2015), these findings add to existing research on gay fathers and to the literature on lesbian and gay adoptive couples. In addition, it is important to note that all of the couples in our sample had adopted children and reported strong parenting alliances. Reports of parenting alliance in our sample are similar to those reported in other studies of married heterosexual parents with biological children (Abidin & Brunner, 1995). Overall, our findings suggest that relationship processes and factors that are associated with positive coparenting behaviors are similar across parental sexual orientations.

Contrary to our expectations, members of same-sex couples did not report receiving less social support from their families than did members of heterosexual couples. Some earlier studies had found that lesbian and gay couples felt less support and acceptance from their families of origin than did heterosexual couples (Kurdek, 1988, 2004). However, our results are consistent with more recent studies of social support among lesbian and gay adoptive couples (Goldberg & Smith, 2014; Graham & Barnow, 2013). Studies of gay men's pathways to parenthood suggest that younger gay men may be more likely to have children after coming out compared with older gay men (Patterson, 2013; Tornello & Patterson, 2015). Our findings, indicating no differences between same-sex and other-sex couples in perceived social support, may be due at least in part to changing social attitudes (McCarthy, 2015).

Alternatively, it could also be the case that lesbian and gay couples with children are viewed more favorably by members of their families of origin than those without children. Our results may differ from past findings because we studied lesbian and gay couples with children; on the other hand, past research has most often examined social support among samples of childless lesbian or gay individuals. Indeed, some data suggest that parenthood may change the amount of perceived support that same-sex couples report. For example, DeMino, Appleby, and Fisk (2007) found that lesbian mothers with planned families reported more social support from their families of origin than did childless lesbian women. These results suggest that parenthood may play an important role in shifting parental perceptions of lesbian and gay couples.

In the sample of families that we studied, a few couples had dissolved their relationships between Wave 1 and Wave 2. Separated couples typically did report lower social support from family members and significant others, as well as lower quality parenting alliance. However, there were no significant differences in the association between coparenting and social support as a function of parental separation. However, because the number of separated couples was small, caution should be used in interpretation of these findings (see Farr, in press). Although there is limited research about dissolution among same-sex couples, some studies have found that a couple's relationship quality, timing of adoption, and adoption self-efficacy may be factors that contribute to separation among same-sex adoptive couples (Goldberg & Garcia, 2015). Our results suggest that social support from family members may also be associated with relationship dissolution among this population.

Finally, all couples who participated in our study lived in states where adoption by same-sex couples was legal. It is likely that states with laws and policies protecting the rights of LGBTQ people also provide more supportive environments than do other states (Riggle, Rostosky, & Horne, 2010). People living in such states may have more positive attitudes toward lesbian and gay couples. These generally favorable climates of opinion may ex-

plain why couples in our sample report similar, high levels of social support from family, friends, and significant others, regardless of sexual orientation. In addition, couples who adopt go through a rigorous screening process that often includes questions about the prospective parents' sources of outside support. The ability to demonstrate strong social support from family and friends may be an important component of a successful adoptive couple's application. Indeed, social support has been found to be associated with parenting self-efficacy and parenting satisfaction (Anglely, Divney, Magriples, & Kershaw, 2015). Thus, several factors could be at play in this sample, and it remains for future research to clarify the mechanisms contributing to levels of social support from family members over time (Patterson, 2013).

Our results did not vary as a function of sexual orientation. Parental support was associated with stronger parenting alliance among lesbian and gay as well as among heterosexual couples. Thus, our findings not only contribute to the literature on relationship processes and factors that promote positive relationship functioning among marginalized populations, but they also reveal the applicability of findings on heterosexual couples to lesbian and gay couples.

### Strengths and Limitations

This study had several strengths. This was the first study to examine social support and parenting alliance among families headed by lesbian, gay, and heterosexual adoptive parents. Furthermore, this study was also the first to examine whether the association between social support and parenting alliance was similar across family type. In particular, results from our study contribute to our limited knowledge of parenting among gay fathers. This sample was systematically recruited from various geographical locations, which increases the generalizability of these findings. The use of psychometrically strong standard instruments also increases the reliability of our results.

A few limitations should also be acknowledged. At the time, families surveyed in this study all resided in states that provided legal recognition for adoption by same-sex couples. As a result, we cannot evaluate the effect of variations in law or policy. In addition, families in our study were relatively homogenous in other ways—parents typically reported good educational opportunities, high incomes, and were predominately White. There were no associations of income, education, social support, and parenting alliance in this sample. However, previous studies of same-sex couples have found that income and education may be associated with relationship functioning and social support among sexual minority couples (Elizur & Mintzer, 2003; Tornello & Patterson, 2015). The lack of association in this sample may be due to the generally high levels of income and education within this sample.

Because data were collected using self-report measures, response bias must be considered as a possibility. However, should this be the case, we would have expected all subscales of social support to be equally associated with parenting alliance. In contrast, we found differential association of the various subscales of social support with parenting alliance. Support from family members was more strongly associated with parenting alliance than was support from friends or from one's significant other/partner. Thus, it is unlikely that strong desires to give positive answers can account for these findings.

Finally, although we used valid and reliable measures of coparenting and social support, they did not assess some aspects of either construct. Future research should utilize assessment tools that address other issues such as satisfaction with support and the under and overprovision of support. In addition, future studies on coparenting should examine additional dimensions of the coparenting relationship such as the degree of agreement in child-rearing values.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, we found that lesbian and gay adoptive parents reported similar levels of social support from family, friends, and significant others as well as similar levels of parenting alliance, as did heterosexual adoptive parents. Moreover, parenting alliance was significantly associated with social support for all three couple types. Couples who saw themselves as receiving considerable social support from their families of origin were more likely to report a stronger parenting alliance. Support from friends and significant others was not associated with parenting alliance. Our findings are especially noteworthy for same-sex couples given that past research suggested that they would report less support from their families of origin (Patterson, 2013). This research contributes to the growing body of literature on coparenting among adoptive families and the identification of strengths and promotive resources that may contribute to their continued health and positive development. Overall, these findings contribute to greater understanding of diverse families and of factors that may help promote family well-being.

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### Call for Nominations

The Publications and Communications (P&C) Board of the American Psychological Association has opened nominations for the editorships of *Clinician's Research Digest: Adult Populations and Child and Adolescent Populations*; *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition*; *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*; *Psychology and Aging*; and *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law* for the years 2019 to 2024. Thomas Joiner, PhD; Robert L. Greene, PhD; Ronald T. Brown, PhD; Ulrich Mayr, PhD; and Michael E. Lamb, PhD, respectively, are the incumbent editors.

Candidates should be members of APA and should be available to start receiving manuscripts in early 2018 to prepare for issues published in 2019. Please note that the P&C Board encourages participation by members of underrepresented groups in the publication process and would particularly welcome such nominees. Self-nominations are also encouraged.

Search chairs have been appointed as follows:

- *Clinician's Research Digest: Adult Populations and Child and Adolescent Populations*, Chair: Pamela Reid, PhD
- *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition*, Chair: Stephen Rao, PhD
- *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, Chair: Kate Hays, PhD
- *Psychology and Aging*, Chair: Pamela Reid, PhD
- *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law*, Chair: David Dunning, PhD

Candidates should be nominated by accessing APA's EditorQuest site on the Web. Using your browser, go to <http://editorquest.apa.org>. On the Home menu on the left, find "Guests/Supporters." Next, click on the link "Submit a Nomination," enter your nominee's information, and click "Submit."

Prepared statements of one page or less in support of a nominee can also be submitted by e-mail to Sarah Wiederkehr, P&C Board Editor Search Liaison, at [swiederkehr@apa.org](mailto:swiederkehr@apa.org).

Deadline for accepting nominations is Monday, January 9, 2017, after which phase one vetting will begin.