

RESEARCH

Family-building desires among adopted adolescents with lesbian, gay, and heterosexual parents

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Abstract

Objective: This study qualitatively examined family-building desires of diverse adopted adolescents.

Background: Research on parenting aspirations has rarely included youth with LGBTQ+ parents and/or from adoptive families. Understanding diverse adopted adolescents' feelings about parenthood may yield insights regarding identity and ideas about family.

Methods: We conducted a thematic analysis of interview data from 48 adopted adolescents (27 were LGBTQ+) in the United States, aged 13 to 18, from lesbian, gay, and heterosexual two-parent families.

Results: Most adolescents desired future parenthood, after achieving other normative milestones, and they typically did not feel familial or societal pressure to become parents. LGBTQ+ participants showed a preference for adoption while transracially adopted adolescents preferred biological parenthood.

Conclusion: Guided by developmental approaches about identity and adoption, as well as queer family theory, we found that teenagers adopted by lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples generally envisioned parenthood for themselves. Plans to do so varied by minoritized gender, sexual, and racial/ethnic identities. Thus, an intersectional perspective is imperative to understand youths' thoughts about family building.

Implications: Our findings reveal insights into adopted adolescents' constructed future identities. Practitioners' understanding of adopted adolescents' development and future planning may be enhanced when adolescents' perspectives are considered.

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KEYWORDS

adolescence, adoption, diverse families, family building, LGBTQ+, qualitative research

Adopted youth must navigate a number of unique developmental milestones. The primary developmental task for adolescents in general to establish an identity while actively seeking independence and separation from family (Erikson, 1968). Adopted adolescents, specifically, must integrate and make sense of two sets of parents in this process. Specifically, as individuals raised by a different parent or set of parents than gave birth to them, they must reconcile how their identity is shaped by two sets of family influences (i.e., birth and adoptive; Grotevant et al., 2017). They may also eventually reflect on whether and how they wish to become parents. This is a decision that may reflect how they feel about their own adoption as well as the salience or significance of genetic ties in their own ideas about family or parenthood, among other factors including their own sexual and gender identities (Chung, 2018; Conrick, 2020; Godfrey et al., 2022; Grotevant & Von Korff, 2011; Jennings et al., 2014). Some research has examined adopted people's experiences as parents, including their parenting values and behaviors (Conrick, 2020; Field & Pond, 2018; Greco et al., 2015). Less work has explored their intentions surrounding parenthood and their preferred routes to parenthood.

Likewise, research on youth raised by parents with lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer identities (LGBTQ+), many of whom are adopted (e.g., Farr et al., 2020), has not, to our knowledge, examined their family-building ideas and intentions. This subgroup of adopted adolescents with LGBTQ+ parents are unique in their direct exposure to multiple forms of family diversity. Understanding diverse adopted adolescents' feelings about parenthood and various routes to parenthood has the potential to reveal important insights about their meaning-making surrounding adoption, family, and identity.

Informed by developmental perspectives on adolescence, identity, and adoption, as well as by queer family theory, our study examines interview data from 48 adopted adolescents in the United States, aged 13 to 18 years, from a diverse range of family structures (i.e., lesbian, gay, and heterosexual parent families), with the goal of examining (a) their desire to become a parent, (b) desired route(s) to parenthood, and (c) explanations for such desires or lack thereof. More than half of our sample were adopted by female and male same-sex couples, for whom adoption is a normative, expected parenthood route amid the reproductive challenges that being in a same-sex couple presents (Goldberg, 2012) and who also raise their children in families that "queer" or challenge dominant notions of family and parenthood (Goldberg & Kivalanka, 2012), which may have implications for children's imagined parenthood routes. Further, more than half of the sample identified as LGBTQ+, enabling us to explore the intersection of youth LGBTQ+ identities and diverse family building routes with regard to parenthood ideas, desires, and aspirations.

ADOPTED INDIVIDUALS' IDEAS AND DESIRES SURROUNDING PARENTHOOD

Adopted youth develop in a broader context that valorizes biological parenthood and parent-child genetic ties (Leon, 2002), but also, ideally, within a familial context that normalizes and celebrates adoptive family ties as similarly strong and meaningful (Goldberg, 2019). Still, because of societal bionormativity, adopted children may at times feel that their families are "less than," and they experience microaggressions to this effect (Garber & Grotevant, 2015). This, as well as their own experience of not being biologically related to anyone in their family, may lead them to idealize or prioritize biological parenthood for themselves (Conrick, 2020)—a

desire that might be especially salient if they lack contact or relationships with birth family (Baden & Wiley, 2007; Leon, 2002).

Although some research has focused on adopted individuals' experience of parenthood (see Conrick, 2020; Greco et al., 2015; Field & Pond, 2018; Zhou et al., 2021), little work has examined their family-building desires (e.g., do they want to become parents, and, if so, do they wish for biological and/or adopted children?). In an early study, Feigelman (1997) used U.S. national survey data to examine parenthood rates and routes among adopted adults and adults raised by both birth parents and found similar fertility rates and patterns. Among adopted adults aged 27 to 34, 55% of women had two or more pregnancies compared with 57% of birth-parent-raised adults. Adopted adults were no more likely to become a parent via adoption than adults raised by both birth parents—but the overall number of parents who had adopted children was small overall. Those who delayed childbearing (e.g., until their 30s and 40s) were the most likely to pursue adoption (e.g., because of fertility issues; Feigelman, 1997). In a more recent, qualitative study of 51 Korean American internationally adopted people who were parents, which mostly focused on parents' racial/cultural socialization practices, the authors noted that most participants had biologically related children; five had both biological and adopted children, and four had adopted children only (Zhou et al., 2021).

Some qualitative work has focused on reasons for wanting a biological or adopted child among adopted adults and young adults. In a qualitative study of 34 Italian couples consisting of one nonadopted individual and one adopted individual (18 domestically, 16 internationally—mostly from India and South Korea), who were parenting young children, Greco et al. (2015) found that 11 couples were characterized by a dual acknowledgment and valorization of both birth family origins and adoptive family. Within this group of 11 couples, most expressed a desire to adopt a child of their own in the future, which the authors suggested may represent one way that they demonstrate their appreciation for and positive feelings about adoption. In a U.S.-based study of 10 emerging adults (five White, and five Black, Asian, and/or Colombian individuals), who were adopted (aged 19–25 years), Moyer and Juang (2011) found that participants' adoptive identity was salient in how they constructed future parenthood, although its salience manifested in diverse ways. A few participants viewed pregnancy as a gift because their adoptive mothers could not conceive; several expressed a desire to have a bond between themselves and their children because this was absent with their adoptive mothers; and a few expressed a desire to “continue their bloodline.” Four participants said that they were reluctant to adopt but might if they had a lot of money and/or infertility issues, four mentioned that they would consider adoption but had not seriously considered looking into it, one said she would not adopt because of negative experiences with her adoptive family, and one said that she wanted to adopt and have a biological child (Moyer & Juang, 2011). Thus, reasons for wanting a biologically related child were plentiful and nuanced, whereas a desire to adopt was rare and conditional on other factors.

Other qualitative work has also highlighted potential reasons for wanting a biological child specifically among adopted adults. Kim et al. (2017) highlighted how, for 40 Korean American adopted adults, both searching for birth family as well as having their own biological child represented ways of gaining a sense of connection to their origins. Personal accounts (e.g., Chung, 2018; Phillips, 2009) of pregnancy, birth, and early parenthood among adoptive parents also highlight the powerful feelings and meaning that may accompany the experience of having biologically related children among adopted adults. For individuals who are a different race or culture than their adoptive parents, having biologically related children may take on special importance (Chung, 2018), amid the lifelong experience of not only being genetically dissimilar from one's parents but also lacking a sense of physical, racial, and/or cultural similarity or belonging (Goss et al., 2017; Samuels, 2009).

INTERSECTIONS AMONG LGBTQ+ IDENTITIES AND IDEAS AND DESIRES SURROUNDING PARENTHOOD

Of interest is how adopted adolescents with LGBTQ+ parents think about future parenthood. Adoption is a normative route to parenthood for LGBTQ+ parents, who are more likely to adopt than cisgender (cis) heterosexual parents (Gates, 2013; Goldberg & Conron, 2018). In turn, youth who are adopted and/or who have LGBTQ+ parents might have particularly expansive ideas about family building, and families in general, due to their non-(hetero)normative family structure and origin story (Burand et al., 2023; Galvin, 2006; Goldberg, 2014). In other words, they may be primed to “queer” family building (Goldberg & Kvalanka, 2012; Oswald et al., 2005). Little work has explored how youth with LGBTQ+ parents think about parenthood, although there is evidence that being raised by LGBTQ+ parents tends to foster broader ideas surrounding family, including less emphasis on biogenetic kinship as a necessity or precursor for familial relationships, and a tendency to embrace nonbiologically related family members as kin (Burand et al., 2023; Farr et al., 2022; Goldberg, 2014; Leddy et al., 2012; Oswald et al., 2005). Leddy et al. (2012), for example, documented broad definitions of family in their sample of 32 adults in the United States who were conceived via donor insemination and grew up in lesbian two-mother families. Such expansiveness among individuals with LGBTQ+ parents is likely facilitated by having at least one parent who is not biologically related to them, as in the case of both adoption and donor insemination—contexts that challenge and disassemble the historic entanglement of biology and parenthood (Goldberg, 2014; Farr et al., 2022).

Our sample of adopted adolescents included many LGBTQ+ youth. In turn, of interest is how adopted LGBTQ+ adolescents evaluate future parenthood options. Although no research to our knowledge has examined family-building intentions and desires among adopted LGBTQ+ youth, some work has explored these topics among LGBTQ+ youth in general. A study of 211 LG and 157 heterosexual young adults in the United States found that LG individuals were less likely to desire parenthood overall; but notably, they were more likely to desire but expect *not* to achieve parenthood (26% of LG individuals desired but did not expect to become parents versus 7% of heterosexual individuals), suggesting that some perceive potential barriers to parenthood (Tate & Patterson, 2019). Another U.S.-based study of 500 LGBTQ+ adults and 1,004 non-LGBTQ+ adults (ages 18–35) revealed that the parenting aspiration gap between these groups (only 7%; 48% vs. 55%) may be narrowing (Family Equality, 2019). Among LGBTQ+ adolescents specifically, there may be differences in parenthood aspirations. One U.S. study of 392 assigned-female-at-birth LGBTQ youth aged 16 to 20 found that about half wanted to become parents; cis female youth were more likely than gender-minority youth to desire parenthood (Godfrey et al., 2022). Those who wanted to become parents generally believed that it was feasible to do so; they did not perceive major structural or reproductive barriers (Godfrey et al., 2022).

Research has also examined LGBTQ+ adults’ attitudes toward parenting and desired parenthood routes. This work has documented how LGBTQ+ individuals’ preferred or chosen route to parenthood tends to reflect normative expectations (e.g., becoming a parent is valued/normal in society), attitudes about biogenetic parenthood (e.g., highly valued or not), personal desire to experience pregnancy (or not), personal experience with adoption (e.g., family member was adopted), ease of access (e.g., access to reproductive technologies), and moral reasoning (e.g., adoption as ethically superior; Goldberg et al., 2012; Goldberg & Scheib, 2015; Jennings et al., 2014). Thus, LGBTQ+ individuals are shaped by a range of personal, cultural, and structural influences in considering and imagining parenthood for themselves.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In the current study, we draw from developmental perspectives that center adolescence and identity (Erikson, 1968) and account for the complexity of adoption in navigating adolescence and developmental milestones (Grotevant & Von Korff, 2011). Adolescence (ages 13–18) is recognized as a period of intense identity development (Arnett, 2000; Wood et al., 2018), wherein various elements of identity (including racial, gender, and sexual) undergo changes and are (re) defined. Adopted adolescents must navigate these elements of identity in interaction with their adoptive identities. In adolescence, youth ask “Who am I?,” and issues of loss, connection, and belonging, which are so central to the adoption experience, become especially salient as adopted youth explore and construct their identity vis-à-vis their adoptive and birth families (Brodzinsky, 2011; Feeney et al., 2007). For adopted people, identity is especially complex because of the absence of biological continuity between adoptive parents and children and is interwoven with questions about one’s genetic lineage, what it means to be adopted, and, for some, what it means to be a different race/ethnicity than one’s parents (Brodzinsky, 2011; Messina & Brodzinsky, 2020).

In adolescence, adopted youth often gain a deeper grasp of adoption, including both its positive and negative aspects (e.g., adoption as a family arrangement that may offer stability and care; adoption as a family form that is viewed as second best by society; Brodzinsky, 2011). Adopted adolescents also typically have a deeper understanding of the biological and environmental bases of various traits (e.g., physical, cognitive, personality; Brodzinsky, 2011; Leon, 2002). In turn, adoption often becomes more salient in adolescence in both explicit and implicit ways. For example, inasmuch as adopted youth often become more curious about their origins in adolescence (Grotevant & von Korff, 2011), teenagers may seek out birth family (explicit) and/or contemplate their future parent identities in ways that reflect their adoptive status (implicit; Grotevant, 1997; Moyer & Juang, 2011).

Indeed, during adolescence, youth may explore the idea of becoming a parent among other future roles they may imagine for themselves, including relational/marital and occupational roles (Arnett, 2000; Goldberg, 2014; Moyer & Juang, 2011; Wood et al., 2018). Adopted adolescents’ constructed future identities may reflect feelings about their adoption, adoptive family, and/or birth family (Moyer & Juang, 2011). Further, whether and how they imagine themselves as adoptive or biological parents may be shaped by societal constructions of parenthood and kinship (e.g., as defined by bloodline) as well as alternate notions of kinship as instilled by their adoptive and/or LGBTQ+ parent families (Burand et al., 2023; Goldberg, 2014; Leon, 2002). Their connections to birth family members (e.g., via open adoptions) may also intersect with their imagined and idealized parenting routes, such that those with contact may feel less need to have a biologically related child to enable or enact a lost or missed connection to biologically related kin (Baden & Wiley, 2007; Conrick, 2020).

A variety of forces likely have an impact on adopted adults’ desire to adopt or have biologically related children (or both). As Bennett and de Kolk (2018) observed, reproductive desires, like all desires, are both deeply personal and also fundamentally socially structured. In turn, adopted individuals are influenced by familial experiences, personal values and desires, and societal valuing of biogenetic connections. Furthermore, parenthood choices and decisions are ultimately influenced and limited by the range of possibilities in a given social context (e.g., presence of partner; options surrounding and access to reproductive technologies; financial stability; Goldberg, 2010) as well as gender, inasmuch as pronatalist ideology encourages all people to have biologically related children—but especially women and girls (Meyers, 2001). Indeed, when envisioning their futures, women and girls may be especially influenced by pronatalist ideologies and societal valuing of motherhood (Meyers, 2001).

The current study also draws from queer family theory (e.g., Oswald et al., 2005), which decenters cis and heterosexual identities as the “default” normative (and binary) identities.

Queer family theory functions to challenge both heteronormativity, which is the belief that heterosexuality is the preferred system of sexuality, and the only “normal” way to be, as well as bionormativity, which privileges biogenetic relationships between parents and children, conflates biological with legal parenthood, and devalues families formed via other means (Baker, 2008; Farr et al., 2022; Oswald et al., 2005). LGBTQ+ parent families, as well as adoptive families, “queer” or challenge dominant ideologies of “the family,” including normative ideas of sexuality, gender, and family formation. In turn, such families disrupt dominant notions of parenthood (e.g., two-parent and heterosexual) and family building (e.g., biological), and youth raised in these families may be impacted by the alternative discourses and values that characterize them. Of course, inasmuch as they challenge family, sexuality, and gender norms, such families also face challenges from outsiders regarding the legitimacy of their relational–familial ties—especially those that are more visibly different from dominant family ideals (e.g., transracially adoptive families; gay father families; Galvin, 2006). In turn, these families and children are necessarily affected by dominant pronatalist, cis-heteronormative, and gendered values and beliefs surrounding families and formation, inasmuch as they live in a broader culture that privileges certain types of families and devalues others.

CURRENT STUDY

The current study qualitatively examined the narratives of adolescents in the United States who were adopted by lesbian, gay, and heterosexual parents, with the goal of exploring their family building perspectives and ideas. Most (two thirds) of the participating adolescents were of color, and most had White parents. More than half of the participating adolescents were LGBTQ+ themselves. This sample is notably diverse, offering unique opportunities to explore intersectional experiences related to adoption, race, gender, sexuality, and family structure. The current study is exploratory, given the lack of research that addresses family building in adopted adolescents, much less in a sample characterized by significant diversity in sexual orientation and family structure.

METHOD

Sample

The current sample consisted of 48 adolescents in the United States, aged 13 to 18 years (M age = 14.86 years, Mdn age = 15.00 years, SD = 1.31), two thirds (n = 31; 65%) with lesbian/gay parents (19 with two moms, and 12 with two dads), and one third (n = 17, 35%) with heterosexual parents. Two-thirds (n = 31; 65%) had siblings. Two thirds (n = 31; 65%) were of color (10 Latinx, nine Black, six Asian, four biracial, two multiracial) and one third (n = 17; 35%) were White. All adolescents of color were adopted by at least one White parent; thus, two-thirds of adoptions were transracial. Most participants (n = 35; 73%) were adopted privately and domestically, 12 (25%) were adopted internationally, and one (2%) was adopted via public domestic adoption. All domestically adopted participants were placed in their adoptive homes as newborns or within a few weeks. Among the 12 who were adopted internationally, age at placement ranged from 4 weeks to 4 years old, with the average age at placement being 13.5 months.

In terms of gender identity, 37 participants (77%) were cis (15 girls, 22 boys), and 11 (23%) were trans, nonbinary, genderfluid, or questioning their gender (herein referred to as trans/gender diverse, or TGD). Most (n = 9) of these TGD adolescents were assigned female at birth (AFAB). In terms of sexual orientation, 27 (56%) identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer,

pansexual, omnisexual, asexual, aromantic, or questioning (LGBQ+) and 21 (44%) identified as heterosexual. Participants largely resided on the East and West Coasts, with about half in suburbs and half in urban areas. Almost two thirds ($n = 30$, 63%) had at least rare contact with birth family; adolescents in lesbian-mother families were the most likely to have at least some contact, and those in heterosexual-parent families were the least likely to have contact. See Table 1 for complete participant data, according to case ID and pseudonym, including age, race, gender, sexual orientation, family structure, adoption type, and contact with birth family.

Procedure

Participants completed a Zoom or phone interview. Although the interviews ranged in length from 45 minutes to 2.5 hours, they were typically 1 to 1.5 hours. Participants' parents were contacted regarding an opportunity to interview their children. Participants' parents had completed several prior interviews as part of a longitudinal study on adoptive parenthood (Goldberg et al., 2007). Same- and different-sex couples were originally recruited through adoption agencies and LGBTQ+ organizations to participate in a study of the transition to adoptive parenthood. Both members of each couple were interviewed multiple times, including before and after they became parents, and throughout their children's early and middle childhood (Goldberg et al., 2012, 2017, 2021).

Both parents had to complete a consent form before the interview for children to participate. Children also completed a separate consent form that informed them of the focus of the study (i.e., to gain a better understanding of the diverse experiences of children who are adopted) and topics to be covered (e.g., school, family, sexuality, and adoption). The consent form also informed them of the parameters surrounding confidentiality—namely, their data would be kept separate from their names and personal information, and their responses would be kept confidential by members of the research team and not be shared with anyone, including their parents, unless they shared that they or another child was being hurt or they seemed to be at imminent risk of harm to self or others. Parents were also told that their children's information would not be shared with them unless there were safety concerns. Children also provided verbal assent before the start of the interview, after the interviewer reviewed the interview purpose and the details of confidentiality. The study was approved by Clark University's human subjects review board.

The principal investigator, a clinical psychologist and professor of psychology, and clinical psychology doctoral students, conducted the interviews. Interviewers were trained in in-depth, semistructured interview techniques. The purpose of the interview was to understand how participants experience and think about adolescence, school, family, friends, birth family, identity (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation, class), future parenthood, and methods for building their own families. Interviews included both closed-ended sociodemographic questions (e.g., age, race, gender identity, sexual orientation) as well as open-ended questions related to the main topics of interest, such as school, family, and identity. The current work draws from the following questions, which were aimed at addressing participants' ideas about family building: (a) Do you think you would want to become a parent someday? (b) When you think about becoming a parent, do you think that is something you definitely want to do? Definitely do not want to do? Are not sure about? Tell me more about that. (c) Do you feel like you have to be a parent? Do you feel like there is pressure in general about becoming a parent? Do you feel like you have choice in becoming a parent? Do your parents and you ever talk about you becoming a parent? (d) Is there anything that you want to do before you become a parent? (e) How do you want to create/build your family (e.g., adoption, foster care, biological kids)? (f) Did you learn about different ways of building families in school at all? What did you learn about (e.g., adoption, in vitro fertilization, donor insemination, surrogacy)? What specifically did you learn? (g) What

TABLE 1 Demographic data for adopted adolescent participants ($N = 48$).

Case no.	Family type	Pseudonym	Age (years)	Race	Parent race	Gender	Sexual orientation	Region	Adoption type	Birth family contact
1	Two moms	Daisy	16	B	Both W	Cis, female	Bisexual	WC city	Private domestic, closed	Rare contact with birth brother only
2	Two moms	Carter	15	Multiracial	Both W	Cis, male	Hetero	Midwest suburb	Private domestic, open	Rare contact with birth parents; regular contact with birth grandparents
3	Two moms	Carly	15	W	Both W	Cis, female	Omnisexual	EC suburb	Private domestic, open	Rare contact with birth mother
4	Two moms, divorced	PJ	15	Biracial (B/W)	Both W	Nonbinary, AFAB	Gay/queer	Midwest city	Private domestic, open	Occasional contact with birth mother
5	Two moms	River	15	L	Both W	Cis, male	Not sure; questioning	WC city	Private domestic, open	Occasional contact with birth mother and birth siblings
6	Two moms	Maya	16	L	Both W	Cis, female	Bisexual	Midwest city	International	None
7	Two moms	Lila	15	Multiracial	Both W	Cis, female	Hetero	EC city	Private domestic, open	Regular contact with birth grandparents
8	Two moms	Hannah	14	W	Both W	Cis, female	Bisexual	WC city	Private domestic, open	Regular contact with birth mother and birth sibling
9	Two moms, divorced	Tate	16	A	Both W	Cis, male	Hetero	Southern city	International	Regular contact with birth sibling
10	Two moms	Sage	15	W	Both W	AFAB, nonbinary	Lesbian	EC suburb	Private domestic, open	Regular contact with birth mother and extended family
11	Two moms	Latham	15	B	Both W	Cis, male	Bisexual	EC city	Private domestic, open	Rare contact with birth mother
12	Two moms, divorced	Andrew	15	W	Both W	Cis, male	Gay	WC city	Private domestic, open	None
13	Two moms	Ben	15	L	Both W	Cis, male	Hetero	EC city	International	Rare contact with birth mother and sibling
14	Two moms	Morgan	15	L	Both W	Trans, male	Pansexual	EC city	International	None

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Case no.	Family type	Pseudonym	Age (years)	Race	Parent race	Gender	Sexual orientation	Region	Adoption type	Birth family contact
15	Two moms	Andy	15	L	Both W	Cis, male	Hetero	EC suburb	International	None
16	Two moms, divorced	Jeremy	13	W	Both W	Cis, male	Asexual	EC suburb	Private domestic, open	Regular contact with birth father and extended family
17	Two moms	Brit	14	B	Both W	AFAB, gender-fluid	Panromantic, asexual	EC city	Private domestic, open	Rare contact with birth mother
18	Two moms	Sebastian	14	L	Both W	Cis, male	Hetero	EC suburb	International	None
19	Two moms	Tori	13	B	Both W	Cis, female	Bisexual, questioning	EC city	Private domestic, open	Regular contact with birth siblings
20	Two dads	Marcus	14	Biracial (B/W)	Both W	Cis, male	Hetero	Southern city	Private domestic, open	None
21	Two dads, divorced	Jessie	17	W	Both	Cis, female	Hetero	EC suburb	Private domestic, open	Regular contact with birth siblings
22	Two dads	Elliot	15	W	Both W	Cis, male	Bisexual	WC suburb	Private domestic, open	Rare contact with birth mother
23	Two dads	Sasha	16	W	Both W	Cis, female	Lesbian	WC city	Private domestic, open	Regular contact with birth siblings, grandparents, rare contact with birth mother
24	Two dads	Ari	15	B	One B, one W	AMAB, questioning	Questioning	WC city	Private domestic, closed	None
25	Two dads	Taylor	16	W	Both W	AFAB, gender non-conforming	Lesbian	Southern city	Private domestic, open	Rare/early contact with birth mother
26	Two dads	Peter	15	A	Both W	Cis, male	Hetero	WC city	International	None
27	Two dads	Devon	15	B	Both W	Cis, male	Hetero	Midwest city	Public domestic	None
28	Two dads	Tess	15	W	Both W	Cis, female	Bisexual/pansexual	EC city	Private domestic, open	Occasional contact with birth mother

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Case no.	Family type	Pseudonym	Age (years)	Race	Parent race	Gender	Sexual orientation	Region	Adoption type	Birth family contact
29	Two dads	Juliette	14	L	Both W	Cis, female	Hetero	WC city	Private domestic, open	Regular contact with birth mother and birth sibling
30	Two dads	Mateo	16	L	Both W	Cis, male	Hetero	Midwest city	Private domestic, open	Rare contact with birth mother
31	Two dads	Jaxie	13	B	One L, one W	AMAB, nonbinary	Questioning	WC city	Private domestic, open	Occasional contact with birth mother
32	Mom and dad	Lizzie	16	W	Both W	Cis, female	Hetero	Southern suburb	Private domestic, open	Rare contact with birth mother
33	Mom and dad, divorced	Martin	15	W	Both W	Cis, male	Hetero	Midwest suburb	Private domestic, open	None
34	Mom and dad	Eddie	16	L	Both W	Cis, male	Gay	Canada	Private domestic, open	Rare contact with extended birth family
35	Mom and dad	Taylor	13	W	Both W	Cis, female	Hetero	WC city	Private domestic, open	Regular contact with birth grandparents
36	Mom and dad	Sawyer	16	A	Both W	Cis, female	Hetero	EC suburb	International	None
37	Mom and dad	Vincent	14	W	Both W	Cis, male	Hetero	EC suburb	Private domestic, open	Occasional contact with birth mother
38	Mom and dad	Drew	18	A	Both W	Cis, male	Hetero	Midwest suburb	International	None
39	Mom and dad	Kat	15	W	Both W	AFAB, genderfluid	Questioning/unsure	EC suburb	Private domestic, open	Occasional contact with birth mother and birth father
40	Mom and dad	Will	17	W	Both W	Cis, male	Hetero	EC suburb	Private domestic, closed	None
41	Mom and dad	Denaë	15	B	One B, one W	Cis, female, questioning	Omnisexual	EC suburb	Private domestic, open	None
42	Mom and dad	Emily	15	A	Both W	Cis, female	Questioning	WC city	International	None
43	Mom and dad	Tara	14	A	One A, one W	Cis, female	Bisexual	Outside of U.S.	International	None

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Case no.	Family type	Pseudonym	Age (years)	Race	Parent race	Gender	Sexual orientation	Region	Adoption type	Birth family contact
44	Mom and dad	Tim	14	Biracial (L/W)	Both W	Cis, male	Gay	WC city	Private domestic, open	None
45	Mom and dad	Lisette	15	L	Both W	Cis, female	Hetero	EC suburb	International	None
46	Mom and dad	Jonah	13	W	Both W	Cis, male	Questioning	WC city	Private domestic, open	Regular contact with birth mother and extended family
47	Mom and dad	Lu	13	Biracial (B/W)	Both W	AFAB, nonbinary	Aromantic/questioning	WC suburb	Private domestic, open	Regular contact with birth mother and extended family
48	Mom and dad	Nic	13	B	Both W	AFAB, unlabeled	Unlabeled	EC suburb	Private domestic, closed	None

Note: A = Asian; AFAB = assigned female at birth; AMAB = assigned male at birth; B = Black; EC = East Coast; Hetero = heterosexual; L = Latinx; W = White; WC = West Coast.

do you think would make it hard to build a family? (h) What do you think you would need to build a family?

Data analysis

Participants' responses were recorded and transcribed verbatim. We used reflexive thematic analysis, a flexible but standard means for considering responses to open-ended questions that identifies and categorizes primary patterns and themes by creating a coding system (or coding "frame"; Braun & Clarke, 2022) to organize the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Goldberg & Allen, 2015; Levitt et al., 2018). Guided by principles of constructivism, we do not view the themes as arising from the data but as emerging as a result of our interaction with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Levitt et al., 2018). Data analysis focused on participants' descriptions of family-building ideas and aspirations, and the salience of family structure; participant gender, sexual orientation, race, and age; and adoption type and level of birth family contact in participants' narratives. The first and second authors initiated the coding process through a process of open coding by immersing themselves in the data, reading the transcripts multiple times to gain a deep understanding of each individual's perspective, and highlighting relevant passages. Initial coding was informed by the literature and relevant theoretical constructs (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Close attention was paid to social locations that varied within and across participants (gender, adoption type) to inform preliminary ideas about the intersection among participants' various identities and family-building ideas and goals.

Following the initial open coding, the first and second authors independently read through the transcripts and wrote memos (1–2 pages) for each participant to process their understanding and generate ideas about emerging codes. To establish trustworthiness, both authors aimed to maintain a reflexive stance throughout the coding process, individually and collaboratively considering how their own positionalities might be shaping their reactions to and interpretation of participants' accounts. By extension, and to enhance rigor, they sought to "bracket" their assumptions and assume an open stance in relation to the data (Charmaz, 2006) while maintaining awareness of how their own experiences, knowledge of the literature, and theoretical framing might in fact enhance the data-analytic process and their ability to glean new insights (Braun & Clarke, 2022). In this early stage, the focus was on describing participants' approach to family building, adoption, and related topics. Themes were refined, specified, and elaborated on as we moved through the coding process; we also generated new themes at this stage. Selective coding was then used to sort the data into initial theoretical categories that stayed fairly close to the data. Initial codes, for example, labeled participants as interested in biologically related children, adopted children, or neither. These codes were refined and elaborated on as the authors moved collectively through the coding process (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Goldberg & Allen, 2015). For instance, as our coding process became more focused, our typology of participants became more nuanced and detailed, such that they were described according to various dimensions, including certainty surrounding parenthood (definitely, maybe, definitely not) and parenthood route (adoption, biological).

At this more conceptual stage of coding, we sought to create a system of categories and sub-categories that best synthesized the data. Our final coding scheme consisted of several major themes: societal and family pressures surrounding parenthood; timing of parenthood; and family building desires and preferences. The first two cross-cutting themes provide context for how this sample of teenagers thinks about parenthood. The latter encompasses the major typology that emerged, which described participants in terms of preferring adoptive parenthood, preferring biological parenthood, definitely wanting parenthood but not specifying a route, lack of interest in parenthood, and uncertainty about parenthood. At this stage, the first two authors examined whether and how themes varied within and across the typology by family structure,

gender, sexual orientation, race, age, adoption type, contact with birth family, and the intersections among these demographic and family features, attending to whether, how, and why certain accounts differed from the dominant emerging “storyline” (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Miles et al., 2014). Throughout this process, the first two authors discussed convergences and divergences in coding, which led to refinements in codes. The use of multiple coders, as well as descriptions of data that are thick, meaningful, and context rich (Levitt et al., 2018; Miles et al., 2014), represent efforts to enhance the credibility of our analysis.

The authors then applied the final coding scheme to the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022), which resulted in minor refinements to increase precision and clarity. At this final stage, the third author provided input about the scheme, including its coherence and organization, which led to minor edits. Then, all three authors attended closely to the “storyline” of the findings to ensure that the presentation of data was organized, clear, and rich in thick description (Goldberg & Allen, 2015).

Of note is that we generally do not discuss the dimensions of age, adoption type, and birth family contact in describing themes because we documented no meaningful patterns according to these dimensions. That is, participants’ ideas and intentions related to family building did not vary and were not meaningfully nuanced by their age, type of adoption, and contact level (e.g., adolescents who desired biologically related children did not differ from those who envisioned adopting in terms of whether they had relationships with birth family). We also found few themes according to family structure but do report these details because family structure is a central aspect of, and source of variability among, our sample.

FINDINGS

Although not the primary focus of our study, we first address adopted adolescents’ perceptions of societal and other pressures surrounding becoming a parent; and feelings surrounding the timing of parenthood, and what was perceived as needing to be achieved before becoming a parent. These introductory findings provide important context for what it is like for adopted teenagers in diverse family structures to envision parenthood in 2023. Pseudonyms are used for all participants.

(Lack of) Family and Societal Pressures Surrounding Parenthood

Many participants ($n = 29$; 11 with heterosexual parents [HP], 11 with lesbian mothers [LM], seven with gay fathers [GF]), in describing their own parenting desires or lack thereof, explicitly endorsed a lack of pressure from their parents to become parents. PJ, a 15-year-old biracial nonbinary queer participant with two moms, exclaimed, “They are very open to me having kids, or not. They’re not the parents who are like, ‘I want you to have 10 kids!’” Twenty-five participants (nine HP, nine LM, seven GF) emphasized a lack of pressure from society to become parents, with some specifically highlighting a lack of pressure toward members of their own generation to become a parent. Sasha, a 16-year-old White cis lesbian with two dads, shared her impression that, compared with 20 years ago, “a lot less people are having kids or are feeling like they’re pressured to have kids and are just kind of living their life.” Emily, a 15-year-old Asian American questioning cis girl with heterosexual parents, shared, “I’ve seen so many people in the Gen Z group be like, ‘There is no way I’m giving birth to dirty children’ (*laughs*).” Only a few said that they felt pressure from society or extended family (e.g., grandparents) to become a parent, perhaps speaking to the contemporary social context of adolescence in 2023, in the United States. Namely, four participants (two LM, two GF) spoke to family pressures to become a parent, and four (two LM, one GF, one HP) said they felt pressure from society.

Timing of parenthood

Many participants explicitly stated that they did not want to be a parent until they were a certain age (i.e., late 20s or 30s were identified as being a good age to have a family by 23 teens: 10 LM, seven HP, six GF). Some wanted to wait until they had accomplished a variety of life milestones, including reaching financial stability ($n = 16$), being married or partnered ($n = 14$), having a job ($n = 6$), having a home ($n = 5$), or being emotionally stable ($n = 3$). Six noted educational milestones they wished to achieve, including graduating from high school (one), college (four), or vocational school (one). Others emphasized life experiences they wanted to have, such as traveling ($n = 9$) (“I want to go on a really long cruise”) and exploring, enjoying new experiences, and learning new things ($n = 5$) (“like, I want to live a bit you know? I don’t want to have a kid at freaking 20. ... It’s like no thank you! I’m living!”). Most mentioned multiple milestones they hoped to achieve by the time they pursued parenthood. Marcus, a 14-year-old biracial cis heterosexual boy with two dads, said:

It depends on if I am, one, emotionally successful, two, financially successful, as well as socially ready, emotionally ready, and financially ready. I just need to make sure that if I’m ready, and if I’m prepared to have a child, and I can give them everything that they’ll need in the future, then I would, without a doubt, have a child.

Family-building desires and preferences

Participants varied in their parenthood aspirations. Most wanted to become parents, although they more frequently named adoption than biological parenthood as their preferred route; further, some were uncertain about the route they would take but confident that they wanted to pursue parenthood. Only a few participants definitively did not want to be parents.

Adoption as preferred route

Almost half of the sample ($n = 21$, 44%: seven LM, seven GF, seven HP) indicated that if they became parents, which they thought they probably would, they would choose to adopt. A disproportionate number of these adolescents were TGD ($n = 8$); seven were cis girls and six were cis boys. Most were also LGBTQ+ ($n = 16$) as opposed to heterosexual ($n = 5$). Most ($n = 16$) used words like “probably” or “most likely” in relation to adoption—words that reflected more their general uncertainty and lack of commitment to parenthood in general rather than a wavering between adoption and biological parenthood. A typical comment came from Carly, a 15-year-old White cis girl with two moms, who identified as omnisexual (i.e., attracted to all genders and sexual orientations), who said that she would likely foster or adopt if she became a parent, but in terms of her general desire to parent, “Maybe, but I’m not sure. I’m never sure about anything!” PJ, a 15-year-old biracial nonbinary queer child with two moms, did not want to become a parent anytime in the future but thought they might eventually adopt: “Right now, I wouldn’t want to. I feel like if I became a parent, I wouldn’t be able to do a lot of things I want to do but I’m planning on doing now ... like living in [other country].” Eventually, however, PJ thought they would become a parent, “but not a biological parent.”

These participants provided several reasons for their preferred route of adoption. Seven emphasized moral reasons/altruism or a desire to “take a kid that would otherwise have no parents.” Maya, a 16-year-old Latinx cis bisexual girl with two moms, wanted to adopt “so they can have a better life. I want to be able to give them the life that they ... deserve.” Jessie, a 17-year-old White cis heterosexual girl with two dads, who herself was adopted privately and domestically, said:

I'm leaning towards fostering and then adopting. I feel like my parents adopting us and that knowledge of how that's one way to make a family [has influenced me]. And the fact that there are so many kids in the system, that doesn't really come from my parents adopting me because I guess it was privatized but, just the fact that there are so many kids out there that don't have families.

Thus, Jessie's ideas about the ideal parenting route were informed by her parents' own pathway—but were different inasmuch as she recognized the difference between private and public adoption, and the fundamental difference in the level of need (from the child's perspective) across these two routes.

Seven said that adoption simply “made sense” to them because they were adopted. Andrew, a 15-year-old white cis gay boy with two moms, said, “I think that me being adopted, and having adopted kids, is kind of unique in a way.” Martin, a White cis heterosexual boy with heterosexual parents, reflected: “I was thinking about it. I would probably just end up adopting someone, just because I'm adopted. Then I'd have to make a choice if I wanted another kid. Then I can have a biological one.”

Six emphasized their lack of desire to give birth, noting that it seemed “gross” as well as painful. As Tess, a 15-year-old White cis girl with two dads, who identified as bisexual/pansexual (i.e., attracted to people of all genders, regardless of their sex or gender identity), noted, “I have zero intention of giving birth. It just doesn't sound appealing to me. So, I would probably adopt a child.” Four cited their own sexual orientation (“not straight”) and implied barriers to childbearing. Eddie, a 16-year-old Latinx cis gay boy with heterosexual parents, said, “I would want to adopt. Since I'm gay, and I can't really get someone pregnant, the options are pretty small.”

Three noted their dislike of babies or preference for older children. Hannah, a 14-year-old White cis bisexual girl with two moms, shared that she would “probably adopt” because she felt that it would be less “stressful,” also noting that she'd prefer adopting an “older” child because the idea of a newborn “kind of turns me off.”

Two participants said that they did not believe in “blood bonds” as a prerequisite or necessary component of family. Marcus, a 14-year-old biracial cis heterosexual boy with two dads, said:

I don't really believe in blood families. ... The only real connection I have with my mom is that she gave birth to me and cared about me. But other than that, I don't have much connection to her. And my birth dad, if I'm being honest. ... I kind of just don't care about him. Because he kind of just didn't really do anything.

Some of these adolescents identified multiple reasons. Sasha, a 16-year-old White cis lesbian girl with two dads, said that she would adopt if she decided to have kids because “it's a way better way to help people as well as being able to have kids rather than adding another kid into the world that might not have a future,” also noting that “having kids is painful.” Ellie, a 15-year-old White genderqueer lesbian with two moms, shared: “I think the main reason I would want to foster is because ... I myself am adopted, [and] I also want to continue to help kids in the system.”

Biological parenthood as preferred route

Thirteen participants, mostly heterosexual ($n = 8$) and cis ($n = 12$) (seven boys, five girls; one gender questioning) from a variety of family structures (five HP, five LM, three GF) expressed a preference for biological parenthood. Although not all of them were entirely certain about

parenthood, these teenagers were fairly confident that they would pursue biological parenthood if at all. Six of them—four cis boys, two cis girls—voiced relative certainty about parenthood in general. Said Daisy, a 16-year-old Black cis bisexual girl with two moms: “I think I definitely want to be a parent. I think it’s cool to have kids and raise someone. ... Just the idea of raising someone and getting to make a child.” The other seven voiced less certainty (i.e., “if I become a parent”). Sawyer, a 16-year-old Asian cis heterosexual boy with heterosexual parents, said, “I think at this point, possibly,” noting that he would have “biological” children if he ended up pursuing parenthood.

In narrating their reasons for wanting a biological child, seven emphasized feelings of longing for the connections that they did not have in their own lives. Namely, they “did not experience” a genetic connection to their own parents and wanted the opportunity to have a child who had their “genes—like, personality, traits, and stuff like that,” said Lisette, a 15-year-old Latinx cis heterosexual girl with heterosexual parents. Tate, a 16-year-old Asian cis heterosexual boy with two moms, wished to be “bonded by blood,” and Lila, a 15-year-old multiracial cis heterosexual girl with two moms, wanted “my own biological kids, just because I want to see—I want a mini me.” Tori, a 13-year-old Black cis bisexual/questioning girl with two moms, noted that her birth mother was a twin, which intrigued her: “I want to see how that [plays] out; I want a kid who looks like me.”

Three of these participants also noted that they thought this family building route would be better for the child—that is, they wanted their child to have the opportunity to be raised by biologically related parents: “I feel like I want my kids to experience that, what it’s like to have your parents be your biological parents” (Daisy). For one participant, the loss of biogenetic connections was explicitly named as a motivating factor for wanting multiple biologically related children. Mateo, a 16-year-old Latinx cis heterosexual boy with two dads, specifically noted that he wanted two biological children, “so they would be siblings; I want them to have someone they can talk to.” Mateo had a biological brother, 1 year older, who lived with their birth mother, whom he did not have contact with, but whom he said he would “really like to meet.” Mateo also did not have current contact with his birth mother, sharing that his parents “used to have [his] birth mother’s number, but then they stopped talking for a while ... they haven’t tried [to contact her] for a while.”

Notably, 10 of 13 of the participants who strongly desired a biological connection to a future child were transracially adopted—that is, they were of color, with at least one White parent. Thus, looking like their parents may matter more to these adolescents inasmuch as they have grown up in a family where they look markedly dissimilar from their parents, potentially leading to greater scrutiny and questioning from outsiders regarding their adoptive status. They may also feel a heightened sense of “othering” in relation to their school and community and may especially value a shared sense of identity, heritage, and pride vis-à-vis a future child. No participants explicitly spoke to their race in explaining their preference, but they did, as highlighted, emphasize shared physical features as a valued component of biological parentage.

Definitely parenthood, route unspecified

Six participants, all but one cis boys (one cis girl) and four heterosexual (two GF, two LM, two HP), had a definitive interest in parenthood but were unsure about route. Thus, they were certain that they wanted to be parents but were uncertain—or had not given much thought—to whether they would pursue biological or adoptive parenthood, often asserting that they were young and had not yet had the life experience to make such a determination. River, a 15-year-old Latinx cis questioning boy with two moms, said he wanted to become a parent, for sure, “one day. [Probably] after age 25, because that’s, like, when you are fully, I guess, matured.” In

terms of route, he “didn’t know,” but clarified that “whatever me and whoever else is making that decision, what we decide.” Similarly, although Peter, a 15-year-old Asian American cis heterosexual boy with two dads, wanted to be a parent and had thought about both adoption and biological routes, he felt that he was “way too young” to consider it in depth. Peter shared:

I definitely feel like I want to be a parent. I just want to raise a kid and instill them with the values I learned, to give them the opportunity to live life. I’ve thought about adopting. ... But I think I might go the biological route, but I don’t know, I’m way too young to think about all that stuff.

The narratives of these participants, who were mostly cis boys but from a variety of family structures, suggest that they largely accepted the idea that people eventually become parents but personally had not seriously considered *how* they might become parents when the time arrived.

Uncertainty about parenthood

Five participants, all but one cis boys (one cis girl), all but one with lesbian moms (one HP), and a mix of sexual orientations (three heterosexual, two LGBTQ+), indicated that they were unsure about whether they would become a parent, noting that they had not yet given it much thought (“I have no idea”; “I don’t really know”). “I am probably going to wait the next few years to really think about it. I’ll be 18 in my last year of high school, so I haven’t really thought much about it,” said Sebastian, a 14-year-old Latinx cis heterosexual boy with two moms. These adolescents, then, did not have a definitive interest in parenthood—mostly, they said, because they had spent little time thinking about it.

No interest in parenthood

Three participants from a mix of family structures (two HP, one LM), genders (two TGD, one cis girl), sexual orientations (two LGBTQ+, one heterosexual) did not want to be parents. They stated that being a parent was too much responsibility (two) and too expensive (one), with two also noting their dislike of children and two invoking their own mental health diagnoses as barriers to parenthood. Lizzie, a 16-year-old White cis heterosexual girl with heterosexual parents, who had diagnoses of anxiety and autism, said, “I do not like children. ... Maybe someday, if I ever get over the hatred of children. ... I don’t mean it to come off as rude.” Brit, a 14-year-old Black genderfluid panromantic teen with two moms, named a lack of interest in children and the expense of raising children, as well as an honest reflection of their own limitations and mental health challenges, as reasons for not wanting to be a parent:

I will never be mentally capable to care for a child the way it needs. I would personally rather not have a kid than take one out of the system, give it the best home I can, and not be able to take care of them. ... I’ve been through a lot [and] had a lot of time to reflect. ... I’m still trying to get my life on track. I’m still trying to do what I want to do with my life.

Thus, these participants endorsed a childfree by choice attitude—which, in a pronatalist society, challenges cultural norms. Voluntary childlessness subverts the dominant idea that individuals eventually go on to have and raise children and can be seen as a form of “queering” dominant ideas about parenthood.

DISCUSSION

The current study examined the narratives of a diverse group of adopted adolescents, with attention to their family-building perspectives and ideas. Amid a general dearth of work that addresses family building in adopted youth, our findings offer important initial insights into how adopted teenagers are thinking about parenthood, family, and their futures.

We found that few participants felt pressured by their own parents or families to become parents. Thus, despite their parents' own extensive investment in and efforts in becoming parents (adoption is not a simple path to parenthood; Goldberg, 2010, 2012), this did not seem to manifest or correlate with an emphasis on the necessity of parenthood as a fundamental or expected life goal or achievement. Few, too, said that they felt pressure from society, highlighting a sense of agency related to parenthood that may reflect generational status. In 2024, a growing number of youth and adults seem to feel that they have more choice in whether and how they become parents. Indeed, according to a 2021 survey of Millennial and Gen Z women, 44% of nonparents aged 18 to 49 said that it was "not too likely" or "not likely at all" that they would have children—up 7 percentage points from 2018 (Pew Research Center, 2021).

Regarding timing of parenthood, participants emphasized a variety of normative life milestones they wished to achieve (e.g., marriage/long-term partnership, financial stability) prior to becoming a parent (Arnett, 2000; Wood et al., 2018). None endorsed early parenthood as a goal. These findings are consistent with prior work showing that many contemporary adults and young adults emphasize their desire to achieve financial, relational, and residential stability prior to parenthood (Beal et al., 2016; Datta et al., 2023). Many explicitly cited late 20s to 30s as the "ideal" time to become a parent, perhaps in part reflecting generational shifts in expectations of educational and personal achievement goals, which extend the period of time before pursuing parenthood (Datta et al., 2023), but also, for LGBTQ+ teenagers and/or teenagers with LGBTQ+ parents, their deviation from dominant cultural norms, which may facilitate openness to "delayed" parenthood (Goldberg et al., 2012; Tate, 2022).

More than half of the sample were oriented to adoption as a family-building route, which is higher than prior studies. For example, Feigelman et al. (1997) found that adopted and nonadopted adults became adoptive parents at similar rates, whereas Zhou et al. (2021) documented that close to one fifth of their sample of adopted adults who were parents had at least one adopted child. Teens who imagined adoption as their preferred route to parenthood were disproportionately TGD and LGBQ+, potentially reflecting both perceived barriers to biological parenthood (particularly for TGD adolescents; Godfrey et al., 2022; Nahata et al., 2017) and expansive ideas related to family building, whereby LGBQ+ people are more likely to "queer" bionormative and heteronormative ideas about families (Burand et al., 2023; Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2012; Oswald et al., 2005). Indeed, trans adults have been found to be even more open to adoption than LGBQ+ individuals, with fewer restrictions on the type of children they are open to adopting (e.g., in terms of race, age, and mental and physical health status; Goldberg et al., 2020), and research on trans youth has also documented strong interest in adoption. For example, Nahata et al. (2017) found that almost half of their U.S. sample of 78 trans youth planned to adopt, whereas almost a quarter did not want children. In a U.S. study of 157 trans youth, Chen et al. (2018) found that about half expressed a desire to parent; within this group, over two thirds were interested in adoption. Our finding that TGD adopted teens were especially open to adopting builds on prior research with TGD youth and adults showing high levels of openness to adoption as a viable family-building route but also reveals their own personal history as adopted as a powerful additional factor that may enhance openness to adoption. Further, participants as a whole cited reasons for wanting to adopt that echo prior work on LGBQ+ adults specifically

(cisgender heterosexual adults primarily adopt due to infertility or older age; Goldberg, 2010), including altruism and a lack of desire to be pregnant (Costa & Tasker, 2018; Goldberg et al., 2012; Jennings et al., 2014), as well as additional reasons that reflect their adoptive status (i.e., personal experience with adoption) and, perhaps, their developmental status (e.g., a dislike of babies).

Our finding that teens of color who were transracially adopted were especially likely to describe biological parenthood as their ideal route to parenthood was surprising yet in some ways consistent with prior work on internationally adopted adults who detailed how having their own biological children would represent a way of gaining a sense of connections to their origins (race, ethnicity, culture; Kim et al., 2017). Adolescents who are transracially adopted—who often face heightened scrutiny and questions related to physical dissimilarities between themselves and other family members—often experience unique identity challenges during adolescence, when issues of loss and belongingness are especially salient (Brodzinsky, 2011). “Continuing the bloodline,” cited by adopted young adults as a reason for wanting biologically related children (Moyer & Juang, 2011), may be especially important to youth and young adults whose racial/ethnic backgrounds have been devalued in society and, perhaps, by the communities in which they are raised (Samuels, 2009).

Participants’ reasons for wanting to be a parent to a biologically related child focused on having a connection to one’s child, carrying on one’s “lineage,” and ultimately experiencing something that they lacked in the context of their adoptive family (Brodzinsky, 2011). Further, several participants described how they wanted to have a biologically related child because, from the child’s perspective, it would likely be easier. In this way, they implicitly spoke to challenges they had experienced in relation to their own adoption, as well as, possibly, a greater awareness—which often comes in adolescence—of the ways in which their physical appearance, cognitive abilities, personality traits, and interests have been shaped by genetic factors and thus mark them as different from members of their adoptive family (Brodzinsky, 2011; Goss et al., 2017; Leon, 2002). Again, for transracially adopted teens in particular, biological parenthood may be attractive inasmuch as they have experienced distinct stresses associated with their racialized experiences within their adoptive family. Indeed, some work (e.g., Hrapczynski et al., 2022) has found that transracially adopted adolescents perceive their families more negatively than those who are the same race as their parents.

Some participants—mostly cis boys—were certain they would become parents but unsure of how. These individuals, then, endorsed the normative goal of parenthood while also seeing it as a distant milestone, one that they had not yet fully explored. In part, this may reflect their gender: Parenthood is generally socially constructed as a less central component of one’s identity for boys than girls, and becoming a parent comes with fewer penalties to career and educational goals for boys, necessitating lesser contemplation of the choice and timing of parenthood (Kahn et al., 2014). Similarly, it was mostly cis boys who voiced a general uncertainty about parenthood, again potentially reflecting the lesser centrality of fatherhood in boys’ lives and also the lesser burden that they would take on by pursuing parenthood in general and biological parenthood specifically, should they go this route.

Only a few participants felt that they were unlikely to be parents. They emphasized their perception of greater costs (e.g., in time, money, and effort) than benefits associated with parenthood and also highlighted personal barriers to parenthood, such as their own mental health and personal limitations. That they felt free to share their childfree intentions may again speak to their generational status, whereby parenthood in general is neither expected nor required among younger generations (Pew Research Center, 2021)—and LGBTQ+ and TGD individuals in particular face less societal pressures to be parents (Tate & Patterson, 2019). Their openness to being childfree, and comfort in sharing such openness, may also reflect other intersecting identities that deviate from dominant cultural norms—such as their family structure and unmarried status (Goldberg, 2014; Tate, 2022).

Limitations

Our sample was diverse in terms of family structure, sexual orientation and gender identity, and race; but it was not remarkably diverse with respect to geographic location. It is possible that teens living in rural or less progressive areas of the United States might espouse more barriers to parenthood or voice greater societal pressures related to parenthood. In addition, the cross-sectional nature of our study means that we obtained only a snapshot of adopted adolescents' ideas about parenthood, at one particular time. Their ideas and intentions surrounding parenthood will likely evolve as they grow older and more fully develop their life goals and aspirations.

Implications for research and practice

Indeed, future research should examine adopted individuals' ideas about parenthood longitudinally. The current sample focused on teens and found that adoption was a preferred route to parenthood among more than half of the sample, in contrast to Moyer and Juang's (2011) study of 10 emerging adults (aged 19–25 years), who primarily imagined themselves pursuing biological parenthood, with a few considering adoption but only as a second-choice route to parenthood. The current sample comprised mainly younger teens, from a more diverse set of family structures and also growing up at a different time, all of which may impact their family-building desires; yet future work should examine cohorts of adopted youth over time to more fully articulate how personal and family identities intersect with generational and societal factors to impact their conceptions of and plans surrounding parenthood. Another future direction is to inquire explicitly about how participants' racial-ethnic background (and the presence or absence of other same-race individuals within the adoptive family) and relationships with birth family shape ideas about family building. Although we did not detect patterns in participants' relationships with birth family vis-à-vis their family-building ideas or intentions, it is possible that future, more targeted questions may reveal key insights in this regard.

Our findings hold implications for practitioners who work with adopted youth and families. Asking youth about whether and how they imagine building families of their own may be useful for practitioners who work with adopted youth with diverse identities in terms of race, gender, sexual orientation, and family structure. Insight into how adopted youth imagine their futures with respect to parenthood—whether they envision themselves as childfree, biological parents, and/or adoptive parents—may provide practitioners with a deeper understanding of their identity processes (e.g., with regard to race, gender, and sexuality). Indeed, the reasons that our participants offered for wanting adopted versus biologically related children are illuminating in that they shed light on various aspects of how they are processing their own identities and futures.

Practitioners can also draw on these findings in their work with adopted adults, who may be at a more advanced stage of considering and building their own families. These findings may help to sensitize practitioners about the unique experiences of adopted adults of diverse gender and sexual identities in imagining what it would be like to have an adopted child (who shares their experience of adoption) versus a biologically related child (who may be their first biogenetically related family member).

Conclusion

The current qualitative study provides insight into the family-building ideas and desires of adopted adolescents parented by lesbian, gay, and heterosexual adults. Our study was informed

by developmental and queer theoretical perspectives about adoption, identity, adolescence, and diverse families. In this sample of diverse adopted adolescents, parenthood was generally an expected future milestone, but not as a result of familial or societal pressure. The role of gender expansive and queer identities was evident in adoption surfacing as a preferred pathway to parenthood, and the role of transracial adoption and being a teenager of color appeared especially relevant to preferences for biological parenthood. Practitioners may better serve their diverse adolescent clients by attending to how marginalized identities, family structure, and adoption shape future parenthood ideas.

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