

# Journal of Adolescent Research

<http://jar.sagepub.com/>

---

## **Coping With Sexual Stigma: Emerging Adults With Lesbian Parents Reflect on the Impact of Heterosexism and Homophobia During Their Adolescence**

Katherine A. Kuvalanka, Leigh A. Leslie and Rachel Radina  
*Journal of Adolescent Research* published online 29 April 2013  
DOI: 10.1177/0743558413484354

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://jar.sagepub.com/content/early/2013/04/26/0743558413484354>

---

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

**Additional services and information for *Journal of Adolescent Research* can be found at:**

**Email Alerts:** <http://jar.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

**Subscriptions:** <http://jar.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

**Reprints:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

**Permissions:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

>> [OnlineFirst Version of Record](#) - Apr 29, 2013

[What is This?](#)

# Coping With Sexual Stigma: Emerging Adults With Lesbian Parents Reflect on the Impact of Heterosexism and Homophobia During Their Adolescence

Journal of Adolescent Research

XX(X) 1–30

© The Author(s) 2013

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/0743558413484354

jar.sagepub.com



Katherine A. Kuvalanka<sup>1</sup>, Leigh A. Leslie<sup>2</sup>  
and Rachel Radina<sup>3</sup>

## Abstract

Little is known about how youth with LGB (lesbian, gay, and bisexual) parents experience various forms of sexual stigma (i.e., homophobia and heterosexism). Previous studies have focused primarily on frequency of teasing and harassment; therefore, much less is known about how indirect and institutional types of sexual stigma play out in the lives of these youth. In-depth, qualitative interviews were conducted with 30 emerging adults with lesbian parents to ascertain how they experienced and coped with sexual stigma during middle school and high school. Findings revealed that both enacted (direct and indirect) and structural sexual stigma were salient to participants during their adolescence. The reactions that participants had to sexual stigma varied and were categorized as: fearful, defiant, or detached. Coping strategies, as well as factors that influenced the impact of sexual stigma on participants, were identified. Findings have implications for family professionals, policymakers, and future research.

<sup>1</sup>Department of Family Studies and Social Work, Miami University, Oxford, OH, USA

<sup>2</sup>Department of Family Science, University of Maryland, College Park, MD, USA

<sup>3</sup>Department of Educational Leadership, Miami University, Oxford, OH, USA

## Corresponding Author:

Katherine A. Kuvalanka, PhD, Department of Family Studies and Social Work, Miami University, 101 McGuffey Hall, Oxford, OH 45056, USA.

Email: kuvalanka@MiamiOH.edu

**Keywords**

sexual stigma, heterosexism, homophobia, lesbian parents, youth with LGB (lesbian, gay, and bisexual), parents, coping, adolescence

A growing number of children in the United States are being raised by lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) parents; yet little is known about how these youth experience and cope with heteronormativity—that is, the dominant cultural ideology that treats traditional gender roles, heterosexuality, and the nuclear, biologically related family as normative (Oswald, Blume, & Marks, 2005). Scholars have noted how U.S. culture continues to privilege heterosexual identities over all others (Herek, Gillis, & Cogan, 2009); thus, LGB-parent families often face homophobia and heterosexism on the part of individuals and social institutions (Herek et al., 2009). For example, researchers conducting the National Longitudinal Lesbian Family Study found that by the age of 17 years, 50% of the 78 children of lesbian mothers in their study reported experiencing teasing or hostility related to their family structure (van Gelderen, Gartrell, Bos, van Rooij, & Hermanns, 2012). Thus, a challenge for many youth with LGB parents seems to be the negative reactions they experience from the outside world. The vast majority of social science research in this area, however, has revealed few differences between children with LGB parents and children with heterosexual parents in terms of psychological, emotional, and social development (see Biblarz & Savci, 2010, for a review). To better understand this finding of limited negative outcomes in the face of negative societal treatment, more research is needed to reveal the complexities of how heteronormativity plays out in the lives of youth in LGB-parent families.

In the present study, 30 emerging adults with lesbian mothers discuss the heterosexism and homophobia they experienced during their adolescence and how they responded to it. Prior to describing the study, however, a brief discussion of terminology is in order. Several terms have been used to describe society's ignorance and intolerance of nonheterosexual behaviors and identities. Despite widespread use of the term *homophobia*, usage of this term has been deemed problematic, as it limits the scope of the problem to the person with the fear, rather than tying it to a larger societal context (Kitzinger, 1996). *Heterosexism*, on the other hand, refers primarily to cultural-level phenomena that work to disadvantage sexual minority groups (Herek et al., 2009).

Alternatively, Herek and colleagues (2009) proposed a conceptual framework of *sexual stigma*—a broader term that refers to “the negative regard,

inferior status, and relative powerlessness that society collectively accords anyone associated with nonheterosexual behaviors, identity, relationships, or communities” (p. 33). Two levels of that framework address how society conveys messages of negative regard or inferiority. At the cultural level, social institutions perpetuate power and status inequalities via *structural* sexual stigma by rendering nonheterosexual individuals and relationships invisible, subjecting them to discrimination when they are visible, and promoting heterosexuality as “normal.” Additionally, individuals perpetrate *enacted* sexual stigma, consisting of overt behaviors, such as antigay epithets and violence targeted at actual or perceived sexual minorities, and subtle messages and behaviors, such as ostracism or innuendo. We use the term *sexual stigma* to encompass both the structural and enacted sexual stigma that youth with LGB parents may encounter in their everyday lives.

### *Sexual Stigma in the Lives of Youth With LGB Parents*

Research on experiences with sexual stigma among youth with LGB parents has focused primarily on enacted sexual stigma on the part of peers and others (e.g., Bos & Van Balen, 2008; Bos, Gartrell, Peyser, & Van Balen, 2008; Leddy, Gartrell, & Bos, 2012). Studies have found that youth with lesbian parents do not experience increased victimization or stigmatization in general, compared to youth with heterosexual parents (Rivers, Poteat, & Noret, 2008; Tasker & Golombok, 1995). Yet, youth with lesbian mothers have reported experiencing more teasing and harassment specifically related to their own sexuality and family structure as compared to their counterparts with heterosexual parents (Tasker & Golombok, 1995). Further, within-group analyses have also provided some evidence that more frequent experiences with, or perceptions of, sexual stigma may have a negative effect on the well-being of youth with lesbian mothers in terms of behavior problems (Gartrell, Deck, Rodas, Peyser, & Banks, 2005) and self-esteem (Bos & Van Balen, 2008).

The early adolescent years in particular may present challenges to some youth with LGB parents, as sexual desires and interests increasingly emerge for youth in this age group (Collins & Laursen, 2004). Thus, adolescents with LGB parents may encounter more heteronormative attitudes from peers than they did at younger ages (Litovich & Langhout, 2004). Welsh (2011) reported that all 14 of the adolescents (ages 13-18 years) with LG parents in her study declared middle school to be the most difficult time in their lives. Although some of these adolescents discussed overt harassment from peers in relation to their family structure, others highlighted the “subtle but powerful encounters with heterosexism and homophobia” (Welsh, 2011, p. 60), such as those related to the increased focus on a heteronormative culture of dating.

Indeed, as peers and peer acceptance become increasingly important during adolescence (Collins & Laursen, 2004), many youth with LGB parents have worries about losing friends or being judged by peers, even if they do not actually experience teasing or rejection (Gartrell et al., 2005; Tasker & Golombok, 1995). Wright (1998) reported that although the children in her study of five lesbian-parent stepfamilies did not experience a lot of trauma overall, they still had tremendous fears about being teased; even the children who had not experienced any overt instances of enacted sexual stigma “seemed to carry around with them a certain uneasiness and anxiety” (p. 149). One participant in Joos and Broad’s (2007) study of 26 adult women with LGB parents recalled: “I lived in fear of someone finding out about my family for much of my adolescence” (p. 283). Although teasing and ridicule pose challenges for some youth with LGB parents, other types of sexual stigma may also play a significant role in their lives. Few studies have looked at the *indirect* enacted sexual stigma (i.e., antigay epithets or violence *not* aimed at the individual with LGB parents) or the structural sexual stigma that these youth have faced.

More specifically, youth with LGB parents likely experience both indirect enacted and structural sexual stigma in their schools, where LGB-parent families are often rendered invisible (Lindsay et al., 2006). That invisibility can range from the absence of any positive or even neutral information about LGB-parent families to discouragement of including LGB family members in school activities (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008; van Gelderen et al., 2012). Beyond invisibility, the lack of antiheteronormative policies, or the failure of school personnel to carry out those policies, may contribute to sexual stigma in schools. In Kosciw and Diaz’s (2008) survey of 154 adolescents with LGB and transgender parents, only 28% reported that school staff intervened frequently when overhearing antigay remarks. More disturbingly, 39% of the youth reported that teachers and other school staff were the perpetrators of antigay comments.

Structural sexual stigma is also perpetuated through governmental laws and policies and has potential implications for some youth with LGB parents. For example, the lack of legal recognition of same-sex partnerships poses potential problems for some children of same-sex couples, especially in the absence of guaranteed access to second parent adoptions (Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2012). Given that some children of same-sex couples only have a legal relationship with one of their parents, these problems may include lack of access to a parent’s health care plan, and no guaranteed relationship with both parents in the event of parental separation or death. Further, adolescents and young adults with LGB parents have reportedly interpreted governmental bans on same-sex marriage as attacks on their families (Goldberg,

2007a; Goldberg & Kusalanka, 2012; Welsh, 2011). It seems critical, then, that researchers consider the role that indirect and structural sexual stigma may play in the lives of youth with LGB parents, in addition to any potential interpersonal harassment these children may endure.

### *Coping With Sexual Stigma During Adolescence*

Few studies have focused on examining how youth with LGB parents cope with the sexual stigma they encounter. Bozett (1987), who reported the use of social control strategies among adolescents and adults with gay fathers, found that his participants' greatest concern was that they would face negative social repercussions if their fathers' sexual identity became known. *Boundary control*, or attempts to control their own behavior or the behavior of others, served to "keep the boundary of the father's expression of his homosexuality within the limits set by the child" (Bozett, 1987, p. 42). For example, some participants asked their gay fathers not to hold hands with their male partners in front of others. A second related strategy of *nondisclosure* refers to not telling others about the parents' sexual orientation, sometimes hiding items such as gay newspapers or books before visits from friends, or referring to their parents' partners as "aunts," "uncles," or "housemates" (Bozett, 1987; van Gelderen et al., 2012).

On the other hand, some youth with LGB parents may choose not to hide their family structure. Bozett (1987) and Welsh (2011) found that, in an attempt to control others' reactions, some participants utilized preemptive *disclosure* of their parents' sexual orientation. Further, in response to antigay remarks, some adolescents and young adults with LGB parents have verbally defended LGB people by coming out about their own families (van Gelderen et al., 2012; Welsh, 2011). Moreover, Joos and Broad (2007) found that some of the adults with LGB parents in their study recalled that they became more open about their families after they made an initial disclosure to a trusted friend or romantic partner and received a positive, supportive response.

Youth with LGB parents may also cope with sexual stigma via *selective association*: choosing to associate primarily with others who are accepting of diverse family forms (Goldberg, 2007a, 2007b; Leddy et al., 2012). It may be especially beneficial for some youth with LGB parents to find allies in other youth with LGB parents (Bos & van Balen, 2008; Welsh, 2011). In their Dutch study of 63 children (8-12 years old) born to lesbian mothers, Bos and van Balen (2008) found that frequent contact with other children with LGB parents helped to protect study participants' self-esteem from the negative effects of stigmatization. Likewise, Welsh (2011) purported that

finding support in other youth with LGB parents reduced feelings of stress and anxiety in her adolescent participants who, subsequently, felt empowered from that support.

In addition to the coping strategies indicated above, van Gelderen and colleagues (2012) reported that some of the 17-year-olds with lesbian mothers in their study dismissed the negativity they encountered and externalized it, while others internalized negative feelings and became antisocial as a result. Gender differences were reported in that girls were more likely to use “adaptive” coping, while boys were more likely to utilize “maladaptive” strategies. These researchers noted the need for more in-depth qualitative studies in which youth with LGB parents have an opportunity to elaborate on their experiences coping with sexual stigma.

In summary, although the impact of some types of sexual stigma on youth with LGB parents has been investigated, research has only begun to reveal coping strategies they employ. How these adolescents cope when faced with sexual stigma—and, especially, the identification of protective factors—warrants additional study (van Gelderen et al., 2012). Both Goldberg (2007b;  $N = 46$ ) and Joos and Broad (2007;  $N = 26$ ) reported that some of their adult participants with LGB parents experienced shame in relation to their parents’ sexual orientations and were, thus, “closeted” about their families. Some of these participants, however, were able to move from this closeted state to one of “openness” or “pride.” We deem the identification of factors that help youth with LGB parents to move to this latter state as critically important.

### ***Purpose of Study***

The current study examined reports of sexual stigma experienced during the middle school and high school years from 30 emerging adults with lesbian parents. We aimed to explain how these participants coped with sexual stigma during their adolescence. More specifically, we sought to: (a) describe the impact that sexual stigma had on participants during their adolescence, (b) identify the strategies they utilized to cope with these experiences, and (c) uncover the factors in their lives that influenced both the impact of sexual stigma and their coping. The majority of studies on youth in LGB-parent families have focused on younger children. Thus, we also aimed to build upon a growing body of literature on adolescents and young adults with LGB parents (Goldberg, 2007a, 2007b; Joos & Broad, 2007; Tasker & Golombok, 1997; van Gelderen et al., 2012; Welsh, 2011). This body of literature (excluding van Gelderen et al., 2012) has primarily involved participants who were born or adopted into the context of a heterosexual relationship and whose parents subsequently came out as LGB. The experiences of youth who are

born to or adopted by “already out” LGB parents may fundamentally differ, if for no other reason than they may have had more time to realize what it means to have a LGB parent in a heteronormative society. Therefore, a unique aim of the present study was to explore differences in experience as a function of familial background among a sample for which half of the participants were born into the context of a heterosexual relationship, and half were born to or adopted by lesbian parents who identified as such for the entirety of the participants’ lives.

## Method

After obtaining Institutional Review Board approval, emerging adults with lesbian mothers were recruited for participation in one-on-one, semistructured, open-ended interviews. Emerging adults, who tend to focus on exploration of identity during this life stage even more so than in adolescence (Arnett, 2000), may be able to speak to their adolescent experiences with sexual stigma in more nuanced ways than younger participants, as they have had more time to reflect upon these incidents and how they have had an impact on their lives (Goldberg, 2007a). Requirements for participation included being a young adult between the ages of 18 and 25, who lived with at least one lesbian parent during adolescence. Individuals with lesbian mothers (as opposed to gay fathers, for example) were sought for two interrelated reasons. First, one of the aims of our study was to investigate the role of family structure (i.e., being born into the context of a heterosexual union versus to parents who already identified as nonheterosexual), providing variability among participants in this regard, in addition to other factors, such as participants’ gender. Therefore, we wanted to limit another obvious variable among participants (i.e., parents’ sexual identity), given our relatively small sample size. Further, the authors deemed the recruitment of emerging adults with lesbian mothers (in contrast to those with gay fathers) from both family types to be more realistic, given that more lesbian women than gay men are parents and, historically, mothers have been awarded custody more often than fathers (Richman, 2009).

Purposive and snowball sampling (Marshall & Rossman, 1999) were utilized, and participants were recruited primarily through contact with COLAGE, a national nonprofit organization run by and for individuals with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) parents. Recruitment efforts also included posting an online recruitment notice through the Human Rights Campaign Family Net and contacting leaders of PFLAG (Parents, Family, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) chapters across the country. Leaders of these organizations distributed the study announcement via member list serves.



## *Participants*

The total sample consisted of 30 participants (see Table 1 for a summary), who were, on average, 21.3 years of age. Eighteen participants identified as female, eight as male, and four as transgender. The vast majority of the sample ( $n = 25$ ) identified as “White” or “Caucasian.” During their adolescence, almost half ( $n = 13$ ) lived in the Northeastern United States, eight lived in the West, five lived in the South, and four lived in the Midwest. Half of the participants (10 female; three male; two transgender) were born to or adopted by mothers who already identified as lesbians (referred to as “planned lesbian families” throughout the remainder of the article); half (eight female; five male; two transgender) were born into a heterosexual union, and their mothers subsequently came out as lesbians (referred to throughout the rest of the article as “heterosexual divorced families,” even though a few of these participants’ mothers and fathers were never married). Participants in the latter family situation were 6-years old or younger when their mothers came out.

## *Procedure*

The first author conducted all of the interviews, which were 45 minutes to over 2 hours in length. Eight of the interviews were in person, while the rest were telephone interviews. All interview participants were given US\$25 each for their time. Participants were asked to read and sign informed consent forms prior to participation in the interviews, and all names and other identifying information were changed in order to protect the identity of participants.

Participants described the structure and the “story” of their families, and answered questions designed to elicit information about sexual stigma they experienced as adolescents. For the present analysis, we addressed data collected from the following open-ended questions:

1. How did you feel about having a lesbian mom/s in middle/high school? Why/explain?
2. Can you think of any specific examples of heterosexism or homophobia you experienced during your middle school/high school years? Where did it happen? Who was involved?
3. What kind of impact did these incidents of heterosexism and homophobia have on you?
4. Thinking back over your middle school and high school years, do you think there were messages in society (e.g., in the media, in textbooks, from the government) about how society thinks about or values lesbian parents and their families? If yes, what were the messages that you came to know? How did you come to learn these messages?

**Table 1.** Summary of Interview Participant Demographics.

Demographic item	Research sample (N = 30)	
	Mean (SD)/%	Range/n
Age of participants (in years)	21.3 (2.2)	18-25
Gender		
Female	60.0	18
Male	26.7	8
Transgender*	13.3	4
Racial/Cultural group		
White/Caucasian	83.3	25
Biracial	7.7	2
Hispanic	3.3	1
Middle Eastern	3.3	1
Indian/Asian American	3.3	1
Education		
Some high school	3.3	1
Completed high school/GED	10.0	3
Completed high school; entering college	13.3	4
Currently in college (undergraduate)	46.7	14
Completed 4-year college	20.0	6
Currently in graduate school	6.7	2
Childhood locale: Region of United States**		
Northeast (CT, MA, NJ, PA, VT)	43.3	13
West (CA, OR, WA)	26.7	8
South (AR, FL, MD)	16.7	5
Midwest (IL, OH, WI)	13.3	4

Note. GED = General Educational Development.

\*Includes those who identified as “gender-ambiguous” or “genderqueer”

\*\*Regions of United States as outlined by the U.S. Census Bureau ([http://www.census.gov/geo/www/maps/CP\\_MapProducts.htm](http://www.census.gov/geo/www/maps/CP_MapProducts.htm))

## Data Analysis

After all interviews were transcribed, both deductive and inductive thematic analyses (Braun & Clarke, 2006) were conducted. For the deductive analysis, the types of sexual stigma described by Herek et al. 2009 were utilized as codes, identified in the data, and then counted. The code for enacted sexual stigma was then refined by separating incidents into *direct* and *indirect*. For the inductive analysis, transcripts were read multiple times to familiarize ourselves with the data, and the first author made notes of initial codes across transcripts. For example, initial codes for coping included: *not telling others*

*about family, hiding family, and not speaking out against slurs.* Next, initial codes were subsumed under larger, more inclusive categories, as the goal was to use these more abstract categories to organize and synthesize the data. For example, the three examples of initial codes above were all put under the category: “*blending in.*” A typology was created in terms of the impact that sexual stigma had on participants: participants were labeled as *fearful*, *defiant*, or *detached*. We then overlaid the categories for coping with this typology to determine whether coping varied by impact type. Finally, we paid attention to how factors in various contexts (e.g., participants’ family structure, LGB visibility in the community) had an influence on how participants experienced and coped with sexual stigma.

At this point, the first author shared her coding scheme, as well as direct evidence (i.e., excerpts from transcripts) for each theme, with the second author, who provided feedback and suggested changes. The coding scheme was then modified and refined. The third author was then enlisted to independently code the data for primary categories, providing for a reliability check of the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Intercode agreement ranged from 86% to 97% ( $M = 90\%$ ) across coding categories [reliability = # of agreements/(total # of agreements + disagreements); Miles & Huberman]. The few existing disagreements in coding were discussed, leading to a final revision of the coding scheme that all authors agreed most accurately reflected the data.

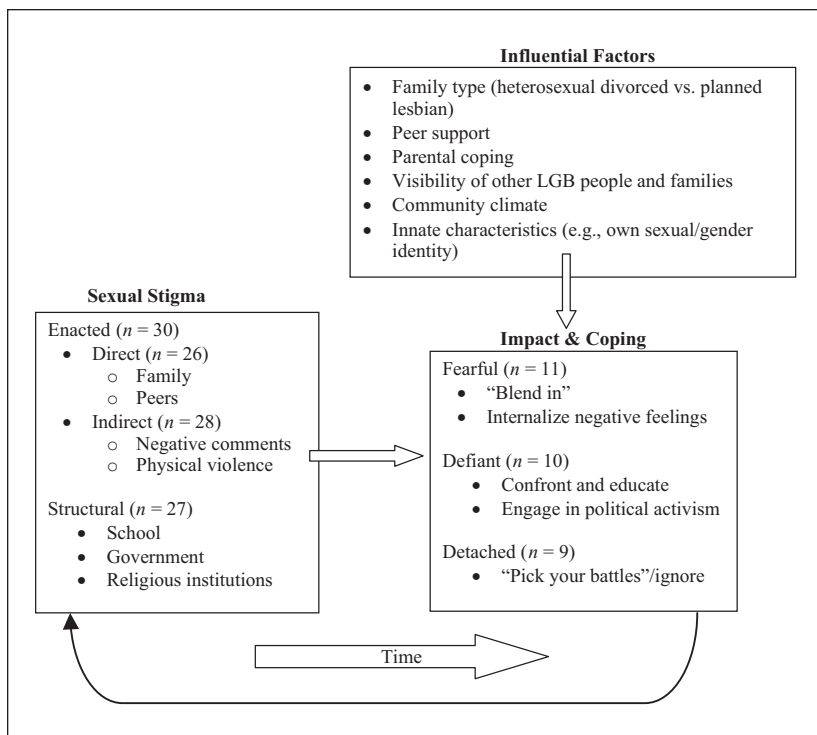
## Findings

### *Sexual Stigma in the Lives of Participants With Lesbian Mothers*

Both enacted and structural sexual stigma, as identified by Herek et al. (2009), were reported by participants in our study. Two types (direct and indirect) of enacted sexual stigma are discussed first, followed by structural sexual stigma. See Figure 1 for a summary of the findings.

**Enacted Sexual Stigma.** All participants recalled witnessing or experiencing at least one incident of *enacted* sexual stigma—individual behavior based on assumptions or personal prejudices about any nonheterosexual form of behavior, identity, relationship, or community. Two subtypes were identified in the data: direct and indirect.

**Direct.** Direct enacted sexual stigma referred to behavior in response to the participant or the participant’s family, and was described by most participants ( $n = 26$ ; 14 from heterosexual divorced families; 16 female, six



**Figure 1.** Conceptualization of how participants experienced and coped with sexual stigma.

male, four transgender). Twenty participants (half from each family type; 13 female, five male, two transgender) discussed direct enacted sexual stigma on the part of family members, including fathers, stepparents, grandparents, and cousins. Participants said these family members made it known that they disapproved of their mothers’ sexual identity or lesbian partnerships, often-times making disparaging comments. Other participants reported a lack of recognition of familial relationships, especially the relationships between participants and their nonbiological mothers. Kristy (21 years old; born via donor insemination to her lesbian mothers) spoke about her nonbiological grandparents, who seemed to have difficulty accepting their daughter’s sexual identity and, in turn, did not to fully recognize Kristy as their grandchild: “I’m considered, I guess, one of their grandchildren, but they don’t really send me cards on my birthday like they do my older sister, because that’s their biological grandchild.”

Nine of these participants (all from heterosexual divorced families; five female, three male, one transgender) reported that their fathers relayed heteronormative attitudes. Rita (20 years old), whose mother and father divorced when she was 2 years old, referred to her father and stepmother:

They were constantly, like, trying to get me to talk about, you know that I was angry at my mom and I didn't want her to be a lesbian. . . And they just made me believe that it wasn't normal and that I should be ashamed and she was a bad person.

Certainly, youth with lesbian parents may experience enacted sexual stigma from various sources—even from inside their own families (van Gelderen et al., 2012).

Another source of direct enacted sexual stigma referred to by more than half of participants ( $n = 18$ ; 12 from heterosexual divorced families; 10 female, five male, three transgender) was peers. Most of these participants reported that their peers made heteronormative assumptions regarding family structure. Kara, who was 18 years old and born via donor insemination to her two lesbian mothers, described her middle school friend's ignorance:

One of my friends. . . like she kind of wanted me to pick which one of my parents would be the father if I were to have a father, and I had to explain to her that neither of them would be the father, because I have two mothers.

Forty percent of the participants ( $n = 12$ ; seven from heterosexual divorced families; four female, four male, four transgender) also reported that they experienced direct enacted sexual stigma in the form of teasing and harassment on the part of their peers. These participants described these incidents as taking place during middle school and/or high school ( $n = 8$ ), during both elementary and middle/high school ( $n = 2$ ), or prior to middle school ( $n = 2$ ). Most of the teasing and harassment described by these participants was targeted at participants' own sexual identity, sometimes regardless of how participants identified. Lisa (25 years old), whose mother and father divorced when she was 5 years old, discussed her middle school experiences: "I was always called like dyke or lezzy—identified as gay, even if I didn't necessarily identify that way."

*Indirect.* The vast majority of participants ( $n = 28$ ; 15 from planned lesbian families; 18 female, six male, four transgender) also reported witnessing indirect enacted sexual stigma, which referred to general individual behavior, not directly regarding the participant or the participant's family. The most

common form of indirect enacted sexual stigma, reported by more than three quarters of the study participants ( $n = 26$ ; 15 from planned lesbian families; 17 female, five male, four transgender), was negative comments about LGB people and use of slurs, such as “gay” and “fag;” peers were the primary source. Debra, who was 21 years old and had a mother and father who divorced when she was 2 years old, talked about the widespread use of these terms: “I think in middle school ‘fag’ was the big word, ‘That’s so gay.’ It was just like everywhere in slang terminology.” Some participants recalled hearing general negative comments about LGB people and about LGB parents in particular. One example came from 22-year-old Jesse, whose mother and father divorced when Jesse was 1 year old: “This girl. . . was telling me that she thinks that gay people make bad parents. . . and that everyone needs a man and a woman as role models.”

Five participants (all from heterosexual divorced families; three female, two male) also discussed physical attacks others endured for being perceived as LGB. For example, Debra (21 years old) told a story about a gay friend who was physically attacked after school by another student for being a “fag.” Further, 18-year-old Shawn, whose mother and father divorced when he was 1 year old, recalled hearing about “a lot of gay deaths and gay beatings” around the time that a movie came out about the murder of Matthew Shepard, a gay University of Wyoming student.

**Structural Sexual Stigma.** The ways in which government, schools, churches, media, and other institutions discriminate against, fail to protect, or render invisible LGB individuals and their families is what is meant here by *structural* sexual stigma. More than three quarters of study participants ( $n = 27$ ; 14 from planned lesbian families; 16 female, eight male, three transgender) reported perceiving this type of sexual stigma during their adolescence. Heather (19 years old), who was born to her two lesbian mothers via donor insemination, spoke about a lack of representation on television: “The normal family obviously is portrayed as a mom and a dad and kids, and. . . you notice those things—that, like, you’re not represented anywhere.”

Two thirds of the participants ( $n = 20$ ; half from each family type; 13 female, four male, three transgender) reported examples of structural sexual stigma in their schools. Participants pointed to the absence of LGB people and families in school curricula, as well as their schools’ antidiscrimination policies, or lack thereof. Denise (23 years old), who was born to her two lesbian mothers (and two gay fathers) via donor insemination, recalled her school’s policy: “In order to get a discount for prom, you had to be in a couple. And. . . the only couples that were recognized were heterosexual couples or a boy and girl, even if they were just friends.” Other participants referred to how

teachers and other school staff handled of antigay epithets and harassment. Heather (19 years old; planned lesbian family) spoke about her disappointment when teachers would not discipline students for using antigay slurs: "When somebody would say something like ('gay,' 'fag') and no one would say anything, especially like if a teacher heard and didn't say anything, like that was really hurtful, because, like, it was your job to make people feel safe."

Two other main sources of structural sexual stigma were governmental policy ( $n = 16$ ; nine from planned lesbian families; eight female, seven male, one transgender) and religious institutions ( $n = 10$ ; six from heterosexual divorced families; four female, four male, two transgender). Participants referred to heteronormative legislation they were aware of during their adolescence, such as bans against marriage for same-sex couples. Marie, who was 25 years old and born to her lesbian mothers via donor insemination, recalled: "I would . . . see flashes on the news of right-wing Republicans saying marriage is between a man and a woman." When recalling experiences pertaining to religion, some participants referred to general religious beliefs that discriminated against LGB people, while a few had direct contact with religious leaders who perpetuated sexual stigma. Denise (23 years old; planned lesbian family) described her experiences at her religious school:

It was made very clear that GLBT families or people weren't welcome. . . . I just remember that whenever discussing marriage or families, it was always made very clear that that was not acceptable and not sanctioned by God or Judaism.

Thus, when asked about the sexual stigma they experienced during their middle and high school years, participants described various forms of sexual stigma that were salient to them as adolescents. Most participants did not report being teased or harassed in relation to their parents' or their own sexual orientation identity, yet the sexual stigma that participants experienced did seem to have a significant influence on their lives; this impact and the meanings that participants associated with these experiences are described below.

### *Impact of Sexual Stigma on Participants and How They Coped*

As a result of exposure to sexual stigma, participants described a range of emotional responses during their adolescence. Some participants merely felt annoyed or frustrated, while others reportedly felt hurt or angry. Half of the participants ( $n = 15$ ; nine from planned lesbian families; 11 female, three male, one transgender) said their experiences with sexual stigma were a constant reminder that their families were different than most others. When 22-year-old Kim, whose mother and father divorced when she was 6 years old, was asked

what kind of impact sexual stigma had on her, she replied: "I remember, every time I would hear something, just like being reminded that my family situation is different, and just always having the feeling of difference."

Further, more than three quarters of participants ( $n = 24$ ; 13 from planned lesbian families; 16 female, four male, four transgender) talked about how sexual stigma reflected a devaluation of LGB people and families. Terry, who was 22 years old and born to two lesbian mothers via donor insemination, commented: "I understood that the role of lesbian parents and the value of lesbian parents in society was always very tenuous. . . . There were some people who felt that the world would be better off if my family didn't exist." Samantha, who was 20 years old and born to two lesbian mothers via donor insemination, explained how this devaluation can have an impact on adolescents with lesbian parents:

Even if nobody comes right out and says, "Oh, you're horrible, you're abnormal, because you have two mothers," doesn't mean you don't feel it. . . . In stuff like the [school] forms that you have to fill out [with one line for "mother" and one line for "father"] and the little "you're so gay" remarks, like all of it as a conglomeration comes together as something that makes you feel like you're lesser than or less normal.

Thus, Samantha described how powerful even indirect forms of sexual stigma can be.

Despite these common feelings of difference and devaluation, the impact that sexual stigma had on participants varied. Thus, three categories were formed based upon the impact that sexual stigma had on participants, at least initially, as adolescents. Participants in the three categories—*fearful*, *defiant*, and *detached*—and their coping strategies are described below.

**Fearful.** Eleven participants (eight from heterosexual divorced families; eight female, three male) experienced high levels of anxiety as adolescents, constantly worrying that others would tease them about their mothers' sexual orientations. Six of these participants (four from heterosexual divorced families; three female, three male) reported being teased or harassed about their mothers' or their own sexual identities. Although not all of these participants were teased by peers, they reported frequent exposure to sexual stigma in general. Denise (23 years old; planned lesbian family) felt that sexual stigma was all around her, everyday during adolescence: "It was just omnipresent." All of these participants were concerned about being teased or losing friends if peers found out they had lesbian parents. When asked why she was not open with her middle school peers about her family, Denise (23 years old; planned lesbian family) responded:



I was terrified of people knowing about my family. . . .In terms of this friend, I was afraid of losing her friendship or of her parents not wanting her to associate with me anymore. . . .And I was afraid of other people finding out. I was definitely afraid of people associating my parents' sexuality with my own. I was afraid of being teased.

Indeed, many participants felt socially vulnerable due to the mere existence of sexual stigma.

Six of these participants (four from heterosexual divorced families; four female, two male) perceived their families to be vulnerable as well. Two were afraid that their mothers might lose their jobs or custody if others became aware of the mothers' lesbian identity. The two others worried about the emotional and physical safety and well-being of their families. For example, after two of her mother's lesbian friends were attacked, leaving one of them dead, Nora (24 years old; heterosexual divorced family) had the following reaction: "I was, like, very terrified that if I came out to people they would kill my mother. . . .I was just really terrified. . . .and feeling the need to protect us." Dana, who was 25 years old and whose mother and father divorced when she was 6 years old, shared her worry about possible repercussions of coming out: "If [my mother] was outed, that could change how everybody looked at her and at me. I wouldn't just have a mom anymore—I would have a *gay* mom. I really didn't want that for me or for her." These participants revealed how and why different types of sexual stigma—and not just the actual experience of direct teasing and harassment, but also the threat of it—had an influence on their lives.

**Coping strategies.** Two main coping strategies were utilized by participants categorized as fearful in response to the vulnerability they felt in the face of sexual stigma. These were: (a) try to "blend in," and (b) internalize negative feelings. Eventually, most of these participants were able to overcome their feelings of fear; their experiences are described below.

At some point during their adolescence, about two thirds of study participants ( $n = 21$ ; 12 from heterosexual divorced families; 16 female, four male, one transgender) reported that they sometimes responded to the sexual stigma they perceived or feared by trying to "blend in" with their peers. This strategy, however, was utilized most prominently by participants who were categorized as fearful as a result of the sexual stigma they experienced: all 11 of them often attempted to blend in with their peers. Blending in involved trying not to appear different from peers or draw attention to oneself. For Lisa (25 years old; heterosexual divorced family), who was teased relentlessly in elementary and middle school for having two mothers, "every day was about

being as invisible as possible.” Participants in the fearful category said they often remained silent when they heard antigay slurs, because they worried about the repercussions of speaking out. Heather (19 years old; planned lesbian family) reflected on her middle school experience: “You’d hear people say, ‘Oh, that’s so gay,’ or like use fag or stuff like that in the halls, . . . but I would never say anything, because I didn’t want to be singled out.”

A primary way in which participants attempted to blend in with their peers was by not telling others about their families. Dana (25 years old; heterosexual divorced family) felt that it was safer not to tell her friends: “I feel like I was always on the verge of telling them, but I was just like I better play it safe and not, because it could get around.” Further, some participants actively hid their families, for example, by not inviting friends to their homes. Sometimes participants involved their parents in their attempts to hide their families: Nora (24 years old; heterosexual divorced family) would tell her mother “not to do anything obviously lesbian when people came over.” Denise (23 years old), who grew up with two lesbian moms and two gay dads, sometimes tried to involve her parents in her attempts to hide without their knowledge: “There were times that I would try to manipulate my parents . . . and have one dad come and one mom come and like pass it off as if I had a dad and a mom like anybody else.” Similar to Bozett’s (1987) participants who utilized social control strategies, Denise and others attempted to “pass” (Welsh, 2011, p. 62) by hiding their family structures behind an illusion of heterosexuality. Some of these participants who hid their families from others talked about “being ashamed of acting ashamed.” Denise spoke about her feelings of guilt and shame:

I think what was probably most painful for me was really being proud of my family and who they were and feeling so frustrated that I couldn’t outwardly protect them or defend them or speak up for their rights. . . I think part of what was so hard was just feeling guilty all the time and feeling ashamed all the time when I knew that was wrong.

Denise and others experienced a complex mix of emotions whereby their feelings of fear overwhelmed their feelings of love and pride for their families.

In some ways, blending in seemed to be gendered, in that all three of the men (and none of the women) in the fearful category described a strategy of “posturing,” such that they actively worked to create an image of themselves that others would not want to “mess with.” All three of these men had been harassed by peers for their perceived or actual sexual orientation identities, so they tried to pre-empt any further teasing or harassment that might come their

way as a result. For example, 23-year-old Chad, who was born to his lesbian mothers via donor insemination, felt there were things he could do to prevent peers, who perceived him as gay, from teasing him: "Just how I carried myself and things like that, there were things I could do to sort of mitigate some of that, or just keep people from really particularly wanting to, you know, to mess with me or whatever." Similar to previous research findings (Tasker & Golombok, 1997), male participants in our study seemed likely to experience harassment in relation to their own sexual identities—thus, they attempted to change their personas to better blend in with their peers.

Six participants in this category (five from heterosexual divorced families; four female, two male) also tried to cope with sexual stigma by internalizing negative feelings rather than dealing with them. When Rita (20 years old; heterosexual divorced family) was asked about the impact sexual stigma had on her, she stated: "It was hard for me. . . . I internalized everything, just kind of bottled it up and let it sit there." Tom (22 years old; mother and father divorced when he was 5 years old) realized he was gay in middle school and was closeted about both his own and his mother's sexual orientations throughout his adolescence. He explained how internalizing his feelings contributed to his three suicide attempts during his adolescence:

Years of holding things back . . . it builds up and you blow up, and I did it in a very big way. . . . And I think that isn't so much a function of growing up with lesbian parents, it's more just growing up in general and having issues to deal with. But, without question, the fact that I didn't know how to address (sexual stigma) in school . . . played a part.

Tara, who was 20 years old and was born into the context of a heterosexual relationship (her mother and father were never married), was so worried that others would find out about her mother that she left middle school for several months:

I just had a lot of anxiety about meeting people and forming relationships. . . and just kind of judgment by association, that I actually ended up stopping going to school and was home schooled for a while. . . . I kind of made myself sick all the time just unconsciously.

Indeed, the experience of sexual stigma had severely negative effects on some participants—some of whom were teased and others who were not.

*Overcoming the fear.* Nine participants (seven from heterosexual divorced families; seven female, two male) in the fearful category were significantly

less so by the end of high school. This change was sometimes attributed to participants' own "growing up" and becoming more self-assured, as well as growing up on the part of their peers, who became less outwardly heteronormative over time. For others, the "turning point" was when they received positive feedback and support from friends. For example, when Heather (19 years old; planned lesbian family) told her high school friends about her mother, they responded well, changing the impact that sexual stigma had her:

In high school, I started to be more open about it and tell more people. . . . The more. . . I consistently had positive responses from them, the more comfortable I felt being open generally about it. . . . So I started to be much more comfortable and realized that it didn't really matter to people, and if it did matter to people, then they weren't worth my time.

For Denise (23 years old; planned lesbian family), her feelings of fear changed drastically—she reportedly felt "empowered"—after meeting other youth with LGB parents (Welsh, 2011):

After freshman year, I found COLAGE (organization for youth with LGBTQ parents) . . . and that totally changed my life. Just being in a space. . . with those other teens, was just mind boggling, because we all had so much in common. . . . And it was empowering to know that there were other people out there and that we could do something about this.

Indeed, six participants (five from heterosexual divorced families; four female, two male), who were able to overcome their fear—many of them by building up their networks of social support—eventually exhibited characteristics of those categorized as *defiant* in the face of sexual stigma.

**Defiant.** Ten participants (half from each family type; four transgender, three female, three male) were categorized as being defiant in the face of sexual stigma, in that they did not become fearful or allow sexual stigma to push them "in the closet"—in fact, they pushed back against it. Five of the 10 participants categorized as defiant (three from heterosexual divorced families; four transgender, one male) were teased or harassed before or during their adolescence in relation to their mothers' or their own actual or perceived sexual orientations. Jason (19 years old; four when his mother and father divorced) came out as gay in middle school and faced resistance from his school and community when he tried to start a gay-straight alliance (GSA) in high school. He was verbally and physically harassed by students, teachers, and others. When asked how he responded to the sexual stigma he faced, he

stated: "Every time someone would say something derogatory to me or anytime I would have to face homophobia or heterosexism, I just grew stronger in my beliefs." Indeed, some of these participants felt that the sexual stigma they faced as adolescents made them stronger. Amy, who was 20 years old and born to her "already out" single lesbian mother, explained how her experiences with sexual stigma had an influence on her:

I feel like in a lot of ways they've made me feel more confident. . . . I feel like being able to get through all of that and learning to defend myself and my family has made me really value myself and my family as something worth defending. . . . It's taught me how to take care of myself, it's taught me that I'm something worth taking care of.

Many of these participants attributed their defiant response to being innately self-assured. Amy (20 years old; planned lesbian family) reflected: "I am a very strong-willed person just naturally." Their outspoken personalities were often in contrast to their parents and their siblings. For example, 23-year-old David, who was born to his lesbian mothers via donor insemination, said: "I'm sure it's inside of me, because I don't think my sister has the same idea. It's being who you are no matter what, not letting it get to you."

*Coping.* Two coping strategies were used prominently by participants labeled as defiant. These were: (a) confront and/or educate others, and (b) get involved in formal political activism.

More than two thirds of participants ( $n = 22$ ; 12 from planned lesbian families; 14 female, four male, four transgender) said they reacted to the sexual stigma they faced by confronting and/or educating others at some point during their adolescence. All 10 of the participants in the defiant category regularly responded in this way. Many of these participants felt they or their families were being attacked or insulted when people used generalized, derogatory remarks, such as "gay" or "fag," and, thus, verbally confronted the perpetrators. Some, like Jesse (22 years old; heterosexual divorced family), said they would try to educate their peers:

These two people, who were really good friends of mine at camp, had all these homophobic things to say, and I just like sat down with them, and I would like process with them, and I would be like "Chris, why do you think that that's weird?"

Eight of these participants (five from planned lesbian families; three female, three transgender, two male) were also open with others about having lesbian mothers throughout the majority of their adolescence; they would often come

out about their families when confronting and educating others and also when simply getting to know their peers. Some participants described coming out to their friends about their families prior to bringing them home, in order to protect their families from potential negative reactions. Kim (22 years old; heterosexual divorced family) explained: "Home has always been like a really safe, like, comfort place for me, and I think that I just wanted to protect that space." Growing up around other youth with LGB parents seemed to play a role in why some of these participants were so open about their families. Jesse (22 years old; heterosexual divorced family) said: "It just didn't occur to me that I should not say something about it. I think it had to do with the fact that we had friends who had queer parents and queer families." Perhaps visibility of and access to other LGB-parent families helped some of these participants to feel more comfortable being open about their families than they might otherwise.

Six of the participants in the defiant category (half from each family type; four transgender, two female) identified as LGBTQ by the time they were adults (participants were not asked about their sexual orientations, but several revealed their identities during the interviews). Perhaps these participants realized that they had an even bigger stake in confronting sexual stigma for themselves in addition to their families (Kuvallanka & Goldberg, 2009). Not all of these participants, however, were always out about their nonheterosexual or gender nonconforming identities during their adolescence. Two of these participants, who were actively and visibly engaged in confronting sexual stigma on behalf of their families, did so at least partly to divert attention from their own sexualities. Amy (20 years old; planned lesbian family), who identified as lesbian and then queer during adolescence, sometimes utilized her mother's sexual identity to deflect from her own when she heard antigay slurs and confronted the perpetrators:

I would say like, "Don't say that, my mom is a lesbian," when I didn't feel comfortable outing myself. I remember at summer camp that happened, 'cause I didn't want to be out, because I was in a cabin with a bunch of girls. . . . and someone was saying, "that's so gay" constantly, and so I told her to stop. I told her that my mom was a lesbian.

For many participants (regardless of their sexual orientations) it was not easy to disentangle how sexual stigma had an influence on them in relation to their families and themselves; indeed, their responses to sexual stigma were tied to both their individual and familial identities.

Eight of the 10 participants (half from each family type; three transgender, three male, two female) in the defiant category discussed the strategy of

getting involved in formal political activism. Similar to Goldberg's (2007a) findings, by joining, creating, or leading their schools' GSAs, these participants provided formal education to others about sexual stigma, and about LGBTQ people and families in general. A few participants, such as Kim (22 years old; heterosexual divorced family), described coming out to their entire schools as part of this work: "My GSA did an all-school assembly on. . . homophobia and gayness, and I had Barb [her non-biological mom] come. . . and speak in front of the entire school." Amy (20 years old; planned lesbian family) explained why getting involved in formal political activism was important for her coping:

Being politically involved was my salvation. Being part of the GSA and knowing that like not only was this important to me, but this was an actual important struggle and like feeling that value and that justification and being part of something larger than myself.

Indeed, getting involved in political activism helped some participants to feel less marginalized and more empowered to confront the sexual stigma they faced.

*Detached.* Nine participants (seven from planned lesbian families; seven female, two male) were categorized as detached from most of the potential negative effects of sexual stigma; thus, sexual stigma did not seem to play a major role in their lives. Although one of these participants (one female) was teased in elementary school for having lesbian mothers, five reported that they did not face much sexual stigma during adolescence. Some of them described their communities as "liberal" or, in one case, as "the lesbian capital of the world." When asked about the sexual stigma she faced as an adolescent, Kristy (21 years old; planned lesbian family) responded: "I think this area is kind of better for that, because we live in more of a liberal area . . . there are a lot of gay parents or gay families there." Perhaps living in communities in which they did not have to endure harassment, or frequent exposure to other types of sexual stigma, allowed these participants to remain relatively unscathed from potential negative effects of sexual stigma.

When they were confronted with sexual stigma, participants in this category described it as "not a big deal." Samantha (20 years old; planned lesbian family) explained:

I mean, like, all of the things that I was dealing with in middle school, that wasn't a huge (deal). It was sort of like an added, I don't know, like annoyance to all the things I was worried about, but it certainly wasn't, like, the governing factor.

Similarly, 18-year-old Rachel, who was born into the context of a heterosexual relationship (her mother and father were never married), explained: "It was more of like a minor every day irritation, and made me feel more like there is something wrong with all these other people, and not really like there was anything wrong with me." Thus, the participants in this category were able to externalize the sexual stigma they encountered.

Further, although the vast majority of participants ( $n = 28$ ; half from each family type; 17 female, seven male, four transgender) spoke about the importance of familial support in their lives as adolescents, participants in the detached category particularly spoke about having the sense that their families were "whole" or "complete," and how that helped them to deal with the impact of sexual stigma. Kendra (23 years old; born to her lesbian mothers via donor insemination) said the following when asked for reasons why she was able to cope so well with sexual stigma: "In my family, I never felt like I was searching for something that was missing or lost, and that's probably a huge part of it." Likewise, 20-year-old Jenny, who was born to her lesbian mothers via donor insemination, was very close to her immediate family during adolescence; she spoke about why she thought the sexual stigma that existed in her extended family did not bother her:

I knew why I didn't know my birth mom's parents . . . I knew that they didn't want to be a part of my life. I knew my dad's family didn't really want to be a part of my life. I knew that existed, but I knew that I didn't need them to exist either. I had other people.

Additionally, some of these participants referred to the positive role-modeling of their mothers. When Samantha (20 years old; planned lesbian family) was asked why she thought she was able to handle sexual stigma so well during her adolescence, she replied:

It's probably mostly due to my parents. They're pretty resilient themselves, especially my non-biological mom . . . she has always really stood up for me and stood up for herself and our family. . . . I think I owe it all to them.

Thus, the sexual stigma that these participants experienced also seemed to be mitigated somewhat by their sense that their families were strong despite the sexual stigma in their lives.

**Coping strategies.** The most prominent coping strategy amongst participants in the detached category was not fighting back against the sexual stigma they experienced but, rather, ignoring it (van Gelderen et al., 2012). Six of



these participants (five from planned lesbian families; five female, one male) chose not to fight back against every instance of sexual stigma but, rather, to pick their battles. Kristy (21 years old; planned lesbian family) explained why she did not always respond when she heard antigay remarks: "I think you start to realize that you can't fight with everybody, because it would be just exhausting." Many of these participants simply ignored the sexual stigma they perceived. Melissa (20 years old), who was born to her lesbian mothers via donor insemination, described her reaction when her peers used the word "gay" in a disparaging way: "I've never been like, 'Don't use that word around me' . . . I'd just ignore it and brush it off. . . . They're just ignorant." Participants in this category detached themselves from the sexual stigma that they perceived, not allowing it to play a central role in their lives.

**Conclusion.** The sexual stigma that participants encountered changed in type and frequency over time, and so did the impact that it had on them. As previously discussed, six of the 11 fearful participants behaved in ways similar to those in the defiant category by the end of high school, while three (two from heterosexual divorced families; all female) appeared to be detached from the sexual stigma they faced late in their adolescence. Indeed, these categorizations of *fearful*, *defiant*, and *detached* were not necessarily final destinations. Denise (23 years old; planned lesbian family), who was defiant in her later years of high school, briefly returned to being "terrified" and closeted about her family when she entered college: "I was really afraid that coming to a Midwest school, I was going to meet a lot of conservative people." Denise quickly built up a new network of support, allowing her to eventually fight back against the sexual stigma she encountered in her new surroundings. Thus, the role that sexual stigma plays in the lives of youth with LGB parents likely changes, as their contexts continually change.

## Discussion

This article expands upon previous research on LGB-parent families by providing an in-depth exploration into how 30 emerging adults with lesbian mothers reportedly experienced and coped with the various forms of sexual stigma they faced during adolescence. Similar to previous studies of youth and young adults with LGB parents (e.g., Gartrell et al., 2005; Kosciw & Diaz, 2008), participants of the current study reported perceiving and experiencing sexual stigma, with 40% enduring teasing or harassment by peers. While previous studies have, importantly, focused primarily on the direct enacted sexual stigma that these youth face, we found that other types of sexual stigma (i.e., indirect enacted and structural; Herek et al., 2009) were

also salient for the majority of participants and had a significant impact on their lives. Findings of the current study also contribute to the literature by suggesting that use of primary coping strategies differed depending upon participants' reactions to the sexual stigma they encountered, and that changing contexts and the presence or absence of certain factors (e.g., visibility of other LGB people and families in community) had an influence on participants' reactions and coping.

### *Why the Different Reactions to Sexual Stigma?*

The impact of sexual stigma on participants varied, and three different categories of responses to sexual stigma were identified: fearful, defiant, and detached. The 12 participants who were teased or harassed in relation to their own or their mothers' sexual orientations had strikingly different reactions; half of these participants responded with fear, while about half responded with defiance. All participants in the fearful and defiant categories, including those who did not experience teasing or harassment, referred to the indirect enacted and structural sexual stigma in their environments that threatened both themselves and their families. Yet, those who were fearful coped by attempting to become invisible amongst their peers, while those who were defiant made themselves extremely visible as they fought back against the sexual stigma they faced. Other participants were able to remain mostly detached from the sexual stigma they experienced and ignore it, thereby deflecting the potential negative impact of sexual stigma.

Participants pointed to several factors in their lives that may help to explain these findings. Most, although not all, in the fearful category were from heterosexual divorced families and had fathers who displayed heteronormative attitudes. Many of these participants worried about the vulnerability of their families, including concerns about their mothers retaining child custody—thus, family type likely was a contributing factor for some. Other factors, such as visibility of other LGB-parent families and community climate were also likely influential. Some of our defiant participants said that knowing other LGB-parent families led them to be open about their own families (Bos et al., 2008); thus, visibility of LGB people and families in communities may lessen feelings of isolation. Moreover, meeting other youth with LGB parents was a positive turning point for some in the fearful category (Welsh, 2011), perhaps partly due to the importance of identity building during adolescence (Collins & Laursen, 2004). In striking contrast to those who were fearful, participants who were able to remain detached from sexual stigma perceived their communities as “liberal” and, thus, unsaturated with sexual stigma, pointing to the relevance of community

climate to well-being (Goldberg & Smith, 2011). Given that most participants in the detached category were from planned lesbian families, we wonder whether most of these mothers purposefully migrated to socially progressive communities prior to having their children. Lastly, youth's own sexual orientation and gender identities emerged as meaningful. The perspectives of "second generation" individuals (LGBTQ youth with LGBTQ parents; Kuvalanka & Goldberg, 2009) are in need of further exploration, given that these youth may be likely to experience direct sexual stigma in relation to their own sexual and gender identities in addition to that of their parents (Kuvalanka & Goldberg, 2009).

### *Implications for Practice and Policy*

This study has important implications for practitioners. Therapists working with LGB-parent families should be aware of potential heteronormative attitudes on the part of some family members—not just others outside of the family. Participants reported fathers' and extended family members' disapproval, as well as beliefs that participants' relationships with their nonbiological lesbian mothers were not as significant, or "real," as participants' bonds with their blood relatives. Family professionals could help to increase understanding of the meaning and significance of these relationships. Further, family professionals should be aware that sexual stigma is experienced in various ways by adolescents with lesbian parents, and reactions vary. The increased importance of peer groups during adolescence (Collins & Laursen, 2004) puts into context the finding that having friends who reacted positively to participants' coming out about their families played an important role in helping them to overcome their secrecy. Family professionals, then, may want to focus their efforts on children with heterosexual parents to teach them how to be supportive allies and friends for youth with LGB parents (Kuvalanka, 2012).

This study also has important implications for policies at the community, state, and federal levels—in schools, churches, and state and federal governments. School staff should be aware of how their policies may promote sexual stigma and should seek to make institutional-level changes, such as those recommended by Jeltova and Fish (2005). Moreover, policies could be created that advise teachers and staff—at elementary, middle, and high schools—on how to recognize and stop the sexual stigma they witness or perpetrate, in order to promote a safe learning environment. Finally, policy-makers need to realize that many adolescents with lesbian parents (and, likely, those with gay, bisexual, and transgender parents, as well) hear

anti-LGBT rhetoric and are reportedly influenced by it. The enactment of antidiscrimination laws and policies would help ensure the rights of LGB parents to keep their jobs and retain custody of their children, regardless of how “out” they are about their sexual identities. Further, funding of programs and organizations, such as COLAGE, that bring youth with LGBTQ parents together also is warranted given the positive impact of such relationship-building for participants.

### *Limitations and Future Research Directions*

The study recruitment methods present obvious limitations. The volunteer sample (mostly White and well educated), recruited primarily through LGBTQ-oriented organizations, was a self-selected group that is not representative of all young adults with lesbian parents. For example, youth with lesbian mothers, who are also members of minority racial and ethnic groups, may perceive, experience, and cope with sexual stigma differently than members of the majority racial/ethnic culture. They also likely experience racism in addition to, or conjunction with, sexual stigma. Exploring the role of such demographic variables as race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status would lead to a more nuanced understanding of the diverse experiences and needs of this population. Moreover, similar studies that focus on youth with gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer parents are also critically needed. Further, given that our findings revealed some gendered differences in coping (van Gelderen et al., 2012)—and that research on child and adolescent coping in general has revealed differential use and effectiveness of coping strategies dependent upon gender (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Skinner, 2002)—future research could explore such variability among youth with LGBTQ parents. Lastly, more studies are needed that examine mechanisms for resilience among youth with LGBTQ parents to increase understanding of how the majority manage to exhibit positive well-being in the face of sexual stigma. Such understanding would help practitioners and others to better serve this population, especially those bearing the brunt of society’s heteronormativity.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

Funding for this research was received from the American Psychological Foundation (Roy Scrivner Research Grant, 2005) and the National Council on Family Relations (Jessie Bernard Outstanding Research Proposal from a Feminist Perspective Award, 2005).

## References

- Arnett, J. J. (2000). Emerging adulthood. *American Psychologist*, 55, 469-480.
- Biblarz, T. J., & Savci, E. (2010). Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender families. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 72, 480-497.
- Bos, H. M. W., & Van Balen, F. (2008). Children in planned lesbian families: Stigmatisation, psychological adjustment, and protective factors. *Culture, Health, & Sexuality*, 10, 221-236.
- Bos, H. M. W., Gartrell, N. K., Peyser, H., & Van Balen, F. (2008). The USA National Longitudinal Lesbian Family Study (NLLFS): Homophobia, psychological adjustment, and protective factors. *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 12, 455-471.
- Bozett, F. (1987). Children of gay fathers. In F. W. Bozett (Ed.), *Gay and lesbian parents* (pp. 39-57). New York, NY: Praeger.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 77-101.
- Collins, W. A., & Laursen, B. (2004). Changing relationships, changing youth: Interpersonal contexts of adolescent development. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 24, 55-62.
- Gartrell, N., Deck, A., Rodas, C., Peyser, H., & Banks, A. (2005). The National Lesbian Family Study: 4. Interviews with the 10-year-old children. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 75, 518-524.
- Goldberg, A. E. (2007a). (How) does it make a difference? Perspectives of adults with lesbian, gay, and bisexual parents. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 77, 550-562.
- Goldberg, A. E. (2007b). Talking about family: Disclosure practices of adults raised by lesbian, gay, and bisexual parents. *Journal of Family Issues*, 28, 100-131.
- Goldberg, A. E., & Kuvalanka, K. A. (2012). Marriage (in)equality: The experiences and perspectives of young adults with LGB parents. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 74, 34-52.
- Goldberg, A. E., & Smith, J. Z. (2011). Stigma, social context, and mental health: Lesbian and gay couples across the transition to adoptive parenthood. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 58, 139-150.
- Herek, G. M., Gillis, J. R., & Cogan, J. C. (2009). Internalized stigma among sexual minority adults: Insights from a social psychological perspective. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 56, 32-43.
- Jeltova, I., & Fish, M. C. (2005). Creating school environments responsive to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender families: Traditional and systemic approaches for consultation. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation*, 16, 17-33.
- Joos, K. E., & Broad, K. L. (2007). Coming out of the family closet: Stories of adult women with LGBTQ parents. *Qualitative Sociology*, 30, 275-295.
- Kitzinger, C. (1996). Speaking of oppression: Psychology, politics, and the language of power. In E. D. Rothblum & L. A. Bond (Eds.), *Preventing heterosexism and homophobia* (pp. 3-19). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

- Kochenderfer-Ladd, B., & Skinner, K. (2002). Children's coping strategies: Moderators of the effects of peer victimization? *Developmental Psychology*, 38, 267-278.
- Kosciw, J. G., & Diaz, E. M. (2008). *Involved, invisible, ignored: The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender parents and their children in our nation's K-12 schools*. New York, NY: Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network.
- Kusalanka, K. A. (2012). The kids may be all right, but some might still end up in your office: Working with children of LGBTQ parents. In J. J. Bigner & J. L. Wetchler (Eds.), *Handbook of LGBT-affirmative couple and family therapy* (pp. 167-182). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Kusalanka, K. A., & Goldberg, A. E. (2009). "Second Generation" voices: Queer youth with lesbian/bisexual mothers. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 38, 904-919.
- Leddy, A., Gartrell, N., & Bos, H. (2012). Growing up in a lesbian family: The life experiences of the adult daughters and sons of lesbian mothers. *Journal of GLBT Family Studies*, 8, 243-257.
- Lindsay, J., Perlesz, A., Brown, R., McNair, R., de Vaus, D., & Pitts, M. (2006). Stigma or respect: Lesbian-parented families negotiating school settings. *Sociology*, 40, 1059-1077.
- Litovich, M. L., & Langhout, R. D. (2004). Framing heterosexism in lesbian families: A preliminary examination of resilient coping. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, 14, 411-435.
- Marshall, C. M., & Rossman, G. B. (1999). *Designing qualitative research* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Oswald, R. F., Blume, L. B., & Marks, S. (2005). Decentering heteronormativity: A model for family studies. In V. L. Bengtson, A. C. Acock, K. R. Allen, P. Dilworth-Anderson, & D. M. Klein (Eds.), *Sourcebook of family theory & research* (pp. 143-154). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Richman, K. D. (2009). *Courting change: Queer parents, judges, and the transformation of American family law*. New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Rivers, I., Poteat, V. P., & Noret, N. (2008). Victimization, social support, and psychosocial functioning among children of same-sex and opposite-sex couples in the United Kingdom. *Developmental Psychology*, 44, 127-134.
- Tasker, F. L., & Golombok, S. (1995). Adults raised as children in lesbian families. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 65, 203-215.
- Tasker, F. L., & Golombok, S. (1997). *Growing up in a lesbian family: Effects on child development*. London, UK: Guilford Press.
- van Gelderen, L., Gartrell, N., Bos, H. M. W., van Rooij, F. B., & Hermanns, J. M. A. (2012). Stigmatization associated with growing up in a lesbian-parented family: What do adolescents experience and how do they deal with it? *Children and Youth Services Review*, 34, 999-1006. doi:10.1016/j.childyouth.2012.01.048
- Welsh, M. G. (2011). Growing up in a same-sex parented family: The voice of adolescent experience. *Journal of GLBT Family Studies*, 7, 49-71.

Wright, J. M. (1998). *Lesbian stepfamilies: An ethnography of love*. Binghamton, NY: Haworth.

### **Author Biographies**

**Katherine Kuvalanka** is an Assistant Professor of Family Studies. Her research interests include examining factors within a range of contexts that pose challenges to and foster resilience among families with LGBTQ members.

**Leigh A. Leslie** is an Associate Professor of Family Science and Director of Graduate Studies. Her research interests include gender issues, social support, and ethnic families.

**Rachel Radina** is a doctoral student in Educational Leadership. Her research interests include family-community-school partnerships, community organizing and education reform, and resistance theory in educational contexts.