More Natural Does Not Equal More Normal: Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual People's Views About Different Pathways to Parenthood

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Abstract
Heterosexual reproduction is often seen as *normal* and *natural*, with the two descriptors commonly understood as mutually reinforcing. I argue that, despite their apparent similarity, the meanings of "normal" and "natural" are distinct in important ways—a distinction that questions the positioning of lesbian motherhood and gay fatherhood as inferior. Through an analysis of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people's ethical judgments about different ways of creating families, I show that pathways to parenthood that make a family appear "more normal" rely on means of reproduction that seem, in fact, "less natural." Conversely, reproductive possibilities seen as "more organic" create families that depart more substantially from the cultural norm of the nuclear family. As a result of this tension, different pathways to parenthood can be justified as being "in children's best interests." However, while this children-centered justification can be flexibly applied, it also has contradictory meanings.

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Introduction

When it comes to parenthood outside the realm of heterosexual reproduction, arguments about ethics and morality tend to be mobilized by socially conservative critics who sometimes question the righteousness of the mere idea of parenting by people who self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ). In turn, sexual-minority parents, along with their liberal allies, often refute these arguments by drawing attention to positive aspects of LGBTQ family life. What can be lost, or strategically ignored, in such polarized debates is the ambivalence experienced by sexual minorities, including their own views about different ways of creating families.

In this article, drawing on interviews conducted with lesbian, gay, and bisexual people in England and Wales, who do not have children but may have them in the future, I explore some of the ethical considerations the interviewees expressed when prompted to think about parenthood and about the different methods that enable people to become parents without engaging in heterosexual sex (what I refer to as "pathways to parenthood"). I draw specific attention to how, in this ethical reasoning, the concepts of "normal" and "natural" relate to each other, and what consequences this relationship has for reproductive decision making of same-sex couples and LGBTQ individuals. I suggest that revealing the disjunctures behind the meanings of normality and naturalness exposes biases inherent in societal expectations that determine what forms of parenthood are seen as morally superior or problematic and what is popularly understood as being "in children's best interests."

Before presenting my research findings, I situate this study vis-à-vis three themes, or perspectives on pathways to parenthood, distilled from the social science scholarship on lesbian motherhood and gay fatherhood, to which this article aims to contribute: (1) concerns about children's needs and welfare, (2) processes of normalization and naturalization, and (3) ethical dimensions of planning for parenthood. Throughout this article, I use the three themes as interrelated "lenses" through which we can make sense of some of the contradictions in lesbian, gay, and bisexual people's reasoning about how to create a family.

The Overarching Priority of Children's Needs

One of the most consistent findings of research on LGBTQ parenthood is that the fundamental principle underlying people's reproductive decisions is the prioritization of child welfare (e.g., Ravelingien et al., 2015; Scholz & Riggs, 2014; Touroni & Coyle, 2002). For example, studies of lesbians who became parents with donor sperm through private arrangements find that, as they

"anticipate a child's future interest" (Ryan-Flood, 2005, p. 196), mothers manage relationships with the donor according to "developing views on how to meet their children's needs" (Haimes & Weiner, 2000, p. 484), which are seen as "an over-arching priority" (Almack, 2006, p. 19).

Sexual-minority parents often recall being hesitant about having children, or about "coming out" if they had children already, for fear of negative repercussions their unconventional family circumstances may have for their offspring. For instance, in one of the earliest sociological studies of nonheterosexual people's family relationships in Britain (conducted in the mid-1990s, before parenthood by same-sex couples received legal protection), parents were "acutely aware that the dominant culture fails to recognise the validity of their family" and, "above all," they were "concerned that their children should not be unduly penalised for a situation over which they have little control" (Weeks, Heaphy, & Donovan, 2001, p. 174). In a U.S. study, Berkowitz and Marsiglio (2007) also report that the gay fathers they interviewed had been "fearful that their children's futures would be overwhelmed with adversity" (p. 375), even though actual discrimination was rarely mentioned. More recently, in a study of adoptive parents in Britain, some lesbian mothers and gay fathers recalled feeling "worried that their children might be disadvantaged or stigmatized" and "concerned that fulfilling their desire to parent would not be in the best interests of a child" (Jennings, Mellish, Tasker, Lamb, & Golombok, 2014, p. 215).

The focus on children's best interests in the academic debates about LGBTQ parenthood stems from popular criticisms directed at sexual-minority parents as unable to provide what children require. Almack (2005) argues that the rhetoric of children's needs is a powerful device that supports the traditional family unit and, as a result, lesbian mothers "may have to work harder than most [parents] to demonstrate that their child's welfare is not in jeopardy" (p. 245). This "work" is made explicit in studies of lesbian mothers' and gay fathers' reproductive decision making, which show that achieving social acceptance often requires a "strategic" approach to parenthood.

Normalizing and Naturalizing Lesbian Motherhood and Gay Fatherhood

In her analysis of debates about lesbian and gay parenting in the late 1990s, Clarke (2002) describes discursive practices such as emphasizing the ordinariness of sexual-minority parents (by highlighting, for example, that they are "just like" heterosexual parents) as "normalizing strategies." Such strategies can be identified in studies of gay fathers, which often report the men's commitment to convention, contrasting it with the hypothesis that

LGBTQ parenthood offers a radical alternative to a nuclear family headed by a heterosexual couple (e.g., Lewin, 2009; Smietana, 2017). Research on lesbian mothers further suggests that parenthood itself can make homosexuality appear more conventional. For instance, in an early anthropological study, Lewin (1993) argued that motherhood normalized lesbianism, making it intelligible to others, especially women's own parents. More recently, in her research on lesbian donor conception (and following from Lewin's findings), Nordqvist (2015) showed how pregnancy and childbirth, in particular, "acted as powerful processes of normalizing lesbian life and making the unfamiliar familiar" (p. 496).

An important aspect of how well a family fits a norm is how parents present themselves to others, which foregrounds the significance of biology and genetics in what people see as kinship. Studies of same-sex couples who have decided to become parents through assisted reproduction emphasize the importance the couples attach to being publicly recognized as a family (e.g., Donovan & Wilson, 2008; Jones, 2005). A central consideration here is the recognition of the parent who is not genetically related to the child (e.g., Mamo, 2005; Murphy, 2013). For example, in a study of Australian gay men who became fathers via surrogacy, Dempsey (2013) found that the men carefully managed biogenetic paternity "in an attempt to subvert potential favoritism or discrimination among friends, family and strangers which could in turn compromise the strength of extended family relationships for the nonbiological father" (p. 50). In the United Kingdom, Nordqvist (2010) reported that, in the process of donor selection, lesbian couples "matched" donors so that children resembled nonbiological mothers, making their families look "natural." Underlying these decisions were not so much "preferences" but rather expectations about how the family would be treated, which made the donors' ethnic background also relevant. Similar to the women in the study by Ravelingien et al. (2015), many White couples interviewed by Nordqvist (2012) avoided selecting a donor of a different ethnicity as they feared their child might encounter racism as well as homophobia.

Reproductive Decision Making as an Ethical Process

Concerns about how their children would be treated in a homophobic society were frequently voiced by women in the earlier research on lesbian motherhood and donor conception, which often responded to negative depictions of lesbian mothers as "selfish" and "morally suspect" by highlighting the women's efforts to protect the integrity of their families (e.g., Donovan & Wilson, 2008; Haimes & Weiner, 2000). These efforts usually involved difficult decisions relating to sperm donors, which posed various ethical dilemmas. For

example, studying lesbian mothers in Sweden, Ryan-Flood (2005) reported that the women "felt a strong moral obligation" to provide their children with knowledge about paternal lineage and "a sense of guilt" deterred them from choosing an unknown donor (p. 195). Similarly, in the study by Almack (2005), women provided accounts that were "deeply imbued with moral discourses around obligations and responsibilities to children," demonstrating efforts to reconcile their family practices with the "dominant convention of good motherhood" (p. 246).

More recent research on adoption highlights a different ethical component of planning for parenthood. In the study by Jennings et al. (2014), "the importance of parents' sense of morality in their decision making" (p. 222) was a common theme. "In contrast to heterosexual parents," the authors explain, "same-sex couples presented the moral argument as a reason that prevented them from trying to conceive" (p. 219). They report further: "Moral discomfort with assisted reproduction was a key reason given by same-sex couples for deciding to adopt as their first choice" (p. 219). Similarly, in a study of adoptive gay fathers in the United States, many men "expressed moral and ethical concerns that had led them to reject surrogacy as an option," with some describing this pathway to parenthood as "selfish" and "wrong" (Goldberg, 2012, p. 43). In contrast, adopting children was viewed as "just the right thing to do" (p. 55).

We can see from these two contexts, in which the moral dimensions of reproductive decision making are brought to the fore, that the "practicality" of planning for parenthood is rarely ethically neutral. Drawing on her work with gay fathers, Lewin (2009) argues that deciding how to create a family involves making moral judgments about how one wants parenthood to resonate with other values that animate one's life. With the rapidly changing landscape of LGBTQ parenthood, it is useful to understand how these judgments are made.

Research Question

Studies of lesbian-mother and gay-father families make it clear that multiple factors are likely to play a role in deciding how to become a parent—they can encourage people to pursue parenthood in a particular way by both pulling them toward certain means of creating a family and pushing them away from others. LGBTQ people—perhaps, because of the higher risk of being criticized, to a greater extent than others—are likely to inform their reproductive decisions by interconnected considerations about what is in the best interest of children, what seems normal or natural, and what appears to be a "good" thing to do. It is evident in the stories of lesbian mothers and gay fathers that, even if parents recall feeling strongly about their decisions, their choices

often involve difficult deliberations. However, retrospective studies of parenthood are likely to give only a partial picture of the ambivalence experienced by prospective parents—let alone people who, for a variety of reasons, end up not having children. To better understand the perceptions and judgments behind reproductive decision making, it is important to explore in greater detail earlier stages of LGBTQ "family planning"—prior to final decisions about whether or not to have children and about *how* to become a parent. This article thus asks the following question: What can we gain in our understanding of lesbian motherhood and gay fatherhood, including the three perspectives on pathways to parenthood reviewed above, when we explore them from the viewpoint of those who may not (yet) be invested in (a specific way of) creating a family?

Method

Data presented in this article come from an interview study, which explored views about parenthood in a young generation of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people in Britain. The study examined what men and women in their twenties and early thirties, who had no children, thought about becoming parents in the future. The interviews focused on narratives of imagining prospective parenthood and different reproductive possibilities.

Context

Compared with lesbian mothers and gay fathers examined in existing literature, the men and women in this study entered their adulthood when, legally, there were more possibilities to become parents in a nonheterosexual context. In Britain, different pathways to parenthood opened up for same-sex couples and LGBTQ individuals in an exceptionally short period of time. Soon after homosexuality ceased to be legally defined as a "pretended family relationship" (under Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988, overturned in 2001), same-sex couples were allowed to jointly adopt (Children and Adoption Act 2002), the rights of nonbiological parents were protected through a new form of relationship recognition (Civil Partnership Act 2004), and it became generally easier to pursue parenthood through assisted conception. For example, the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 2008 replaced the reference to a consideration of "the need for a father" with one of "the need for supporting parenting," which facilitated access to fertility treatment for lesbian couples. Also, as from 2010, surrogacy legislation applies to same-sex and heterosexual couples equally in that both intended parents, regardless of their gender and sexual

identity, can be named on the child's birth certificate ("commercial surrogacy" is, however, illegal). Changes in British law have been accompanied by a more explicit acknowledgment of family diversity by subsequent governments and other institutions, including adoption agencies and fertility clinics, and by an increasing availability of information for prospective parents from sexual minorities.

Participants

This article draws on 22 interviews conducted in England and Wales between 2012 and 2015 with 23 people who self-identified as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Most interviewees were recruited via a dedicated study website. A link to the website was disseminated through multiple channels, including LGBTQ organizations, LGBTQ staff networks, and Facebook advertising. The website described the study as exploring "what having and not having children can mean for the young generation of non-heterosexual adults in Britain." It targeted people aged 20 to 35 years who *did not* have children. Website visitors could register their interest in being interviewed by completing a short form, which asked a small number of questions, including whether the person wanted to become a parent at some point in the future. The form aimed to select a diverse group of interviewees with respect to their sociodemographic characteristics as well as their views about parenthood. By the end of the outreach period, 88 people had expressed interest in the study and, due to various fieldwork constraints, about a quarter could be interviewed.

Of the 23 people interviewed, 12 were men and 11 were women. Interviewees were aged between 23 and 33 years, with a median age of 28. Twenty identified as lesbian or gay and three as bisexual (none identified as transgender). Fifteen interviewees were in a same-sex relationship, seven were single, and one man was in a relationship with a woman. Nineteen lived in England and four lived in Wales. Twenty-one resided in urban areas and two in a rural location. Twenty were British, one American, one Spanish, and one French. Using ethnic group categories from the U.K. Census, 19 interviewees identified as White, two as Black, one as Asian, and one as "other." Seventeen had a university degree and six had completed their education at GCSE or A Levels. All but two interviewees were employed at the time of our interview and worked in a range of industries. With its qualitative focus, the study did not attempt to produce findings that would be statistically representative of, or generalizable to, any particular population. However, it should be noted that, despite efforts to

recruit a diverse group of people, interviewees were predominantly well-educated and middle-class.

Interviews

Twenty-one interviews were one-to-one and one was with a couple. The interviews, all audio-recorded, lasted between 1 and 3 hours; the average length was just over 1.5 hours. I usually started the interview by asking about the interviewee's initial thoughts on finding out about the study. With each answer, I prompted the interviewees to elaborate on what they had already said. In doing so, I was guided by three broad topic areas, identified in six initial interviews (which were included in the final analysis): (1) thinking about parenthood (including parenting desires, intentions, and motivations, or lack thereof, and how they had formed and changed over time), (2) talking about parenthood (including recollections of conversations with partners, family, and friends, as well as assumptions about other people's views), and (3) attitudes toward different pathways to parenthood (including thoughts and feelings about ways of creating families such as adoption, surrogacy, coparenting, and donor insemination). This article focuses especially on the third topic area.

Once the interviews had been transcribed, I read each transcript multiple times, looking for themes that were similar across the interviews and listing ones that appeared most frequently. Simultaneously, I sought extracts and phrases that seemed most effective in capturing the meaning of the themes. As I began to write up my analysis, I ordered the themes to form a coherent account of my interpretations of the data and, as my arguments developed, I reengaged with existing empirical literature and directed my narrative toward questions provoked by ongoing scholarly debates. In my analysis, I did not follow a specific methodological school of thought, but rather my approach had what Sandelowski (2000) refers to as "hues," including narrative and discourse analysis, and grounded theory overtones.

My list of themes included preconceptualized thematic areas (what we can call "top-down" themes) that I specifically addressed in the interviews—for example, particular pathways to parenthood—and themes identified only as I began to look for common features across the interview transcripts ("bottom-up" themes) such as "morality" and "child welfare." These latter themes were never explicitly signaled in my interview questions, but came out of interviewees' answers in multiple interviews. The findings presented below reflect to a large extent the salience of bottom-up themes, which gradually reshaped the "story" of parenthood that I wanted to tell. In the reporting of my data, I refer to interviewees using pseudonyms and, in quotations, I use italics to highlight interviewees' own emphases.

Findings

In my interviews, it quickly became clear that different pathways to parenthood raised various ethical issues for the men and women I spoke with. In this article, I focus specifically on three ways of creating families. The first subsection of findings discusses surrogacy and friendship-based coparenting, with a particular focus on views about parenthood among gay men. The second subsection discusses adoption. It is beyond the scope of this article to examine donor conception, in vitro fertilization, and ways of creating and raising children, such as sperm donation and fostering, which may or may not be understood as parenthood as such. This selective approach allows me to develop my argument about the relationship between normality and naturalness in addition to providing an overview of the contexts in which ethics and morality were explicitly or implicitly discussed in my interviews. My focus is not so much on the prevalence of particular views but rather on the rhetorical mechanisms that shed light on how these views develop.

When It Doesn't Feel Quite Right: The Discomfort of Imagining Becoming a Parent

As the literature on lesbian mothers and gay fathers would lead us to predict, the principle of child welfare was often the main force behind interviewees' narratives. The men and women I spoke with usually ventured into exploring their own parenting desires, intentions, and motivations to the extent their reflections were consistent with the child-focused approach to parenthood. Whenever interviewees hinted at any "preferences" about their future child, they seemed self-conscious and often joked or laughed at their comments, which camouflaged the extent to which their likings actually mattered. Discussing any personal preferences about becoming a parent risked diverting attention away from who was clearly the most important figure in any potential family-building project: the child.

As was especially evident in gay men's accounts of surrogacy, expressions of parenting desire were sometimes hindered by associations of different methods of creating families with consumption. It was often the difficulty of finding neutral terms to describe various reproductive possibilities that encouraged interviewees to be ethically reflective. Such reflections were also prompted by considerations about the involvement of a "third party" in the pursuit of parenthood. Being a surrogate was seen as a much more demanding form of partaking in the creation of a new life than being a sperm or egg donor. There was an element of fascination in interviewees' accounts—some of them were "amazed" at the idea of "altruistic" surrogacy and the fact that

certain women were prepared to go so far to "help" other people. Generally, however, surrogacy—particularly commercial surrogacy with inevitable travel overseas—provoked more troubled reactions. No interviewees condemned it as such but some drew a distinction between their "public facing" and their "personal view." Especially men, whom I asked about surrogacy in light of their own future family rather than in terms of their opinions about it, often expressed sentiments along the lines of "I don't mind other people doing it, but I can't envisage doing it myself." The following extract from my interview with Ryan is illustrative of this others-versus-me framework.

> *Ryan:* I can't really imagine asking someone else to have a baby for me or, like, [*laughs*] paying someone else to have a baby for me . . . I don't think it would feel . . . quite right.
>
> *Robert:* Could you elaborate on this feeling that it's not quite right to ask someone?
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> *Ryan:* I wouldn't say "right," I would say very awkward. [*laughs*] I don't know, I just, I don't know anyone, I mean, any acquaintance [whom I could ask], you know, "Can I grow a child in your womb?" [*laughs*] Or I don't think I could . . . you know, pay a stranger to have [my child]. I would feel very awkward about it, more than—it's not that I think it's wrong. It's just me, it wouldn't be a particularly comfortable option.
>
> *Robert:* Even if, for example, one of your friends offered to do it?
>
> *Ryan:* I think even more so. I don't know . . . That would be worse almost . . . I don't know, I'm quite . . . I like to be in control of things. [*laughs*] You know, if it was someone close to me I would just want to, like, tell them what to do all the time or what they could eat and that kind of thing. I would feel very out of control.

Expressing his discomfort about surrogacy, Ryan was careful not to be judgmental about the practice itself. He was quick to correct my more emphatic repetition of his original observation—that it would not feel "quite right"—by opting for the less loaded word "awkward." Later, he clarified further—"it's not that I think it's wrong"—as he tried to make sense of his own reservations. Apart from not feeling "particularly comfortable" either asking or paying a woman "to have a baby for me," he worried about a lack of control. When envisaging a friend being pregnant with his child, he found it challenging to imagine striking a balance between respecting the woman's autonomy and attending to the process of bringing to the world a life that he would ultimately be responsible for.

Ryan's account is not unusual in its tentative expression of his views, which seem complex and unstable because of the multiple considerations they rely on. His laughter and repeated use of the phrase "I don't know" may imply a relative lack of thought he had given surrogacy before, but they also

reveal a general difficulty in forming an opinion on an issue so multifaceted as this method of creating families. Here, as in most comments from other interviews, surrogacy is primarily associated with potential problems it can entail rather than opportunities it can offer, which exacerbates the feeling of discomfort. Even Gavin, who had already been committed to the idea of pursuing parenthood via surrogacy in the future, did not feel entirely comfortable talking about his plans:

> *Gavin:* Our understanding is that the easiest option is to do it in America where it's all kind of sorted out there. And then you sort out the costs and whatever else associated with that, and then, when the child's born, then—it sounds terrible, doesn't it?—you can get the child and bring it home. It sounds terrible . . . Yeah, I think it's the easiest way to go about it, in our understanding.
> *Robert:* It's interesting how you say that it sounds terrible . . .
> *Gavin:* It does, it sounds horrible! It defies nature, I suppose, in a way, because it's not normal, at all.

Gavin was trying to explain what he imagined his pursuit of surrogacy would look like. However, when attempting to describe the logistics of the process, he got interrupted by his own unease about his description. Remarking a couple of times that "it sounds terrible," he concluded that his chosen way of becoming a parent was "not normal, at all." Tellingly, in the same sentence, he also noted that pursuing surrogacy "defies nature."

When I asked the men and women about their views on becoming parents, comments that explicitly questioned the "naturalness" of various pathways to parenthood seemed relatively rare. This may have been for at least two reasons. First, interviewees took the multiplicity of available ways of having children as a fact and thus ascribed to the different methods the quality of being natural in relative rather than absolute terms. In other words, there were few attempts to evaluate what was natural and what was not. Second, a more cautious use of references to nature could perhaps be expected of people whose sexual attractions are often hostilely labeled as unnatural. Comfortable with their identities while not strongly attached to sexual self-identifications, most men and women seemed rather critical about visions of the world that relied on strict definitions. Nonetheless, broadly defined "nature" had a strong implicit presence in my interviews since perceiving something as more natural often went hand in hand with seeing it as less complicated and less commercial. Mobilizing a "natural discourse" was therefore consistent with interviewees' appreciation of both simplicity and remoteness from consumerism—two strong values that underlay the men and women's conceptions of parenthood.

After telling me about his doubts regarding surrogacy, which echoed the lack of conviction expressed by Ryan, Louis considered an alternative means of creating a family:

> Interestingly [my boyfriend] thinks that actually [rather than pursuing surrogacy] it would be much better, um . . . to . . . I'm not sure how to phrase this in a good way—but to have like an arrangement where you will raise, you know, kids as three or four, um, you know, some like, you know, with a woman or with another couple, and then, um . . . four friends, and then, you know, the arrangement would be much more clear. And it would be something, um . . . which he thinks would be much easier for a child to understand. You know, there were three people who loved him, who decided [to raise him together], rather than . . . we went to get you in another country. [*laughs*] And I can see how that makes sense. I don't necessarily think I agree because I can see how legally it would be difficult. But I can see how there is something more organic about that.

It is somewhat ironic that a method of family building that Louis suggested was "much more clear" than surrogacy turned out to be quite difficult for him to describe. But the difficulty in finding suitable words tells us more about the deficiency of culturally available vocabulary to make sense of family forms that include three or more parents than about the interviewee's descriptive capabilities. In fact, Louis acknowledged his boyfriend's observation that a coparenting arrangement would be easier for a child to understand than the transnational undertaking of surrogacy. This greater clarity relates to nature—Louis noted that "there is something more organic" when it comes to becoming parents and parenting together with friends. Importantly, from this point of view, a method of creating a family that is seen as more natural is also based on a family form that, structurally, seems most dissimilar from a "traditional" nuclear family of a heterosexual couple with biogenetically related offspring.

The relative naturalness of coparenting is further reflected in the following extract from my interview with Nathan. I asked him what he thought about the idea of a coparenting arrangement, to which he responded,

> I think *were I* have to have children and every avenue was open to me, that would be the one I'd be most comfortable with. It would have to be the right friends, the right arrangement but . . . I think that would be . . . *personally* the most comfortable situation for me. So I would feel, if I did come to an arrangement with, however it comes into being, it would be more . . . more organic, more . . . less commercial, and . . . I'm aware of, you have to be aware of the legal implications, and you can't go into something just blind. But so

long as all the parties are in agreement, it feels to me as a way that would work more . . . comfortably and equally. I'd be more comfortable with the . . . if it was arranged through friends and in friendship. That would feel more comfortable than if I just put down 20 grand or however much it costs, and someone carries my baby and has nothing more to do with it.

Using the very same word as Louis, Nathan described coparenting as "more organic," drawing a contrast with the commercial character of surrogacy. He emphasized the importance of feeling comfortable, and thus of minimizing his ambivalence, to which the prospect of coparenting seemed to come closest. However, even though he could imagine "the right arrangement" with "the right friends" where "all the parties are in agreement," Nathan did not underplay the legal complexity of becoming parents with friends.

In Britain, a child can have only two legal parents. Consequently, in any coparenting arrangement with more than two parents, there has to be at least one parent who has no parenting rights. In such a family, there is also at least one parent who has no genetic connection to the child. This raises issues of legal as well as public recognition when it comes to the family unit and the individuals concerned, on which Louis shed further light:

I think personally that would make me anxious because I would be worried . . . of the status of the nonbiological parent—'cause there necessarily would be one that's nonbiological in that case. And I think part of the point why there's been so much activism, um, to legalize adoptions and stuff like that is precisely to get out of those kind of issues where you have these kind of murky arrangements, and then somebody ends up getting hurt.

We can see how, while it might be relatively easy to understand for a child, coparenting can be less intelligible for people outside of the family. The status of the nonbiological parent is especially at risk because he or she can be perceived as genetically unrelated to the child and thus seen as a nonparent. This problem is, of course, not limited to coparenting arrangements—ensuring the recognition of the nonbiological parent is a concern for any couple-based pursuits of biogenetic parenthood, as evident in the literature reviewed in the introduction. But in the absence of the legal protection that same-sex couples now have—whether it is through civil partnership, marriage, or joint adoption—coparents are reliant solely on legally nonbinding agreements with each other. As Louis suggested, such "murky arrangements" have a potentially heightened possibility of "somebody getting hurt."

In my interviews, comments about friendship-based coparenting generated the longest list of pros and cons, in more or less equal proportions. On one hand, as has already been highlighted, some interviewees considered

coparenting as easier to explain to the child than family-building efforts that required invisible others such as a surrogate. We have also seen how coparenting was regarded as "more organic" or, as another interviewee put it, more "healthy," which meant that not only could coparenting circumvent medically assisted reproduction but it also created distance from the idea of "buying a child." In addition, the relative naturalness of coparenting tallied with the structural resemblance to stepparenting and most interviewees whose parents had divorced had good relationships with their stepparents. The idea of having an extra parent was described as "fabulous," and additional parental attention was seen as an "axiomatic good." Furthermore, some interviewees appreciated that a coparenting arrangement would provide the child with a wider gender spectrum to draw upon within the family environment; some also saw it as beneficial, although not necessary, for the child to have both a mother and a father.

On the other hand, some interviewees, especially lesbian couples who had already decided to become parents with donor sperm, perceived coparenting as potentially undermining the legitimacy of a same-sex couple as sufficient providers of family life. Conscious of the potential threat to the position of the prospective nonbiological parent, they found it easy to imagine how a coparenting arrangement could "pass" as a family unit based on a heterosexual couple. But perhaps the most tangible barrier to envisaging coparenting was that interviewees simply had no friends with whom they could imagine becoming parents. Hence, even though this route to parenthood was not necessarily dependent on income or medicine, the need for mutual trust, effective communication, and a joint commitment to parent in an unusual setting often made the prospect of coparenting appealing in theory but unfeasible in reality.

Central to these concerns was a sense of responsibility. As with Ryan, who admitted that he would feel uncomfortably "out of control" if a friend of his offered to be his surrogate, scenarios of a coparenting arrangement gave some interviewees a "red light" signaling limited control over the situation. Entering into coparenting meant sharing the responsibility of parenthood with a number of individuals, including people other than intimate partners. Based on interviewees' hesitant accounts, this kind of arrangement seemed to require a different kind, or perhaps simply an additional amount, of trust than would conventionally be expected from a partner. As we will see next, feeling responsible was not constrained to reproductive behaviors. The same logic extended to broader considerations about life and one's role in society. Here, too, interviewees alluded to nature—not on the micro level of family units, but on a macro level where families formed only part of a bigger picture.

Overpopulation and Children That Need Homes: Responsibility Beyond the Family

The outward-looking understanding of parenthood involved more than putting the child before the self—it led to questions of social justice, fairness, and accountability to the wider world. Let us consider the following three quotations.

> *Stephen:* It's been a sentiment that I've always had at the back of my mind—that *if I ever were* to have kids, I probably wouldn't kind of want to contribute to the surplus of humans.
>
> *Vicky:* [My partner] always felt like, you know, there's overpopulation in the world. You know, why don't we adopt a child and then we're not adding to overpopulation?
>
> *Chris:* The world's got enough people in it. I don't necessarily want—I think there is more of a moral responsibility on us to try not to increase the population just so I can have a kid.

Although comments about the population were more likely to come from those who were less invested in the idea of having children in the future, interviewees as a whole demonstrated a high level of consciousness that extended far beyond their own imagined family. The three quotations above suggest that the idea of creating new human beings seems unethical in the context of excessive population growth. It is particularly difficult to justify reproducing if one can only do so by going the extra mile—as LGBTQ people often need to do if they want to have children to whom they are biogenetically related. For Stephen and for Vicky's partner, when there was already a "surplus of humans," it was not worth "adding to overpopulation." Chris went even further to suggest that there was an additional "moral responsibility" on *us* (presumably sexual minorities) to keep population levels under control. From this point of view, creating a family "just so I can have a kid" seems irresponsible as it comes at a cost of the care required for the world to thrive as a whole. In other words, focusing on our own reproduction can risk neglecting the environment and the welfare of people who already exist.

Interestingly in comparison, only one interviewee made a reference to the population as an entity that, apart from growing, is also getting older: "I think the fertility rate is low and we have an aging population to support, so I think [having] kids is good." As this comment shows, one can think about the population not only in global terms, but also in local or national contexts, in which the impact of reproduction is positive—since people live longer, more of them require care in the old age and younger generations ensure that this care can be provided. Ironically, this different framing renders socially

desirable an opposite practice—it is contributing to reproduction, rather than refusing to reproduce, that is commendable. Nonetheless, even though the potential shortage of care in developed countries with aging populations, such as the United Kingdom, might seem more tangible than environmental changes taking place globally, it was the latter concern that interviewees mentioned more often.

One reason for a relative lack of emphasis on population aging might be that talking about children as future carers directed attention away from children's needs and potentially toward interviewees' own future interests. Generally, the topic of aging did not come up in the interviews unless I specifically asked about it. Few men and women shared plans for or visions of getting older and, once asked, although some expressed concerns about requiring care in the old age, most admitted that they seldom thought about it. A potential "benefit" of having children was described by one interviewee as a "pretty cynical pension policy," but most often the topic was not mentioned at all. If it was, the motives behind parenting desire had to be clarified, as the following extract from my interview with Ollie illustrates.

> I think it would really suck to be sort of older—so, you know, retired—and not have any family around . . . But I think that would just be a selfish consideration, and I wouldn't want to have children just to have company when I'm old . . . I think if I was gonna have children, I'd want to have them because I could, you know, offer them something that would, you know, give them a really good life.

Another possible reason for the greater focus on population growth was that the concern about too many "people in the world," implying a moral superiority of *non*reproduction, was closely related to another social issue that came through in the interviews, namely, the growing numbers of children that need homes. While about a quarter of interviewees made comments about overpopulation, more than half expressed concerns about children that were "already there." It was often the needs of children in care that constituted a primary reference point when I asked the men and women about parenthood, as illustrated by the following two quotations.

> *Amit:* I don't necessarily want to bring another child into the world when there are so many who are in need of families. There is no need to further add to a resource. It's better to deal with what we have.
> *Sally:* My first reaction [when I think about the possibility of having children] is adoption. Because . . . it just seems ridiculous to create more human beings when there's so many that actually need looking after.

The men and women interviewed for this study were aware that the number of children in the U.K. care system was high. This awareness was so

prominent that even for those who admitted having no parenting desire adoption was portrayed as not entirely out of question. Stephen, for example, after explaining at length his lack of interest in having children, reflected on the unlikely possibility of pursuing parenthood:

> This would be a *terrible* reason to have children, but, in a social conscience way, there's a hell lot of kids that . . . that sort of need adopting essentially. And if I did think that I wanted to have children, I would want to do that. I mean, you know, I've got a pretty decent job, have pretty decent education—I personally think I'd make a terrible parent, but the unfair advantage stuff that you pass on simply by virtue of your education and your background . . . I know that's *incredibly grim*—it makes me sound like I was some sort of arsehole and I genuinely think I'd be a terrible parent as well—but from a pure social justice perspective, there's kind of a fairly strong argument for trying to do what you can.

While approving of this pathway to parenthood, the men and women I spoke with also seemed generally aware of the difficulties inherent in the process of adopting a child—for example, that being placed with a child without special needs was relatively rare or that the process of screening potential adopters was likely to be lengthy and intrusive. Like Stephen, some interviewees went beyond questioning whether they could deal with practical obstacles involved in adoption and pondered if they were suitable to be adoptive parents. When talking about the possibility of adopting a child from care, Gemma shared her thoughts:

> Adoption is such a long-winded pain in the arse from what I understand of it . . . That or the kids who are the . . . easiest to adopt—that's not the word I'm looking for—but the young babies are high in demand, whereas needier kids, who presumably had troubled backgrounds in the first place, are . . . a bigger commitment. And currently, with my feelings about children [and being unsure if I want to have them], I think that's a big . . . a big commitment, and you need to be possibly a better person than I am to be prepared to deal with those aspects, I think. That said, I've got a shelter cat who was vile when I got her and is now lovely, and it's been *wonderful* watching that transformation. So, you know, *maybe*? I don't know.

Both Stephen and Gemma appeared to experience a moral tension when framing their thinking about adoption in terms of responsibility and commitment. Being responsible for and committed to the wider issue of social justice is not quite the same as responsibility and commitment required to care for an actual child. Yet it is difficult to separate one from the other. The resulting dissonance seems to elicit moral judgments directed at oneself.

Explaining why adopting might not be the best idea in their case, Stephen and Gemma questioned whether they were *good enough*—not only as potential parents (Stephen) but also as people (Gemma). However, they also recognized what they could offer a child, which made them keep the possibility of adopting open.

As we can see, interviewees' considerations about their potential pursuit of parenthood were inextricably linked to bigger questions about social inequalities and moral responsibility. By directing attention away from the self, the men and women consistently asserted that becoming a parent was not so much about them as it was about children and society. From this point of view, unsurprisingly perhaps, adoption emerged as the most "organic" and rational pathway to parenthood as well as one provoking the most explicitly ethical statements. In some cases, the passive act of not adopting was sufficient to bring about at least some moral unease. As one interviewee noted, "if there are children who need a loving home, it seems foolish to not provide that for them . . . and a bit selfish as well."

Yet there was a tension between the willingness to minimize harm by adopting children who needed homes and the willingness to avoid harm in the first place by creating situations in which children may be disadvantaged. Worrying about possible bullying that their future child might face was one of the most frequently expressed concerns in the interviews. None of the interviewees suggested that their sexual identity, or the structure of their future family, would in itself adversely affect their child. However, they were conscious of the treatment children might receive outside of the family as a result of being raised by a same-sex couple or in a particular family setup. One woman noted: "I wouldn't like to put my child into a situation where they would be bullied *because of me*." In another interview, toward the end of our conversation, the man I spoke with said he was "shocked" that I had not asked him about bullying as he had expected this would be "the main question." Such comments highlighted how central the issue of child welfare was in interviewees' consciousness and, accordingly, how the prospect of LGBTQ-parent families becoming a "norm" was still a domain of the future rather than the present. Even if the men and women experienced no prejudice from their relatives or colleagues, which was usually the case, they often expressed worries about how their future family would be treated in society at large.

The question of how to become a parent was again central in imagining the societal response to one's future family. Interviewees adopted the discourse of responsibility regardless of how they positioned themselves on the map of pathways to parenthood. But focusing on people's reactions, rather than society's needs, meant that the commitment to being

responsible favored different avenues to create a family. Let us consider Becky who, along with her partner, was hoping to have her "own" baby in the future. When I asked Becky whether adoption was something the couple would consider, she said,

> I think we would adopt in the case of infertility, but other than that we'd like to have our own babies. I don't know, I think we might get an easier time if the child's ours, you know. Whereas with adoption they've got a whole host of other issues they're contending with, to do with the birth parents and things. I would just, I think I would fall short, I might fall short as a parent to provide that sort of support on top of what we're inflicting, you know, in inverted commas, on them. I mean, we're in a *gay* relationship.

This interview extract shows that adoption does not have to be seen as the morally superior pathway to parenthood and the decision not to adopt can also be justified on the basis of child welfare. Becky's response foregrounds sexual identity of the potential parents as a significant factor to consider in one's family planning: The stigma attached to the parents' sexual-minority status may be one burden too many for a child who is already disadvantaged. For this reason, Becky did not want to "inflict" the unconventional family structure, and potential societal reactions to it, on an adoptee who is likely to struggle with his or her background.

In line with what much of the literature on lesbian mothers and gay fathers would lead us to predict, planned efforts to minimize the risk of child bullying included various ways of normalizing and standardizing the family structure and its visibility. A common sentiment was trying to avoid one's family standing out in ways other than being headed by a same-sex couple. This was a "pull factor" of biogenetic parenthood and, as Becky's comment shows, a counterargument to a preference for adopting a child. The concern about being "too different" came up also when I asked some of the White interviewees about adopting a child of color. Issues of ethnic background and physical appearance were seen as adding layers of complexity, which not only made the job of the future parent more difficult but, more significantly, jeopardized the welfare of the child. Chris, for example, was not convinced that society was ready for multiethnic LGBTQ-parent families:

> At the moment our society is adjusting to the idea of a gay or lesbian couple, or bi, whatever, adopting. Maybe you don't want to push society along too far. As in an element of you wants to reform society but you don't necessarily want to bear the cross of that reformation. By the same token, there's a difference between being a trailblazer yourself, but I think it's also very different when

you have a family. One thing is me deciding to take on responsibility, some societal pressure; it's another thing passing that pressure onto a kid.

Here, Chris was suggesting that society was only "adjusting" to the idea of same-sex couples adopting children from their own ethnic backgrounds. His cautious remark—"maybe you don't want to push society along too far"— implied that substantial improvements had been made in terms of winning society's acceptance of LGBTQ parenthood (and perhaps also in terms of reducing ethnic inequalities), but what has been won can be lost if too much is asked for too quickly. Chris's use of words such as "push" and "pressure" presents an uncomfortable relationship between sexual minorities and the heterosexual mainstream, and between people of color and the White majority. These relationships, it seems, need to be carefully managed to facilitate acceptance of difference and to avoid backlash.

At the time of cultural adjustment to family diversity, Chris was wary of "bearing the cross of the reformation"—specifically because it was not only him and his partner that would be affected by the societal pressure, but also their notional child. He made a similar argument when I asked him about coparenting arrangements:

> In some ways I feel more comfortable about them. [But here also] the family unit would be nonstandard, potentially nonstandard enough. You're adding another variable, potentially another complication. Complication is not always bad, but in terms of acceptance by society, in terms of understanding by others, it just keeps getting even more complicated. Maybe that's tough, maybe society just has to live with that. But maybe we want to keep things simple for the moment, and maybe that's a complication we worry about further down the road.

In this instance, Chris used mathematical analogies to illustrate why he would be hesitant about coparenting. In his view, the "nonstandard" structure of the family unit was "adding another variable," which meant that receiving acceptance and understanding of society was "getting even more complicated." Echoing his views about adopting a child from a different ethnic background, Chris proposed that it might be better to "keep things simple for the moment" and deal with any additional complication "further down the road." At this point in time, then, an ethical approach to parenthood seemed to involve a scrupulous weighing of what society actually needed and what it was able to accommodate.

Discussion

Based on my interviews with lesbian, gay, and bisexual people, I have shown that thinking about parenthood can be a deeply ethical process. Imagining becoming a parent made the men and women I spoke with mindful of different caveats that came with specific methods of creating families. Considerations of the multiple avenues to parenthood were informed by a child-focused approach that presented the interest of future children as paramount. But keeping the notional child in mind did not necessarily help with eliminating certain options of family building as less child-centered. On the contrary, it turned the men and women in different directions depending on what exactly was understood by child welfare.

Paying specific attention to two reproductive alternatives that are potentially open to gay men—surrogacy and coparenting with female friends—I have demonstrated how the intricacy of moral discomfort was especially evident in men's evaluations of pathways to parenthood (although it was also present, albeit to a lesser extent, in women's narratives). The men expressed highly ambivalent attitudes toward surrogacy—a means of reproduction that made the prospect of having children appear problematically consumerist and that was seen as giving limited control over the process of creating a new life. The inability to feel fully responsible for bringing a child into the world, and the need for reliance on others, was also a downside of organizing a coparenting arrangement. Yet there were many positives about this route to parenthood, which was deemed as "more organic" than pursuing surrogacy.

Implicit references to nature were also present in interviewees' sentiments about overpopulation, which questioned *any* endeavors to have children "biologically." Here, the issue of population growth appeared more pertinent than the problem of population aging. Reluctant to reflect on their own later life prospects, the men and women seemed to avoid thinking of children as potential care providers. Concerns about the environment were also more consistent with recognizing the needs, and the growing numbers, of children in care. Aware of the shortage of adoptive parents, some interviewees saw reproductive decision making as intertwined with the responsibility for facilitating social justice. However, adoption was not necessarily seen as "more about children and less about parents" than creating a couple-based biogenetic family. In fact, envisaging societal treatment as a significant influence on the well-being of future children put the various pathways to parenthood in a "reverse order." LGBTQ-parent families that departed in additional ways from the norm—by having more than two parents or a visible lack of biological connection—were seen as potentially "too complicated" for society to comprehend at this point in time.

It is intriguing how different arguments for child welfare can "rank" potential pathways to parenthood in contrary ways. Avenues of creating families that seem "more organic"—that is, less commercial, less clinical, and less about parents' interests and more about children's—can also be understood as more complicated and ultimately detrimental to the child. Using a different measure of child-focused parenthood—expected societal treatment rather than distance from commodification—positions families based on coparenting and adoption (especially transracial adoption) as potentially more at risk of stigmatization than families created through assisted reproductive technologies. By the same logic, couple-headed families based on biogenetic relatedness and physical resemblance (of which surrogacy is exemplary) provide settings where the child is most likely to be free from prejudice. There is thus an inherent tension in embarking on *any* pathway to parenthood as no single route is straightforwardly in children's best interests. While particular child-centred arguments can be highlighted strategically to justify the pursuit of parenthood in a given way, there is also a flip side to each argument. The ambivalence running through interviewees' comments is indicative of contradictory understandings of what is best for the child. This contradiction is likely to create an internal conflict, whichever means of creating a family is considered.

My findings highlight the discrepancy between the two descriptors often used interchangeably to delineate what counts as a family. If natural equals normal, we would expect pathways to parenthood that are "more organic" to fit more comfortably into social conventions. But this was not the case—the relationship between "natural" and "normal" was, in fact, inverted: what seemed more organic was not seen as more conventional. Vice versa, what seemed more likely to fit into a societal norm of a family appeared more at odds with nature since it required more technological and financial assistance. The fact that more "natural" forms of reproduction created families perceived as being more likely to experience stigma (because of what made them less "normal") complicated what could be understood as "good" or "right." Consequently, different things were seen as being in "children's best interests" depending on what was perceived as threatening these interests.

These insights contribute to the ongoing debates about social norms and nature among researchers of LGBTQ parenthood and among those studying reproduction or sexuality in other contexts (e.g., Dow, 2016; Walters, 2014). When normality and naturalness draw critical scholarly attention as cultural products, they tend to be explained as strengthening one another. As popular attributes, the two concepts also go hand in hand, often additionally assisted by religious rhetoric. As Clarke (2002) observes, "Arguments used to oppose lesbian and gay parenting are familiar and well-rehearsed: lesbian and gay

parenting is abnormal, unnatural and against God's will" (p. 98). Based on her study of infertility medicine, Thompson (2005) argues that what is seen as "normal" is often stabilized by what is regarded as "natural" and, conversely, what becomes normative can further naturalize what has already been taken for granted or rendered self-evident. The "normalizing strategies" that lesbian mothers and gay fathers often adopt, implicitly or explicitly, may involve "naturalizing" their parenthood by strategically responding to societal fascination (or obsession) with biogenetic relatedness (e.g., Dempsey, 2013; Nordqvist, 2010). Similarly, making a family "look natural," or highlighting the "naturalness" of parenting desire, "normalizes" less conventional and more technologized ways of becoming parents (e.g., Lewin, 2009; Ravelingien et al., 2015). The fact that the idioms of normality and naturalness are often invoked together in the context of defending children's interests is significant here. What happens then, we may ask, if we problematize the normal/natural equation?

My data show that the principle of child welfare can be flexibly applied to justify different pathways to parenthood. This gives prospective parents freedom to "choose" arguments that warrant their decisions to create a family in one way or another. But it also means that whichever route they take, a feeling of "experimenting" on the child, or of not being "fair" toward the child, is likely to endure. Recognizing that normality and naturalness are not necessarily mutually reinforcing may provide tools to help people invalidate criticisms of their reproductive decisions. It also highlights limits of a rhetoric, subscribing to which is ultimately unlikely to guarantee security or integrity in creating a family.

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