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### Recalled Social Experiences and Current Psychological Adjustment among Adults Reared by Gay and Lesbian Parents

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## **Recalled Social Experiences and Current Psychological Adjustment among Adults Reared by Gay and Lesbian Parents**

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*Children of gay and lesbian parents are a diverse group, but existing studies offer limited information about individual differences in their social experiences and subsequent psychological outcomes. In this study, 91 adults reared by gay and lesbian parents responded to measures of recalled social experiences as well as current depressive symptoms, positive and negative affect, and life satisfaction. Participants reported differing social experiences (e.g., stigma) as a function of their sex, family type, gay/lesbian parent's sex, and age at which they learned that a parent was gay or lesbian. Despite such diverse experiences, participants reported no significant differences in long-term psychological adjustment. It could be the case that children of gay and lesbian parents learn to cope with difficult social experiences, leading to positive adjustment overall. Indeed, the current sample perceived their social experiences as becoming significantly more positive over the life course, with less stigma and more benefits related to their family situation during adulthood than during earlier developmental periods. Future studies of adaptive coping processes and longitudinal changes in social experiences among offspring of gay and lesbian parents are warranted.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Sexual minority communities are diverse, and offspring of gay and lesbian parents grow up in a variety of family situations (Goldberg, 2010; Golombok & Tasker, 2010; Patterson, 2009). For example, some children are reared by two fathers or two mothers while others have a single gay or lesbian parent. Some are conceived via donor insemination, some are adopted, and some are born in the context of a heterosexual marriage that is later disrupted when a parent comes out as gay or lesbian. Most children of gay and lesbian parents identify themselves as heterosexual, though some identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Despite these many sources of diversity, few quantitative studies have examined individual differences among offspring of gay and lesbian parents. Furthermore, research in this area has generally focused on overall psychological adjustment, offering limited information about how early psychosocial experiences relate to long-term mental health outcomes. The current study was designed to address these gaps in the literature by investigating individual differences in recalled social experiences and their associations with long-term psychological adjustment among adult offspring of gay and lesbian parents.

### Social Experiences and Psychological Adjustment among Offspring of Gay and Lesbian Parents

For many years now, psychologists have studied the influence of parental sexual orientation on child development. The bulk of this work has compared mental health outcomes among offspring of gay and lesbian parents to those of heterosexual parents (Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). Results have converged across studies, demonstrating no significant differences in psychological adjustment between individuals reared by heterosexual parents and those reared by gay and lesbian parents (Anderssen, Amlie, & Ytterøy, 2002; Biblarz & Stacey, 2010; Goldberg, 2010; Golombok & Tasker, 2010). That is, offspring of gay and lesbian parents are comparable to offspring of heterosexual parents in terms of their overall mental health (Patterson, 2006).

Despite rich data concerning psychological adjustment among offspring of gay and lesbian parents, information about their social experiences is more limited. This remains an important area for research because social experiences are likely to diverge as a function of parental sexual orientation (Lick, Schmidt, & Patterson, 2011). Indeed, sexual minority individuals are more likely to face stigma and prejudice than are heterosexual individuals (Brewer & Wilcox, 2005; Herek, Cogan, & Gillis, 2002; Katz-Wise

& Hyde, 2012), and studies from social psychology suggest that this stigma may be associative (Richards, 2008). For example, family members of people with psychiatric disorders (e.g., schizophrenia; Östman & Kjellin, 2002) and communicable diseases (e.g., HIV/AIDS; Mitchell & Knowlton, 2009) report facing high rates of stigma even though they do not have a stigmatizing trait themselves. In light of this evidence, it seems possible that offspring of gay and lesbian parents may face associative stigma due to their parents' stigmatized sexual orientations. At the same time, offspring of gay and lesbian parents might enjoy some positive experiences related to their family structure, including cohesion with other minority groups (Kuvalanka & Goldberg, 2009; Lick et al., 2011). However, few studies have systematically examined these possibilities.

The unique social experiences of individuals with gay and lesbian parents are important because they may predict psychological well-being. Indeed, according to minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003), difficult social experiences lead to mental health deficits among stigmatized individuals. For instance, in a nationally representative sample, gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals reported more frequent day-to-day and lifetime experiences with stigma than did heterosexuals; these experiences were associated with heightened reports of psychological distress (Mays & Cochran, 2001). Similar results have emerged among offspring of gay and lesbian parents. In one recent study, heterosexual offspring of gay and lesbian parents showed positive adjustment overall, but social climate moderated adjustment such that individuals living in stigmatizing environments reported poorer outcomes than did those living in more supportive environments (Lick, Tornello, Riskind, Schmidt, & Patterson, 2012). Thus, experiences with stigma may have important psychological consequences for offspring of gay and lesbian parents.

While researchers have consistently demonstrated links between sexual orientation-related stigma and poor mental health outcomes (Hatzenbuehler, 2009; Meyer, 2003), and while it is likely that offspring of lesbian and gay parents face some stigma related to their family situation (Lick et al., 2011; Lick et al., 2012), the fact remains that offspring of gay and lesbian parents have displayed positive adjustment in most previous studies (Patterson, 2006). These observations lead to an apparent contradiction: Children of gay and lesbian parents are likely to face stigma related to their parents' sexual orientations, yet few of them suffer mental health deficits. A resolution of this contradiction is that offspring of gay and lesbian parents may learn to cope with stigma over time, mitigating the impact of early life stressors on long-term mental health. That is, as they grow from childhood into adolescence and adulthood, offspring of gay and lesbian parents may face fewer instances of stigma and recognize more benefits of their family situation, buffering them from minority stress and enhancing their subsequent mental health. While this hypothesis is certainly plausible, current data about

experiences of stigma among offspring of gay and lesbian parents are sparse and pertain mostly to youths (Bos, van Balen, van den Boom, & Sandfort, 2004; Gartrell, Rodas, Deck, Peyser, & Banks, 2005). New studies of adults who grew up with gay and lesbian parents may enhance our knowledge of associations between early social experiences and psychological outcomes in this community.

### Potential Moderators of Social Experiences among Offspring of Gay and Lesbian Parents

It is also worth noting that offspring of gay and lesbian parents have diverse backgrounds that might influence their social experiences and subsequent psychological adjustment. Indeed, several recent studies have demonstrated that social climate moderates psychological outcomes among children of gay and lesbian parents. For example, living in an area with a large number of families headed by same-sex parents and social policies that support sexual minority rights has been linked to better psychological adjustment among heterosexual adults reared by gay or lesbian parents (Lick et al., 2012). Similarly, children in planned lesbian-parent families reported better psychological adjustment when they attended schools that included sexual minority issues in the curriculum and when they knew peers with similar families (Bos, Gartrell, van Balen, Peyser, & Sandfort, 2008). These data suggest that individual differences such as social climate moderate social experiences and psychological outcomes related to having gay or lesbian parents. Aside from ecological factors, however, there are many other potential differences among offspring of gay and lesbian parents about which we have less recent information. Next, we briefly review existing literature to pinpoint several understudied areas in which individual differences may influence social experiences and adjustment among offspring of gay and lesbian parents.

First, family types vary widely within this community. Many children of gay and lesbian parents are born in the context of a heterosexual marriage that is later disrupted when one or both parents come out (Goldberg, 2010; Patterson, 2000; Tasker, 1999), but increasing numbers are born to or adopted by adults who already identify as gay or lesbian (Perrin, 2002). Experiences may differ across these family types. For example, offspring of divorced parents may face stress as they discover a parent's sexual minority status and cope with family separation (MacCallum & Golombok, 2004). In contrast, individuals who live with same-sex couples from birth may never experience parental separation, and may express a high degree of comfort with their parents' sexual orientations (Brewaey, Ponjaert, van Hall, & Golombok, 1997). Thus, individuals who are reared by gay and lesbian parents from birth may have more positive social experiences than those who learn that a parent is gay or lesbian later in life, leading to enhanced psychological

adjustment during adulthood. We are not aware of published studies that systematically test these possibilities.

Experiences may also vary depending upon the age at which a person learns that a parent is gay or lesbian. Both Paul (1986) and Huggins (1989) reported that participants who discovered that a parent was gay or lesbian during childhood had an easier time coping than those who learned when they were older. However, these findings are more than 20 years old now, and current social climates may lead to different outcomes. Also, many other differences may exist based on the age at which a child learned that a parent is gay or lesbian. For instance, some evidence suggests that children of gay and lesbian parents experience benefits of their family situation, including increased solidarity with members of other minority groups and particularly strong family bonds (Goldberg, 2007; Lick et al., 2011). Children who learn of parental sexual orientation early in life may have more opportunity to experience such benefits, buffering them from stigma-related stress later in life.

Offspring of gay and lesbian parents do not appear to be disproportionately gay or lesbian themselves (Golombok & Tasker, 1996; Huggins, 1989). Nevertheless, some offspring of lesbian and gay parents do identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, and their experiences are likely to differ from those of their heterosexual peers. For example, in a recent qualitative study of 18 gay and lesbian adults reared by gay and lesbian parents, some participants reported little to no fear of family rejection when disclosing their sexual orientation, making them feel particularly close to their families (Kovalanka & Goldberg, 2009). However, other participants reported feeling social pressure to conform to heterosexual norms, perhaps to deflect criticisms of gay and lesbian parents. Larger quantitative studies are needed to further explore these differences and to determine their associations, if any, with long-term adjustment.

Most work in this area has focused on children of lesbian mothers (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010), and findings indicate that these children are relatively open with peers about their mothers' sexual orientations (Gartrell et al., 2005). In contrast, studies of children with gay fathers are sparse, and existing data indicate that they tend not to disclose their fathers' gay identities to peers (Barrett & Tasker, 2001). These findings suggest that offspring of gay fathers might be less open with their peers than are offspring of lesbian mothers; however, the discrepancy might also be due to sampling variation between studies. Systematic comparisons of individuals with lesbian mothers and those with gay fathers are necessary to determine whether significant differences emerge as a function of parent sex.

The visibility of and legal rights for families led by lesbian and gay parents have improved dramatically in recent decades (Baird & Rosenbaum, 2004; Lee, 2002), and offspring who live in communities with accepting social climates tend to have better psychological adjustment than those in

more stigmatizing communities (Bos et al., 2008; Lick et al., 2012). These findings suggest that children of gay and lesbian parents may have an easier time in general growing up today than in previous decades (Anderssen et al., 2002). Despite this possibility, however, most existing studies have examined cross-sectional samples of children with gay and lesbian parents from the same age cohort. Larger and more diverse samples would help us to understand whether social experiences vary as a function of the time during which children of gay and lesbian parents grew up.

Men and women may also differ in their experiences related to having gay or lesbian parents. While some early studies reported no differences among young boys and girls reared by gay and lesbian parents (Golombok, Spencer, & Rutter, 1983), others suggest potential differences in children's psychosocial experiences based upon their sex. For example, it has been argued that sexual minority status is more widely accepted among heterosexual women than men (Herek, 2002). If young boys with gay/lesbian parents are more likely to affiliate with male peers than with female peers, then they might face especially high rates of stigma and subsequently be less open because their male peers are likely to show prejudice against sexual minority individuals. A longitudinal study of 25 children reared by lesbian mothers found support for this hypothesis: Boys were more likely than girls to report being teased because of their mothers' sexual orientations (Tasker & Golombok, 1997). A more recent study of 44 children with lesbian mothers also found higher reports of victimization among boys relative to girls (Wainright & Patterson, 2006; Wainright & Patterson, 2008). Larger studies that include individuals with gay fathers are necessary to further explore sex differences in social experiences and adjustment among offspring of gay and lesbian parents.

Finally, offspring of gay and lesbian parents may grow up in either single- or dual-parent homes. While previous studies have not uncovered significant differences in psychological adjustment among children in these homes (Brewaeys et al., 1997; Chan, Raboy, & Patterson, 1998), their social experiences may well differ based upon the relationship status of their parents. For example, lesbian couples report sharing household labor equally, while single lesbian mothers perform household and financial duties independently (Chan et al., 1998; Patterson, 1995). Thus, single lesbian mothers might have less time to spend with their children than do lesbian mothers in partnerships, and this could affect the benefits that children perceive related to having a sexual minority parent. One might also expect that children reared by a gay or lesbian couple have difficulty concealing their parents' relationship status, especially if both parents attend the child's extracurricular events. In this case, peers might learn that the child has same-sex parents, leading to stigma or harassment. Therefore, one might expect children reared by same-sex couples to report somewhat different experiences from those reared by a single gay or lesbian parent.

## The Current Study

In summary, few studies have examined social experiences among offspring of gay and lesbian parents, and even fewer studies have linked such experiences to long-term psychological adjustment. Furthermore, there are many sources of diversity that might lead to different experiences among offspring of gay and lesbian parents, but systematic investigations of such individual differences are limited at best. We sought to address both of these issues in a diverse sample of adults reared by gay and lesbian parents.

Based on existing findings, we predicted that adult offspring of gay and lesbian parents would display positive psychological adjustment overall. Despite generally positive outcomes, however, we expected them to recall some difficult social experiences throughout their lives (e.g., stigma), especially during childhood and adolescence. We also expected that participants would recall changes in their social experiences over the life course, reporting fewer negative and more positive experiences as they grew up. Finally, we predicted that these recalled social experiences would differ as a function of family background. In particular, we predicted that older participants, those who self-identified as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, those from divorced-parent families, and those reared by gay fathers would recall experiencing more stigma than their peers. We also predicted that individuals reared by a gay or lesbian couple would recall being more open about their family situation than would those reared by single gay or lesbian parents. We predicted that individuals who learned of their parents' sexual orientations earlier in life would perceive more benefits of their family situation than would those who learned later in life. In testing these hypotheses, we aimed to provide quantitatively rigorous information about individual differences, social experiences, and their links to long-term adjustment among adult offspring of gay and lesbian parents.

## METHOD

### Participants

Participants were 91 adults who grew up with at least 1 openly gay or lesbian parent. They ranged in age from 18 to 61 years old ( $M = 27.6$  years,  $SD = 7.2$  years), and on average they were 7.6 years old ( $SD = 5.2$  years) when they learned that a parent was gay or lesbian. Most had lesbian mothers (69%) and identified themselves as heterosexual (60%) and female (75%). In general, participants and their parents were highly educated (96% of participants and 89% of parents completed at least some college) and lived in the United States (90%). Finally, most participants were white (91%), though 4% of the sample identified as Hispanic/Latino, 2% identified as African-American, and 2% identified with another racial group.



## Procedure

Participants were recruited between September 2008 and August 2009 via four methods: (1) snowball sampling of personal acquaintances, (2) advertisements to gay, lesbian, and bisexual family support groups in person and on the Internet, (3) community advertisements in restaurants and shops with prominently gay or lesbian clientele, and (4) a pool of introductory psychology students. Recruitment materials targeted adults who grew up with at least one parent who openly identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer. In the final sample, most participants reported hearing about the study from a friend or family member (53%), while others heard about it from a gay, lesbian, or bisexual family organization (31%), a university participant pool (6%), or other means (11%).

Interested individuals contacted a researcher via e-mail and gave a brief description of their family. Those who were eligible (i.e., over 18 years of age with at least 1 openly gay or lesbian parent) were provided with a link and access code to an online study. Participants read instructions, provided consent, and responded to a series of surveys in their own time and without compensation. The University of Virginia Institutional Review Board for the Social and Behavioral Sciences approved this study.

## Materials

### THE RAINBOW FAMILIES SCALE

The Rainbow Families Scale (RFS; Lick et al., 2011) assessed recalled experiences across the life span for offspring of gay and lesbian parents. Participants responded to 28 items on a 5-point scale (1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree), rating the extent to which they experienced each statement as a child (0–12 years old), as an adolescent (13–17 years old), and as an adult (18+ years old). Participants who did not learn that a parent was gay or lesbian until adolescence were asked to leave the childhood items blank.

The Rainbow Families Scale measures three independent dimensions of experience associated with having gay/lesbian parents: (1) Stigma (14 items, e.g., “Others teased me because of my parent’s sexual orientation”; *Min* = 14, *Max* = 70), (2) Benefits (8 items, e.g., “I was closer to my parents than my friends were with their heterosexual parents”; *Min* = 8, *Max* = 40), and (3) Openness (6 items, e.g., “It was easy to talk to my teachers /administrators about my family”; *Min* = 6, *Max* = 30). Negatively worded items were reverse-scored, and totals were computed for each subscale such that a high score on the Stigma subscale indicated relatively few recollections of stigma, a high score on the Benefits subscale indicated many perceived benefits related to having a gay or lesbian parent, and a high score on the Openness subscale revealed a high degree of disclosure about one’s family situation.

These scores were computed for each developmental period, yielding nine subscales:

1. Childhood Stigma (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .89$ ),
2. Adolescent Stigma (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .89$ ),
3. Adult Stigma (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .84$ ),
4. Childhood Benefits (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .54$ ),
5. Adolescent Benefits (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .56$ ),
6. Adult Benefits (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .63$ ),
7. Childhood Openness (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .68$ ),
8. Adolescent Openness (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .75$ ), and
9. Adult Openness (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .68$ ).

Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for most subscales was at or above .7, but values for the Benefits subscales were lower. Therefore, we conducted additional tests of reliability. Split-half methods revealed slightly higher reliability (Childhood Benefits = .65; Adolescent Benefits = .62; Adult Benefits = .68), and Spearman-Brown prophecy analyses showed that the alpha coefficients would have been notably higher with a longer test of the same psychometric properties. In fact, doubling the number of items would have increased Cronbach's alpha for the Benefits subscales to .64, .66, and .72, respectively. We took this as evidence for acceptable reliability of the RFS subscales in the current sample.

#### DEPRESSIVE SYMPTOMS

The Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (CES-D; Radloff, 1977) consisted of 20 statements assessing depressive symptoms over the past week. Participants responded to each statement using a 4-point rating scale (0 = Rarely or none of the time to 3 = Most or all of the time). Positively worded items were reverse-scored, such that a high score corresponded to heightened depressive symptoms. Previous researchers suggested that scores exceeding 16 indicate notable depressive symptoms (Boyd, Weissman, Thompson, & Myers, 1982), and that 20% to 45% of the adult population reports depressive symptoms on the CES-D (Roberts, Lewinsohn, & Seeley, 1991). In the current study, Cronbach's  $\alpha = .91$ .

#### POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE AFFECT

The Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988) measured affective experiences at the time of testing. Participants read 20 single-word descriptors—10 positive (e.g., interested, proud) and 10 negative (e.g., ashamed, nervous)—and rated how strongly they felt each one on a 5-point scale (1 = Very slightly/Not at all to 5 = Extremely). Higher

scores across the positive and negative items revealed heightened levels of positive and negative affect, respectively. In the current study, Cronbach's  $\alpha = .93$  for positive affect and  $.89$  for negative affect.

#### LIFE SATISFACTION

The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) consisted of five statements that participants endorsed on a 7-point rating scale (1 = Strongly disagree to 7 = Strongly agree). The total score yielded a measure of overall life satisfaction, and previous researchers have suggested the following scoring criteria: 30–35 = high satisfaction, 25–29 = average satisfaction, 20–24 = neutral, 15–19 = below average satisfaction, 10–14 = dissatisfaction, 5–9 = extreme dissatisfaction (Diener et al., 1985). In the current study, Cronbach's  $\alpha = .88$ .

#### SOCIAL DESIRABILITY

To assess social desirability, we drew eight “unlikely virtue” items from L. Goldberg's database (Goldberg et al., 2006; [www.ipip.ori.org/ipip](http://www.ipip.ori.org/ipip)) that presented overly positive statements about the self (e.g., “I always follow the rules”). Participants responded to each statement using a 5-point rating scale (1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree), with extreme scores suggesting that they presented themselves in an overly positive or negative light on survey items. In the current study, Cronbach's  $\alpha = .64$ .

#### Plan of Analysis

We approached our analysis in several steps. First, we used *t*-tests, Pearson correlations, and chi-square tests to explore individual differences in recalled social experiences and current psychological adjustment based upon seven demographic variables of interest (i.e., age, sex, sexual orientation, family type, parent sex, parent relationship status, age when participant learned of parent sexual orientation). After uncovering several differences in participants' recalled experiences, we used multiple linear regressions to explore whether responses to the Rainbow Families Scale predicted psychological adjustment, and whether these associations were moderated by individual differences. Finally, we used repeated-measures ANOVAs to test whether participants' recalled social experiences varied across developmental periods.

Because we performed multiple statistical tests on these data, we adjusted the alpha level with a Bonferroni correction to reduce the likelihood of Type I error ( $\alpha = .01$  for all *t*-tests and correlations). Furthermore, we computed all models using ANCOVA and partial correlations to control for social desirability. In only one case did controlling for social desirability alter

effects of interest. This instance is noted; in all other cases, we report the statistics without controlling for social desirability, because it did not make a significant difference. Finally, we were missing demographic data for some participants, so degrees of freedom do not always match the 91 participants in the sample. We included all possible participants in each analysis.

## RESULTS

### Recalled Social Experiences

#### SEX

We compared Rainbow Families Scale responses of women ( $N = 68$ ) with those of men ( $N = 20$ ). Independent samples  $t$ -tests revealed one significant difference: Men recalled significantly more openness during childhood than did women,  $t(72) = 2.85$ ,  $p = .006$ ,  $d = 0.79$ . We did not predict this effect, so we used a chi-square test to explore whether another factor might be responsible for the difference. For example, we tested whether more male participants lived with a couple as opposed to a single gay or lesbian parent. There were not significantly greater numbers of men relative to women across any of the other demographic variables we collected (single parent versus coupled parents, lesbian mothers versus gay fathers, etc.).

#### AGE

Correlations between participant age and Rainbow Families Scale responses revealed no statistically significant associations (see Table 1). Because several of the participants were notably older than the others (6 participants over the age of 40), we excluded them from the sample and re-analyzed the correlations, obtaining the same result: Participant age was not associated with recollections of social experiences in our sample.

#### FAMILY TYPE

Participants who were born in the context of a heterosexual marriage in which one parent later came out as gay or lesbian ( $N = 73$ ) were compared to those born to or adopted by gay or lesbian parents ( $N = 18$ ). Independent samples  $t$ -tests revealed that participants born to or adopted by gay or lesbian parents recalled significantly more openness during childhood than did those who were born to heterosexual parents, one of whom later came out,  $t(75) = -2.72$ ,  $p = .008$ ,  $d = 0.75$ . In addition, statistical trends indicated that participants who were born to or adopted by gay or lesbian parents recalled more openness during adolescence,  $t(84) = -2.47$ ,  $p = .016$ ,  $d = -0.54$ , and during adulthood,  $t(85) = -2.23$ ,  $p = .028$ ,  $d = -0.48$ , than did those who were born to heterosexual parents, one of whom later came out.

**TABLE 1** Correlations Between Rainbow Families Scale and Measures of Psychological Adjustment

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
1		-.24*	.48**	-.65**	-.07	-.03	-.10	-.12	-.19	-.23*	-.13	-.09	-.08	-.20	-.20	.09
2			.04	.34**	-.15	-.29*	-.20	-.18	.16	.31**	.35**	-.06	.07	.14	.19	-.07
3				-.44**	-.06	-.19	-.26*	-.39**	-.13	-.28*	-.31**	-.20	-.14	-.18	-.08	.12
4					.02	.05	.21	.25*	.16	.42**	.36**	.16	.24*	.24*	.10	-.12
5						-.05	.02	-.08	.08	-.06	-.03	.03	-.08	-.19	.05	-.18
6							.86**	.58**	-.02	-.05	-.16	.53**	.30*	-.03	.14	.01
7								.79**	.08	.09	-.08	.54**	.55**	.23*	.16	-.15
8									.14	.13	.12	.41**	.46**	.39**	.14	-.17
9										.76**	.49**	.21	.32**	.31**	.00	-.32**
10											.77**	.14	.34**	.29**	-.01	-.27*
11												-.11	.04	.23*	.08	-.15
12													.75**	.45**	-.22	-.18
13														.68**	-.11	-.24*
14															-.06	-.15
15																-.26
16																

*Notes.* Stigma subscales were reverse-coded, such that a high score indicates few experiences with stigma. Correlations revealed that participants' responses to the Rainbow Families Scale were associated with several measures of psychological adjustment. In addition, the items assessing social desirability were not correlated with any other scales. 1 – Depressive Symptoms; 2 – Positive Affect; 3 – Negative Affect; 4 – Life Satisfaction; 5 – Social Desirability; 6 – Childhood Stigma; 7 – Adolescent Stigma; 8 – Adult Stigma; 9 – Childhood Benefits; 10 – Adolescent Benefits; 11 – Adult Benefits; 12 – Childhood Openness; 13 – Adolescent Openness; 14 – Adult Openness; 15 – Age; 16 – Age When Participant Learned a Parent Was Gay/Lesbian.

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

## SEXUAL ORIENTATION

We compared responses of heterosexual participants ( $N = 52$ ) to those of gay, lesbian, and bisexual participants ( $N = 35$ ). We found no statistically significant differences in experiences based upon participant sexual orientation.

## PARENT SEX

Participants with lesbian mothers ( $N = 62$ ) recalled more stigma during childhood than did those with gay fathers ( $N = 28$ ),  $t(73) = 2.90$ ,  $p = .005$ ,  $d = 0.70$ . We did not predict this effect, so we used chi-square tests to examine the possibility that another factor might be responsible for the difference. Results indicated that more participants lived in the same home as a lesbian mother compared to a gay father,  $\chi^2(1, N = 80) = 22.20$ ,  $p < .001$ , Cramer's  $V = 0.53$ . Therefore, we used ANCOVA to test whether this variable explained the relationship between parent sex and childhood stigma. After controlling for the sexual orientation of the parent with whom participants lived, there was still a significant main effect of parent sex on reported level of childhood stigma,  $F(1, 62) = 11.34$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.16$ . There were not significantly greater numbers of participants with lesbian mothers relative to gay fathers across any of the other demographic variables we collected (single parent versus coupled parents, lesbian mothers versus gay fathers, etc.).

We also examined whether children of lesbian mothers recalled being more open about parental sexual orientation than did those of gay fathers, which may have exposed them to more stigma. To test this possibility, we regressed childhood stigma onto parental sexual orientation, childhood openness, and their interaction. The interaction term was not significant,  $B = -0.58$ ,  $SE = 0.51$ ,  $t(72) = -1.15$ ,  $p = .256$ , indicating that reports of childhood openness did not moderate the relationship between parental sexual orientation and reports of childhood stigma.

## PARENT RELATIONSHIP STATUS

We compared responses of participants reared by a single gay or lesbian parent ( $N = 18$ ) with those of participants reared by a gay or lesbian couple ( $N = 72$ ). After the Bonferroni correction, there were no significant differences in recalled social experiences based upon parental relationship status. However, statistical trends indicated that relative to individuals with a single gay or lesbian parent, those reared by a gay or lesbian couple recalled more openness during childhood,  $t(75) = -2.35$ ,  $p = .021$ ,  $d = -0.54$ , and during adolescence,  $t(84) = -2.09$ ,  $p = .024$ ,  $d = -0.50$ . In addition, participants who grew up in a dual-parent family recalled somewhat more stigma during

adolescence,  $t(81) = -2.21$ ,  $p = .030$ ,  $d = -0.49$ , and during adulthood,  $t(21.61) = -1.280$ ,  $p = .086$ ,  $d = -0.78$ , than did those who grew up with a single parent.<sup>1</sup>

#### AGE AT WHICH PARTICIPANT LEARNED OF PARENTAL SEXUAL ORIENTATION

We examined correlations between recalled social experiences and the age at which participants learned a parent was gay or lesbian. Learning about parental sexual orientation earlier in life was associated with more recalled benefits during childhood,  $r(74) = -.32$ ,  $p = .005$ , and more recalled benefits during adolescence,  $r(82) = -.27$ ,  $p = .013$ . After the Bonferroni correction, learning about parental sexual orientation earlier in life was marginally associated with more openness during adolescence,  $r(77) = -.24$ ,  $p = .027$ . After using partial correlations to control for social desirability, however, these results were no longer statistically significant ( $p_{\text{childhood benefits;age.social desirability}} = .038$ ,  $p_{\text{adolescent benefits;age.social desirability}} = .056$ ,  $p_{\text{adolescent openness;age.social desirability}} = .242$ ).

#### Current Psychological Adjustment

Next, we examined reports of current psychological adjustment. Overall, participants displayed normative adjustment across all measures of well-being. Mean scores for positive affect ( $M = 32.44$ ,  $SD = 9.81$ ) and negative affect ( $M = 15.36$ ,  $SD = 6.07$ ) did not differ significantly from population averages (Crawford & Henry, 2004),  $ps > .37$ . Consistent with previous studies of the general population (Roberts et al., 1991), 32% of participants scored above 16 on the CES-D ( $M = 12.96$ ,  $SD = 9.65$ ). A majority of the participants (67%) reported average-to-high life satisfaction ( $M = 25.90$ ,  $SD = 6.79$ ). Finally, social desirability was not significantly correlated with any of these scales, indicating that extreme responding did not affect reports of psychological adjustment.

Although the sample displayed normative adjustment overall, we sought to test whether groups of participants who recalled more stigma, benefits, and openness during various developmental periods reported notably different well-being at the time of participation. Therefore, we conducted additional  $t$ -tests and correlations on total scores for positive affect, negative affect, depressive symptoms, and life satisfaction based upon the seven demographic variables of interest. Results indicated no significant differences in current psychological adjustment as a function of demographic variables (see Table 2).

We also tested whether recalled social experiences predicted current psychological adjustment. To do so, we entered the nine Rainbow Families Scale subscales into four separate multiple linear regressions predicting positive affect, negative affect, depressive symptoms, and life satisfaction.

**TABLE 2** Psychological Adjustment as a Function of Demographic Characteristics

	Positive Affect <i>M(SD)</i>	Negative Affect <i>M(SD)</i>	Depression <i>M(SD)</i>	Life Satisfaction <i>M(SD)</i>
<i>Age</i>				
Younger ( <i>N</i> = 44)	30.67 (10.08)	14.81 (5.45)	13.80 (9.53)	25.71 (6.66)
Older ( <i>N</i> = 47)	34.09 (9.36)	15.87 (6.61)	12.16 (9.81)	26.06 (6.97)
<i>Sex</i>				
Male ( <i>N</i> = 20)	32.35 (10.92)	17.15 (5.99)	13.79 (9.38)	24.32 (7.73)
Female ( <i>N</i> = 68)	32.65 (9.69)	14.71 (6.00)	12.60 (9.78)	26.25 (6.63)
<i>Sexual Orientation</i>				
Heterosexual ( <i>N</i> = 52)	32.18 (9.91)	15.14 (6.18)	14.67 (10.31)	25.96 (6.57)
Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual ( <i>N</i> = 35)	32.31 (8.90)	15.66 (6.07)	10.38 (7.74)	26.00 (6.46)
<i>Family Type</i>				
Divorce ( <i>N</i> = 73)	32.27 (9.79)	15.44 (6.49)	12.79 (9.19)	26.03 (6.56)
Adoption/Insemination ( <i>N</i> = 18)	33.11 (10.15)	15.06 (4.17)	13.65 (11.60)	25.35 (7.88)
<i>Sex of Gay/Lesbian Parent</i>				
Female ( <i>N</i> = 62)	31.95 (9.79)	15.98 (6.36)	13.80 (10.29)	25.26 (7.27)
Male ( <i>N</i> = 28)	33.56 (9.96)	13.96 (5.19)	11.00 (7.78)	27.29 (5.46)
<i>Parental Relationship Status</i>				
Single ( <i>N</i> = 18)	31.94 (9.79)	16.82 (7.22)	12.33 (9.66)	23.94 (7.83)
Partnered ( <i>N</i> = 72)	32.39 (9.86)	14.80 (5.51)	12.93 (9.68)	26.40 (6.52)
<i>Age Learned of Parental Sexual Orientation</i>				
Older ( <i>N</i> = 48)	31.50 (9.85)	15.98 (6.02)	13.51 (9.58)	25.82 (6.12)
Younger ( <i>N</i> = 43)	33.36 (9.80)	14.75 (6.13)	12.44 (9.80)	25.98 (7.46)

*Note.* Mean total scores on each scale as a function of demographic characteristics. None of the means between groups were significantly different, indicating that individual differences had no reliable effect on long-term psychological adjustment.

Overall, responses to the RFS subscales significantly predicted life satisfaction,  $R^2 = .30$ ,  $F(9, 58) = 2.80$ ,  $p = .009$ , negative affect,  $R^2 = .31$ ,  $F(9, 57) = 2.86$ ,  $p = .008$ , and positive affect,  $R^2 = .27$ ,  $F(9, 58) = 2.35$ ,  $p = .024$ . In terms of individual predictors, greater recollections of Adulthood Stigma were associated with more negative affect at present,  $B = 0.32$ ,  $SE = 0.15$ ,  $t = 2.19$ ,  $p = .033$ , and less positive affect at present,  $B = -0.52$ ,  $SE = 0.21$ ,  $t = -2.48$ ,  $p = .016$ . Greater recollections of Childhood Benefits were unexpectedly associated with lower life satisfaction at present,  $B = -0.50$ ,  $SE = 0.24$ ,  $t = -2.07$ ,  $p = .043$ . These three were the only subscales of the Rainbow Families Scale that emerged as significant individual predictors in the multiple regression models.

Finally, we used a series of nested linear regressions to test whether individual difference variables moderated the association between RFS subscales and current psychological adjustment. In the first step, we included a moderator variable (e.g., current age) along with each of the Rainbow



Families Scale subscales. In the second step, we included interactions between the moderator and all Rainbow Families Scale subscales. We examined  $\Delta R^2$  to determine whether the inclusion of interaction effects significantly improved the predictive power of each model. The inclusion of interaction terms did not significantly improve the fit of any of the models ( $ps > .07$ ).

### Recalled Experiences over the Life Course

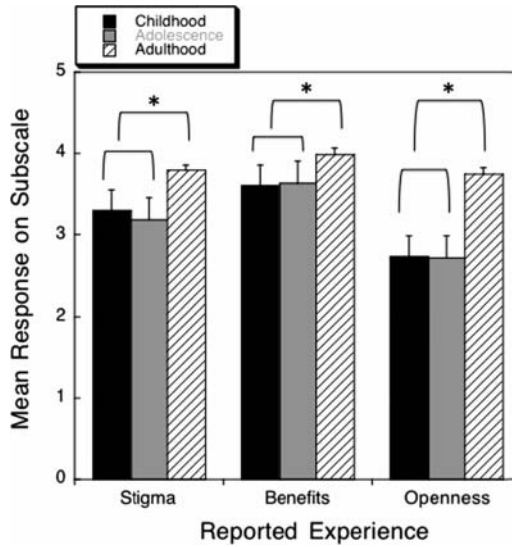
Thus far, we have found that adult offspring of gay and lesbian parents recall different social experiences as a function of some aspects of their family backgrounds, but no significant differences in long-term psychological outcomes. One explanation for these results is that offspring of gay and lesbian parents adapt to their social experiences over the life course. We used Repeated Measures Analysis of Variance to test this possibility. The assumption of sphericity was violated for all main effects (Mauchly's  $w = .69$  for stigma,  $.72$  for benefits, and  $.86$  for openness), so we applied Huynh-Feldt corrections.

As expected, participants' recollections of stigma varied as a function of developmental period,  $F(1.56, 112.12) = 44.64$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.38$  (Table 3). Difference contrasts revealed that memories of stigma did not vary significantly between childhood and adolescence,  $F(1, 72) = 1.53$ ,  $p = .220$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.02$ , but that participants recalled significantly less stigma during adulthood than during childhood/adolescence combined,  $F(1, 72) = 64.23$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.47$  (Figure 1). Also consistent with our hypothesis, participants' recollections of benefits they gained from having gay

**TABLE 3** Means and Standard Deviations for Repeated Measures Analysis of Variance Performed on the Rainbow Families Scale

RFS Subscale	<i>M(SD)</i>
<i>Stigma</i>	
Childhood Stigma	46.12 (12.50)
Adolescent Stigma	45.15 (12.51)
Adulthood Stigma	53.73 (9.80)
<i>Benefits</i>	
Childhood Benefits	28.85 (4.72)
Adolescent Benefits	29.51 (5.76)
Adulthood Benefits	32.22 (4.84)
<i>Openness</i>	
Childhood Openness	16.35 (5.04)
Adolescent Openness	16.41 (5.73)
Adulthood Openness	22.31 (4.86)

*Note.* Mean scores on each subscale of the Rainbow Families Scale are displayed. For all three subscales (Stigma, Benefits, Openness), participants' responses varied significantly as a function of developmental period.



**FIGURE 1** Change in recalled experiences with stigma, benefits, and openness over the life course. The stigma subscale was reverse-coded; thus, a high value indicates few experiences with stigma.

or lesbian parents varied over the life course,  $F(1.59, 116.30) = 33.89$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.32$  (Table 3). Again, there was no difference in reports of benefits between childhood and adolescence,  $F(1, 73) = 3.16$ ,  $p = .079$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.04$ , but participants recalled significantly more benefits during adulthood than during earlier developmental periods,  $F(1, 73) = 51.89$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.42$  (Figure 1). Finally, participants' reports of openness also varied as a function of developmental period,  $F(1.79, 132.22) = 87.93$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.54$  (Table 3). While memories of openness did not vary significantly between childhood and adolescence,  $F(1, 74) = 0.02$ ,  $p = .878$ ,  $\eta_p^2 < 0.001$ , participants recalled significantly more openness during adulthood than during earlier developmental periods,  $F(1, 74) = 136.10$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.65$  (Figure 1).

## DISCUSSION

Although research on offspring of gay and lesbian parents spans three decades, a number of topics remain understudied. One such topic involves the nature of individual differences in social experiences among offspring of gay and lesbian parents; another concerns associations between early psychosocial experiences and long-term mental health among offspring of gay and lesbian parents. The current study addressed both of these topics.

First, we uncovered several variations in participants' recalled social experiences as a function of their family background. For example,

participants with lesbian mothers recalled more stigma than did those with gay fathers. We did not predict this finding because it does not have a strong basis in previous literature. However, it is consistent with data suggesting that children of lesbian mothers are more likely than are children of gay fathers to disclose information to peers about parental sexual orientation (e.g., Barrett & Tasker, 2001). If children of lesbian mothers were more open about their parents' sexual orientation, more peers may have known about their nontraditional family structure, creating more opportunities for them to encounter stigma. While this explanation is plausible, interactions between childhood openness and parental sexual orientation did not predict childhood stigma in the current study. Thus, further research on this issue is warranted.

Participants born to or adopted by gay or lesbian parents reported more openness about their parents' sexual orientations during childhood than did participants born to heterosexual parents, one of whom later came out. Children born to or adopted early in life by gay or lesbian parents may have disclosed information about their family before they fully understood the nature of stigma, thereby increasing their level of openness during childhood. On the other hand, children born to heterosexual parents could not be open about parental sexual orientations until one of their parents came out, which may have happened later in life. Either or both of these factors may have contributed to increased reports of openness among children born to or adopted by gay or lesbian parents.

Male participants indicated higher degrees of openness about their parents' sexual orientations than did female participants. This may have been due to the fact that more male than female participants grew up with gay or lesbian parents who were in committed relationships. Thus, two women or two men may have picked them up from school, or a same-sex couple might have attended their extracurricular events, giving male participants no choice but to be open with peers about their parents' sexual orientations. Of course, there are other possible explanations that future researchers might explore.

Offspring who learned that a parent was gay or lesbian earlier in life reported more benefits associated with having a gay or lesbian parent in childhood and adolescence than did those who learned when they were older. This finding is consistent with results of previous studies that reported more positive reactions to parental sexual orientation when children learned about it earlier in life (e.g., Paul, 1986). Children born to gay and lesbian parents are likely to have been aware of this fact from an early age. Those who learned of parental sexual orientation later in life may have done so in the context of parental conflict or divorce, and this may have obscured any relevant benefits.

Thus, participants in the current study remembered their social experiences in differing ways. While many recalled a mix of positive and negative

experiences related to their parents' sexual orientations, some recalled less stigma, more benefits, and more openness than others. Several of these experiences were also associated with long-term adjustment. For example, participants who recalled more stigma during adulthood also reported higher levels of negative affect and lower levels of positive affect at the time of testing. Furthermore, participants who recalled more benefits of their family situation during childhood reported lower life satisfaction at present. We did not predict the latter effect, and it appears to have been driven by suppression (Cohen & Cohen, 1975; Krus & Wilkinson, 1986). Indeed, the simple Pearson correlation between Childhood Benefits and Life Satisfaction was positive ( $r = .16$ ), indicating that without the influence of other variables, greater recollections of benefits associated with one's family situation during childhood were associated with greater life satisfaction in the long term. Upon entering all of the other Rainbow Families Scale subscales into a regression predicting Life Satisfaction, however, the direction of the effect for Childhood Benefits was reversed and emerged as statistically significant ( $B = -0.50$ ,  $p = .043$ ). This unexpected change in direction may have been due to high correlations between Childhood Benefits and the Adolescent Benefits and Adulthood Benefits subscales ( $r_s = .76$  and  $.49$ , respectively). After accounting for these overlapping experiences, the Childhood Benefits subscale was only able to explain a small portion of unique variance in Life Satisfaction, and the association was unexpectedly negative. These analyses suggest that the negative association we found between childhood benefits and life satisfaction was merely a function of suppression in the multiple regression framework.

Despite the fact that some recalled social experiences predicted psychological adjustment in the long term, most of the current participants developed into psychologically healthy adults. In fact, we did not uncover any statistically significant differences in overall well-being as a function of family characteristics. Adaptive coping provides one explanation for such positive long-term adjustment despite mixed social experiences earlier in life. Indeed, participants in our study perceived their experiences as becoming increasingly positive over the life course, with less stigma, more benefits, and more openness during adulthood than during earlier developmental periods. These results suggest that participants may have learned to cope effectively with stigma, leading to better social experiences and positive adjustment in the long term. Participants' increasingly positive experiences could also indicate a broader cultural shift towards acceptance of gay and lesbian family life over the past several decades; however, we did not find differences in recalled psychosocial experiences as a function of participant age. Therefore, adaptive coping is a more plausible explanation for our findings than are cohort effects. Still, these explanations deserve further study.

## Strengths and Limitations

Despite our study's contributions, it had several limitations. First, because the Rainbow Families Scale measured retrospective self-reports, it is possible that participants' recollections of their social experiences were biased by their current circumstances. However, it is worth noting that participants' responses were not overly generalized—they recalled a variety of positive and negative experiences across the life span. In addition, recent studies have indicated that surveys of this kind have moderately high reliability over time (e.g., Yancura & Aldwin, 2009), and that memory distortion is not so great that it invalidates statistically significant conclusions drawn from retrospective reports (e.g., Brown, Craig, Harris, Handley, & Harvey, 2007). Thus, while retrospective biases may have had some influence on our data, it is not likely that they produced our primary results. Furthermore, sampling is an issue in all studies of sexual orientation, as stigma might deter vulnerable individuals from participating in research. Because ours was a convenience sample, results are not generalizable to all children with gay and lesbian parents. In particular, the current findings may not generalize to racial and ethnic minority individuals, as our sample was predominately white. We should also note that a substantial minority of our participants identified as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. We believe that this relatively high proportion of gay and lesbian individuals was due to sampling procedures, because we advertised to organizations with primarily gay/lesbian membership. Future research could mitigate some of these sampling concerns by obtaining population-based samples of individuals reared by gay and lesbian parents.

Our study also had notable strengths. First, relative to other research in this area, our sample was relatively diverse, allowing us to compare individuals from single- and dual-parent families, those from divorced-parent families as well as adoptive families, and those from different age groups. These are among the first quantitative findings of individual differences among offspring of gay and lesbian parents in a single sample, and they improve knowledge of within-group differences in this community. Second, since gay- and lesbian-parent families became widely visible within the past several decades, research on long-term development has only recently become feasible (Gartrell & Bos, 2010; Tasker, 1999). Ours is among a handful of studies examining long-term outcomes among offspring of gay and lesbian parents. Finally, by asking participants to reflect upon their experiences during different developmental periods, we were able to track their memories of stigma, benefits, and openness from childhood to adulthood. These findings add to our knowledge of long-term development and adaptive coping among children of gay and lesbian parents, and they pave the way for longitudinal studies that can pinpoint the precise mechanisms through which social experiences affect development.

## CONCLUSION

In summary, offspring of gay and lesbian parents recall their pasts in various ways. In this study, male participants and those born to or adopted by gay/lesbian parents recalled a high degree of openness about their parents' sexual orientations during childhood. Individuals born to or adopted by gay or lesbian parents reported more benefits related to their family situation than did individuals from divorced families. On the other hand, some characteristics of the respondents (e.g., age, sexual orientation) were not associated with their reported experiences. Furthermore, despite varied recollections of social experiences, there were no significant differences in long-term psychological adjustment among demographic groups in our sample. Such generally positive outcomes may have been due to changes in social experiences over the life course. Indeed, participants recalled more benefits and fewer drawbacks related to having a gay or lesbian parent during adulthood than during earlier developmental periods. Taken together, these results provide some of the first quantitative findings about individual differences in psychosocial experiences among offspring of gay and lesbian parents, as well as their associations with long-term psychological adjustment.

## NOTE

1. Final *t*-test corrected for inequality of variances. Levene's  $F = 7.59, p = .007$ .

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