

Lesbian and Gay families: Exploring clients' thoughts and considerations



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Background

Relevant literature has broadly explored the challenges for gay and lesbian family members. Many studies reviewed by Patterson (2000) show that lesbian and gay couples and families have no significant difference from their heterosexual counterparts in relationship quality, psychological well-being, social adjustment, and parental investment (Biblarz & Savci, 2010). However, popular discourses show that lesbian and gay families still create anxieties expressed on a social, cultural and government level (Hicks, 2005). Also, according to Weststrate and McLean (2010), the dynamics of voice and silence of gay narratives are influenced by the larger cultural context in which the personal narratives are constructed.

The study of lesbian and gay family relations provides new perspectives in traditional family therapy norms (Green, 1996). Mitchell (as cited in Laird and Green, 1996) suggests that if family therapists want to develop effective approaches for working with these families, it is important to deepen their understanding of their lived experience. The current lexicon of family therapy and child development must be deconstructed and reconstructed again, taking into account the challenges and dilemmas that lesbian and gay families bring to family therapy. Lesbians and gay men are born into families of origin and later on create their own families. In some respects, the issues about families that lesbians and gays consider, are the same ones that heterosexual individuals face. In other respects, the issues are quite different (Patterson, 2000).

In a previous research (Viou, M. & Kalofonou, E., 2013), we attempted to understand therapists' own dilemmas and considerations when working with lesbian and gay family members. Based on our findings, therapists do face dilemmas linked to the dominant culture and their own personal history. Most of these themes were related to the homosexual factor.

Contemporary literature focuses mostly on the therapists' part. Therefore, we considered important to identify what are the challenges, if any, from the clients' perspective. The aim of this qualitative study is to understand and discuss the considerations of clients' related to the creation of a family.

Method

In this qualitative study, we used thematic analysis to examine 8 semi-structured interviews with lesbian and gay clients in family oriented therapy. Even though the interviews had a specific focus that informed the interview questions, there was a deliberate attempt to allow the interviewees to provide insights into their own reality and experience (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). Focusing on the similarities of the clients' experiences, we used coding process (Boyatzis, 1998) to identify specific 'dilemma' themes from the interviews.

Discussion

Although, many views were common, clients' have thoughts that are linked to their own personal history. Most of the findings were related to the clients' personal considerations about a child's rearing and less to the specific homosexual factor. This is in accordance with Patterson's suggestion that many of the issues that lesbian and gay families have to consider are the same as the heterosexual ones.

Compared to Viou and Kalofonou research, a common theme between therapists' and clients' considerations is the coming out of the gay family. However, an important difference is that, while therapists focus on issues related to homosexuality, clients focus on factors that are not necessarily linked to being gay.

The therapeutic process seems to have played an important role in the way these thoughts and considerations have been processed and tackled with by the interviewees.

Themes	Quotes	Quotes
Relationship Quality The interviewees focused largely on the quality and importance of their relationship, as a critical factor before starting a family.	Markos: "The quality of a relationship matters because the child is "tabula rasa". The child should experience a relationship with good structure, in order to have good role models".	John: "It is important to have a good relationship with a man to grow up a child. A person I would have a good communication and special connection".
Supportive Networks Another important thought that seemed to influence their decision regarding family formation is the existence, or not, of supportive and empathetic groups and networks.	Katerina: "Having people around us with the same values and way of thinking with us is essential. I choose my friends and networks based on that."	Maria: "I need the support from my family, parents and friends. I want my child to meet my brothers, cousins and friends... I don't want to have secrets from the child, secrecy might do harm. My close friends should accept me, that is something necessary".
Social and Legal Factors The interviewees referred to some social and legal factors that are specific to the Greek culture, such as homophobia and gay marriage rights	Katerina: "A society that would not judge a child from the moment of its birth is important. Greece enhances marginalization and does not support different kind of families e.g. psychological and financial support to single pregnant woman."	Nikos: "I don't know if I want to have a family in Greece. Gay rights in Greece are not recognized at all. If I would start a family, I would like to get married and have legal rights such as if I get sick I want my partner to be in the emergency room".
Financial Issues Another important theme was the financial status of the interviewees and their capability to support a new family.	Maria: "In order to take that decision we both need to be ready. Financial and practical factors such as to have space in the house should be considered first..."	John: "I would need to consider practical issues such as time, financial issues etc".
Personal Aspects This consideration involved the clients' ability to become parents and commit to a relationship. Also, it referred to some understandings related to their parental family	Markos: "Having a family is something I have considered. You need to spent time with the child, encourage mistakes and learn things. It is a huge responsibility, I don't know if I can do that".	Fanis: "I am thinking what emotions might rise from such a decision to have a child that has to do with my own traumas and wounds and that is the basic thing that troubles me..." 'coming out as gay family'
Coming out as gay family This thematic category involved considerations about whether the clients' would come out as a gay family and to whom.	Petros: "My family would be open and out. The child would be protected emotionally with the help of a counselor, to prevent damage from possible bullying."	Stella: "I would select the people I would talk to, considering who can handle it. For my family would be rather socking because they are deeply religious, but that would not stop me from doing it. I would be ok to talk about my family at work but it also depends on who can listen and accept it. My goal would be to protect my child..."

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