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A Tale of Two Mommies: (Re)Storying Family of Origin Narratives

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Abstract

This study examined co-mother family of origin stories. Origin stories, representing the formation of a family, are culturally understood within a master narrative of heterosexual love and biological childbearing. Beginnings of co-mother families rupture this dominant, gendered, boy-meets-girl script. Investigating whether or not co-mother stories reify the normative master narrative or if instead their narrations resist and/or possibly transform conventional understandings, analysis identified three co-mother origin story themes: Becoming a Family (1) as Normal, (2) as Negotiation, and (3) as Normalization. Themes differ in terms of depiction of co-mother family formation as congruent with current norms, as something that needs to be made to seem normal (i.e., in need of normalization), or as something between normal and normalization—to be negotiated internally within the couple. Study results are discussed within a broader framework of family coming-together stories.

Introduction

Family stories provide a blueprint for family life. Stories that comprise a family's history offer guidelines and rules for behavior, shape individual and family values, and offer legacies to current and future generations (Stone, 2004; Thompson et al., 2009). According to the theory of communicated narrative sense-making (CNSM, Koenig Kellas & Kranstuber Horstman, 2015) family stories create individual and relational identity, socialize children and new members, help families cope with and make sense of difficulty, trauma, and stress (Koenig Kellas & Trees, 2013) communicating family identity and esteem to outsiders (Stone). At the foundation of all family stories is the family origin story. Origin stories represent the formation, or the coming together of a family, and are typically situated within a master narrative of heterosexual love and childbearing (Bochner, Ellis, & Tillmann-Healy, 1997). Indeed, the majority of research on origin stories has been on heterosexual courtship and marriage (e.g., Buehlman, Gottman, & Katz, 1992; Holmberg, Orbuch, & Veroff, 2004). According to Stone (2004), courtship stories are not only instructive, teaching members lessons about love and marriage, but they are also necessary for a family's survival and longevity,

[A]ny family, has a major stake in perpetuating itself, and. . .so it must unrelentingly push the institutions that preserve it—the institution of marriage especially, but also the institution of heterosexual romantic love, which, if all goes the way the family would have it go, culminates in marriage, children, and enhanced family stability. (p. 50)

Thus, courtship narratives function as a canonical narrative (Bochner et al., 1997) perpetuating traditional notions of family culture. As a form of retrospective storytelling in CNSM, or stories that people here and tell that have a significant impact (Koenig Kellas & Kranstuber Horstman, 2015), courtship stories provide a means by which individuals and couples cast their relationship into the context of cultural, relational, and personal meaning-making systems (Holmberg et al., 2004), while also creating

a sense of relational identity (Koenig Kellas & Trees, 2013) and reminding the couple about their reasons for coming together (Ponzetti, 2005). Overall, the literature suggests that the courtship and birth stories of heterosexual families are scripted, linear, and gendered tales of family formation. The literature also suggests that these stories are critical to developing meaning, understanding, and family identity—in defining and making sense of the family's past, present, and future. Despite this, current research on courtship stories continues to be predominated by a master narrative of heterosexual love (Ponzetti, 2005).

The state of the literature appears, however, incongruent with the most recent census, which reports that the traditional household headed by a husband and wife is in decline, dipping below the 50% point for the first time in U.S. history, with couples with children dropping to 20% (Baxter, 2014). During this same period, same-sex households with children showed percentage increases. Currently, it is estimated that 2 million U.S. children are growing up with a lesbian or gay parent (Movement Advancement Project [MAP], 2011). In the coming years, that number is expected to rise, as one third of all lesbians and over one half of gay men report plans to parent (MAP). Indeed, the 2015 ruling that gay marriage is a constitutional right also suggests imminent change in the landscape of same-sex parenting. Given this context, we focused on origin stories of non-normative families—co-mother families—in the current study. These families are historically understudied, but vitally important to understand given contemporary family life in the United States today.

This study examines the origin stories of co-mother, discourse-dependent families. All families are dependent on discourse, but more diverse families that depart from cultural norms lean more heavily on discourse to define themselves as a family and to legitimate their family form to outsiders (Galvin, 2014). We first review the research on the cultural and familial context in which co-mothers create families, building an argument for the need to understand the origin stories of co-mothers. Subsequently, we present our thematic analysis of co-mothers' co-constructed narratives of their family origin stories, shedding light on same-sex family beginnings, opportunities, and constraints.

The cultural and familial context of co-mother families

The familial and cultural lives of co-mother families are multifaceted, defying neat characterization. Co-mother families are increasing in number (MAP, 2011) and in visibility. Thirty years of social scientific research presents a strong case for high levels of family functioning and positive parenting outcomes (Biblarz & Savci, 2010). Co-mothers and their children have been found to be resilient, demonstrating unique strengths (Suter, 2014). Co-mother families are often privileged over heterosexual parents for placement of the hardest-to-place children in the U.S. foster care system. They are viewed as more willing to adapt their parenting for children who present the most severe behavioral, physical, and emotional problems (Richardson, Moyer, & Goldberg, 2012), produce higher family functioning capabilities (Erich, Leung, Kindle, & Carter, 2005), and demonstrate higher levels of resourcefulness and more highly developed social support networks as compared to their heterosexual counterparts (Brooks & Goldberg, 2001). Co-mother experiences of heterosexist stigmatization increase their sensitivity to children's experiences with discrimination and ability to promote children's positive coping (Ausbrooks & Russell, 2011).

Yet, in spite of the increase in numbers, rise in visibility, and favorable parenting outcomes, co-mothers and their children still face challenges emanating from heteronormative interpersonal interactions, social climates, and legal contexts (Suter, 2014). Co-mothers have been found to experience discursive legitimacy challenges (Breshears, 2011), ranging from direct attacks on them as mothers and their families as a whole, to master narrative challenges (Koenig Kellas & Suter, 2012). Their children often contend with negative social climates, particularly in the school context, the primary site for peer bullying. Studies still find teachers and staff unprepared (Kintner-Duffy, Vardell, Lower, & Cassidy, 2012) and sometimes even uncomfortable (Averett & Hegde, 2012) when working with co-mothers and their children. Co-mothers internalize the negative cultural messages encoded in these interactions (Broad,

Alden, Berkowitz, & Ryan, 2008) reporting higher levels of internalized homophobia compared to lesbians without children (Demino, Appleby, & Fisk, 2007). In sum, the familial and cultural lives of co-mother families are riddled with contradiction; co-mothers enact resilient and positive parenting in the face of sociocultural level stigmatization.

Family origin stories

Previous research on heterosexual family beginnings suggests that origin stories adhere to a master narrative through gendered, linear, positively valenced romantic love myths (see Ponzetti, 2005). Previous research also indicates that family stories are central to the formation of individual and family identity and work to reinforce family cohesion, adaptability, and functioning (Koenig Kellas, 2005). Family origin stories affect and reflect important societal, group, and personal meanings about family life. Although researchers have investigated same-sex family formation (Patterson & Riskind, 2010), the emphasis in narrative research has been on individual coming-out stories (e.g., Breshears & Braithwaite, 2014). Research has yet to investigate co-mothers' family of origin stories.

We find this gap problematic, as stories potentiate increased societal legitimation and acceptance of alternate paths of family formation. By definition, the origin stories of co-mother families depart from the canonical. The beginnings of co-mother families rupture the dominant, assumed, linear, boy-meets-girl story. Previous research on the origin stories of other types of discourse-dependent families reveals attempts to calibrate toward the traditional as well as communicate uniqueness. For example, adoption entrance narratives are often told in an attempt to ameliorate negative identity implications of the child's birth story, to promote attachment, and ideally secure the child's place in the adoptive family (Krusiewicz & Wood, 2001).

Adoption backstories—or the version of how the family came to be that parents share with individuals outside the family—have been found to function as counterstories (Baxter, Norwood, Asbury, & Scharp, 2014) challenging the master narrative by envisioning a new view of legitimate family that pays homage to both biological and nonbiological family relations. Finally, stepfamily origin stories are situated at the intersection of canonical family origins (Galvin, 2014) and the deviation from the master narratives about the lasting nature of nuclear families (Jones, 2003). Koenig Kellas et al. (2014) found that the majority of adult children's stories of their stepfamily beginnings were negatively valenced, with over 50% characterized as too sudden or tainted by dark themes; they also found that those who told stories that broke from the traditional themes of "happily ever after" also reported more negative feelings about family.

The question remains as to whether or not co-mother stories mirror the normative master narrative and/or if their narrations resist and/or possibly transform conventional understandings. According to the theory of CNSM, origin stories are among the most commonly told retrospective family stories, in part because they provide a foundation for other story types and because they teach initial lessons about values, attitudes toward love, and enduring life lessons (Koenig Kellas & Kranstuber Horstman, 2015; see also Stone, 2004). The study of origin stories of discourse-dependent families highlights the destabilized character of the postmodern family (Langellier & Peterson, 2004). We understand the family origin story as a performative site capable of recreating the master family of origin story or perhaps of decentering and destabilizing the master narrative to legitimate other family forms and their ways of coming together. For, "the family is always jerry-built and has to be reconstituted and reimagined every generation" (Stone, 2004, p. 40); co-mother family of origin stories might assist in this transformation for as Stone continues, "what blood does not provide, narrative can" (p. 70). Therefore, in order to better understand the origins, identity negotiations, and sociocultural climate of co-mother families, we undertook the current study guided by the following research question:

RQ: What themes characterize the origin stories of co-mothers?

Method

Participants

Participants in this study were recruited by the first and second author in a Western and Midwestern state, respectively, through flyers posted in the community, at local congregations welcoming gay and lesbian families, at local chapters of Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG), and social networking websites geared toward co-mothers. At the time of the interviews neither state recognized same-sex marriage. To qualify, participants had to be at least 18 years of age, be in a committed same-sex relationship, and be co-parenting at least one child. Children could be biologically and legally related or come from a previous relationship. Five couples were recruited from each state. In total, 10 couples ($n = 20$) participated in a dyadic interview about their family of origin stories.

Demographics were reported on an individual level, primarily in response to open-ended questions. On average participants were 45 years of age. Eighteen (90%) women identified as White, one (5%) as Hispanic, and one (5%) as Black. Eighteen (90%) women identified as lesbian/ gay, one participant identified as bisexual, and one participant identified as sexually fluid/undecided. Based on participants descriptions of their relational status, eight (40%) reported their relationship status as *partners*, seven (35%) as *married* (of which two denoted married in Hawaii, two married in Canada, and the remaining three did not specify the location), two (10%) as *committed relationship*, one (5%) as *committed*, one (5%) as *civil union*, and one (5%) as *lady loves*. Participants' house-hold incomes were between \$50,000 and \$400,000 ($M = \$104,000$; $SD = \$89,496$). Thirteen (65%) participants identified as Christian, one (5%) identified as Buddhist, one (5%) participant identified as atheist, and five (25%) participants reported being religiously unaffiliated. Overall, participants were well-educated with one (5%) participant earning an associate degree, six (30%) earning a bachelor's degree, 10 (50%) earning a master's degree, and four (20%) earning a PhD. Participants' children ranged in age from 1.3 years to 24 years of age ($M = 8.06$, $SD = 5.77$). Nine (50%) children came to the family through insemination, four (22%) children entered the family through adoption, and five (27%) children came through previous heterosexual relationships ($n = 18$). Table 1 reports individual-level demographics for each of the co-mothers interviewed for this study.

Procedures

After gaining IRB approval from both institutions, the two lead authors interviewed co-mothers.¹ During the interviews, co-mothers were asked to tell the story of how their family came to be, describe conversations with family outsiders about their family form, and recount couple- and family-level discussions and stories about family identity. Answers to the first question, narratives about the family's origin story or the story of how the family came to be, were analyzed for the current study. Specifically, couples were asked:

We'd like to begin by asking you to tell us the story of how your family came to be.

Please keep in mind that there is no right way to tell a story, although most stories are retellings of some noteworthy event that include a plot (a sequence of events), characters (you, your partner, your child[ren] and any other relevant persons), and usually some type of meaning (a point, a conclusion).² You can tell it together, separately, however you would normally tell this story to someone else.

Participant responses were transcribed. All identifying information (e.g., participant names, family member names, and cities) were masked (e.g., pseudonyms) to protect the anonymity of participants in the study.

Table 1. Co-mother demographics.

Pseudonym	Sexual Orientation	Gender	Race	Ethnicity	Religion	Education Level	DOB	Relationship Status	Household Income
Laney	Lesbian	Female	White	Irish-English	Unaffiliated	MSW	1971	Married in Hawaii	\$80,000
Nina	Gay	Female	White	Scottish-English	7th Day Adventist	BS, CPA	1969	Married in Hawaii	\$80,000
Gwen	Lesbian	Female	White	White	Episcopal	Master's	1967	Partners	No answer
Dina	Lesbian	Female	White	German-Irish	Christian	Bachelor's	1961	Partners	\$76,000
Toni	Bisexual	Female	White	White	Episcopal	BA	1969	Partners	\$70,000
Kay	Lesbian	Female	White	White	Episcopal	MA	1954	Partners	\$65,000
Shelly	Lesbian	Female	White	European	Atheist	Associate's	1969	Partners	\$65,000
Ava	Fluid/ Undecided	Female	White	White	Methodist	Bachelor's	1983	Partners	\$60,000
Olivia	Lesbian	Female	White	Irish	Episcopal	Master's	1959	Married in Canada	\$300,000
Leah	Lesbian	Female	White	American Irish-Latvian	Episcopal	MSN	1959	Married in Canada	\$400,000
Sherry	Lesbian	Female	White	Germanish	N/A	BS	1968	Civil Union	\$70,000
Lisa	Lesbian	Female	White	Germanish	N/A	Master's	1967	Married	\$70,000
Jill	Lesbian	Female	White	Czech-Irish- English	Presbyterian	MBA	1971	Committed Relationship	\$100,000
Deanna	Lesbian	Female	White	Swedish- German- English	Presbyterian	MS	1968	Committed Relationship	\$100,000
Becky	Lesbian	Female	White	German Irish	Lutheran/ UCC	Master's coursework	1972	Married	\$85,000
Kathy	Lesbian	Female	White	European American	United Methodist/ UCC	MA	1970	Married	\$70,000
Kendra	Lesbian	Female	White	Non-Hispanic	None	PhD	1976	Partners	\$85,000
Renee	Gay	Female	None reported	Hispanic	None	PhD	1978	Committed	\$85,000
Delia	Lesbian	Female	Black	None	Buddhist	BFA	1974	Lady Loves	\$50,000
Celia	Lesbian	Female	White	German	Feminist	Grad School	1975	Partners	\$50,000

Note. No co-mothers had state- or federal-level legal marital recognition at the time of data collection. Although 7 participants had married in other states (e.g., Hawaii) and countries (e.g., Canada) where same-sex marriage was legal at the time, these marriages were not recognized in participants' current states of residence.

Data analysis

To answer the research question, the data were thematically analyzed. To begin, all four authors conducted independent thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of the five dyadic interviews from the first state, archiving the five dyadic interviews from the second state for referential adequacy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To guide the analysis, a summary of heterosexual coming together stories was used as a theoretical sensitizing device (Holmberg et al., 2004; Koenig Kellas et al., 2014; Kranstuber Horstman, 2013). Engaging in investigator triangulation, the verification procedure in which findings are verified by using multiple investigators (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), the four coders then met to compare initial independent analyses, which resulted in the identification of two themes: becoming a family as normal and becoming family as normalization. Employing referential adequacy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), the four coders verified the initial analysis by independently analyzing the archived five couple interviews.

Subsequently, the four coders again met to compare the independent analyses (investigator triangulation), resulting in confirmation of the initial two themes and identification of a third theme: becoming a family as negotiation. Two coders subsequently reanalyzed the five interviews from the first state, confirming the presence of the newly emergent becoming a family as negotiation theme across the entire data set. To further ensure the validity of the findings, the research team maintained an analytic

audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), or careful records of data analysis and analytic decisions. Moreover, to demonstrate the interrelationships between raw data and analysis, the results section includes data exemplars (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Results

Thematic coding of co-mothers' narratives responses to the query, "Tell me the story of how your family came to be" unearthed three overarching themes: (1) Becoming a Family as Normal, (2) Becoming a Family as Negotiation, and (3) Becoming a Family as Normalization. The three differ in terms of depiction of co-mother family formation as congruent with current norms, as something that needs to be made to seem normal (i.e., in need of normalization), or as something between normal and normalization—to be negotiated. During coding, we found co-mother stories referencing elements of more than one of these themes. At least two of the themes emerged in each of the narratives across the data set. At the same time though, we found that the holistic narrative of each couple was dominated by the essence of one theme, with one exception. Becky and Jenny's co-telling, couple interview eight, invoked two themes: negotiation and normalization. In total, becoming a family as normal characterized three co-narratives, negotiation characterized five narratives, and normalization characterized three narratives. This tally includes the manifestation of both the negotiation and the normalization theme in Becky and Jenny's narrative.

Becoming a family as normal

The first theme, becoming a family as normal, sidesteps larger cultural conversations about ab/ normalness of female-female headed families. Becoming a family as normal depicts co-mother family formation as having a usual or expected character, as being in accordance with, and even at times as determined by nature. Becoming a family as normal was articulated in terms of three subthemes: coupling, desiring children, and conceiving children.

Coupling

In the becoming a family as normal theme, coupling was depicted as a natural step in the coming together process—providing a foundation for raising children together. For instance, co-mothers coupled as a natural consequence of: (a) friendship (e.g., "We've been best friends since we were 14 and we are celebrating 25 years of a committed relationship in a few months" Leah, 5: 6–9); (b) shared interests (e.g., "I don't think we went in with the intentions of really being a couple, but we became a couple just cause we had the same interests" Deanna, 7: 297); (c) playing sports together (e.g., "So for years I saw her, but never had met her, then all the sudden our teams merged and I went, 'ooh, I'm going to be playing with that, that woman now.' And things just blossomed immediately" Dina, 2: 33–36); (d) working together, (e.g., "I started working part time where my partner worked and that's how we met" Celia, 10: 56); or (e) having gone to college together ("We met in college" Laney, 1: 48–51).

The coupling aspect of the coming together story mirrored the ways in which women and men come together in the dominant heteronormative family of origin story. Starting out as friends and eventually falling in love, meeting in college and growing up and becoming a unit, mirror traditional family of origin story beginnings. Likewise, as discussed next, the second constituent property of the becoming a family as normal theme, desiring children, reflects the traditional coming together narrative.

Desiring children

The desire for children was depicted as part of a natural, evolutionary process in family formation. Some co-mothers ascribed this normal desire for children to naturally occurring, biologically-based desires (Park, 2013) encoded in female DNA (Hequembourg, 2007). Some narrated having always been psychologically aware of a biologically induced desire to procreate, invoking the cultural sense of

women as “natural or born mothers,” as “maternal.” As Toni narrated, “As far as having kids, I mean, that was a given for me. Um, I could never have gone through my life without becoming a parent. And that’s something I’ve known my whole life” (Toni, 3: 207–211). For others, biological desire emanated from the female biological clock. Co-mothers analogized this to bells going off, referencing sharp increases in fertility-related hormones, “I was going through the typical woman hitting my early thirties and the bells were going off and every time I saw a kid . . . I had the hormonal surge and desire to have a child” (Deanna, 7: 55–156). Women who noted the “ticking biological clock” framed desires for children as an inevitable, inherent part of a woman’s nature, invoking the master narrative of heterosexual love and childbearing (Bochner et al., 1997).

Other co-mothers narrated the naturalness of the desire for children from a more rational space, depicting their desire as the logical, next step in the process of becoming family. Calling upon the cultural discourse of rationality, having children was characterized as a goal to achieve after having accomplished other things in life, such as buying a home, traveling, and fulfilling other life goals (e.g., participating in marathons and triathlons). Co-mothers often found themselves asking each other, “What next?” For example, Deanna explained:

We just came to that conclusion in our life like most people do when they hit a certain age, and they’ve got and they’ve done some things, I mean we have done a little bit of traveling, and having our fun, and you know, kind of, what’s the next step relationship wise? Do you wanna live together have a family? . . . I think it’s almost like any couple, whether you’re gay or straight, you just hit that point where you kind of have to decide if you want this. You have to do it now, or decide not to have a family. (Deanna, 7: 207–222)

Appealing to the dominant cultural script of heterosexual romantic relationships, Deanna positions the decision of whether or not to have children as a normal process of discernment that each couple needs to make, regardless of sexual orientation, “whether you’re gay or straight.” In doing so, she underscores the sense that having children is just the rational next step in family formation.

Within the third theme of becoming a family as normal, biological conception of children also was portrayed as normal, despite the inherent struggles associated with donor conception. Co-mothers in this data set who conceived their children using donated sperm (whether donors were known or unknown) uniformly characterized donor conception as requiring tremendous investments of time and money, as taxing emotional, physical, and spiritual reserves. Fertility medicines were described as “garish” (Leah, 5: 293); insurance typically did not cover costs, and the process was often described as “misery” (Olivia, 5: 292).

(Donor) conceiving

Donor conception was construed as the most natural, preferred, and desirable manner of having children within the third constituent property of the becoming a family as normal theme. This biogenetic preference often manifested as superior to adoption as evidenced in the following instances:

We chose donor insemination because that seemed like the thing that wouldn’t have any complications of any external things. We were terrified of the thought of getting a child and then having it taken from us so we really didn’t want, we just wanted to have our family be our family. (Laney, 1: 58–64)

Laney characterizes donor insemination as having less “complications,” referencing the U.S. foster care system’s preference for reunification with birth parents (Suter, Baxter, Seurer, & Thomas, 2014). Relatedly, Toni positions adoption as the next best option only after the first, preferred, seemingly more normal choice of donor-inseminated biological childbirth fails:

I wanted to have the experience of being pregnant. My mom couldn’t get pregnant so my brother and I are both adopted. But it was something I wanted to experience. So we tried artificial insemination and then in vitro. Was pregnant briefly and then miscarried . . . So, after the miscarriage we started the process with Social Services. (Toni, 3: 207–219)

Only after going to great lengths to realize her first choice of pregnancy including enduring artificial insemination, turning next to in vitro fertilization, experiencing a brief pregnancy and then early miscarriage, did Toni turn to her second choice of adoption.

In sum, the becoming family as normal theme characterized the coming together stories of co-mothers in ways that mirror traditional courtship stories. The participants described coupling rituals based in common interests, a biological drive for desiring children, and the dominant preference for biologically based ways of conceiving.

Becoming a family as negotiation

The second theme, becoming family as negotiation, captures the interpersonal processes by which co-mothers described negotiating family beginnings *within* the couple. Becoming a family as negotiation encapsulates processes that occur when normal and normalization collide within the couple, including transforming the dominant cultural family of origin story by inventing a new fairy tale, by negotiating divergences in desiring children, and by processing together the losses and difficulty associated with forming a family.

Negotiating a new fairytale

In contrast to the coupling element of the becoming a family as normal theme in which co-mothers mirrored conventional ways of coming together, coupling in the becoming a family as negotiation theme required a new script for coupling, a new fairytale if you will. Without exception, co-mothers who described coupling as a negotiation of a new fairytale were those who had originally been in relationships with men and were moving for the first time into committed same-sex relationships. Characterized by a sense of surprise, of grace, and eventual grateful acceptance, this emergent fairytale allowed women to build relationships and subsequent family based on novel understandings of “true love.” Sometimes the new fairytale began with one memorable quite ground-shifting moment. For example, Toni and Kay were both in unhappy heterosexual marriages before they met one another. Kay describes how her perception of the “knight in shining armor” shifted when she met Toni:

Um, but I always, being the girl that I was, harbored that knight in shining armor, so that perfect love sort of thing. And, uh, amazingly enough the day that Toni walked into [the office], and everything shifted in the universe for me. And I had, as she said, I had been in a heterosexual relationship for 20 years at that point almost, nearly. Um, was not necessarily happy but I wasn't feeling completely out of sync with myself. Um, just not in love. But everything shifted. And I really didn't know what I was going to do about it, but I was just very happy that God had graced me with this gift at a point when I was really feeling like I didn't know what I was gonna do next with my life. And, uh, just relished every day that I had to spend with her. (Kay, 3: 143–164)

Kay describes a key moment when meeting Toni “when everything shifted.” In essence, her worldview of romantic relationships changed due to Toni, and Kay was more than willing to spend time developing the relationship. Kay's partner, Toni, echoes the sentiment that the relationship was welcome, albeit unexpected: “Um, but I've always believed in true love. And I found, I suddenly came to terms with the fact that I'd found true love and it just was in a very different body than I expected” (Toni, 3: 203–207). Both Kay and Toni make note of a very specific, surprising change that occurred when they realized that their relationship would not look like their previous marital relationships. They also discussed the ways in which they had to negotiate this shift in conversation with themselves and each other.

Other couples tracked the progression of their relationship from friends to committed partners as more of a sense of coming to a realization. This relational development is characterized differently because it was not a surprise, but rather a gradual process. Becky describes this phenomenon: “We were working all day, I mean even when we were still in our other relationships, it was, ‘How do we end these other pieces?’ We were working all day making excuses to work late at night” (Becky, 8: 121–126). Like others, Becky and her partner's relationship developed over time during which the two were still engaged in different-sex relationships. Over time, they came to accept the female-female romance.

The negotiation of the relationship and eventual acceptance of the new fairytale was a function of time and significance rather than a moment of realization.

Negotiating discrepant desires for children

In contrast to the first theme, becoming a family as normal, in which desires for children were construed as natural, discrepancies in desire between co-mothers characterized the becoming family as negotiation theme. Several couples acknowledged the dichotomy between the partners in the couple over original desires—or lack thereof—to have children. Typically, one partner had “always known” she wanted children, and the other was unsure or adamantly opposed. These discrepancies were sometimes described matter-of-factly as key elements to the history of the couple. For instance, some co-mothers experienced a complete lack of an urge to nurture, “As a matter of fact I thought, you know, some things just should not be in your house, (chuckle) pets, plants, kids (group chuckle), in that order” (Lisa, 6: 72–79). Others experienced an urge to nurture, but planned on transferring it to the care and keeping of pets or gardens, “We didn’t think we were gonna have kids at all, we were gonna just have lots of animals” (Renee, 9: 58–59).

For other co-mothers, discrepant urges to mother were framed as key elements of the coming together story. For example, Leah described the choices she had to make:

And I always knew that I wanted to have children and Olivia wasn’t and so when our coupling became very serious and we were talking about a committed relationship, Olivia kind of threw the gauntlet down and said, ‘If you want children, if you want a guarantee with children, we cannot commit to one another because I can’t promise you that.’ (Leah, 5: 9–16)

Although Olivia eventually changed her mind and the couple had children after 10 years together, an important element of their coming together story was Leah making the choice to commit in the face of an unrequited desire for children.

Importantly, when situated in the context of co-mother family formation, some co-mothers ascribed their lack of desire to mother to their cultural identity as a lesbian. Lesbianism was thought to foreclose motherhood, as in the following case:

Being a Lesbian and everything, I just figured that that [becoming a mother] was not something that was gonna happen . . . I still look at him [son] every now and then and go, “Oh, my god, I have a kid!” I mean I just really never saw myself doing this. I mean I told my mom from the time I was ten years old I was never gonna have kids, so . . . (chuckle) she was surprised, um, because I just, I never saw myself doing this. (Kendra, 9: 220–337)

Negotiations with her female partner who came into the relationship always knowing she would mother forced Kendra to re-envision possibilities inherent within the lesbian identity category.

Negotiating difficulty and loss

When the normalizing desire to conceive through donor-insemination in order to have biological children failed (e.g., unsuccessful IVF; miscarriage) or collided with normalization (e.g., cultural disagreements about the normality of co-mother families), mothers in our sample described the ways in which they circumvented or coped with the outcomes. This was particularly relevant when managing loss and confronting challenges. For example, when discussing the adoption of their second son, Kay and Toni talked about the ways in which it helped them parent their first adopted son who had a number of challenges:

Parenting him [second son] tends to be a little bit redemptive, I think especially for me that it reminds me to not take the blame for things that I didn’t do to our first son and didn’t have any control over. And things that hurt him to this day. So, it’s a good reminder. (Kay, 3: 291–296)

When infertility was a problem, couples discussed the loss and decision-making process:

When we first started trying to having a family we, um, we went to the, we thought that the fastest and least expensive way would be to go to the sperm bank and try to do it that way. And, um, we did and then, um, like it didn't work a couple . . . And then the doctor said, you know, "there were little complications that may be in order to make that work Gwen might have to have some procedures." And so we kind of took a step back and thought, is this really feeling right? Is this what we really want to do? Or maybe should be go another route? Because we did always talk about adopting. (Dina, 2: 67–83)

Within this subtheme, couples negotiated the challenges associated with having and parenting children and positioned these conversations as relevant to their origin story. In sum, the becoming family as negotiation theme depicted instances in which couples within the relationship had to negotiate the collision of "normal" master narratives of coming together and the ruptures from normality. Whereas this second theme focuses on internal dynamics, the third theme shifts back to external dynamics or how the family sits in relation to the larger sociocultural context.

Becoming a family as normalization

The third theme, becoming a family as normalization, directly engages outsider sanction of co-mother families as abnormal, as deviating from cultural expectations. In sociological theory, normalization denotes the sociocultural processes by which modes, manners, and behaviors come to be *understood* as normal. Normalization captures the movement from abnormal to an accepted, taken-for-granted, natural status. In short, becoming a family as normalization, captures co-mothers' discursive and performative labors to normalize or make their coming together as family *seem* normal—with children as the prime audience for the effects of their story. Two properties animated this theme, normalizing conversations and normalizing actions, both of which are addressed next.

Normalizing conversations

The first constituent property of the becoming a family as normalization theme—normalizing conversations—encapsulates co-mother-child conversations that frame familial coming together as normal for children. These conversations often transpired in highly charged environments (e.g., ex-husbands suing co-mothers for custody based on the wrongness of their new family form, children feeling jealous of the second mother). In the context of such difficult transitions, co-mothers often relied on discourse to communicate the family's congruency with basic underlying familial values and commitments, such as love as the foundation for family, as evidenced here:

Jason had chosen to move out, they'd still get to see him, 'cause they were worried about that, and uh, that Kathy and mommy loved each other, and that love is what makes a family . . . It's just been kind of a normal thing since then. (Becky, 8: 133–136; 151–152)

In the following narrative, the co-mother analogized brownie making and donor conception in order to normalize the family's coming together for her daughter:

"When we make brownies what do we do first?" She said, "We have to go to the store." I said okay then what do we have to do? "Well we have to buy the mix." I said, "Okay, what else?" "Eggs and we have water at home." "Okay, then what do we do?" "Well we come home" "Then?" "Get a bowl out" "Then?" I made her walk through the whole thing, put the brownie mix in, stir it all up, put it in the pan and "Then what do you do?" "You put it in the oven." I said, "When the brownies come out do you say that those brownies are Safeway's?" She said, "No." I said, "Who do you say? Who made those brownies?" She said, "Well I made those brownies." I said "Okay, well you keep that thought because now I am going to tell you a story. Momo and I went to the seed store and there was nothing but shelves with jars with numbers and we decided we wanted this kind of seed to make babies and we brought the seed and we gave it to the doctor and he took eggs from Momo and it got mixed up and put into a petri dish." And I said, "and then it became an embryo and the embryos were put into my oven. Baby, you were put into *my oven*." And I said, "So when you came out, do you say that you are product of Momo and the sperm because I gotta tell you, I was your oven." And she, that was an amazing thing for her and she really got it. (Leah, 5: 371–397)

As in this instance, becoming a family as normalization highlights how co-mothers work to make the family seem normal, especially for their children. Leah promotes her daughter's sense-making of donor insemination by using an analogy of making brownies. Here, Leah is helping her child to understand that the co-mothers are the parents, and that the sperm is not the important factor in their current family form. As such, she normalizes co-motherhood by linking the child to both mothers—one through the eggs and the other through the oven. An effective tool in normalization, the story helped her daughter to better understand the role of the doctor and the sperm, as well as the significance of the co-mothers.

Normalizing actions

In the second constituent property, normalizing actions, co-mothers moved beyond discourse to embodied actions to normalize their family's coming together. Normalizing actions captures co-mothers' use of strategic, political acts to normalize their family's coming together. Co-mothers invoked embodied actions to assist children in seeing the family as congruent with prevailing normative conventions for family in the United States. For instance, like other children in co-mother stepfamilies who were conceived and previously raised in a mother-father family, Celia and Delia's daughter struggled to integrate her new positionality as a daughter of two mothers. Extending earlier normalizing family conversations, Celia and Delia traveled with their daughter to the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, an annual openly lesbian space, in an effort to surround their daughter with families like her own. Celia and Delia described their daughter's attendance at the festival as a turning point in their daughter's processes of normalization. The festival functioned as a physical space in which she saw her family form embodied in other families—families like her own:

Delia: She really didn't grasp it [the co-mother family], or become comfortable with it until probably when we went to Michigan, is when, everything started to click.

Celia: When she other families . . . we went to the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival last summer. Where there's lots of, you know, lesbian-headed families, and she saw families that looked like hers and it was very transformational . . . visibility was huge . . . Cause prior to then she only had . . . we'd say other families existed or we'd say things, but no firsthand experience.

Delia: Yeah that was a turning point. That was a, I think that was a huge turning point. (Delia & Celia, 10: 293–371)

By choosing to take their daughter to a music festival affirming of the co-mother family form, Celia and Delia helped their child understand and accept their family. Delia went on to say, "And now after Michigan she's been getting a lot more comfortable speaking about our family, speaking up about things when people would say . . . um, if people were to say negative things" (Delia, 10: 398–408). Attendance at the festival not only worked to help normalize Celia and Delia's daughter's internal sense of family, but it also bolstered her sense of family to the extent that she became more comfortable representing her family to outsiders. Through language and activities, mothers promote sense-making, specifically for the sake of the children in the family.

Discussion

The three emergent themes in co-mothers' family origin stories sit in relation to the concept of normality. The term normal connotes typical or usual behaviors, the expected modes of being in the world (Padavic & Butterfield, 2011). In the context of the family, normal refers to taken-for-granted assumptions about family formation (Suter, Seurer, Webb, Grewe, & Koenig Kellas, 2015). In mainstream U.S. culture, the normal way a family is formed is presumed to be the result of a man and woman marrying and producing biological offspring. By definition then, the very nature of a two-woman family resists this presumed natural order (Hequembourg, 2007); two women having sex does not naturally produce offspring. By extension, co-mother families are often characterized as unnatural by society at large (Suter et al., 2015). Within the current study, co-mothers both reified "normal" through consistencies

with the traditional master narrative of coming together and resisted “normal” through normalizing conversations and actions.

Within the family as normal theme, co-mothers in our sample told stories that were relatively consistent with heterosexual courtship stories (Ponzetti, 2005). Courtship stories of heterosexual couples tend to follow a trajectory of meeting, getting interested in one another, becoming a couple, planning to get married, the wedding, after the wedding, now, and the future. Co-mothers in our sample told stories that followed a similar script. Their stories depicted the stages of getting interested in one another and becoming a couple in the subtheme of coupling, and followed a natural progression to desiring and conceiving children. Further, stories in the becoming family as normal theme reinforced the sense that biogenetic ties constitute a normal family (Suter et al., 2014); a sentiment that overrode the intrinsic struggles, investments, and sacrifices of donor conception. In doing so, narrators reified the dominant cultural positioning of adoption as “second best” to biologically created families (Baxter, Suter, Thomas, & Seurer, 2015). This similarity in linear progression as well as reinforcement of the primacy of biological family ties suggests an agreed-upon structure for origin stories across traditional and discourse-dependent families. Notably, the decision to get married and planning the wedding were absent from the narratives of these co-mothers. Research might analyze the changing trajectory of future stories in light of the 2015 Supreme Court ruling against same-sex marriage bans.

Within the becoming family as normalization theme, addressing the deviation from the heteronormative script of coming together was an important aspect of co-mothers’ family of origin stories. Importantly, co-mothers positioned their children as the audience for these stories. Although becoming a family as normal narratives were primarily told for external audiences, becoming family as normalization stories were designed to help children understand how the family came to be. Given the external challenges faced by co-mothers (Koenig Kellas & Suter, 2012), future research might further examine co-mothers’ use of internal stories to combat external challenges. Related storytelling practices have already been identified in other forms of discourse-dependent families (e.g., transracial, internationally adoptive families [Suter, Reyes, & Ballard, 2011]). Moreover, deeper analysis of the normalizing aspects of actions that effectively surround the child with families like his or her own, like Celia and Delia’s attendance (with their daughter) at the annual Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival or previously identified attendance at same-sex parenting play groups (Suter, Daas, & Bergen, 2008), is warranted.

Finally, the becoming family as negotiation theme captured negotiations of family beginnings *within* the couple and the *intersection* of normalizing and normalization. This theme positioned interpersonal communication within the couple as an important aspect of coming together. Specifically, in our sample, co-mothers described negotiating a new fairytale when their conceptions of heterosexual love were thwarted and/or replaced by the love they found together. In this theme, stories also depicted the interactional negotiation surrounding discrepancies over having children. In some stories, the negotiation of this difference was depicted as a minor bump in the road followed by consensus, whereas others described the origin of the family as rooted in love between the mothers who chose being together at the sacrifice of having children. Although all the women in the sample eventually had children, stories of coming together acknowledged the negotiated struggle of this decision. These struggles are extensive (Bergen, Suter, & Daas, 2006). Of course, this dissonance is not unique to co-mother families. Opposite sex couples also have reported on the processes, privacy management, and rules through which they negotiate and define being child-free (e.g., Durham, 2008). However, within the current sample, this negotiation, as well as those related to managing the loss and challenges of having children, were depicted as key elements of the coming together story.

The themes that emerged in our interpretive analysis were not mutually exclusive. Instead, they provide a collective initial portrait of previously unstudied co-mother family of origin stories. The portrait is one that pieces together elements of canonical courtship stories including coupling (e.g., Holmberg et al., 2004) and the means by which children enter the family (e.g., Reese, 1996) and elements necessitated by deviations from heterosexual master narratives, such as donor insemination, crafting

a new fairytale, and explaining the family identity to children within the family. The portrait is also one that positions communication and negotiating decisions about coming together as central to the family of origin story.

Of note, origin stories in the current sample were predominantly, if not exclusively, positive. Even when difficulties were presented (e.g., the misery of in vitro fertilization, the pain of miscarriage), they were reframed in terms of triumph or overcoming adversity. This is consistent with research that identifies redemption as one of two primary scripts (the other is contamination) for framing life narratives (McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, & Bowman, 2001). Future research should expand upon the current study and gather the origin stories of female-female couples who have separated or from adult children of co-mother headed families to see if the valence of themes differs in ways similar to other discourse-dependent families such as stepfamilies and adoptive families when told from varying perspectives on family.

Moreover, participants in the current study reflect mainly majority perspectives. Co-mothers were almost exclusively White (90%), reported a mean household income over a little over \$100,000, were primarily Christian (65%), and well-educated. Participants were drawn from primarily White states, which clearly played a role. However, across the United States, same-sex parents are less likely to identify as White (59%) as compared to different-sex parents (73%) (MAP, 2011). Children raised by same-sex parents are twice as likely to live in poverty; the average household income lags behind by more than \$15,200 or 20% from the average different-sex couple raising children (MAP). It remains possible the becoming family as normal theme was unnecessarily influenced by the fact that the sample reflected majority U.S. characteristics. Future research merits an intersectional approach (Crenshaw, 1991) examining the ways that co-mothers' cultural positionings (e.g., race, class, education) influence their stories of becoming.

This study forwards novel understandings of co-mother origin stories. Like male-female couples, co-mothers in our sample followed a linear script with themes of coupling and conceiving. Like adoptive families, co-mother conversations with children were central to coming together stories, potentially suggesting an important trend for discourse-dependent families to story children's identity socialization in ways not necessarily evident in traditional family of origin stories (see Kranstuber Horstman, 2013; Stone, 2004). Children's involvement in conversations situated at the fault lines of external challenges and family narratives deserves additional empirical attention.

Finally, similar to stepfamily origin stories (Koenig Kellas et al., 2014), mothers negotiated dark-side themes in their origin stories including problems conceiving, miscarriage, custody battles, and adjustment of stepchildren. This study, thus, adds to communicated narrative sense-making theory (Koenig Kellas & Kranstuber Horstman, 2015) and its heuristic framework of retrospective storytelling by adding texture to our understanding of how telling and hearing [canonical] stories can have a significant and lasting impact on individual and relational identity, health, and coping. Future research might explore ways co-mother origin stories mirror and/or resist normative master narrative, investigating how new meanings might transform conventional understandings of becoming a legitimate family, and/or legitimate co-mother (Suter et al., 2015).

Notes

1. Co-mothers were interviewed together as part of a larger project in which the processes of narrative co-construction are relevant to the creation and management of family identity. We did not analyze the process of co-construction in this manuscript as questions of process were outside the scope of our current analysis.
2. Because we were particularly interested in stories as a discursive form in the current study, we provided the characteristics typical of stories and narratives (Koenig Kellas, 2015) in order to ensure that participants told stories as opposed to describing family using other forms of discourse (e.g., reports, chronicles, lists) (see Linde, 1993).

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