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## Adults Conceived via Donor Insemination by Lesbian Parents Reflect on Their Own Future Parenting Plans (and Their Own Parents Reflect on Being Grandparents)

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### ABSTRACT

The National Longitudinal Lesbian Family Study (NLLFS) started in 1986 when donor insemination became available for lesbian women in the U.S. Wave 7 of the NLLFS was the first time that adults conceived *via* donor insemination were asked if they had or planned to have children, and what they anticipated telling children about their own nontraditional conception. Of 75 NLLFS adult offspring (mean age 30.93; 49.33% female, 48.00% male, and 2.66% gender nonbinary; 90.67% White, 9.33% people of color), 8 (10.67%) had children and 42 of the rest (62.67%) hoped to have children. Most anticipated no parenting challenges, though some mentioned societal reactions or not having had a father. They expected to rear children in an open-minded and child-focused way, and to discuss their own nontraditional conception in a casual and straightforward manner. They viewed their own mothers as role models. Wave 7 was also the first time that NLLFS parents were asked about grandchildren; of 124 parents, 7 (5.64%) were grandparents. They expressed joy in spending time with their grandchildren and pride in their offspring's parenting skills. The results are discussed in relation to research about how parents who are members of minority groups educate children about minority status.

### KEYWORDS

Lesbian parents; donor insemination; lesbian grandparents; future parenting plans; sexual minority parents

Until the 1980s there were limited options for lesbian and bisexual women in the U.S. who wanted to become parents. The National Lesbian Health Care Survey, conducted in 1984–1985 with 1,927 respondents, included the open-ended item, “What, if anything, has kept you from becoming pregnant?” (Bradford et al., 2013). Many respondents replied that they were lesbian, did not have sex with men, and so could not become pregnant.

Coinciding with that survey, donor insemination, which had been limited to married couples, became available to single women, including those who were not heterosexual. The Sperm Bank of California was the first to offer insemination to lesbian and single women (thespermbankofca.org), and other fertility clinics followed. In 1986, Nanette Gartrell and her colleagues (1996) began the U.S. National Longitudinal Lesbian Family Study (NLLFS), the longest-running, prospective community study of lesbian women who had children *via* donor insemination, and that study has continued into the present. By the mid-1990s, a large national convenience sample

survey of 2,431 lesbian and bisexual women found that those who were older more often had children in the context of a heterosexual relationship, whereas younger women were more likely to use insemination (Morris et al., 2002).

The offspring conceived from this first cohort of donor insemination by sexual minority women are now adults in their thirties. The purpose of the present study was to examine how these adult offspring anticipated having children of their own and what they planned to tell their children about their own nontraditional conception. We were also interested to see if any offspring already had children and, if so, what they had told the children. Finally, we wanted to see what the parents of the adult offspring felt about having grandchildren.

There has been no prior research specifically on the parenting plans of adult donor-conceived offspring who have or are planning to have children, nor on the grandparent aspirations of their sexual minority parents. Consequently, we will review three related literatures. First, we will examine research on decisions to parent among heterosexual versus sexual minority individuals, given that the majority of offspring identify as heterosexual yet were reared by sexual minority parents. Second, due to the minority status of the offspring, we will review research on how parents who are members of minority groups communicate minority status to their children. Finally, we will describe prior research on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) grandparenting.

Considering the intergenerational dynamic underlying the study (i.e., the direct involvement of adult offspring and their sexual minority parents, and the indirect involvement of grandchildren), the life course perspective (Elder, 1998) represents a useful theoretical framework. Its focus is on the interaction between individual paths and structural contexts, the interdependence of different life events, and the connections between early and later events throughout a person's lifespan. Understanding parenting plans of adult donor-conceived offspring requires considering that their individual trajectories over the lifetime are shaped by their experiences of growing up in a household with sexual minority parents and the relationships with both their biological and non-biological parents, regardless of the offspring's own sexual orientation. The social context in which these adult offspring grew up might also influence their parenting plans, particularly related to the level of acceptance of sexual minority parenting within their community, the presence of supportive social networks, and the availability of legal protections (if any) that benefited their family of origin. Finally, for adult offspring of lesbian parents, transitions can include parental separation or divorce, new relationships or marriages, the blending of families, and disclosing to friends and significant others the structure of their family of origin. These transitions can have a profound impact on their own parenting plans.

The life course perspective is also helpful in exploring the grandparent aspirations of sexual minority parents considering their ongoing relationship with their adult offspring, which can facilitate or discourage the development of a relationship with potential grandchildren. Similarly, the sexual minority parents' social context may influence their grandparent aspirations, given the stigmatization and obstacles these parents had to overcome to form their family (Gartrell et al., 1996), the legal recognition of their family structure, and the support or acceptance they experienced from their families of origin and broader social networks. Finally, transitions relevant to their grandparent aspirations may include the ways in which the relationship with their own parents and grandparents evolved over time regarding their sexual orientation and their decision to have children.

### ***Decisions to parent among heterosexual and sexual minority individuals***

The overwhelming majority of women in the U.S. have had children or expect to have children in the future. Data from the 2017–2019 National Survey of Family Growth of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that 87% of women and 85% of men aged 15–49 expected to have children in their lifetime ([https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nsfg/key\\_statistics/b-keystat.htm#birthsmothers](https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nsfg/key_statistics/b-keystat.htm#birthsmothers)). In addition, 55% of women aged 15–49 reported having given birth, and 44% of men in that age group reported having fathered a child.

A few studies have found that sexual and gender minorities (SGMs) are less likely to have or want children (c.f., Gato et al., 2017, for an international review). In the 2013 U.S. National Health Interview Survey, 42% of different-sex couples were rearing children under the age of 18 in the home, compared with 19% of SGM couples (Gates, 2014). Solomon et al. (2004) compared a national sample of same-sex couples who came to Vermont for civil unions with their heterosexual married siblings. Just over 80% of the heterosexual married couples had children compared with 34% of female same-sex couples and 18% of male same-sex couples. Riskind and Tornello (2017) used data from the 2011 to 2013 National Survey of Family Growth to compare future parenting intentions among childless heterosexual, bisexual, lesbian, and gay respondents aged 15–44 years. Heterosexual women were 3.78 times more likely than lesbian women, bisexual women were 2.96 times more likely than lesbian women, and heterosexual men were 3.85 times more likely than gay men to want children in the future. Riskind and Patterson (2010) also found that childless heterosexual women and men reported greater distress than lesbian women and gay men, respectively, if they turned out to remain childless throughout their lifetime.

Some research has focused on reasons why SGMs are less likely to have or want children. One factor is lesbian women's lower income, coupled with the high costs of adoption and insemination (c.f., Carpinello et al., 2016; Gregory et al., 2022). Simon et al. (2018) asked lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual women in the U.S. who wanted children about aspects of future parenthood. Lesbian women were more likely to report waiting to have children until they had a permanent, full-time job than did bisexual and heterosexual women. Unlike heterosexual and bisexual women partnered with men, lesbian women may realize that their own income needs to be the major contributor to their future family. Related to this factor, SGMs are far less likely to be married or in a partnered relationship than heterosexual individuals (Gates, 2014), so that some SGMs who want to have children would be bearing these costs alone.

In contrast to heterosexual couples, who may experience social pressure from their family of origin to have children as soon as they marry (Patterson & Riskind, 2010), a second factor for SGMs is lack of support from their families of origin. Goldberg (2006) interviewed lesbian couples about their decisions to become parents *via* donor insemination, finding that lesbian women reported more support from friends and less support from family of origin, though this support improved over time. In their review of the role of social support in the transition to parenthood among LGB individuals, Leal et al. (2021) found that lesbian women perceived less support from their family of origin and their partner's family than did heterosexual women, especially when first considering pregnancy. For lesbian women of color, family of origin serves as a protective factor against racism in society, and Mezey (2008) indicated that lesbian women of color and working-class lesbian women risk alienating their families because identifying as lesbian and having children are viewed as mutually incompatible.

Another factor is societal stigma and discrimination. In the first wave of the NLLFS (Gartrell et al., 1996), conducted when the lesbian parents were inseminating or pregnant, respondents expressed concerns about rearing a child conceived *via* donor insemination in a nontraditional family as well as in a homophobic and heterosexist world. Goldberg (2006) found that over half her lesbian interviewees described the process of becoming pregnant as difficult or very difficult, and a number reported homophobia on the part of health care providers. In the population-based U.S. Generations Study, Dorri and Russell (2022) found that older childless LGB respondents had lower parenting desires than those who were younger, who had grown up at a time of progress in LGB civil rights. LGB adults in Portugal (Gato et al., 2020) and Israel (Shenkman et al., 2021) anticipated higher levels of stigma when becoming parents than did heterosexual respondents. Johnson (2012) conducted a content analysis of the websites of U.S. fertility clinics and found that many portrayed a heterosexual and partnered image. Lesbian parents also differ from "traditional" heterosexual-parent families in terms of more co-parenting and less gendered division of labor; even the role of the non-gestational mother may be stigmatized by the general public (Dalton & Bielby, 2000) and in maternity healthcare services (Dahl & Malterud, 2015).

### ***Parents' decisions to inform children about minority status***

Parents who are members of minority groups and/or those whose children are members of minority groups need to communicate their minority status to children in ways that promote pride and prepare the children for potential stigmatizing experiences (e.g., Goldberg et al., 2016; Wyman Battalen et al., 2019). There have been many studies on how parents of color, especially African American parents, communicate salient components of race and ethnicity to their children. McHale et al. (2006) investigated the ways in which African American youth were socialized about race, finding that mothers played an important role in socializing their older children, and fathers did the same with their sons. Stevenson et al. (2002) developed a racial socialization scale to investigate how African American adolescents were socialized about race from their parents and other sources and found that boys received more messages alerting them to potential discrimination than did girls. Umaña-Taylor and Fine (2004) focused on ethnic identity development among Mexican American adolescents; those who had more relatives born in Mexico and those who had fewer Mexican American peers received more ethnic socialization from their families. In their review, Hughes et al. (2006) found that parents alter their socialization messages depending on their children's age and gender, as well as on the parents' own immigration status, socioeconomic class, and geographic location.

Related to the present study, there have been some prior studies on SGM parents coming out to their children. Lynch and Murray (2000) interviewed sexual minority couples, consisting of a biological parent (who was most often a lesbian woman in her first same-sex relationship) and a stepparent (who was often in their first stepparenting relationship), about their decisions to come out to their children who were conceived in a prior different-sex relationship. Most parents were out to their children and based their communications on the child's developmental stage and comfort level. This also meant that some parents were flexible in their level of outness, adjusting their degree of openness to prevent difficulties for their children, and reminding children that not everyone might be affirming of their relationship.

Goldberg et al. (2016) focused on understanding parents' socialization practices and strategies surrounding race and family structure among lesbian, gay, and heterosexual adoptive parents, some of whom had adopted children of color. Most parents socialized their children about their racial minority and SGM family status, employing several strategies such as having parent-child conversations with the goal of instilling pride, joining communities that reflect their child's identities, and educating their children about racism and heterosexism. Some parents reported a cautious approach, acknowledging their child's racial background and SGM family status but taking care to not over-focus on their differences. A minority of parents, who were more often heterosexual than lesbian or gay, reported not discussing their child's differences. Two further studies with adoptive SGM parent families (Oakley et al., 2017; Wyman Battalen, 2019) found that most SGM parents endorse behaviors designed to promote children's awareness of their diverse family structures and prepare them for potential stigma-related barriers to socialization. Finally, in SGM parent families formed through assisted reproduction, greater parents' self-efficacy in socializing children about their assisted conception was associated with fewer child externalizing problems in Israel (Shenkman et al., 2023).

Recently, Davenport-Pleasant and Imrie (2022) interviewed bisexual mothers about how they come out to their children, given that bisexual individuals are more likely to have children than are lesbian or gay parents. Because bisexual women in relationships with men are viewed as heterosexual and those in relationships with women are viewed as lesbian, the authors were interested in whether and how mothers discuss their bisexual identity with their children. They found that some mothers believed that this conversation should happen early on whereas others waited until the children were adolescents. Mothers reported that the explanation should be child-focused and child-led, such as when children ask where babies come from. Some mothers avoided identity labels and others found that they needed to have this conversation multiple times because children forgot. Mothers had conversations about discrimination and prepared children for potential negative reactions, but also celebrated diversity and acceptance.

## **LGBT grandparenting**

There has been very little research on grandparenting in LGBT families, and some of the focus has been on heterosexual grandparents reacting to their LGBT offspring having children (c.f. Orel & Fruhauf, 2006; Perlesz et al., 2006). Studies have also had very small samples. Patterson (2005a, 2005b) surveyed 14 lesbian grandmothers in Canada; most of them had had children within heterosexual marriages and so their children associated the mothers' coming out with their parents' divorce. Coming out to their offspring was often painful at first, though the birth of a grandchild tended to improve the relationship with offspring (Patterson, 2005a). The grandmothers often let their offspring make the decision about whether the grandchildren should know that their grandmother was a lesbian (Patterson, 2005b). Orel and Fruhauf (2006) interviewed 16 lesbian or bisexual grandmothers in the U.S. Grandmothers discussed the impact their sexual orientation had on their relationship with their grandchildren, including whether or not to come out to grandchildren. They too felt that their adult offspring encouraged or discouraged their relationship with their grandchildren.

Orel and Fruhauf's (2013) review of LGBT grandparents emphasizes that grandparenting lacks specific norms and thus has great flexibility. Variables such as the grandchildren's age and developmental stage, economic resources, frequency of contact, geographic proximity, and the "mediating effects of parents" (p. 180), among others, influence the relationship with grandchildren. These authors also state that grandparents often have a core role in communities of color, and are regarded as important in maintaining connections among family members.

## **The present study**

The offspring of the NLLFS are now in their early thirties, a period that Mehta et al. (2020) have termed "established adulthood." This is the first study to examine whether adult offspring conceived *via* donor insemination by lesbian parents anticipate having children of their own. Although the majority of the offspring (68%) identify as heterosexual (Carone et al., under review), most were brought up by one or two lesbian-identified parents in the context of the SGM community (Gartrell et al., 1999). We expected that the percentage of offspring who intended to have children would be lower than the high rates of anticipated parenthood expressed by members of the general public and higher than the fairly low rates expressed by lesbian women.

Our second aim was to ask respondents what they planned to tell their children about their own minority status as offspring who were conceived *via* donor insemination by lesbian parents. We were interested in what respondents anticipated might be their most challenging and their best experience related to being a parent, and also how they envisioned talking about their own conception to future children.

The third aim was an analysis of offspring who were already parents themselves. Offspring with children were also asked what their most challenging and best experiences were related to being a parent, and whether they had talked about their own conception to their children.

The final aim was to ask the NLLFS parents of offspring with children about their own experiences as grandparents. We were interested in how they saw their role as grandparents, and in their most challenging and best experiences related to grandparenting.

## **Materials and methods**

### **Participants**

#### **Offspring**

Respondents were 75 offspring (37 female, 36 male, and 2 gender nonbinary) born *via* donor insemination to lesbian parents. At Wave 7, offspring were between 30 and 33 years old ( $M=30.93$ ,  $SD=0.92$ ) and all were born in the U.S. Most identified as White (90.67%,  $n=68$ ) and 9.33%



( $n=7$ ) identified as people of color: African American/Black ( $n=3$ ), Latina/o or Hispanic ( $n=1$ ), or other/mixed ( $n=3$ ). About half (50.67%,  $n=38$ ) had completed a bachelor's or registered nurse degree and an additional 40.00% ( $n=30$ ) had completed some graduate school or had a graduate degree. In terms of sexual orientation, a majority of participants identified as heterosexual (68.00%,  $n=51$ ), and a smaller number as lesbian/gay (4.00%,  $n=3$ ) or bisexual plus (28.00%,  $n=21$ ). The majority of offspring (78.67%,  $n=59$ ) were in a current intimate relationship.

### **Parents**

Respondents were 124 parents of offspring born *via* donor insemination, who ranged in age from 56 to 82 ( $M=66.6$ ,  $SD=4.86$ ). Of the 118 parents whose data on race/ethnicity is available, most identified as White (94.91%,  $n=112$ ); 6 (5.08%) identified as people of color: African American ( $n=1$ ), Asian American ( $n=2$ ), Native American ( $n=2$ ), and one person of color did not specify race/ethnicity. Educational level was high, with 41.13% having completed a master's degree and 25.81% having a doctorate or law degree.

### **Procedure**

The NLLFS began in 1986 when donor insemination became available to lesbian women and has continued for 36 years with a 90% family retention rate. Lesbian prospective parents were initially contacted *via* lesbian events, community newspapers, and posted announcements in women's bookstores in the cities of Boston, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C. NLLFS parents were first interviewed when they were inseminating or pregnant. The initial cohort consisted of 84 families and 85 index offspring, including one set of twins. The parents were surveyed again when their offspring were ages 2 (Wave 2), 5 (Wave 3), 10 (Wave 4), 17 (Wave 5), 25 (Wave 6), and 30–33 (Wave 7). NLLFS offspring began being involved directly at age 10 (Waves 4–7). The current Wave 7 sample consisted of 75 offspring and 124 parents. Each offspring and parent respondent received a \$60 gift card for compensation. The principal investigator's motivations for launching this study and strategies for retaining participants are described extensively in a prior report (Gartrell, 2021).

### **Measures**

#### **Offspring without children**

Respondents who did not have children were asked if they wanted to have children. For those who indicated that they wanted to have children, there were three open-ended items: (1) "What do you anticipate might be your most challenging experience related to being a parent, given your nontraditional family background of being conceived through donor insemination by (a) sexual minority parent(s)?" (2) "What do you anticipate might be your best experience related to being a parent, given your nontraditional family background?" and (3) "How do you envision telling your future children about your conception?"

#### **Offspring with children**

Respondents who indicated that they had children were asked for each child's age and gender, and whether the child was living with them. They were asked if they had a child through sexual intercourse, assisted reproduction, adoption, foster care, step-parenting, or other routes. There were three open-ended items: (1) "What is your most challenging experience related to being a parent, given your nontraditional family background of being conceived through donor insemination by (a) sexual minority parent(s)?" (2) "What is your best experience related to being a parent, given your nontraditional family background?" and (3) "If you have discussed your donor conception with your children, what did you tell them? How did they react?"

### **Parents with grandchildren**

The questionnaire completed by the NLLFS parents asked if they were a grandparent, at what age they became a grandparent, and if the index offspring followed in the NLLFS study had become a parent. Those who had become grandparents were asked three open-ended questions in relation to the index offspring and their children: (1) “How do you see your role as a grandparent in this child’s family? (Here “child” referred to index offspring.) (2) “What is your most challenging experience related to being a grandparent, given your nontraditional family background?” and (3) “What is your best experience related to be a grandparent, given your nontraditional family background?”

### **Data analysis and coding of qualitative items**

We performed Fisher’s exact test to examine differences in parenthood status among the offspring by sexual orientation and relationship status. We also conducted Fisher’s exact test to examine whether offspring who did not have children yet but who wanted to have children differed by sexual orientation and relationship status.

Most respondents answered the qualitative items, ranging from a sentence to a long paragraph in length. In order to analyze these open-ended items, we followed the qualitative research analysis presented by Magnusson and Marecek (2015), who focus on identifying repetitive concepts that add to the meaning of each qualitative question. For the three open-ended items for respondents without children, the first and last author read each response multiple times. The first author then created descriptive labels for broad categories that encompassed general repetitive ideas expressed by the respondents and created individual segments from the responses. The last author (the principal investigator who designed the NLLFS and has been part of the study since its inception) and first author (who is fairly new to the NLLFS) met to discuss and refine the coding procedure, and then each independently coded 30% of the response segments for each of the three items. These codes were independently submitted to the second author, who calculated the Krippendorff’s alphas: 1.00 for the first, .64 for the second, and .74 for the third open-ended item, respectively. The first and last author then discussed all discrepancies in their coding and agreed on the final codes. Based on this discussion, the first author then assigned codes to the remaining 70% of each open-ended item.

We followed the same procedure for offspring who already had children, as well as for the NLLFS parents with grandchildren *via* the index offspring. However, given the small numbers of these responses, we did not conduct independent reliability checks.

## **Results**

Eight offspring (10.67%) indicated that they had children and 67 did not (89.33%). Table 1 presents offspring’s parenthood status by sexual orientation and relationship status. All offspring with children identified as heterosexual. None of the offspring who identified as lesbian/gay or bisexual had children, nor did the vast majority of heterosexual offspring. All offspring with children were in a relationship, as were the majority of offspring without children. Results by sexual orientation and relationship status were not significant.

Among the offspring who did not have children, 42 indicated that they wanted to have children (62.67%) and 25 said they did not (37.31%). About half of heterosexual ( $n=28$ ) and bisexual ( $n=13$ ) offspring wanted children, and so did about half ( $n=34$ ) of offspring who were in a relationship. Results by sexual orientation and relationship status were not significant.

### **Parenting plans of offspring without children**

#### **Most challenging experience related to being a parent**

Based on the respondents’ answers to the open-ended item “What do you anticipate might be your most challenging experience related to being a parent, given your nontraditional family



**Table 1.** NLLFS Wave 7 Offspring's parenthood status and desire for children by sexual orientation and relationship status.

	Sexual orientation			<i>p</i> -value Fisher's exact test	Relationship status		<i>p</i> -value Fisher's exact test
	Heterosexual/ straight	Lesbian/gay/ homosexual	Bisexual+		In a relationship	Not in a relationship	
	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)		<i>n</i> (%)	<i>n</i> (%)	
Parenthood status ( <i>N</i> =75)				.144			.190
Parents	8 (15.69)	0	0		8 (13.56)	0	
Non-parents	43 (84.31)	3 (100.00)	21 (100.0)		51 (86.44)	16 (100.0)	
Desire for children ( <i>N</i> =67)				.676			.251
Want children	28 (65.12)	1 (33.33)	13 (61.90)		34 (66.67)	8 (50.00)	
Do not want children	15 (34.88)	2 (66.67)	8 (38.10)		17 (33.33)	8 (50.00)	

background of being conceived through donor insemination by (a) sexual minority parent(s)?" 46 segments were coded. Qualitative analysis of these segments identified four major categories: (1) nothing related to their nontraditional background (52.17%), (2) factors related to society's reactions (21.74%), (3) factors related to not having a father (19.57%), and (4) factors related to their own parents (6.52%).

The first category, that there was nothing related to their nontraditional background, was the most frequent response. Andrea (all names are pseudonyms) wrote, "I don't think any of my challenges would have to do with my family background," Peter admitted, "I have considered this thoroughly and can think of none," Connie stated, "I don't think I would experience any challenges related to this aspect of my background," and Frieda indicated that "I don't view having any specific challenges related to having grown up with two moms. I think my upbringing prepared me well, personally."

The second category consisted of factors related to society's reactions. Paul wrote, "Other people's opinions." Jessica elaborated, "I guess the most challenging aspect might be the legality issues of having my wife adopt our child (which I've heard, from my own moms' experiences, was lengthy and expensive and frustrating) which I think will be more frustrating/annoying than challenging." Adam replied, "I find it challenging to anticipate the difficulties of raising a biracial child because my female partner of eight years is African American. I know society will judge my child differently based upon skin color. That is challenging!" And Clarissa indicated that "My mothers were fairly egalitarian in their parenting responsibilities and related chores. Even though my partner is progressive in his thinking, he wasn't raised this way and I worry that we will fall into traditional gender roles."

The third category related to not having a father. Barbara wrote, "Perhaps in understanding my partner's experience as a father," Kate stated, "If I have a son I may have difficulty understanding and empathizing with the male experience," Robert explained, "I might take some time to figure out what the full 'father' role needs to be. I would go in as a parent, but might miss some things as I didn't really have the experience," and Ruth felt that a challenge was "Being unfamiliar with a father's role in the home/family."

A few respondents mentioned challenging factors related to their own parents, constituting the fourth category. Willa stated, "However, I think my primary challenges will be related to my parents' lack of emotional skills, not their sexual orientation." In Laura's case her parents were divorced; she wrote, "How to partner in a non-divorced loving heterosexual relationship."

### **Best experience related to being a parent**

Based on the respondents' answers to the open-ended item "What do you anticipate might be your best experience related to being a parent, given your nontraditional family background?," 46 segments were coded. Qualitative analysis of these segments identified four major categories:

(1) characteristics about the child (32.61%), (2) factors about family or society (32.61%), (3) factors related to being reared by lesbian parents (23.91%); and (4) nothing, or don't know (10.87%).

The first category focused on characteristics about the child, such as open-mindedness to the child's uniqueness or differences, acceptance of the child's sexual or gender identity, or the child's freedom to be who they want to be. Darlene replied, "I think I'll be more open to whoever my child identifies as, including but not limited to their sexuality and gender identity. I imagine I'll be more open to differences in general." Openness was mentioned by other respondents, including Janice, "watching a child grow in an open loving environment," Brian, "I may be more open minded to different people and communities, and may be able to share that with kids," Jane, "I think my experience with and open mindedness to the endless ways families and love can exist will be the best thing for me as a parent," and James, "Open mindedness and acceptance of others." Derek stated, "Giving my child a sense of freedom to follow their own path. Being able to genuinely say that 'the right way' is not the only way," and in a similar vein, Mitchel wrote, "Understanding the importance of accepting and loving my child no matter what choices he or she makes in life."

The second category related to factors about family or society, including having a better understanding of what family is, knowing about nontraditional families, being connected to queer community, or having had a father in the family. Marlene responded, "I feel open and confident to create and engage in nontraditional family structures—perhaps sharing finances and responsibilities with multiple adults, for example—and I do not feel limited by any preconceived notions of what parenting/family 'should' look like." Similarly, Henry indicated that "I will be more open to nontraditional societal norms," and Jeanine elaborated, "I will make a very conscious effort to teach my children about all different types of families and relationships. I will raise them to welcome and accept without question all types of families and people, and that is the best gift I can give to them and to the people they will encounter. One of my favorite books growing up was 'One Dad, Two Dads, Brown Dad, Blue Dad.' I plan to fill my kids' shelves with similar books to spark all kinds of conversations and questions about the world." Kevin felt that "my children would have queer community as family and grow up being loved and accepted for who they are without question."

The third category was about factors related to being reared by lesbian parents. For example, Beth replied, "I am excited to share with my children the courage, love, thoughtfulness, kindness, and flexible thinking that my moms raised me with, knowing that it will set them up for success as wonderful and kind humans." Marie wrote that she would "be able to ask my parents about their experience trying to have me," and Stanley stated that "Having two mothers that love and support me through my decisions have been imperative to having an open and respectful relationship with my moms." Debra explained that "My moms constantly pushed boundaries and fought for equality so I have seen what being fiercely passionate about fighting for their and their kids' personal rights looks like. I was raised in a very open household and exposed to all different backgrounds (religions, cultures, languages, sexual orientations, foods, etc.). I think having that diversity in my upbringing is something I would like to pass forward."

A few respondents didn't know or had nothing to say, constituting the fourth category. Mark admitted, "(I've spent a long time on this question, which surprises me.) I'm not sure," and Antonio stated, "I don't really have an answer to this question either."

### ***How to tell future children about their own conception***

The item "How do you envision telling your future children about your conception?" resulted in 54 segments. Qualitative analysis of these segments identified four major categories (1) factors related to the child's age, or when they want to know, and then being honest and straightforward (66.67%); (2) factors related to explaining reproductive biology or the role of the man in conception (16.67%); (3) factors related to the political climate then and now (11.11%); and (4) don't know or haven't thought about it (5.56%).

The first category referred to factors related to the child's age, or when they want to know, and then being honest and straightforward. The overwhelming majority of respondents mentioned some version of this, including Carmen, who stated, "Straightforwardly and early, in a casual way, not making it a big thing," Martina, who wrote, "straightforward as a fact as early as it comes up," Hilary, who replied, "There wouldn't be one conversation. It would be a matter of fact that would just get brought up when relevant. That is how I remember it being in my childhood for my conception," and Charles, who explained, "Straightforward—this isn't something I'm self-conscious about and I don't think my children should judge others based on this sort of thing."

For the second category, respondents mentioned factors related to explaining reproductive biology or the role of the man in conception. Margaret replied, "The same way I have told everyone since I could talk. If it comes up; 'I have two moms. They couldn't have a baby on their own, so my uncle helped'; I would obviously go into more detail as my child could understand conception. I'm totally open about it." Similarly, Victoria wrote, "I will tell them the same way my parents told me. I had a 'seed dad.' My mom had the egg, but they needed a seed, so they got one from a nice man who wanted to help them have a baby, and he was my 'seed dad.' When I got older, they explained about sperm donors, and that fit the understanding I already had." And Tania stated, "I'll probably explain that children are conceived in different ways, and explain my own conception and theirs."

Some respondents mentioned factors related to the political climate then and now, which was the third category. As Jamie wrote, "I would explain to them the political climate around gay marriage and family in the early nineties," Harriet stated, "It's very important to me that my child know the history of how people who don't identify as heterosexual were treated by society so my child can see how far we've come and how far we have yet to go," and Eugenia responded. "telling them my brother and I were so wanted by our mothers that they worked tirelessly to figure out a way to have us, at a time when it was challenging for them to do so. How lucky I was/am."

A few respondents didn't know or hadn't thought about it, which constituted the fourth category. This included Michael, who wrote, "I haven't thought about this," and Louisa, who admitted, "I haven't thought about this since I haven't started to try and conceive yet."

### ***Parenting plans of offspring with children***

Eight (four male and four female) respondents already had children (three had one child, four had two children, and one had three children). Children ranged in age from 1 to 12, with a median age of 2 years. Seven respondents had biological children and one was a stepparent.

### ***Most challenging experience related to being a parent***

Only eight offspring indicated that they already have children, and over half the children were ages 1–2. Despite the small number of responses, we found that the same four categories applied to this item that we had developed for offspring without children: (1) nothing related to their nontraditional background, (2) factors related to society's reactions, (3) factors related to not having a father, and (4) factors related to their own parents.

Two respondents mentioned the first category, that there were no challenges related to their nontraditional background. Petra wrote, "I don't think there is one. My older child identifies as queer and so it has been a huge benefit." Clarence replied, "My daughter is only 3 wk old so I haven't experienced a challenge related to my personal upbringing that I'm aware of. I also can't foresee any problems in the future because I was conceived/raised the way I was. In my opinion, they are exclusive events."

The second category consisted of factors related to society's reactions. Marlon wrote that it was "difficult to honor my nontraditional family background by finding clothes and toys that aren't gendered."

Regarding the third category, factors related to not having a father, Stuart replied, “Not knowing half of my genetic background has sometimes been difficult in terms of not knowing what I might be a carrier for and pass on to my kids,” and Connor stated, “I wish I knew more about my donor’s medical history to guide my own health care and that of my kids.” Caroline wrote, “I think since I grew up with two moms I don’t know firsthand what fathers typically act like and the role that they play. I think navigating this will be the hardest part for me related to being a parent given my nontraditional family background. It may also make me wish somewhat that I had a dad growing up, which I sometimes used to wish.”

Two respondents mentioned the fourth category, factors related to their own parents. Willa stated, “Explaining to others why there are two grandmothers. Even then not a huge challenge. My husband also has two moms.” Susannah explained, “this is probably the hardest thing because even though I have lesbian parents, they were not actually together since I was very young.”

### ***Best experience related to being a parent***

Based on the respondents’ answers to the open-ended item “What do you anticipate might be your best experience related to being a parent, given your nontraditional family background?”, we found that three of the four major categories we had identified for offspring without children applied: (1) characteristics about the child; (2) factors about family or society, and (3) nothing, or don’t know. None of the respondents with children mentioned factors related to being reared by lesbian parents

Characteristics about the child included the response of Marcus, who wrote, “More open minded.” Odile explained, “My ability to relate to the kids, to their questions about gender identity, the amount we can discuss gender inequality and sexual orientation.”

Factors about family or society were mentioned by Thom, who explained “When they’re old enough to understand, I think it will be nice for them to have first-hand experience of how families come in all different forms.” Daphna wrote, “I’m extremely and whole heartedly inclusive of all types of people and their views/values.” Alexandra stated, “I think the best experience related to being a parent from a nontraditional family will be showing and explaining to my son that there are different ways families are made. I will teach him that some are nontraditional like mine and that is important to be accepting of them all.” Paulette indicated, “Now being part of a rather heteronormative family, it helps give my kids a personal connection to sexual diversity and different kinds of families,” and Shulee mentioned that her children “say that they are ‘proud to be a part of the queer community.’ It’s pretty beautiful.”

Only one respondent, Zack, indicated that nothing was related to the respondents’ nontraditional background, “My girlfriend and I are still in the beginning stages of parenthood and are experiencing the normal struggles of new parents. I can’t think of a link between what I’ve experienced and my nontraditional upbringing.”

### ***What did you tell your children about your own conception?***

Only two respondents had already discussed their own donor conception with their children. One response fell into the first category of factors related to the child’s age, or when they want to know, and then being honest and straightforward. Hilda wrote, “They grew up knowing my moms. It wasn’t so much one sit-down conversation, but just a fact, the way that straight parents exist. While they know about my donor, they have never met him, but know that I have a good relationship with him.” Regarding the children’s reactions, she stated, “They’ve always known. Over the years they’ve had different questions about my experience, but it is quite normal for them.”

The other reply related to the category of factors associated with explaining reproductive biology or the role of the man in conception. Martin wrote, “When talking about having two moms instead of a mom and a dad, explained that a man donated some seeds to help families like mine have kids.” He added, “They reacted like the information was normal/mundane.”

### ***Experiences of grandparents***

The questionnaire completed by the NLLFS parents asked if they were a grandparent. Seven parents (5.64%) indicated that they had grandchildren. These parents who had grandchildren did not match exactly with the index offspring who had children. In one case a parent indicated that their grandchild was born to an offspring who was not part of the NLLFS study, and in another case an offspring did not complete a survey at Wave 7 whereas the parent did. Also, there were three offspring with children whose parents did not complete surveys: one offspring whose parent had died, one offspring whose parent did not complete a Wave 7 survey, and one offspring who was a stepparent.

#### ***How do you see your role as a grandparent in [index offspring's] family?***

Most of the grandparents viewed their role as very important and essential, including Naomi, who responded, “As a very important positive attachment and touchstone,” and Chris, who wrote, “I do daily childcare for my grandchildren. I feel that I am essential in their lives.” Several grandparents used the term “involved”: Starr stated, “very involved, currently doing childcare two and a half days/a week. Hope to continue throughout the child’s life,” Mandy replied, “Hopefully extremely involved and close and participatory,” and Eleonore wrote, “I spent several weeks with my daughter when her son was born and spent two months this spring living close to them and helping care for him and support her in her maternal role. I expect to be a significant part of his life. I want to know him and to be involved as he grows up and want to have an on-going adult relationship with my daughter.” Heidi admitted that the relationship was “loving but distant since we live so far apart.” Mary Beth wrote, “My son (study participant) is in a serious monogamous relationship with a woman who has 2 children. I see myself as a bonus grandparent.”

#### ***Most challenging experience related to being a grandparent***

Regarding the most challenging experience, Caitlin stated, “There isn’t one,” and Peggy reported that the challenge was not related to the nontraditional conception, explaining, “not sure the nontraditional comes into play much. Hardest so far has been pregnancy complications, premature birth and not being able to be at the hospital due to COVID.” Amanda also wrote, “Being so far away. My nontraditional background doesn’t have much to do with it at this point.” Two respondents described challenges with in-laws: Josie stated, “feel not included as much as daughter’s husband’s family,” and Sonia stated, “Balancing my desires for the nature and quality of relationship with grandchildren, my child, my child’s spouse, and child’s spouse’s very intense and close relationships with their traditional (although also Jewish) family of origin.” Finally, Belinda responded, “Being divorced from my co-parent. I would really have liked to be able to share in the friendship we had as parents and that is not possible. It is difficult to have to make decisions without the feedback and support of my ex.”

#### ***Best experience related to being a grandparent***

Several respondents described the joy of being around their grandchildren: Amalia stated, “spending time with grandchildren laughing and telling nursery rhymes and telling stories,” Erin replied, “I have all the fun and none of the responsibility. Seems the same as other grandparents, regardless of family background,” Babs wrote, “Comfortably being myself in a close and special physical, emotional, and playful relationship with my grandchildren and being recognized as such by my child and my child’s spouse and their family.” Corinne added, “I love being around my grandchildren—that is the best. I believe that being a lesbian parent has given me the courage to trust my children, my grandchildren and the job I did as a parent. Coming from being nontraditional I have the flexibility to support my children and grandchildren in their choices.” Two grandparents described their pride in seeing their offspring being a parent: Loretta

wrote, “Watching my son be a father—it just melts my heart how loving and wonderful he is as a parent,” and Allie stated, “The baby is 4 wk old (so to be determined) but seeing my son and [his partner] become parents and meeting the sweet boy has been amazing.

## Discussion

Donor insemination was available for lesbian women in the U.S. beginning in the early 1980s, so this is the first cohort of donor-conceived offspring who have or are planning to have children. Out of 75 offspring, 10.67% had had children by the time they were in their early thirties and from those who did not have a child 62.67% stated that they wanted to have children in the future. As we expected, these percentages fall between the high rates of anticipated parenthood reported by the general public and the lower rates reported by lesbian women.

The offspring were reared by sexual minority parents, and most were connected with the SGM communities (Gartrell et al., 1999), where there was less pressure to have children, parenthood may have been less idealized than in heterosexual culture (c.f., Bradford et al., 2013), and there may have been fewer children among their parents’ friends. From a life course perspective (Elder, 1998), these speculative factors intertwine with the different trajectories and transitions offspring of sexual minority parents may have followed relative to offspring of heterosexual parents, and, in turn, might explain why rates of anticipated parenthood were lower than among the general public. On the other hand, most offspring identify as heterosexual and many are in a partnered relationship, so that their partner and in-laws may expect the couple to have children in the future. Even offspring who are SGM have more options than their lesbian parents did, including adoption as single or partnered SGMs, surrogacy, and increased availability of donor insemination and advanced reproductive technology.

This study is unique in its ability to ask offspring who were conceived *via* donor insemination how their own nontraditional family background influenced their plans to have children in the future, though it was limited by open-ended survey questions rather than semi-structured interviews. Generally, the results indicate that offspring did not expect their background to be a challenge, though some mentioned negative reactions from society and others not being familiar with the role of a father in their family. The life course perspective (Elder, 1998) would predict that, despite such anticipated negative reactions, these offspring may have developed resiliency in the face of stigmatization due to their parents’ sexual orientation. Additionally, their own sexual minority parents may have shown them how to navigate difficulties in a heteronormative context (Bos et al., 2016; Oakley et al., 2017; Orel & Fruhauf, 2013; Wyman Battalen et al., 2019;).

At the same time, offspring were excited to love and accept their future children with open-mindedness to the children’s uniqueness, including their gender and sexual identity. They were proud of their own parents as supportive and accepting role models and hoped to follow in their footsteps. The offspring had been reared in nontraditional families, and exposed to the SGM community, and knew that they could teach their children to welcome diversity in families. The majority of offspring were planning to disclose their own conception *via* donor insemination to their own children early on, in a casual, honest, and straightforward way. Some offspring would use the conversation to explain reproductive biology, and also to describe the past and current political climate around insemination for lesbian parents.

Although we were excited by the opportunity to survey offspring who already had children, as well as their parents reflecting on having grandchildren, these data are very limited because most of these children are still very young and pre-verbal. Still, offspring looked forward to being open-minded with their children, discussing gender and sexuality, and modeling acceptance of nontraditional family forms. Those who had already discussed their own donor conception with their children found that the children viewed this as normal. The grandparents too expressed joy in seeing their own offspring as parents and loved being around their grandchildren. Based on these results, one could speculate that the experience of grandparenthood represented a key



transaction in the lives of NLLFS parents that dissipated potential concerns they might have had when conceiving their own children in a heteronormative and stigmatizing context in the 1980s (Gartrell et al., 1996).

This study adds to the literature on parents' decisions to inform children about minority status. Similar to research about bisexual parents coming out to children (Davenport-Pleasant & Imrie, 2022), the offspring's minority status in the current study is not immediately apparent, requiring that parents explain this to their future children. Situations might arise in which peers ask the children why they have two grandmothers living together, a homework assignment involves creating a family tree, or a medical intake form asks about maternal and paternal health risks.

Prior research on educating children about minority status has focused on promoting cultural pride (Davenport-Pleasant & Imrie, 2022; Hughes et al., 2006; Lynch & Murray, 2000; Oakley et al., 2017; Wyman Battalen et al., 2019), and this was also a category in the present study. Offspring expressed excitement about telling their own future children about how they were reared by lesbian parents who fought for equality and exposed them to diverse family forms. They felt grateful and lucky.

Another category in prior research was preparing children for potential stigmatizing experiences related to their or their parents' minority status (Davenport-Pleasant & Imrie, 2022; Goldberg et al., 2016; Hughes et al., 2006; Lynch & Murray, 2000; Oakley et al., 2017; Wyman Battalen et al., 2019). This category was less salient in the present study. Though some offspring worried about raising sons or becoming a father given their own lack of a father, and others acknowledged not knowing the medical history on their father's side of the family, these issues did not specifically involve stigma for the children. According to a Pew Research Center survey (2019), 23% of children under the age of 18 in the U.S. live with one parent, usually their mother, so many children who were reared without fathers go on to become fathers themselves.

Research on educating children about minority status has also emphasized the importance of the children's developmental stage, given that children's awareness of race and sexuality changes with age (Davenport-Pleasant & Imrie, 2022; Hughes et al., 2006; Lynch & Murray, 2000). The majority of offspring in the current study also mentioned factors related to future children's age, but in contrast to prior studies on stepparents in same-sex couples (Lynch & Murray, 2000) and bisexual parents (Davenport-Pleasant & Imrie, 2022) coming out to children, some of whom waited until the children were adolescents, most offspring in the current study were planning to tell future children very early on. Possibly donor insemination has become more familiar to the general public over past decades, and the lesbian community is more accustomed to lesbian women having children. There is also more societal acceptance of lesbian identity than bisexual identity (e.g., McInnis et al., 2022) or nonbinary parenting (Worthen & Herbolsheimer, 2022), potentially making it easier for NLLFS offspring to educate their children about their lesbian grandparents.

A strength of the current study is that the NLLFS is the longest, prospective study of lesbian-identified women who conceived children *via* donor insemination, and it has followed the parents since they were pregnant or inseminating. This means that the results are not biased by focusing only on parents or offspring who were already doing well. The study also has an extremely high family retention rate of 90% over time (Gartrell, 2021). However, it should be noted that the NLLFS began before there were methods of gathering population-based data about sexual minorities, so the sample is not representative. Finally, the use of the life course perspective (Elder, 1998) as a theoretical framework helped interpret the study results with intergenerational and transactional lenses.

A major limitation of the current study is that the parents and offspring are overwhelmingly White and well educated. Partly this reflects the high cost of donor insemination (Carpinello et al., 2016; Gregory et al., 2022) coupled with the lower incomes of women of color. There is need to conduct future research on adults conceived *via* donor insemination who are more diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic class. For example, in the U.S.

population-based Generations Study (Dorri & Russell, 2022), childless Latino/Hispanic LGB respondents reported greater parenting desire than White respondents. Mezey (2008) found that lesbian mothers of color and working-class lesbian mothers risked losing connections with their families of origin and their communities than White, middle-class lesbian mothers. “There is more at risk for us than for white women,” wrote Silvera (1992, p. 529), describing the intersection of racism and sexual orientation among Afro-Caribbean lesbians.

The results of the study have several implications for parents, teachers, clinicians, and health professionals. Prospective parents who are planning to use donor insemination should take heart from the comments by offspring in this study, who mostly see few challenges and many benefits in telling their own children about nontraditional conception and diverse families. Teachers at all grade levels should be aware that children come from a variety of family backgrounds and should keep this in mind when conducting classroom assignments related to family composition. Clinicians should be knowledgeable about reproductive technologies so that they can provide counseling to parents and offspring of donor insemination, including strategies to cope with potential negative attitudes by society in general. And health professionals should be sensitive to the fact that not all patients have extensive medical information about both maternal and paternal families of origin. As of this writing, the U.S. is facing a conservative backlash regarding both reproductive and SGM rights (c.f., Greve, 2022) so it is especially important that offspring conceived *via* donor insemination by sexual minority parents can feel safe and reassured rearing their own children.

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The authors report that there are no competing interests to declare.

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## Data availability statement

The data reported in this article are not publicly available and this study was not preregistered. Requests to access the dataset should be directed to Dr. Nanette Gartrell, the Principal Investigator of the NLLFS.

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