



Between Abnormal “Otherness” to Groundbreaking “Uniqueness”: The Family-Construction Process of the GLBT Family

A. Oren & A. Ben-Ari

To cite this article: A. Oren & A. Ben-Ari (2019): Between Abnormal “Otherness” to Groundbreaking “Uniqueness”: The Family-Construction Process of the GLBT Family, *Journal of Homosexuality*

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2019.1600901>



Published online: 18 Apr 2019.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Between Abnormal “Otherness” to Groundbreaking “Uniqueness”: The Family-Construction Process of the GLBT Family

A. Oren and A. Ben-Ari

School of Social Work, Faculty of Health and Welfare, Haifa University, Haifa, Israel

ABSTRACT

The GLBT family is a new postmodern phenomenon demonstrating the accomplishments of marginal groups seeking acceptance within mainstream society. The article is based on a qualitative phenomenological study conducted in Israel during 2012, providing a theoretical model combining a vast number of GLBT parenting options ranging from surrogacy, sperm donation, adoption, and co-parenting. The research consisted of 50 personal interviews that concentrated on the family experiences of couples of gay men and lesbian woman who opted to bring a child into their families. Analysis of the data points to a process of empowerment where societal norms in respect to gender, parenting, and family are deconstructed and then reconstructed. The theoretical model conceptualizes three parenting challenges that highlight the respondent's family experience: “Otherness,” belonging, and self-actualization. Research shows that every period of family life addresses a different segment, where one of the three challenges becomes the dominant experience.

KEYWORDS

GLBT parents; same-sex parents; same sex families; family development; gender roles

Theoretical background

The last three decades have provided fertile ground for the formation of birthing and parenting channels such as sperm donation, surrogacy, and adoption and new family structures: single parents, divorced parents, combined, and single-sex parents. Changes taking place over the last few years have given GLBT members a legitimate cause for parenting, as reported in numerous articles discussing “planned” parenting within the GLBT community (Gates, 2013; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). The “planned” GLBT family developed using two different models: the same-sex model, which takes place autonomically by either men or women, and the co-parenting model, based on the connection between a man and a woman for conception and parenting. In this model two family units are developed—the father's and the mother's.

Studies conducted in recent decades describe the struggle for parenting recognition by the GLBT family in a homophobic and heteronormative

environment. In the last decade, the research focused on family empowerment, self-awareness, and a sense of self-actualization when constructing the family (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010; Hayman & Wilkes, 2017; Van Ewyk & Kruger, 2017).

It is possible to identify a reciprocal relationship between the resilient experience of the GLBT family and prevailing social attitudes. Forming a family established an environment where informational channels relied on the family experience and helped forge the way in terms of both social and legal alteration. Changes in social policy have created an environment for the resilient experience and have increased the access and motivation for forming a family (Ryan-Flood, 2009). As early as 2008, Hare and Skinner argued that the GLBT family in the United States received legal recognition and was on the verge of legislative acceptance, including instances where conservative social expressions were maintained. The law in Israel is influenced by religion and tradition and receives a renewed legal interpretation that is backed by enlightened social policy making. The law permits lesbian woman to become mothers through sperm donation but does not permit gay men to use local surrogacy programs, and it places them at the bottom of the priority list in terms of the adoption of Israeli children (Blecher-Prigat & Vazarpan, 2016). As a sign of the changing thought process in society, gay men availed themselves to parenting options that were available overseas. However, alongside the feeling of freedom to choose the parenting route, global conservative tendencies attempted to close these opportunities for gay men. Hence, the overseas adoption channel was virtually closed for Israeli gay men, including surrogacy from Third World countries, which was also becoming increasingly difficult, as it was the preferred parenting option for gay men due to its relatively low cost (Yaron, 2017).

It is difficult to find a qualitative research that addresses the GLBT family experience in various parenting models as research has traditionally been focused on one parenting model or another, or on a singular aspect of the family-construction process. Until recently, most research has focused on the mother's perspective (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010). Studies about the process of GLBT lesbian family construction have addressed several important issues. Research that examined the decision-making process in parenting (Chabot & Ames, 2004; Donovan & Wilson, 2008; Farr & Tornello, 2016) indicated that choices in the autonomous parenting channel, such as sperm donation, came from a desire to provide children a shelter for growth in the absence of a father figure. Additionally, when the identity of the donor was known, mothers took measures to decrease their presence in family life (Dempsey, 2012).

The transition to parenting appeared as a period where "cracks" in equality between the couple developed, parenting status gaps were discovered, and the balance between the couple was disturbed (e.g., Ben-Ari & Livni, 2006; Dunne, 2000). The biological mother took on a central role both inside

and outside the home and marginalized the “other” mother (Goldberg, Kinkler, Moyer, & Weber, 2014).

Over the last decade, research of gay families has doubled, and in the waning months of 2016, 66 separate articles have addressed this topic (Carneiro, Tasker, Salinas-Quiroz, Leal, & Costa, 2017). Men move toward parenting in the shadow of a societal concept where the mother plays a “soft,” nurturing, and comforting role that envelops her newborn child, leaving the father with the duties of taking care of everything outside the home. In the path toward parenting, men are forced to overcome such dichotomic concepts (Tsfati & Ben-Ari, 2018). Oren-Patishi (2007), who considered the parenting experience of men who adopt, stipulates that resiliency and a paternal sense of empowerment overshadows the need to show their ability to perform a “motherly” role.

Research of both gay and lesbian families suggests that a structural gap exists, highlighting status differences regarding the existence of “other” forms of parenting alongside formal or biological parenting. The “other” parent is showcased as an interesting, rising phenomenon in various paths of research (e.g. Donovan & Wilson, 2008; Goldhaber, 2007; Hayman & Wilkes, 2017). Its status and position are not taken for granted and are received with resistance. It deals with both the lack of judicial and societal acceptance. The “other” parent exemplifies a new form of parenting whose legitimacy is based on the premise of what is happening within the family unit and not on blood bonds or legal validity. This new meaning was formed under the banner of social parenting as an alternative to biological parenting.

Over time, they established an internal and societal legitimacy for being a family (Hayman & Wilkes, 2017). Some articles describe coping mechanisms they use to overcome the gap created between the couple (e.g., Bergen, Suter, & Daas, 2006). Over the years, it has become possible to identify a trend of formal judicial and legislative recognition of the “other” parent as a legitimate parent. In Israel, it is possible to initiate a legal process within several months after a child joins the family unit. This appeal is conditional on the premise of maintaining a joint household and is not present in the joint-parenting model where a legal mother-father unit is present (Blecher-Prigat & Vazarpan, 2016).

Since the discussion revolves around the structure of a same-sex family, it supports a platform for research that deals with the meaning of gender and its roles (e.g., Dunne, 2000; Tornello, Sonnenberg, & Patterson, 2015). These studies highlight an expansion of the classic singular gender role. Hicks (2008) suggested that discussing gender essence can no longer advocate for the sign of the times. Research enforces the argument that GLBT family research provides an important starting point for gender study.

By examining various studies, it is evident that the main challenge is that of the “other” family structure. This structure breaks through the monolithic bonds that define the classic family as “a man and his wife jointly raising

their joint biological child” (Fogiel-Bijaoui, 2002). The current research tries to examine the family construction process in the GLBT family and how respondents form and strengthen a new definition of “family,” with new rules, bonds, and a parenting framework of partnership, marriage, blood bonds, and joint households.

Method

This qualitative research is conducted using the phenomenological approach, seeking a contextual reality for the phenomena (Creswell, 2012; Patton, 2015). The objective of the research was to illustrate the GLBT family experience in Israel.

The research question at the heart of this study deals with how gay men and lesbian women experience the concept of family. Subsequent questions the research was able to address include:

- (1) What characteristics does the formation of the family unit exhibit at major intersections of its development?
- (2) What meaning do research participants attribute to their family? How do they relate their own status within the family? How do they characterize the bonding feeling with the child or children and the level of acceptance within the family?
- (3) How are the couplehood and parenting dynamics depicted in the family unit? How does role definition manifest itself, and does each partner feel fulfilled?
- (4) How is the tension between conservatism and new thinking about the formation of the same-sex family unit maintained and what type of bonds exist between the social-cultural norms to the family experience?

Participants

This research differentiates between the GLBT family models (co-parenting, one sex) and the parenting channels (co-parenting, surrogacy, adoption, anonymous sperm donation).

Research group

Lesbian women and gay men, including parents in a same-sex relationship, are opting to start a family using all available means. This stems from a desire to incorporate the experience from the theoretical model that represents the phenomena.

The respondents were chosen using a stratified purposeful sampling method that provides an optimal range for patterns, characteristics, and information on the topic (Patton, 2015). The size of the sample was developed to represent

the entire range of the phenomena (Padgett, 1998; Patton, 2015) and conducted in tandem with the analysis of data. While it was possible to identify three parenting channels in men (co-parenting, adoption, and surrogacy), the women presented two channels (co-parenting and sperm donation). All in all, 50 interviews were conducted, of which 20 represented the co-parenting family model, and 30 represented the same-sex family model, which was divided into 20 female and 30 male.

Characteristics of the respondents

The respondents were between the ages of 27–56, with a median age of 39. All were secular, and their social-economic status was defined as middle to high. Couples were together for an average of eight years. The average age of first-time parents was 35. Of all respondents, only 14 represented a family structure with a clear distinction between one whose parenting was biological to that which was not, and only 13 were not formal parents to their children. Together, the sample represented 34 families with 66 children, ranging from six months to 15 years of age. The number of children in the family ranged from one to three, with most homes reporting two children. Men from the surrogacy channel represent the youngest age in the group.

Research tools

Data collection was done through a semistructured in-depth interview (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Respondents were able to move freely between relevant topics (e.g., Berg, 1995). The interviewer was able to steer the discussion toward subject matters dealing with self-empowerment, partnership, and parenting.

Research process

Connecting to the research group began by approaching couples taking part in alternative parenting courses moderated by the researcher, along with a call for respondents going out to media and community organizations run by the GLBT community. The closed nature of the community mandated using a snowball effect, meaning word-of-mouth messaging to potential respondents by enablers, people with whom the researcher made prior contact (Patton, 2015). Once accepted, the researcher contacted respondents by telephone, providing a deeper insight into the research. An interview of an hour and a half, conducted with each couple separately, was completed with full permission to record, transcribe, and use the material anonymously in accordance with the needs of the research.

Data analysis

Analysis of data was done inductively in accordance with the phenomenological practice and influenced by the grounded theory field. Raw data were collected to provide context and an integrated structure to represent a theoretical framework for the GLBT phenomena, leading to an understanding that the subject matter fulfilled its purpose within the wider context of the various models. Re-examining text offered a continuous dialogue with the visible content and an examination of hidden meanings (Creswell, 2012; Moustakas, 1994). By deconstructing raw data, basic terms and major statements were discovered and reconstructed as similar categories and three main themes (Patton, 2015).

Results

The analysis of data identifies three main themes that break down the family experience. “Between the mainstream and margins of society” describes experiences fluctuating between belonging to marginal groups and mainstream elements of society. “Between the inner and the outer” describes a range that runs from being inside a family to feeling like an “outsider” without a clear parental status. “Between the conservative and the reformer” describes a sense of freedom, authenticity, and self-actualization on the one hand to a feeling of being fixated and marginalized in the framework of parenting and gender.

Between the mainstream and margins of society: “The decision to be part of a straight wedding or to ‘come out of the closet’”

The main theme describes the range of experiences from belonging to an out-of-the-ordinary “other” or homosexual group, to a reference group, family and parenthood, that is central and prominent—and one they seek to join.

Possibility for combining homosexual and parenting

The connection between homosexuality and parenting is not perceived by respondents as a foregone conclusion. Respondents seeking to become parents in the 1980s describe a period where their sexual preference was totally branded to conservative social norms. The desire to become a parent mandated giving up one of the foundations of self-determination—parenting or homosexuality: “The decision was to stay hidden in the closet and know that it would lead to some sort of wedding, living life in secrecy and in a lie, or to come out of the closet” (Yaron, age 49, a nonbiological father via co-parenting). In the dichotomy of conventional definitions, there is a link between parenting, heterosexuality, and the mainstream. Choosing coming

out of the closet requires living on the margins of mainstream society. There is a clear link between the margins and center, which does not offer room for the “other” to represent an alternative segment of the mainstream.

Over time, a new reality formed that offered the transition to same-sex parenting. In the beginning of the 1990s, in the absence of available models, they looked for ways of fulfillment. Throughout the years, Alon assumed that he would become a father, though he was not clear on the “how.” “I always wanted to have a child. I knew that I wanted to become a father, and it did not conflict with the fact that I was gay. It was clear to me that I needed to become a father” (Alon, age 40, a parent through adoption). It seemed as if parenting was a taboo that must be realized. For some of the respondents the answer to the “what,” was clear even though the “how” was left unanswered. At the same time, the homosexual lifestyle was non-negotiable. It often appears as if two separate tracks exist—parenting and homosexuality—which develop in tandem and do not contradict each other.

Combining homosexuality, partnership, and family

Seeking to fulfill the dream of parenting and family, the couple seeks to construct a new form of parenting without clear rules. They understand that parenting is a precious commodity. As one member seeks to exercise the right to parent, it becomes a taboo, undisputable fact to be realized within the context of partnership. In instances where differences are presented, maturity or readiness, it is possible to identify a search for a framework that permits parenting to exist alongside of being a couple. Rina explains the concept: “At this stage I knew I was going to become a mother, and I had a feeling that it was okay, and we would see what happens...It will be okay if you want to be part of this, and if not, it is your right, too. I am not going to coerce you, because the need is mine” (Rina, age 41, a biological mother via sperm donation). Couples thought that parenting could be identified or separated from “being” a couple, with parenting viewed as a right that cannot be blocked by the other party, while giving that party every right to choose the level of involvement and role they would play.

Most respondents opted for total, autonomous, and exclusive parenting. This is also true for women from the co-parenting model who sought a minimal male presence and saw the male as an object able to bring closure to certain mental elements of their child:

We searched a long time for people willing to bring children into the world with us. We had several tries that failed, especially due to their over-involvement. We did not want 50–50 parenting. We wanted the children to live in our house and have an involved father. Of course, it is important for the child’s identity to have a father, but we asked that he not take part in the everyday decisions. It was our concept, and we did not want the other party to be involved. We also did not want to have a 50–50 split of finances. We wanted the center to be here. We suffered many pitfalls because most men we tried with wanted more. (Galia, age 41, a biological mother via co-parenting)

For Galia and other respondents who identified with this model, the male is a “necessary evil.” This is not from a sense of longing, but from a desire to have the child grow up normally. It is an object that must have set limits, with minimal involvement, as is expected from a known sperm donor (Dempsey, 2012). Female respondents started the journey with a sense of inner strength and community support and a conviction that a woman could take on traditional male roles so that the family would not be hurt.

Men begin their journey having to tread through the traditional gender conviction that a mother provides a nurturing and protective role, controlling the household headcount. To go against these convictions, they need to view “other” families as a relational group, which allows for groundbreaking concepts in terms of family, parenting, and gender. It is possible to see postmodern tendencies within men identified in the co-parenting model with a woman. Some even recognized the ability of the man, even in the absence of a womb, with the woman’s stronger starting-off point, finding themselves in a continuous struggle for future self-determination through paternal agreements. In retrospect, after having gone through the family experience, only a small segment of respondents viewed the role of the opposite sex as necessary.

Between the mainstream and margins of society

The family experience formulates a sense of normalcy over the years. Parenting offers a path for self-exploration and maturity in the “coming-out” process. A child brings everything out into the open, thereby requiring closure for any open issues. The daily rigor of parenting places the family at the center of the experience and ruptures the dam between them and the surrounding community. Interviews have suggested the existence of concepts where homosexuality takes a secondary role to parenting, which breaks surrounding barriers. Alona describes how society dealt with her motherhood and diminished dealing with her lesbianism:

Slowly, as my stomach grew, it was clear that a real bond existed and that I have a child in there, that I am pregnant just like anyone else and would give birth just like any other woman. We have a family just like anyone else. So, the issue of a ‘child’ is much easier to digest. I think you stop thinking of it in terms of two women living together, and more in terms of a family. When you have a family you have two mothers, so it’s an easier concept to digest than two lesbian women. (Alona, age 31, a biological mother in via sperm donation)

Her words accentuate the feeling of transitioning from a marginal group into mainstream society. If previously the “difference” of the GLBT community stood between it and mainstream society, parenting emphasizes a self-determination that can be identified and appreciated by the surrounding community. In the interactions between marginal groups and the mainstream,

the mainstream brings a soft agenda. According to their belief system, they are part of a process where the margins lose part of their uniqueness, by changing the norm to relative, where societal change occurs, and the traditional and exclusive definition of family begins to lose its meaning and superiority.

Most families report a feeling of success and accomplishment—a strengthening of their inner self, which has a positive impact and creates change within their surrounding community. Some report how the feeling of inner legitimacy transcends to their surroundings, creating social change:

We are model parents. We are adored by other parents and their children. We are happy that the environment we are raising our child in is tolerant, and we are witnessing this ‘revolution’ in utter disbelief. Our child has a book that discusses the school’s pluralism with great pride. During the “Family Day” program, 6th grade students talk about “these types of parents and those types of families.” In school everything is omnipresent, and we are taking an active part in this ‘revolution.’ (Aviv, age 56, father and parent to three children through adoption and surrogacy)

Aviv’s words emphasize the reciprocal relationship between global social processes and individuals vying for change in society from within the mainstream, interacting with it, and not creating radical struggles on its periphery. Their strength as a marginal group is evident—a model worth mimicking embracing the social mainstream. As such, a synthesis between the margin and mainstream is created, between traditional parenting and the “other,” between homosexuality, parenting, and family.

Between the inner and the outer: “She was a mother, and I was not one yet.”

This theme focuses on the range of experiences between a sense of presence within the family to a sense of non-belonging, between centrality and family margins. This theme addresses the meaning of gaps between the couple and how they try to overcome these gaps through daily activities, such as strategies for building family unity that provide the couple with a sense of belonging. The entrance of a child into the family mix on the one hand creates a gap between the primary parent, who is attached to the child in a symbiotic bond, and the secondary parent, who seeks belonging. What is the norm in heterosexual families as the mother bonds with her child finds them unprepared, often spoiling their sense of unity. Two parental experiences are developed with two separate parenting channels.

Dalia, a nonbiological mother, describes the feeling of being left out. The pre-parenthood intimacy and closeness of the couple has now shifted to focus on the infant. She refers to a statement made by a man that exemplifies the sense of being stripped from the physical “asset”—his partner—who transitions from being a couple to becoming the sole asset of the baby. “This is how a man feels after his wife gives birth. He says that he is tired of the fact that the child is asleep, that his wife’s breast now belongs to the

baby and not me” (Dalia, age 41, a nonbiological mother for two children via sperm donation). In the absence of models to emulate, the father groups become a reference group:

My experience was very difficult, because my partner was no longer the same person I knew. She was a mother, and I wasn’t one yet. I still did not feel like a mother, and I was claiming my place. I felt that there were two separate units, and just like that, I felt abandoned, because a mother with her hormones is with the child, especially after the first child. I can empathize with how fathers feel after their wives give birth. Suddenly, you are left on your own, with someone going down a different path than you, so okay, excuse me, but I am also here. This was the first year, and it was very difficult for me, but little-by-little things improved. (Dalia, age 41, a nonbiological mother, via sperm donation)

The use of fathers’ groups as a reference model points to the sense of abandonment by the mother, difficulties in adapting to rapid changes and remaining in a vacuum, where the hidden is greater than the seen. Men have always been expected to remain on the “outside,” as no one has prepared them to be in this improbable position:

The sense that I am not ‘motherly’ enough, along with all the supporting literature about the feelings that men experience as fathers, but I am not a man, I am a woman and that makes a world of difference, and not only because men cannot breastfeed, but they also cannot play the same role as a mother. This does not comfort me as a woman. A father does not want to be a mother, a father wants to be a father, but I want to be a mother. (Talya, age 41, a nonbiological mother to two children via co-parenting)

The feeling of the outsider is augmented by the biological factor that creates and emphasizes the difference between the biological and nonbiological parent. When one feels on the outside, biology serves as a form of bond between the parent and child, placing the parent into roles that enable them to overcome the feelings of being left out. While the biological parent takes comfort in the blood bond, the other parent may equate the absence of it with the feeling of being left out. This complexity, which is intuitively developed with the transition to parenting, is omnipresent even in the pre-parenting phase:

She understands that if she is not the one, she will not have that bond and will not fully feel that it is ‘her’ child. Moreover, I have had the experience of raising a child who was not mine, so I know that I could bond and love a child as if it were mine from birth, biologically speaking, even if it was not. So, I was not afraid of the fact that she was going to carry a child, and she was afraid that if she was not going to give birth to the baby she would not have the bond. (Shelly, age 34, a nonbiological for the first child and a biological mother to the second via sperm donation)

It seems as if the sense of security and perfection that characterized Shelly pre-parenthood permitted her to give a voice to her partner’s fears of being left out. Her words echo a situation where the same household reflects a traditional

belief alongside a new belief guided by the spirit of progress. This spirit provides her with a belief in her ability to break the boundaries of norms and strengthen the bonds between her future children and herself. This gap also raises the question of parental status and the possibility of having a same-sex family. The right to bear the title “mother” or “father,” obvious in heterosexual families, may be denied in a subjective experience or in the actual reality of an “other” central parent. Yaron describes the power of the mother:

She (the mother) is very conservative, she was very negative to begin with, and somehow instilled this feeling in the child, so he does not see me as a father too, even though my partner tried to instill this feeling within him, saying that in his home he had two fathers. During infancy, the child saw me as a father, but as he grew older, she stressed the notion that he has one father. She was more concerned with what people might say, or that in kindergarten or school the child may share that he lives in a home with two fathers. She pushed me, because she wanted to maintain the structure of mother, father and child. She always wanted them to have leisure time together, something that my partner rejected outright. (Yaron, age 49, a nonbiological father through co-parenting)

The co-parenting model creates a family structure that misleads because it has the components of the main social circles: father–mother–child or father–parent–child. any attempts by the couple to gain autonomy and freedom to define their parental status are met with a family norm that only includes a biological father and mother, thus marginalizing the additional father. What is evident in the co-parenting model is the focus the “other” parents place on their feelings of being left out during the transition to parenting.

To overcome gaps in the family structure, respondents form strategies for coping. Through a process of repetition, these practices apply a sense of family unity. Often, it is a deliberate action by parents sometimes done subconsciously, while at other times it only occurs after becoming parents. Nadav, a parent by surrogacy, describes their efforts to block the norms influencing the inner family. He discusses attempts to block biological influences that exist between biological grandparents and grandchildren even prior to birth:

We did not want to create a situation where they are less-connected grandparents, less-loving, less-giving, less-belonging, or that the children will be hurt by this and it was extremely important to us. We did not know how to deny them of this without hiding the fact. I can tell you today that I am convinced that they all know who belongs to who genetically and there is no difference. One of the reasons for this happening is because we made it clear to them that we are not telling them who belongs to whom genetically. We made it clear that we were very concerned that we did not want them to deal with the issue and hence we denied sharing the knowledge with them, unless it was self-evident. (Nadav, age 36, a father of three via surrogacy)

Nadav’s words highlight the evasiveness and misleading social attitude toward parenting and family. These positions may create an experience, influence a connection, instill security, and enforce insecurity within parental

status and, more so, with the status of the grandparents. They understand the complexity of this issue by inward observation. Through a process of inward strengthening, they try to mitigate outside influences on their family experience. At the same time, they must assist grandparents in overcoming the first few stages of the process that may create a sense of bewilderment, a lack of place, and a questioning their ability to be a grandparent to a child who is (biologically) theirs.

Between the conservative and the reformer: "Helping Mommy and not disturbing Daddy"

One of the most important findings relates to notions respondents have toward the role gender plays. To break with mainstream wisdom that fashions a clear distinction between the concept of father-male and mother-female, they are forced to adopt new conventions, allowing the individual to escape normal gender roles. By forming a family, they are forced to prove to both themselves and the surrounding environment that their initial premise is possible and executable. This journey has a different starting-off point for men and women:

In both television programs and children's literature, it is always Mommy-Daddy. Thank god that there is a father figure, because most times you hear only—Mommy, Mommy. Somehow it creates a literary distortion, which is both bothersome and stereotypical. There is a book that reads: 'I helped Mommy and I did not bother Daddy.' I cannot even read this to her. What does it mean I helped Mommy but did not bother Daddy? Is Daddy a figure that must not be disturbed because he is always doing something? He reads the paper, works, he is not involved and that is not right. (Micah, age 37, a biological father via co-parenting)

Micah represents how true-normative positions are exemplified in multiple outlets such as media and books. The comprehensive role of the mother is represented alongside the absent father. These situations follow the respondents in the first few years. As pioneers they are forced to invent new directions, without available models to rely on in times of difficulty. To form an alternative, they are forced to shield themselves from environmental norms and even attempt to give the male basic, motherly tools. Even when they become more resilient and less sensitive, it seems as if the new father figures they are trying to invent does not stand on its own but is consistently compared to the role of the mother. Some, like Yocha, find a unique system that helps them make use of their homosexuality to bridge gender gaps:

Gay men possess a much wider emotional spectrum than their straight counterparts. This stems from our cerebral physiology and because of our ability to possess deep emotional understanding. We combine several things simultaneously. We speak differently. It is scientific. We have a totally different brain structure from a straight man living with a woman—emotionally and intellectually. So, I do not think that my

children lack an emotional or educational experience or that we are denying them access to anything. If anything, it is the opposite. (Yocha, age 36, a father to twins through surrogacy)

Yocha presents an expression of resiliency and parental strength. In order to convey these attributes to the surrounding society, he still requires a bridge, something that will explain, to both himself and to others, the fact that a man can fulfill critical roles that historically were accomplished by a woman. The interviews paint a father's journey within a society that embraces a motherly dominance, where they are forced to embrace new covenants that include apologetic elements alongside new convictions, which challenge the exclusive role of the mother, often by adopting her roles as part of the new father's image. Conservative opinions do not stop to examine the existence of inner conflicts. On the one hand, they are faced with opinions that question the ability of one sex to adequately fulfill the role of the other, while, on the other hand, they are faced with an environment seeking to make a distinction between one who is "like" a mother to one who is "like" a father—role-playing that adopts conservative gender scenarios:

You are the mother. Play the mother's role, and when someone plays this role, society does not know how to respond. It is a difficult concept to grasp even in a home with both a mother and a father. Now, take two mothers, and kill both... like where is the father? Or take two fathers. Where is the mother? How can you function in a home where this is not clear? When looking at women, society views motherhood as a desired role. What would two mothers do? There is no such thing as two mothers, you can only have a mother and a father, so when one mother takes on the role of 'father' she is upset and feels terrible. And I do not see it this way. (Nira, age 27, a nonbiological mother to a child through sperm donation)

Nira focused a true-normative lens on society, reflecting on a crucial question in the couple's life. This is the manner in which they choose to disengage from forces embedded and preserved in dichotomous role-playing, where one plays the traditional role of the mother and the other the traditional role of the father. The issue of role playing is extremely sensitive to respondents that have embraced freedoms and equality as their major principles. They are fearful of the need to play strict roles needed for family unity, finding it hard to change the concept of role playing. Throughout the years, it seems that innovative and creative solutions were found. The rigors of daily life permit families to practice varying parenting techniques, applied to the first child and, later, to any additional children. It is possible to identify that, over time, the fear of dichotomous division transforms itself into a multi-channel division that considers personal preferences in the interpersonal dialogue. If at first, considering the possibilities of one while minimizing the presence of the other was paramount, now, observations are more integrative and whole. Adir described a multidimensional structure:

There are differences between us. In the way we manage time. I am the main provider, which means I am at home less. My partner spends more time at home, his studio is there, he is available to cook and clean. With regard to cleaning, I am responsible for the bathroom and kitchen and he is responsible for the rest of the house. I buy the child's clothing, books, and art supplies. He buys the wheel for the fishing rod. There is a division of labor. Sometimes it is based upon who we are, and not on something that is defined. But we talk about it. Emotionally he speaks to me more, because I am more emotional. I feel that my partner has more time with the child, first and foremost technically, but also physically. On the other hand, I feel that my discussions with the child are more meaningful, as he can be more open and direct with me, talk about his identity, his worries and his struggles. His emotional language is conducted with me because I am more sensitive. (Adir, age 36, a parent through adoption)

It is possible to observe various aspects that define role playing. In the functional dimension, traditional gender divisions of outward and inward exist. This is expressed by traditional gender practices steaming from each partner's personal preferences. In the dynamic-emotional dimension that develops over time, it is possible to ascribe separate dominant attributes to each partner. This shows two directions that exist between the parenting practice and its role and function. A feeling of dominance in the parent can occur by the actual time spent with the child, or from an emotional tendency through discussion that forms a central place in the child's life. This multifaceted model brings to light how everything that from the outside seems to be utter dominance, after examining the finite details, turns into a structure of multifaceted dominance. This permits the couple to feel a sense of self-fulfillment and belonging, while preserving equality.

Discussion: The family experience coming into being over time

The research showcases the process of family construction, characterized by a dialectic of splitting and integration over three main periods: Pre-Parenting, Family at its Infancy, and Establishing the Family. At the center of these periods a separate social challenge exists, offering a different dominant experience. The challenges may trigger an experience of cerebral and emotional division providing a platform for renewed balance. The themes previously described serve as an axis on which the various emotional experiences travel: Pre-Parenting questions the "otherness," which runs on the mainstream–margins axis. Family at its Infancy questions the belonging, which runs on the inner–outer axis. Establishing the Family questions the otherness, which runs on the conservative–innovative axis. The reciprocal relationships between them and the manner that they relate to GLBT research will be discussed.

The dominance of the otherness component in the pre-parenting period

“Otherness” represents a feeling of perceived difference, separated and defined by those who situate themselves on the margins of society, as opposed to those who identify as being part of the mainstream.

In accordance with the queer theory, prevailing conservative opinions assign a gay definition that is different and out of the ordinary, creating a social “otherness” that is outside the boundaries of the norm (Kosofsky, 1991; Watson, 2005). “Otherness” was a basic component described by respondents, and it starts with their decision to “come out.” It seems that most began the parenting process after overcoming the sense that their homosexuality was setting them apart, being able to draw strength from their uniqueness while transitioning to parenthood.

The possibility for GLBT parenting is measured by the ability to provide a family experience that is part of the social mainstream. Findings coincide with the current literature that discusses the evolution of social “otherness.” A primary survival concern about the ability to function as a parent gives way to a more advanced optimal model conveying family strength and healthy child development. Respondents are less occupied with social stigmas and more focused on structural and gender “otherness.” A change is seen in questioning internal family issues, differences between the biological and nonbiological parent, empowerment and resiliency. While women were able to latch on to the mother “myth,” putting them at the top of the parental hierarchal order, men had to deal with negative opinions where the father is absent from the family framework (Martin & Colbert, 1997). It appears that younger men were able to use male family models and reach strengths equal to those found in women.

“Otherness” is seen as a primary element in the experience; it nests itself and then bursts out in times of crisis. Even in people whose decision to become a parent came from a position of strength and maturity, the dominant factor for becoming a parent created a structural gap between the two. It seems that a lack of family balance serves as grounds for regressive dealings with “otherness,” which helps to gain strength and formulate an integrative free position unrestricted by the shackles of society.

The dominance of the belonging component in the family at its infancy period

Belonging is described as the way each family member views attraction, closeness, and commitment to the other family members. The power of belonging by each family member establishes family cohesion, resiliency, mutual responsivity, and a motivation to preserve and foster the family unit. The system theory emphasizes the need of the human system to find equilibrium and reinforces the manner in which the belonging experience between family members in a reciprocal relationship determines its strength (Nichols, 2013).

In its first year, many changes take place in the family unit, as new dimensions are added, and the experience changes along with the content. Amalgamation of various studies suggests that this period is characterized by divisions that occur due to the gaps between the partners when it comes to parental status, in both the parent–child experience and the biological component (e.g., Ben-Ari & Livni, 2006; Goldberg & Sayer, 2006). The current research emphasizes the meaning of transitioning to parenting through the concept of inclusion. The immediate gap that develops between the couple creates a cerebral difference and a sense that there is only one central way to belong to the family. In these moments, the known parental status of “mother” and “father” are manifested as exclusive with a single dimension. The person holding a strong internal position receives a sense of status—parental status—that is anchored through centuries of history. The other, viewed as weak and detached, finds it hard to break free of the social norms of parenting and family and tries, to no avail, to arrive at such through the tried and tested classical tools. As such, the inclusive component faces dealing with concepts of “otherness,” the rigid classical family that bind the child–parent bond to biology, one home, or legal status. The division process emphasizes a feeling of helplessness and reduces the authentic revelation needed to base the “other” family bond.

To create a shelter, they set the limits of family boundaries to form a metaphorical bridge between the central parent and the “other” parent. Inter-family focus provides the ability to deconstruct and reconstruct the undisputable ties of parenting, partnership, household, gender, and family connections. To ensure cohesiveness, strategies for coping and parental practices bring new meaning that validate the connection between the parent and child.

Dominance of the self-actualization component in the establishing the family period

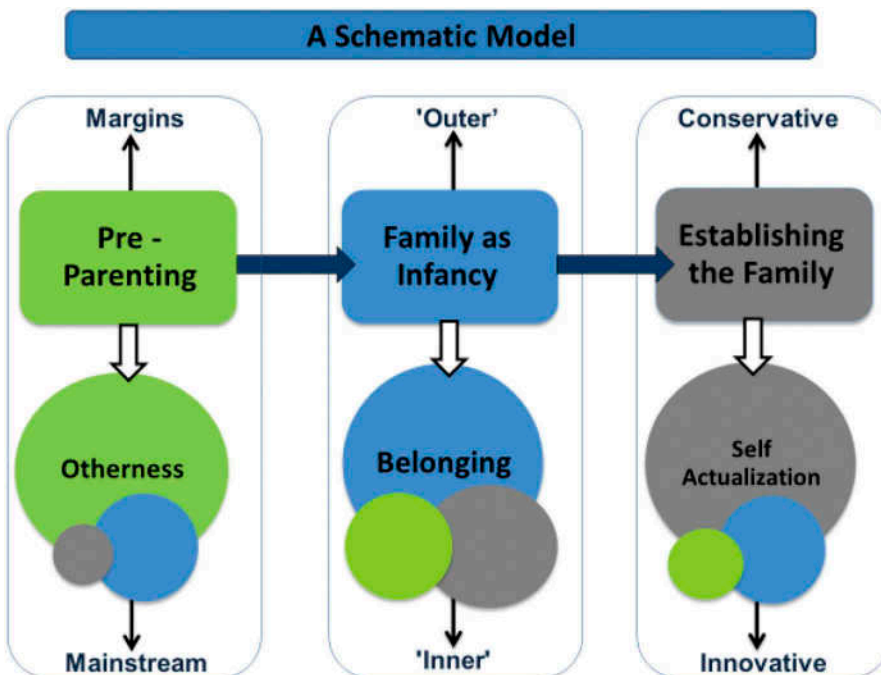
Self-actualization is the feeling a person has about the way they maximize the potential within. It develops dynamically starting with the decision to remain true to one’s sexual orientation, through maintaining the right to become a parent. It focuses on the question of freedom and its context within the roles of gender in parenting and family. The question of freedom, which manifests itself in the tension that exists between those who guard tradition to those who seek to reform it, general convictions that define “Mommy” as female and “Daddy” as male, which is reflected in the family structure and challenges the self-determination of the individual, couple, and family.

The dichotomous concept of categorical role division of parent–mother and parent–father changes, and gender types of mother–father become multifaceted. Respondents enforce the distinction between practical and emotional functioning. The dichotomy of parental roles is modified according to the possibility that the typical emotional role of the father or mother is not always in line with the person who holds that position.

The parent–child bonding experience interacts with a child’s needs and the presence of the second parent that provides a wide range of emotional and functional parental capabilities. Parenting an additional child introduces new elements, as it brings balance and allows for new bonds, different parental expressions, and lessens the rigidity of gender roles and functions. Many respondents do not identify with the classical roles of father or mother in their family and describe a unique matrix for each family and gender makeup. Experiencing various situations has exposed new capabilities and enforced self-actualization, ability, freedom, and personal strength, with a partner and as part of the family. Through the perspective of time, while considering many variables, it is possible to adopt an argument that changes the meanings of gender as it relates to relationships, dynamics, and situations. All these have reciprocal relationships and exist in a never-ending dynamic.

The family experience and its components over time: A concluding schematic model

Findings can be drawn as an integrative model that contains three components of the family experience: “otherness,” belonging, and self-actualization. Family construction is described as a process that flows through all three periods. Each period contains a dominant element that travels on an axis that is exposed using the thematic examination of data analysis. The effect of the dominant component on each of the periods is evident in the other functions that travel on the same timeline.



The centrality of self-actualization in the family experience

The centrality of self-actualization throughout the experience is a major finding that points to far-reaching social changes taking place in the family experience within gay and lesbian homes. While dealing with the “otherness” component, which showcased the centrality of conservative norms in self-actualization and experience, the importance of self-determination reflected concepts of liberalism and ingenuity. It is possible to witness an emphasis of the “normative” aspect of the family experience as a unifying factor with other families. At the same time, it is possible to view the experience with strength and resiliency and what was once considered as marginal reflects the values of inner strength to self-determination that is based on inner-family validation.

The path toward the mainstream

The current research sees the GLBT family as a social phenomenon that, although it exists in a social climate that is generally heteronormative, is characterized by struggles with new and preserving forces. Possibilities of starting a family deemed impossible because of social norms began to find answers through social spheres of influence, changes within Israeli society, and the GLBT community serving as a chosen alternative group. This family could not form without proactive action by its forbearers. This action was characterized mainly by a fluctuation of experience in a dialectic of splitting and integration. While only at the starting gate, the power base is external and identifies the dominant weight of experienced conservatism, while at the end, innovation is the legitimate tool used to reach objectives in the social field, while receiving social and legal awareness.

A strong need to build a family allowed respondents to identify every loophole in the norm. A process of empowerment in the GLBT community has renewed traditional terminology. Family structures and birthing channels were deemed heteronormative in the traditional family because foundations for well-defined family structures within the GLBT community represented freedom, equality, and hope. This process began with the challenging of social prohibitions about the idea of family development and continued until the exclusivity and centrality of “normative” society has lost its validity. In a process where the community sought to start a family due to the success of their peers, who refined models, ideas, and directions to form a cohesive, coherent statement, a gay or lesbian family became a family that embodies values of freedom, equality, and self-worth. This statement crosses the age range and gender within all respondents and all parenting channels. All these offer this study the necessary insight and depth that examines the change that has occurred in the gay and lesbian family, until it has become what it is today—a legitimate and rewarding solution for its members. It appears that

the transition from a preferred choice in the joint family model to the direction of the single-sex family has identified a gradual sense of liberation from social norms with regard to parenting and family. Advancements in technology, alongside mental maturity, have empowered the ability of respondents to cope with edicts of the heteronormative society that define the dependent relationship between the partners.

The path to family cohesiveness

The dominance of the belonging component that builds with the transition to parenting signifies the difficulty of respondents to break free from normative social edicts that define the connections between family conventions. The inner struggle taking place between biological-formal parenting to society tries to find a bridge between traditional family conventions and postmodern ideas. Status gaps between parents looking for a solution to these threaten family unity. Partners strengthen family boundaries in order to moderate the weight of the preserving forces. By looking inward, they deconstruct and reconstruct basic family principles, social ideas that redefine the meaning of parenting, gender, and family. The external validity of the family that coalesces family with biology, gender, household, and law is challenged by finding internal family validity. This study shows that daily experience in the family practice, through a renewed language, influences the overall experience. Parallel to the undermining of convictions with regard to gender and its roles and the clear undermining of boundaries between mainstream and social margins offer a new range of definitions and parental statuses created to bring to light a new context for the experience across various roles within the family. At the same time, the validity of the biological and formal component is weakened. With the new definition of family, the power of connections between its members is not defined by the normative definition but by the experience, its connection and daily practice. As a result, the sense of belonging to the family turns its focus inward, formed in accordance with the needs and desires of the gay and lesbian family members. Integration between components of the experience allows them to experience both themselves and their family members as powerful and as a source of admiration and mirroring for others in the heteronormative and GLBT society as one.

Family as a vehicle for self-actualization

The GLBT family is one that provides an inspirational framework, a safe place for self-determination, free of gender or social edicts that place clear roles for both men and women, offering freedom of expression and choice and realizing personal potential. At the same time, due to the dynamic between members of the family, restrictions to these freedoms do exist, and as such there is inner

tension in regard to freedom and equality. Development began with the question of gender freedom signaling the path taken by the gay-lesbian family as a total social phenomenon, but also as partners embarked on a path of self-actualization the current study exposed the feeling that respondents were able to traverse freely between traditional roles. It discovered a link between the development of a person as parent and a family member and the relationship with their partner. It raised questions with regard to the gender role of each partner and the meaning of absence, on the one hand, and the presence of a same-sex partner, on the other hand. In the process of researching the GLBT family, it is possible to see how this dependence is weakened between partners, with no connection to the chosen parenting model, and to increasingly witness the sense of self-determination that is not dependent on the relationship and role of gender in parenting and family.

Possible ramifications of the research

This article may contribute to the research of the family and GLBT community. The research identifies the development mode of the GLBT family experience. It is possible to learn of the normative practices of the GLBT family and adapt a response that considers various stages of family development. The research points to family resiliency and its relationship to prevailing social trends. The respondents in this study were able to isolate themselves from external influences, and they developed coping strategies that are important to address in future studies, turning them into a tool that will benefit professionals working in the field of family empowerment. The study identified three common experiences to all GLBT parenting channels: "otherness," belonging, and self-realization. It is possible to identify each channel and its weighted influence on itself and other channels. Future researchers should take into account that a main focus in the "otherness" could be influenced by a lack in feeling a sense of belonging or the ability to accomplish self-realization, or the ability to shift the focus to a relevant practice in the development process of the family. The larger common ground of all the factors comprising the family experience could become relevant to other types of families (divorced, combined, single parenting, and adoptive families).

The study was able to illustrate a postmodern mode of role playing in the family and parenting model. It shows a multidimensional division of role playing, exemplifying a departure from the traditional partition of mother type to father type. The research dissects the dichotomy of the male-female category, joining and confirming current research and lending its findings. The parental status that is bound by biology, gender, formality, and household receives a renewed meaning and creates an internal familial challenge. In the process of conducting this research, inner strength sources were identified that helped break down the conservative meaning of the subject and create a platform for a renewed building process.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

References

- Ben-Ari, A., & Livni, T. (2006). Motherhood isn't a given thing: Experiences and constructed meanings of biological and non-biological lesbian mothers. *Sex Roles*, 54, 521–523. doi:10.1007/s11199-006-9016-0
- Berg, B. L. (1995). *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences*. London, UK: Allyn and Bacon.
- Bergen, K. M., Suter, E. A., & Daas, K. L. (2006). “About as solid as a fishnet:” Symbolic construction of a legitimate parental identity for nonbiological lesbian mothers. *Journal of Family Communication*, 6, 201–220. doi:10.1207/s15327698jfc0603_3
- Biblarz, T. J., & Stacey, J. (2010). How does the gender of parents matter? *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 72(1), 3–22. doi:10.1111/j.1741-3737.2009.00678.x
- Blecher-Prigat, A., & Vazarpan, R. (2016). Children are happiness: Parenting using artificial birthing techniques by the same couple of a same sex. In A. Morgenstern, Y. Loshinky, & A. Harel (Eds.), *The rights of the gay community in israel, law review: Sexual preference and gender identity* (pp. 395–436). Jerusalem, Israel: Nevo Publishers.
- Carneiro, F. A., Tasker, F., Salinas-Quiroz, F., Leal, I., & Costa, P. A. (2017). Are the fathers alright? A systematic and critical review of studies on gay and bisexual fatherhood. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 8, 1636. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2017.01636
- Chabot, J., & Ames, B. (2004). It wasn't 'let's get pregnant and go do it': Decision making in lesbian couples planning motherhood via donor insemination. *Family Relations*, 53, 348–356. doi:10.1111/j.0197-6664.2004.00041.x
- Creswell, J. W. (2012). *Research design* (4th ed.). London, UK: Sage Publications.
- Dempsey, D. (2012). Gay male couples' paternal involvement in lesbian-parented families. *Journal of Family Studies*, 18(2–3), 155–164. doi:10.5172/jfs.2012.18.2-3.155
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2011). *The Sage handbook of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Donovan, C., & Wilson, A. R. (2008). Imagination and integrity: Decision-making among lesbian couples to use medically provided donor insemination. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 10(7), 649–665. doi:10.1080/13691050802175739
- Dunne, G. A. (2000). Opting into motherhood: Lesbians blurring the boundaries and transforming the meaning of parenthood and kinship. *Gender & Society*, 14, 11–35. doi:10.1177/089124300014001003
- Farr, R. H., & Tornello, S. L. (2016). The transition to parenthood and early child development in families with same-sex parents. *International Journal of Birth and Parent Education*, 3(3), 17–22. Retrieved from <https://ijbpe.com/index.php/component/content/article/92-vol-3-issue-3/324>
- Fogiel-Bijaoui, S. (2002). Familism, postmodernity and the state: The case of Israel. *The Journal of Israeli History*, 21(1–2), 38–62. doi:10.1080/13531040212331295852
- Gates, G. J. (2013) *LGBT parenting in the United States*. Retrieved from <http://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/LGBT-Parenting.pdf>
- Goldberg, A. E., Kinkler, L. A., Moyer, A. M., & Weber, E. (2014). Intimate relationship challenges in early parenthood among lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples adopting via the child welfare system. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 45(4), 221–230. doi:10.1037/a0037443

- Goldberg, A. E., & Sayer, A. (2006). Lesbian couples' relationship quality across the transition to parenthood. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 68, 87–100. doi:10.1111/j.1741-3737.2006.00235.x
- Goldhaber, O. (2007). "I want my mommies:" The cry for mini-DOMAs to recognize the best interests of the children of same-sex couples. *Family Court Review*, 45(2), 287–301. doi:10.1111/j.1744-1617.2007.00144.x
- Hayman, B., & Wilkes, L. (2017). De novo families: Lesbian motherhood. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 64(5), 577–591. doi:10.1080/00918369.2016.1194119
- Hicks, S. (2008). Gender role models. Who needs 'em?! *Qualitative Social Work*, 7(1), 43–59. doi:10.1177/1473325007086415
- Kosofsky, E. S. (1991). *Epistemology of the closet*. New York, NY: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Martin, C. A., & Colbert, K. K. (1997). *Parenting: A lifespan perspective*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Moustakas, C. E. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Nichols, P. N. (2013). *Family therapy: Concepts and methods* (10th ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson/Allyn and Bacon.
- Oren-Patishi, G. (2007). *Parenting by homosexual men who adopt: Statement of responsibility* (Graduate Thesis). Tel Aviv, Israel: Tel Aviv University.
- Padgett, D. K. (1998). *Qualitative methods in social work research: Challenges and rewards*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Patton, M. J. (2015). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Ryan-Flood, R. (2009). *Lesbian motherhood: Gender, families and sexual citizenship*. Palgrave Macmillan studies in family and intimate life. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Stacey, J., & Biblarz, T. J. (2001). (How) does the sexual orientation of parents matter? *American Sociological Review*, 66(2), 159–183. doi:10.2307/2657413
- Tornello, S. L., Sonnenberg, B. N., & Patterson, C. J. (2015). Division of labor among gay fathers: Associations with parent, couple and child adjustment. *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity*, 2(4), 365–375. doi:10.1037/sgd0000109
- Tsfati, M., & Ben-Ari, A. (2018). Between the social and the personal: Israeli male gay parents, surrogacy and socio-political concepts of parenthood and gender. *Journal of GLBT Family Studies*, 1–16. doi:10.1080/1550428X.2017.1413475
- Van Ewyk, J., & Kruger, L. M. (2017). The emotional experience of motherhood in planned lesbian families in the South African context: "...Look how good a job I'm doing, look how amazing we are.". *Journal of Homosexuality*, 64(3), 343–366. doi:10.1080/00918369.2016.1190216
- Watson, K. (2005). Queer theory. *Group-Analysis*, 38(1), 67–81. doi:10.1177/0533316405049369
- Yaron, L. (2017). For nine years only three single sex couples were able to adopt a child in Israel. *Ha'aretz*. Retrieved from <https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/education/.premium-1.3989922>