



Experiences of Microaggressions and Resiliency among Children with Same-Sex Parents

Emily E. Crain & Dr. Rachel H. Farr

University of Massachusetts Amherst, Department of Psychology



Introduction

- As social and political climates shift concerning the rights of same-sex couples and their families, research regarding the experiences of lesbian and gay individuals and their children has become increasingly relevant.
- Studies have examined topics from microaggressions to emotional and behavioral consequences of oppression in the lives of sexual minority individuals (e.g., Woodford, Howell, & Silverschanz, 2013; Williams et al., 2005).
- Specifically, microaggressions are defined as subtle ways in which others oppress individuals of marginalized groups (Sue et al., 2007).
- Furthermore, researchers have studied the behavioral and socioemotional development of children with sexual minority parents. Findings indicate that these children meet the same developmental milestones as children with heterosexual parents (e.g., Farr, Forssell, & Patterson, 2010).
- However, limited research exists about the possible victimization of children with same-sex parents (e.g., Kosciw & Diaz, 2008; Rivers, Poteat, & Noret, 2008).
- Moreover, adoptees' experiences with microaggressions have been scarcely documented, let alone children adopted by sexual minority parents.
- Recently, Garber (2013) pioneered the first study to our knowledge about microaggressions encountered by adoptees.
- Our study aims to expand research on the experiences of adopted children with same-sex parents, specifically instances of microaggressions, awareness of difference, and resiliency.

Methods

- Data were collected from the second wave of a larger longitudinal study examining child development, parenting, and family functioning in diverse adoptive families (e.g., Farr & Patterson, 2013).
- Participating families were recruited from five different adoption agencies throughout the United States, which were located in a jurisdiction that permitted legal adoptions by same-sex couples.
- Generally, adoptive parents worked full time, were well-educated, and had family incomes above the national average.
- Video-recorded interviews and interview transcriptions from 44 children, ($M_{age} = 8$ years, range = 6-11 years; 21 girls, 23 boys) representing 27 two-dad families and 17 two-mom families, were coded using thematic analysis.
- Specifically, 25 target questions, which generally elicited responses about children's experiences with same-sex parents, were used.
- For example, children were asked "Are there any things your particularly like/do not like about having two moms/dads, how would you describe your family, how is your family different/same as other families, have you ever been bullied or treated unfairly?"
- Thematic analysis was chosen as the method to coding the qualitative data set in this study.
- A template of themes related to microaggressions, feelings of difference, and resiliency and positive conceptualizations of family were coded for.
- Three research personnel systematically coded the interviews for each theme, as well as rated emotional valence and intensity/saliency.

Results

- Results indicated that 24 (of the 44) different children reported 50 instances of microaggressions; 14 of these children reported more than 1 microaggression (range: 1 to 7).
- The average emotional valence for the total number microaggressions was neutral and on average microaggressions were committed at a low intensity.
- The most common microaggression reported was Heterosexism; 18 different children cited 26 total instances of heterosexism. Most frequently, children reported neutral emotional valence (Mode = 2, 88.5%) and low intensity (Mode = 1, 61.5%).
- Out of 40 children, 62.5% reported not being afraid of disclosure.
- Nine children reported a total of 14 distinct instances of acknowledging their difference through a place of a resiliency. These resilient conceptualizations were on average medium or high saliency (35.7% medium, 35.7% high).
- 26 individual children made 47 total positive feelings statements about their families; 46.2% of these children reported 2 or more positive feelings about their family.
- Additionally, 16 different children expressed 21 instances of positive feelings specifically regarding their parents' sexual orientation.
- Outside of the scripted interview questions, 6 individual children made reference to positive external supports regarding the sexual orientation of their parents by others.

Table 1: Themes & Child Examples

Theme	Quotation
Microaggressions	
Heterosexism	"I tell people who do not know that same-sex couples exist."
Teasing & Bullying	"It's not nice, but people make fun of me because of my parents."
Public Outing	"I have to make two Father's Day cards at school."
Negative Stereotypes & Overt Discrimination	"I was told I am going to help."
Spokesperson	"They ask me lots of questions about my parents."
Feelings of Difference	
Disclosure	"I tell anyone who asks."
Uncomfortable Disclosing	"I do not tell strangers about my parents."
Afraid of Disclosure	"I've been afraid to tell people about my parents."
Fear of Disclosure	"I am worried they won't be my friend anymore."
Guard Up & Need for Security	"They have to promise not to make fun of me."
Awareness of Difference among Families	"Some families come in different colors."
Awareness of Difference in Own Family	"I have a rainbow family."
Internalized Stigma	"They freak me out."
Resiliency & Positive Conceptualizations	
Resiliency	"People shouldn't make fun of you because you have a different family."
Positive Feelings	"We are special."

Figure 1: Total Frequencies & Averages

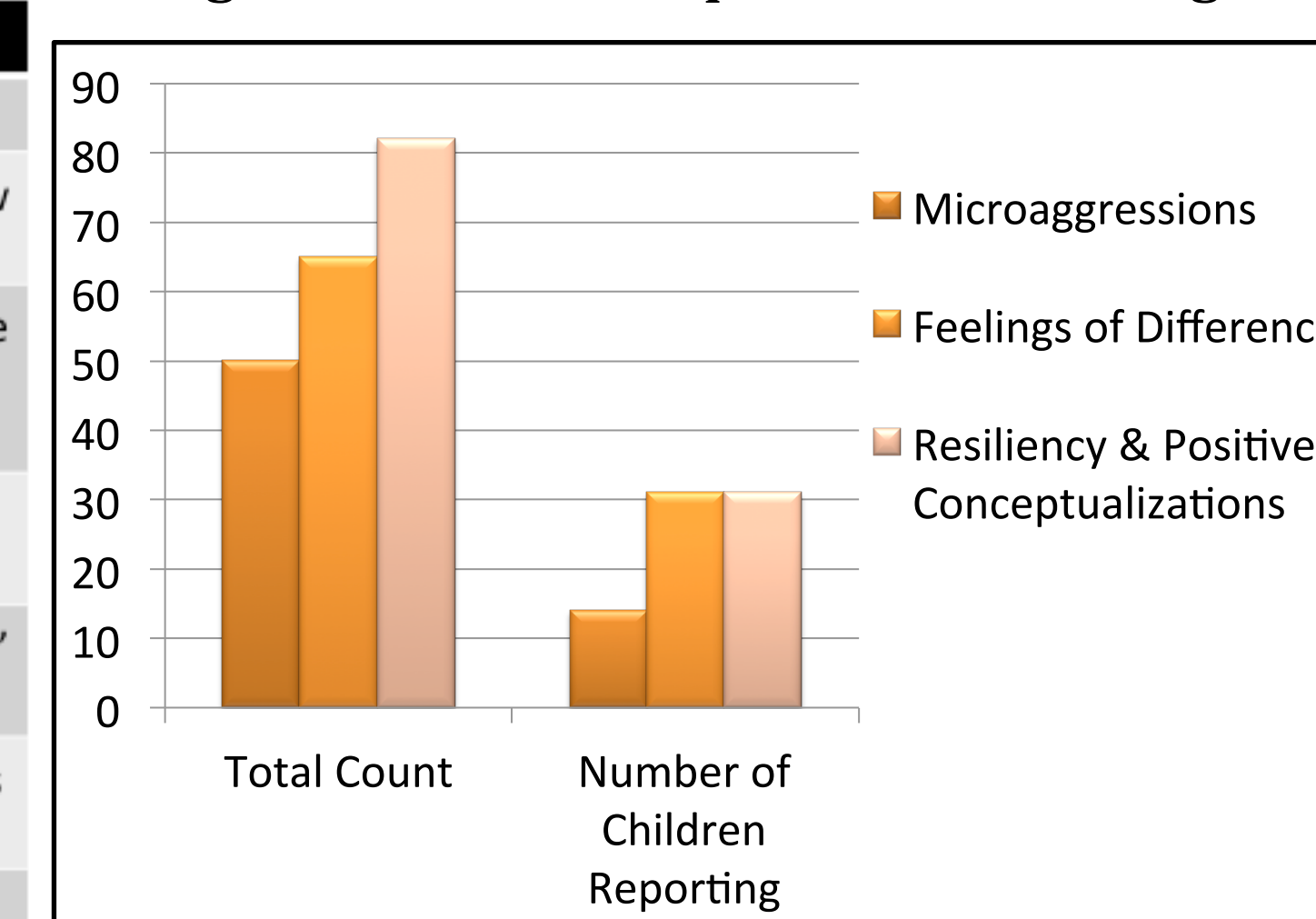


Table 2: Participant Pool Demographics

Child Demographics	
Age	M = 8.1 (range = 6 to 11)
Family Type	Lesbian: 17; Gay: 27
Sex	F: 21; M: 23
Race	White: 17; Non-white: 27
Siblings	Yes: 27; No: 17
Transracial Adoption	Yes: 24; No: 20
Geographic Location	South: 5 Northeast: 5 Northwest: 5 West Coast: 7 Mid Atlantic: 22
Two-Parent Household at Wave 2	Yes: 39; No: 5

- The number of microaggressions and feelings of difference reported by children did not vary due to their geographical location; $F(4, 39) = 1.265, p = .300$; $F(4, 39) = .800, p = .533$.
- There was no significant difference between the total number of microaggressions, feelings of difference, or the total count of resiliency & positive conceptualizations of family reported by females and males.
- There was no significant positive relationship between age and total number of reported microaggressions or feelings of difference, $r(42) = .21, p = .167$; $r(42) = .27, p = .077$.
- There was a significant positive correlation between age and the total count of resiliency and positive conceptualizations of family; $r(42) = .432, p = .003$.

Discussion

- Microaggressions are generally occurring at low levels of intensity and children typically display neutral emotional valence when talking about such offenses.
- 54.5% of the children in our sample report experiencing microaggressions.
- Microaggressions are most often committed by classmates and peers and most frequently take the form of heterosexism, followed by public outing.
- Children identify feelings of difference more frequently than microaggressions; and over double the number of children express such feelings (70.5%).
- The majority of children can identify domains in which their own family is different from others', especially recognizing their parents' sexual orientation.
- Although they can recognize this difference and the majority of these children also know others with same-sex parents, still less than half of the children can define the terms "lesbian" and "gay".
- Above all, children are demonstrating resiliency and can form positive conceptualizations of their family, especially as they grow older with age.
- Children identified more instances of resiliency and positive feelings of their family more often than both microaggressions and feelings of difference.
- Our findings add support to the notion that same-sex parented families provide loving and nurturing environments for their children.
- Additionally, having a more clear and in-depth understanding of these children's experiences is of critical importance to educators, counselors, parents, and other personnel who can help cultivate inclusive environments that contribute to children's positive development and growth.

Selected References

- Farr, R. H., Forssell, S. L., & Patterson, C. J. (2010). Parenting and child development in adoptive families: does parental sexual orientation matter? *Applied Developmental Science, 14*(3), 164-178. doi:10.1080/10888691.2010.500958
- Farr, R. H., & Patterson, C. J. (2013). Coparenting among lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples: associations with adopted children's outcomes. *Child Development, 84*(4), 1226-40. doi:10.1111/cdev.12046
- Garber, K. J. (2013). *You were adopted?: an exploratory analysis of microaggressions experienced by adolescent adopted individuals*. (Unpublished masters dissertation). University of Massachusetts Amherst, Amherst MA.
- Kosciw, J., & Diaz, E. (2008). *Involved, Invisible, Ignored: The Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Parents and Their Children in Our Nation's K-12 Schools*. Retrieved from <http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/recordDetail?accno=ED500474>
- Rivers, I., Poteat, V. P., & Noret, N. (2008). Victimization, social support, and psychosocial functioning among children of same-sex and opposite-sex couples in the United Kingdom. *Developmental Psychology, 44*(1), 127-34. doi:10.1037/0012-1649.44.1.127
- Sue, D. W., Capodilupo, C. M., Torino, G. C., Bucceri, J. M., Holder, A. M. B., Nadal, K. L., & Esquilin, M. (2007). Racial microaggressions in everyday life: implications for clinical practice. *The American Psychologist, 62*(4), 271-86. doi:10.1037/0003-066X.62.4.271
- Williams, T., Connolly, J., Pepler, D., & Craig, W. (2005). Peer victimization, social support, and psychosocial adjustment of sexual minority adolescents. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 34*(5), 471-482. doi:10.1007/s10964-005-7264-x
- Woodford, M. R., Howell, M. L., Kulick, A., & Silverschanz, P. (2013). "That's so gay": heterosexual male undergraduates and the perpetuation of sexual orientation microaggressions on campus. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 28*(2), 416-35. doi: 10.1177/0886260512454719

Contact

Emily E. Crain, ecrain@umass.edu; Dr. Rachel H. Farr, rfarr@psych.umass.edu