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Making visible the invisible: Bisexual parents ponder coming out to their kids

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Abstract

Unlike straight or gay parents whose sexuality is often made obvious to their children based on the gender composition of their relationships, bisexual and other non-monosexual parents are regularly and inaccurately assumed to be straight or gay. As a result, bisexuals in both same-gender and mixed-gender relationships must choose whether or not to come out to their children. This article uses data from an online survey of 767 US parents and explores reasons that bisexual parents offered when discussing their plans to come out or not come out to their children. Using a qualitative, thematic analysis of the open-ended question "Do you plan to tell your children about your sexual orientation? Why or why not?", this article demonstrates that bisexuals planned to come out in order to educate their children on diversity, to encourage their children to be allies, to combat bisexual erasure, to promote honest communication, to convey solidarity to their LGBTQ+ children, and for necessary logistical reasons. Some parents did not plan to come out to their children, explaining that their sexuality was private, shameful, or confusing. Others said they would come out if asked, or if their children were also queer. These motivations relate to bisexual parents' unique experiences with binegativity and erasure.

Keywords

Bisexuality, parenting, family, coming out, queer

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Introduction

For decades, social scientists have researched the experiences of gay and lesbian parents (for example Crowl et al., 2008; Stacey and Biblarz, 2001), but few have given the same quality of attention to bisexual and other non-monosexual parents, despite evidence that they are more likely than gays or lesbians to desire and eventually obtain parenthood (Gates et al., 2007; Pew Research Center, 2013). Whereas children of gay, lesbian, and straight parents are usually able to make accurate assumptions about their parents' identities based on their parents' genders (Tasker, 2005), bisexual erasure limits children's ability to accurately predict their parents' bisexual identities. Bisexual erasure, or the popular assumption that everyone is either straight or gay (Yoshino, 2000), leads most bisexual and other non-monosexual parents to be (mis)classified depending on their partner's gender (Hartman-Linck, 2014; Ross and Dobinson, 2013; Ulrich, 2011). That is, if a bisexual mother is with another woman, she is read as gay. If a bisexual mother is with a man, she is read as straight. As a result, bisexual and other non-monosexual parents are faced with a unique dilemma: do they risk the possibility of stigma for themselves and their families in order to tell their children about their sexuality? And if they do choose to tell their children, what reasons guide their choice?

In this article, I explore this quandary using original data from an online survey of bisexual and other LGBTQ+ parents, the majority of whom were "out" and open about their sexuality. My survey yielded a sample of 767 US parents (47% bisexual, 25% lesbian, 20% straight, 7% gay, and 1% aromantic asexual). To understand why the majority of bisexual and other non-monosexual parents in my sample planned to disclose their sexuality to their children, I examine the results of one open-ended survey question: "Do you plan to tell your children about your sexual orientation? Why or why not?" Using data from a qualitative, thematic analysis of this question, I identify several common reasons that parents planned to come out to their children, including (1) to educate their children on diversity, (2) to encourage their children to be LGBTQ+ allies, (3) to combat bisexual erasure, (4) to promote open and honest communication with their children, (5) to convey solidarity to their children who might also be bisexual or queer, and (6) for necessary logistical reasons. Many parents expressed a willingness to risk the stigma associated with coming out as bisexual because, in doing so, they were also able to connect to these values of diversity, allyship, bisexual visibility, honesty, and solidarity. Additionally, I explore the less common responses provided by parents who said they might come out if asked or if their kids were also queer, along with the parents who had no plans to come out to their children. For some parents, choosing not to come out was necessary in order to maintain privacy, mitigate feelings of shame, evade their children's confusion, and avoid any experiences of stigma associated with bisexuality.

These results complicate existing literature on queer parenthood, which tends to dichotomize and simplify the coming out experience. Studies often highlight the

conversations that parents in same-gender relationships have with their children regarding why and how their families differ from heteronormative family structures (for example Breshears, 2010; Tasker, 2005), or they refer to the experiences of gays and lesbians who become parents in different-gender relationships before eventually separating and disclosing their same-gender attraction (for example Giunti and Fioravanti, 2017; Lynch and Murray, 2000). Neither of these empirical frames account for the experiences of bisexual parents in same-gender relationships whose specific sexualities may not feel relevant during discussions about family structure, or for those in different-gender relationships whose identities are relatively compatible with a heteronormative lifestyle. The findings presented in this article advance current understandings of LGBTQ+ families by factoring the experiences of bisexual and other non-monosexual parents into the conversation on parental coming out narratives, ultimately revealing that many queer parents come out to their children for reasons other than the aforementioned circumstances. Recently, researchers have addressed the topic of sexuality-related communication between bisexual parents and their children, including some consideration as to how and why bisexual parents discuss their sexuality with their kids (Bowling et al., 2017). In this paper, I develop the topic even further by analyzing several distinct reasons why many openly non-monosexual parents plan to come out to their children despite the risks of stigmatization associated with being labeled bisexual. I also examine the limited responses from parents who intended not to come out to their kids, given that they exemplify bisexual parents' unique ability to choose whether or not to come out.

Prior empirical work

Bisexual people are "non-monosexual", meaning they are sexually attracted to more than one gender (Ross and Dobinson, 2013). "Bisexuality" is often defined as the sexual attraction to two or more genders, whereas "pansexuality" is often defined as the sexual attraction to people regardless of gender (Morandini et al., 2017). Younger generations often gravitate toward the pansexual label specifically because it does not contain the prefix bi-, which is sometimes believed to indicate an attraction to only binary, as opposed to non-binary, genders (Morandini et al., 2017). However, bisexual activists have insisted that bisexual attraction extends beyond the scope of binary genders since at least 1990 when "The Bisexual Manifesto" was written and published by the Bay Area Bisexual Network (Holthaus, 2014). In general, bisexuals and pansexuals typically use similar language to describe their attraction. The main difference is that the term "pansexual" has only recently gained popularity, whereas "bisexual" has been accessible to people exploring and defining their identities for many years (Morandini et al., 2017). As a result, many non-monosexual people use "bisexual" and "pansexual" interchangeably to describe themselves—and these are just two of several labels used to indicate multi-gender attraction (Galupo et al., 2017). Nonetheless, as Holthaus (2014) explains, "Although individuals may vary in their choice of

personal identity labels, there is still a need to form community and be able to identify like-minded people. To this end, there is a growing movement to use bisexual as the community label" (24). In this article, I adhere to this sentiment and use the terms bisexual and non-monosexual interchangeably to refer to individuals with multi-gender attraction. I also use these labels because they are the most commonly used terms in existing literature, and I do not want to alter the words of other scholars when discussing their works. However, when referring to specific research participants in my sample, I use whichever label they selected or wrote-in on the survey, because I recognize that not every person with multi-gender attraction would use the bisexual label to describe themselves if given an alternative option.

As previously defined, *bisexual erasure* refers to the popular assumption that every person is either straight or gay (Yoshino, 2000). Due to the prevalence of bisexual erasure in society, people are rarely assumed to be bisexual. This manifests in a lack of bisexual representation in the media, academia, and even within the queer community. Bisexual erasure is perpetuated by both straight and gay people, many of whom are invested in a sexual binary (Yoshino, 2000). Whereas straight people often contribute to this erasure by suggesting bisexuality is a "phase", gay and lesbian people often contribute to this erasure by suggesting bisexuals are "closeted" gays holding onto "heterosexual privilege" (Erickson-Schroth and Mitchell, 2009: 301–302). Not only is bisexuality often "erased" in popular culture, but research suggests that people feel more negatively toward bisexuals than other sexuality groups (Dodge et al., 2016; Dyar and Feinstein, 2018). According to Dyar and Feinstein (2018), "Binegativity is comprised of stereotypes that bisexuality is an illegitimate and unstable sexual orientation, stereotypes that portray bisexual individuals as sexually irresponsible, and hostility toward bisexual people" (108). This negativity is expressed by straight and gay people, although research suggests that heterosexual men are more binegative than other groups (Dyar and Feinstein, 2018).

For straight, gay, and lesbian people in monogamous relationships, sexuality is usually made apparent through their relationship's gender composition. Children with different-gender parents likely view their family as "normal" and their parents as straight. Similarly, many children of gays and lesbians gradually understand their parents' sexuality over time, rather than recalling a specific coming out moment (Tasker, 2005). Yet bisexuals in monogamous relationships are rarely recognized as bisexual (Hartman, 2013; Hartman-Linck, 2014). Bisexual erasure makes conveying one's bisexual identity to others much harder than conveying hetero- or homosexuality. Non-monosexual people often rely on visual cues to communicate their identities, such as wearing pride pins or dressing in a mixture of traditionally masculine and feminine clothing (Hartman, 2013). Unfortunately, these cues are seldomly interpreted as bisexual, and many bisexuals do not even know what the bisexual pride flag looks like (Hartman, 2013). Even while being in monogamous relationships, many bisexuals feel that it is important to be recognized as bisexual—not in order to attract sexual partners, but because being

bisexual is a crucial part of their identities (Hartman-Linck, 2014). However, similar to communicating a non-binary gender identity (Darwin, 2017), naming one's sexuality is often the only way to be recognized as bisexual (Hartman, 2013). Whereas gay and lesbian parents might teach their children that being gay is an option by simply explaining that the structure of their family is acceptable, bisexual parents, and especially those in mixed-gender relationships, must rely heavily on the disclosure or coming out process in order to role model a queer identity for their children. Moreover, parents who do choose to come out may create lasting impacts on their children; for example, Kuvalanka and Goldberg (2009) found that children of parents who openly identify as bisexual attribute the acceptance of their own sexualities to their parents' openness.

I use the term "coming out" despite the justifiable critique by many sexuality scholars (for example Fuss, 1991) that "coming out of the closet" is often not an accurate or complete metaphor to describe the experiences of identity disclosure for queer people. As Orne (2011) suggests, the term "coming out" is widely and casually used by sexuality researchers, but its definition remains unclear. Guittar (2014) explains that coming out is often viewed as an external experience, where one discloses their sexuality to another person. In contrast, they suggest that the process of internally understanding and accepting one's own identity is an equally crucial part of coming out (Guittar, 2014). Although frequently referred to as a single moment in a queer person's life, coming out is more nuanced than this. Data from the Pew Research Center (2015) speak to this distinction of coming out to oneself versus coming out to others—on average, bisexuals are about 13-year old when they first realize they may be bisexual, and about 20-year old when they first disclose their identity to someone. Orne (2011) introduces the term "strategic outness" or "the contextual and continual management of identity" to explore the complexities of coming out (681). In order for new people to know of their identities, queer people often must self-disclose repeatedly throughout their lifetimes. In other words, there is no "end point" (Orne, 2011). Additionally, queer people manage their identities across contexts, strategically deciding which people should know about their sexuality (Orne, 2011). For example, although the majority of people in my survey sample were "openly" bisexual in many areas of their life, this does not mean they were automatically inclined to be "out" to their children. In fact, bisexuals are significantly less likely to come out to the important people in their lives compared to gays or lesbians. The Pew Research Center (2015) found that only 28% of bisexuals, compared to 77% of gay men and 71% of lesbians, "say all or most of the important people in their life know" about their sexual orientation. This distinction is likely related to the fact that bisexuals are less likely than gays and lesbians to view their sexuality as an important part of their identity (Pew Research Center, 2015). However, bisexuals could also be less likely to come out to the important people in their lives due to fears of prejudice and discrimination from both heterosexuals and homosexuals (Beach et al., 2019). Like Orne (2011), I contend that "coming out", despite its imperfections, is a useful framework for thinking about identity disclosure. The term emphasizes the reality that

we are not yet living in a "post gay" society—rather, heterosexuality is still upheld as the norm, and queer people continue to manage and be stigmatized for the disclosure of their identities (Orne, 2011).

Although research on bisexual parenthood is growing, the majority of this work focuses primarily on bisexual mothers (Delvoye and Tasker, 2016; Ross and Dobinson, 2013; Tasker and Delvoye, 2015). Many bisexual mothers feel forced to choose between their bisexuality and motherhood (Lynch and Maree, 2013; Tasker and Delvoye, 2015). In fact, some bisexual mothers report intentionally living a traditional, "heterosexual" life during their children's upbringing and exploring their same-gender attraction later in life (Tasker and Delvoye, 2015). Less is known about bisexual fatherhood, although the existing research suggests that bisexual fathers may be more fearful about discussing their bisexuality with their children, partially due to HIV stigma (Bowling et al., 2017). Regardless of the fear associated with coming out to children as bisexual, many bisexuals do disclose their sexuality to their children. In Bowling et al.'s (2017) study of 33 parents, more than half came out as bisexual to their children. Many reported coming out in order to encourage their children to accept the queer community. In addition to coming out, bisexual parents reported taking their children to pride festivals and reading queer-friendly books to educate their children about sexual diversity. Bisexual parents in different-gender relationships, however, were less likely to participate in these activities, and many feared being perceived as heterosexual in queer spaces (Bowling et al., 2017). Bisexual parents in different-gender relationships may also be less likely to come out in order to protect their children from bullying (Tasker and Delvoye, 2015).

The aforementioned studies have laid a foundation for further research on bisexual parenthood. Some researchers have examined the experiences of bisexual mothers as they navigate occupying a heavily stigmatized identity (Delvoye and Tasker, 2016; Tasker and Delvoye, 2015). Others have examined the sexuality-related conversations that bisexual parents have with their children—although this research broadly focuses on sex education in the family, including topics related to sexually transmitted infections and pregnancy (Bowling et al., 2017). This article expands the current literature by providing an in-depth exploration of the various reasons non-monosexual parents plan to come out, or not come out, to their children. Gays and lesbians in same-gender relationships might offer a variety of reasons for which they discuss their sexuality with their children. Ultimately, though, their children will learn how their parents' sexuality differs from a privileged heterosexual identity simply by observing how their family compares to the norm. In contrast, bisexual parents are in the unique position of choosing whether or not to disclose their sexuality to their children—if they do not come out, their children will likely assume they are straight or gay depending on the gender composition of their relationship. In this paper, I acknowledge this unique position and highlight the reasons that a person whose sexuality is otherwise invisible might choose to either remain invisible or make themselves seen by their children.

Methods

The data presented in this article derive from an extensive, 65-question survey that I designed to understand the experiences of bisexual parents. Most researchers studying bisexuality conduct interviews with small convenience samples, comprised mainly of White cisgender women (for example Delvoye and Tasker, 2016). This is likely because people who identify as bisexual are a minority in the US and tend to be underrepresented in random samples. In order to reach a larger and more diverse sample of bisexual parents, I conducted an online survey of parents across the United States. I distributed my survey to 25 Facebook groups, chosen specifically because they were understood to be queer spaces, parenting spaces, or both. Members of these groups shared my survey to their own Facebook pages, email listservs, and messaging boards, thus producing a snowball sample.

The use of social media as a sampling frame for underrepresented populations has increased in popularity in recent years. For example, Brickman Bhutta (2012) recruited 4000 baptized Roman Catholics to answer their survey by posting to several Facebook groups. They encouraged respondents to share the survey with others, producing a snowball sample similar to my own. A snowball sample is a cost-effective way to reach a large, diverse group of participants who are often underrepresented in random samples, or who are not asked important questions about their identities when they are represented in random samples. However, the main critique of snowball samples generated from social media is their non-randomness, meaning certain groups are more highly represented than in the general US population (Schneider and Harknett, 2019). Although I welcomed some of this non-randomness (that is, I desired a higher number of bisexual respondents than would be achieved in a random sample), my sample was not perfectly representative of the bisexual community itself. My sample overrepresented White people, women, and high-income earners, for instance. Furthermore, the likelihood of being a member (or a friend of a member) of one of the 25 Facebook distribution groups, in addition to the willingness to participate in an unpaid online survey about sexuality, systematically differentiated my respondents from those who chose not to participate.

Although most of these Facebook groups were "closed", meaning a person's friends cannot see if they are a member, the people in my sample were understandably still more likely to be "out" than the average LGBTQ+ person. Of the LGBTQ+ parents who completed my survey ($N = 614$), 93% said they planned to come out to their children, and more than half of the respondents who said they planned to come out had already done so prior to taking the survey. Being in these Facebook groups meant my participants were already exposed to positive representations of bisexuality and other queer identities, and they had likely received messages countering harmful stigma. A survey of bisexuals who were not "out" would likely yield very different responses, and future research should still be done in this area. However, because bisexuals occupy a minority position, conducting a survey of mostly "closeted" bisexuals presents logistical challenges.

Another important limitation of conducting a survey on a sensitive topic like sexuality is that I asked detailed personal questions with no chance of interaction or rapport. Interview data would provide me with a chance to ask probing questions and dig beyond the surface of my survey results. Although my survey data demonstrated parents' initial reflections on their reasons for coming out or not coming out to their children, interviews would allow an opportunity for parents to be more nuanced in their responses. Despite these shortcomings, my survey has produced the largest and most diverse dataset on the topic of coming out as a non-monosexual parent in the US, and the results are useful for understanding why openly bisexual parents plan to discuss, or sometimes not discuss, their sexuality with their children.

The survey asked respondents to answer a variety of open- and closed-ended questions about their sexuality, family history, romantic relationships, parenting strategies, and demographics. Whereas most questions were closed-ended (for example "Do you currently have children?"), some questions invited participants to write a response (for example "Please define or describe the sexual orientation you identify with"). Including open-ended questions in surveys allows for a mixed-method analysis of data. These answers can be numerically coded and quantified, but they also allow respondents' voices to be heard in a unique way often left out of most survey research. Additionally, most closed-ended questions in this survey allowed respondents to write-in their own answer if none available matched their experience. Parents of all genders and sexual orientations were invited to answer questions about how they approached conversations about sex and sexuality with their children.

The survey was originally designed to understand how participants' approaches to communicating about sexuality with their children were impacted by the sexuality-related communication they had with their own parents growing up. In particular, I was first interested in participants' perceptions of their parents' tolerance toward different identities, and how this might correlate to the tolerance they had toward their children. The main question analyzed in this article, "Do you plan to tell your children about your sexual orientation? Why or why not?" became relevant as I coded and analyzed the responses and identified clear, interesting differences in the reasons that parents provided for coming out, or not coming out, to their children. I have chosen to focus primarily on this question in this article due to the richness of the data and the complexity of the responses once analyzed by gender and sexuality. However, I also draw information from a close-ended survey question which asked parents if they had discussed a variety of topics with their children (e.g. sexual consent, masturbation, their child's sexuality), including whether or not they had already discussed their own sexuality prior to taking the survey. I utilize the data from this close-ended question in order to demonstrate that the majority of people who answered the question regarding whether they "planned" to come out had actually already come out, despite the question being written in future-tense.

Knowing a parent's plans to come out, even if they have not already come out to their children, is helpful in understanding how they might be conceptualizing and prioritizing their own experiences with bisexual erasure. This open-ended question, which asked parents why they planned to come out or not come out to their children, invited both a quantitative and qualitative analysis. In addition to quantifying how many people planned to come out (or had already come out) and analyzing these data demographically, I analyzed the qualitative responses to this question and identified several common reasons parents offered for planning to come out or not come out to their children. I then numerically coded these responses to explore how parents of various identities answered the question in systematically different ways. My results are numerically descriptive and qualitatively rich; several of the participants' written responses are provided to illustrate my findings. I use pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of the respondents whose written responses are provided.

Sample

The survey was open to anyone 18 years of age or older and yielded 1210 completed responses and 316 partial responses. This paper focuses specifically on the 767 US parents with completed responses in my sample. Nearly 75% of the US parents in my sample identified as cisgender women, while 16% identified as cisgender men; less than 1% identified as transgender women, 1% identified as transgender men, and 8% identified with genders outside the gender binary (including genderqueer, agender, non-binary, bigender, gender fluid, demigender, two-spirit, gray-gender, and polygender). The most common sexual orientation was bisexual (47%)—which included bisexual, pansexual, queer with multi-gender attraction, polysexual, demisexual with multi-gender attraction, and those who identified as both gay and bisexual—followed by gay or lesbian (32%), straight (20%), and aromantic asexual (1%). The average participant was between the age of 35 and 39. Most identified as White (84%), held at least a bachelor's degree (78%), and reported a household income of $75,000 or more (68%). Respondents were distributed across the US, with 33% in the West, 30% in the South, 17% in the Midwest, and 20% in the Northeast. Nearly all US states were represented. Many respondents were Atheist, Agnostic, or held no religious beliefs (49%), whereas 29% were Christian, 9% were Jewish, and 13% practiced another religion. The majority of respondents (84%) identified their political beliefs as liberal, very liberal, or radical left (including communists, socialists, and leftists). See Table 1 for a comprehensive overview of the sample's descriptive statistics.

Trading safety for stigma

Bisexuality is heavily stigmatized by both straight and gay communities (Erickson-Schroth and Mitchell, 2009; Yoshino, 2000). This means that regardless of whether

Table 1. Sample descriptive statistics.

	Frequency	Percent	Completed (%)
Gender			100
Cisgender woman	574	74.84	
Cisgender man	124	16.17	
Transgender woman	3	0.39	
Transgender man	8	1.04	
Genderqueer	58	7.56	
Sexuality			99.87
Straight	152	19.84	
Lesbian	192	25.07	
Gay	53	6.92	
Bisexual	362	47.26	
Asexual (only)	7	0.91	
Age			100
18–29	68	8.87	
30–39	390	50.85	
40–49	220	28.68	
50–59	52	6.78	
60–69	24	3.13	
70+	13	1.69	
Race/ethnicity			96.35
White	623	84.3	
Hispanic	50	6.77	
Black	21	2.84	
Asian	15	2.03	
Am. Indian/Alaskan	14	1.89	
Middle Eastern	7	0.95	
Pacific Islander	1	0.14	
Jewish	8	1.08	
Education			95.96
Some high school	1	0.14	
High school	14	1.9	
Some college	98	13.31	
Trade/technical school	16	2.17	
College	161	21.88	
Professional degree	31	4.21	
Masters	226	30.71	
Doctorate	189	25.68	
Income			94.26
$0–$24,999	37	5.12	
$25,000–$49,999	79	10.93	
$50,000–$74,999	112	15.49	
$75,000–$99,999	131	18.12	
$100,000–$124,999	103	14.25	

(continued)

Table 1. Continued.

	Frequency	Percent	Completed (%)
$125,000–$149,999	77	10.65	
$150,000–$174,999	52	7.19	
$175,000–$199,999	41	5.67	
$200,000+	91	12.59	
US region			95.57
West	241	32.88	
South	219	29.88	
Midwest	128	17.46	
Northeast	144	19.65	
Territories	1	0.14	
Religion			96.48
Agnostic/atheist/none	362	48.93	
Buddhist	15	2.03	
Christian	211	28.51	
Hindu	2	0.27	
Jewish	64	8.65	
Muslim	3	0.41	
Pagan/Wiccan	28	3.78	
Spiritual	16	2.16	
Unitarian universalist	23	3.11	
Something else	16	2.16	
Politics			96.35
Very conservative	4	0.54	
Conservative	18	2.44	
Moderate	88	11.91	
Liberal	201	27.2	
Very liberal	396	53.59	
Radical left	23	3.11	
Something else	9	1.22	
Total (*N*)	767	100	

a person is in a same-gender or different-gender relationship, they risk stigmatization when coming out as bisexual. Each of these relationship formations presents unique challenges. Bisexuals in relationships which appear "straight" to the outside world sacrifice the safety and privilege of "passing" as heterosexual when they choose to come out. Bisexuals in relationships which appear "gay" or "lesbian" risk stigmatization and disbelief from queer communities that previously welcomed them (Erickson-Schroth and Mitchell, 2009). Because of this stigma, many bisexual parents worry their children will be bullied if they come out (Tasker and Delvoye, 2015). Despite these risks, the majority of bisexual parents who participated in this research planned to come out to their children and surrender the relative safety of appearing monosexual. Parents provided six main reasons for

planning to come out to their children: (1) to educate their children on diversity, (2) to encourage their children to be LGBTQ+ allies, (3) to combat bisexual erasure, (4) to promote open and honest communication with their children, (5) to convey solidarity to their children who might also be bisexual or queer, and (6) for necessary logistical reasons. With the exception of needing to come out for logistical reasons, each of these reasons provides an explanation for why many bisexual parents in this sample were willing to trade the safety of "passing" as straight or gay for the stigma associated with bisexuality. In other words, in addition to trading safety for stigma, these parents also traded safety for diversity, allyship, bisexual visibility, honesty, and solidarity.

In my subsample of bisexual parents who responded to the survey question about their plans to come out (including parents who had already come out), 95% of bisexual women ($n = 236$), 73% of bisexual men ($n = 60$), and 98% of bisexual genderqueer or non-binary people ($n = 47$) planned to come out to their children. Furthermore, 99% of bisexual men and women in same-gender relationships ($n = 103$), compared to 84% of bisexual men and women in different-gender relationships ($n = 173$), planned to come out to their children. Of the lesbian respondents ($n = 188$), 98% planned to come out, in comparison to 90% of bisexual women in different-gender relationships ($n = 123$). In contrast, although 89% of gay men ($n = 37$) planned to come out to their kids, only 70% of bisexual men in different-gender relationships ($n = 50$) planned to do so. Moreover, while the majority of parents in each of these demographics said they planned to come out to their children, 51% of LGBTQ+ parents indicated on an additional closed-ended question that they had already come out to their kids before taking the survey. Unsurprisingly, parents in same-gender relationships were significantly more likely to already be out their kids. In total, at least 57% of lesbians, 65% of gay men, and 62% of bisexual women in same-gender relationships had already come out to their kids. Bisexual men in same-gender relationships, along with bisexual women and men in different-gender relationships, were equally likely to have already come out to their kids (40%). These numbers are assumed to be underestimates given that this particular question had a lower completion rate; only 74% of LGBTQ+ participants responded. See Table 2 for a breakdown of parents who were already out, parents who were not yet out but who planned to come out, and parents who had no plans to come out, categorized by gender and sexuality.

The reality that bisexual parents in different-gender relationships were less likely to be out to their children prior to participating in the survey is unsurprising given that these parents are uniquely situated to choose whether or not to disclose their same-gender attraction to their kids. Although the majority of bisexual parents in different-gender relationships who participated in my survey ($n = 173$) said that they planned to come out or were already out to their children (84%), these parents were able to delay the coming out process in a way that many parents in same-gender relationships felt was impossible. Many of the parents who had already discussed their orientation with their kids did not provide an explanation

Table 2. Percentage of parents who were already out, who planned to come out, and who had no plans to come out based on gender and sexuality.

	Already out (%)	Not out, planned to come out (%)	Not out, did not plan to come out (%)
Bisexual women ($n = 236$)	62.6	31.9	5.5
Bisexual men ($n = 60$)	55.3	18	26.7
Bisexual genderqueer ($n = 47$)	73.2	24.6	2.2
Lesbians ($n = 188$)	80.5	17.4	2.1
Gay men ($n = 37$)	75	14.2	14.2
Gay genderqueer ($n = 10$)	57	43	0

regarding why they planned to come out (30%). However, the most common reason offered by these parents was related to necessary logistical reasons, such as explaining how and why their families differed from heteronormative families (25%). Without needing to disclose their sexuality for necessary logistical reasons, most bisexual parents in the sample were able to choose if they wanted to discuss their sexuality openly with their children. It is through this process that parents navigated whether to risk stigmatization and biphobia, or to continue "passing" as monosexual.

The bisexual parents in this sample were clearly more likely to be out than would be expected in a nationally representative sample of bisexuals. The Pew Research Center (2015) found that only 28% of bisexuals in their sample felt that most of the important people in their lives knew about their sexual orientation. Although many bisexuals may not feel that coming out is worth the stigma or binegativity, a majority of the parents in this sample upheld the belief that coming out as bisexual was worthwhile because it allowed them to express their values related to diversity, allyship, bisexual visibility, honesty, and solidarity. In the following sections, I explore the various reasons for coming out provided by parents in my sample and identify common threads among the people who provided each of these reasons. Neither race nor class predicted parents' reasons for coming out, but sexuality and gender were clearly influential in these responses. For example, bisexual women were more likely than bisexual men to discuss the promotion of allyship or the education of diversity when explaining their reasons for coming out to their children. I make these comparisons in order to highlight the reality that bisexuals' experiences are not monolithic—and yet, many parents in my sample did share common reasons for planning to come out to their children. My findings suggest that bisexuality, separate from gender or relationship composition, played a significant role in determining how parents planned for these conversations. In particular, bisexuals of all genders and relationship compositions in my sample were more likely than gays and lesbians to suggest reasons related to "honesty" and "solidarity" when describing their plans to come out to their children.

Teaching diversity

> My goal as a parent is to teach [my children] about life and the various gender and sexual/romantic orientations which exist . . . therefore I'd want to educate them about [my sexuality].—Alex, a 37-year-old, White, agender, panromantic parent, not out yet

> We will be teaching our children about sexual orientation when we teach them about sex. This is something that is relevant [and] needs to be brought up in order for them to have knowledge of the different types of orientations.—Sally, 35-year-old, biracial, cisgender, bisexual mother, not out yet

> I told [my children about my sexuality] because I wanted them to know how different everyone is.—Blake, a 30-year-old, White, genderqueer, pansexual parent, already out

Alex, Sally, and Blake shared a common goal—they desired for their children to know the range of possible sexual orientations that exist in the world. As such, they each described their own coming out experience as an opportunity to teach their children about sexual diversity. Whereas gay and lesbian parents can role model sexual diversity for their children simply by being in same-gender relationships, many of the non-monosexual parents in my sample (and especially those in different-gender relationships) conceptualized the coming out process as an opportunity to communicate to their children that bisexuality is a valid identity. This finding aligns with Bowling et al.'s (2017) study on sexuality-related communication in families with bisexual parents. In their study of 33 parents, many indicated an interest in educating their children about sexual diversity. Similar to the parents in my study, some parents were aware of the prevalence of biphobia and felt that teaching their kids about sexual diversity was useful in mitigating the bisexual erasure they might encounter outside their families. Although most of the parents in Bowling et al.'s (2017) sample were in different-gender relationships, many of them discussed previous relationships with same-gender partners around their children in order to guide these conversations on sexual diversity.

The sentiment of using self-disclosure as a mechanism to teach diversity was shared by many of my participants—especially bisexual mothers and genderqueer or non-binary parents. Seventeen percent of bisexual mothers in "straight-seeming" relationships, 14% of bisexual mothers in same-gender relationships, and 26% of genderqueer or non-binary bisexual parents said they planned to come out in order to teach their children about sexual diversity. Bisexual men were less likely to discuss diversity in their answers—9% of those in mixed-gender relationships and none in same-gender relationships displayed this sentiment. Interestingly, Bowling et al. (2017) did not report a gender difference in sexuality communication like this in their sample; however, they did find that parents were more inclined to discuss sexuality-related topics with children of their own gender, which is something that my survey did not explore.

Nevertheless, the fact that mothers and genderqueer or non-binary parents in my sample were more likely than fathers to discuss a desire to teach their children about sexual diversity aligns with the existing literature on heterosexual parents, which suggests that mothers take on the primary role of educating their children about sex and sexuality (Baldwin and Baranoski, 1990; El-Shaieb and Wurtele, 2009; Nolin and Petersen, 1992; Trudell, 1993; Wyckoff et al., 2008). Bisexual mothers and assigned female at birth genderqueer and non-binary parents may be more inclined to take on the feminized task of educating their children about sexual diversity because they see it as an extension of their responsibilities in teaching their children about sex more broadly. Relatedly, the bisexual mothers and genderqueer or non-binary parents in my sample were also significantly more likely than bisexual fathers to extend their reasons for coming out to their children from "teaching diversity" to "encouraging allyship".

Encouraging allyship

Several parents in my sample discussed coming out to their children as a means to encourage their children to be LGBTQ+ allies. For example:

> I want [my children] to be accepting of everyone's sexual orientation, and that includes mine.—Candace, a 45-year-old, Asian, cisgender, bisexual mother, not out yet

> I've told my children [about my bisexuality] mostly to show acceptance of multiple orientations.—Joey, a 53-year-old, White, cisgender, bisexual father, already out

> It's important to me that my child is accepting and kind to everyone regardless of gender or orientation.—Sam, a 24-year-old, multiracial, demigender, bisexual parent, not out yet

These parents used terms like "acceptance" and "allyship" in their responses. Candace, Joey, and Sam each demonstrated this attitude—not only did they want their children to be accepting of bisexuality, but they specifically desired for their children to be accepting of *everyone's* sexuality. Some parents in this category also discussed a desire to prevent their children from bullying LGBTQ+ kids. In contrast to the parents who discussed a desire to come out in order to demonstrate sexual diversity, these parents were focused on the impact coming out might have on their children's actions as allies or non-allies. That is, they recognized the impact that their own self-disclosure could have on the ways their children treated other people. Bowling et al. (2017) also found that bisexual parents were interested in teaching their children to be accepting of diverse sexual identities, but they did not differentiate between teaching sexual diversity and encouraging acceptance or allyship. According to Ji and Fujimoto (2013), knowledge about LGBTQ+ identities is the first step toward identifying as an ally.

However, in order to reach an ally identity, individuals must learn ally skills and practice these skills through interpersonal relationships (Ji and Fujimoto, 2013). The parents in my sample who emphasized acceptance—and especially those who referenced bullying—alluded to an additional interpersonal component of LGBTQ+ allyship which separated them from the parents who discussed their plans to come out in relation to teaching their children about diversity.

Bisexual women in different-gender relationships were the most likely to discuss themes related to allyship, with 10% of their responses being coded in this category. Similarly, 7% of bisexual genderqueer or non-binary individuals and 10% of gay genderqueer or non-binary individuals offered reasons related to encouraging allyship when discussing their plans to come out to their children. No bisexual men, and only 3% of gay men, discussed this topic. This gender difference may be explained by the fact that women tend to have "a higher propensity toward social justice behavior, lower levels of prejudice, and higher levels of nonprejudice" (Perrin et al., 2013). Part of this gender discrepancy may also be explained by the fact that bisexual men in the sample ($n = 60$) were less likely to plan to come out in general. Thirty percent of bisexual men in different-gender relationships ($n = 50$) said they had no plans to come out to their children. This decision not to come out may reflect Connell's (1987) theory of hegemonic masculinity, or the practice that legitimizes certain men's dominant position over women and other feminine people in society. According to Connell (1987), heterosexual masculinity is linked to power, and an LGBTQ+ identity may be delegitimizing. Given that bisexual men in different-gender relationships typically appear straight, they have more to lose than other sexual minorities when it comes to being perceived as less masculine (Connell, 1987). Bisexual men, regardless of relationship status, may also be less inclined to come out or promote allyship because male bisexuality is generally perceived less positively than female bisexuality (Dodge et al., 2016; Dyar and Feinstein, 2018). Thus, men's tendency to be less engaged in social justice behavior, along with the impacts of hegemonic masculinity and binegativity, may explain why men were less likely to discuss allyship in their answers (Connell, 1987; Dyar and Feinstein, 2018; Perrin et al., 2013). Although the majority of the men in my sample reported a desire to come out to their children, many of them described their sexuality as personal or private, suggesting they do not always see themselves in relation to the larger LGBTQ+ community. Many fathers who planned to come out to their children interpreted this conversation as a way to talk openly about themselves, rather than a steppingstone for talking about the experiences of the larger LGBTQ+ community.

Combatting bisexual erasure

Although less common, some parents in my sample said that they planned to come out to their children specifically in order to combat bisexual erasure, stigma, or invisibility. For example, Drew, a 40-year-old, White, genderqueer, bisexual parent who already came out wrote, "It's important for bisexuality to remain visible.

As a bisexual in a heteronormative relationship, my identity is invisible". Drew's statement demonstrates the effect that bisexual erasure (Yoshino, 2000) has on a bisexual person in a monogamous, different-gender relationship. Drew was aware that others would not perceive them as bisexual—rather, they would be misclassified as heterosexual unless they chose to come out (Ross and Dobinson, 2013; Ulrich, 2011). Whereas many parents often feel forced to "choose" between bisexuality and parenthood (Lynch and Maree, 2013; Tasker and Delvoye, 2015), parents in my sample like Drew were insistent that bisexuality was a valid identity for a parent to occupy. Hannah, a 42-year-old, White, cisgender, bisexual mother who already came out, echoed this sentiment. She said that coming out as bisexual was "important for visibility". This line of reasoning was similar to the explanations offered by parents who discussed a desire to teach their children about sexual diversity. The main difference here is that parents like Drew and Hannah were specifically concerned with how bisexuality fit into this conversation about diversity.

Bisexual erasure is often described as something that happens at the macro-level—for example, the media and academia have both historically presented sexuality as a rigid binary, where people are either straight or gay (Erickson-Schroth and Mitchell, 2009). However, research rarely highlights the ways that bisexual erasure may be reproduced or challenged within micro-interactions. Scholars have suggested that schoolteachers have a responsibility to engage in discussions about bisexuality with their students in order to decrease some of this stigma (Elia, 2014), but parents are seldomly presented as advocates for change in this area. In their study of 33 bisexual parents, Bowling et al. (2017) also found that some parents were motivated to discuss sexual diversity with their children because they had experienced biphobia in their own lives and wanted to mitigate this experience for their children. Both mine and Bowling et al.'s (2017) findings highlight the reality that bisexuality may be validated or invalidated within micro-level family relationships. Although scholars have highlighted the fact that bisexuals are often erased in parenting research (Ross and Dobinson, 2013), none have currently examined how bisexual erasure actually occurs within families. Approximately 3% of bisexual women in different-gender relationships, 2% of bisexual women in same-gender relationships, and 4% of genderqueer or non-binary parents in my sample discussed a desire to come out in order to challenge bisexual erasure. Future research should explore the ways that parents reproduce or challenge bisexual erasure in greater detail.

Being honest

> We value honest communication in our family.– Leah, a 45-year-old, White, cisgender, bisexual mother, already out

> I think it's important to be open and honest as a role model for [my children].—Heather, a 37-year-old, White, cisgender, pansexual mother, not out yet

The most common reason that bisexual parents in my sample offered when discussing their plans to come out to their children was the desire to promote open and honest communication. For parents like Leah and Heather, coming out was a reflection of their dedication to speak truthfully with their children about a variety of topics. In comparison to the parents who emphasized diversity and allyship, these parents generally discussed coming out as part of their larger commitment to honesty, unrelated to a more specific goal of advocating for sexual inclusivity. Some parents even suggested that withholding their identities from their children would be deceitful. For example:

> [My sexuality] is part of who I am. I don't want to hide or lie about who I am to my children.—Kate, a 46-year-old, White cisgender, pansexual mother, already out

> People can't love you if you never give them the opportunity to know you.—Daniel, a 39-year-old, White, cisgender, bisexual father, not out yet

Kate and Daniel, like many other parents in my sample, believed their sexualities were such an integral part of their identities that they would be misrepresenting themselves if they chose not to come out to their children. This aligns with previous research, which suggests that bisexuals often understand their sexualities to be a reflection of their "authentic selves", rather than simply a descriptor of their sexual attraction to multiple genders (Hartman-Linck, 2014: 190). Approximately 37% of bisexual women, 40% of bisexual men, and 26% of genderqueer or non-binary bisexuals in my sample planned to come out to promote honest and open communication with their children. Bisexual mothers and fathers were nearly twice as likely to prioritize honesty in the disclosure of their sexual identities as gays and lesbians.

This prioritization of honesty contradicts the common stereotype of bisexuality as a manipulative identity. Bowling et al. (2017) also found that bisexual parents emphasized the importance of honest and direct communication when discussing sex and sexuality with their children. Similarly, Buxton (2001, 2004) found that bisexuals who came out to their spouses emphasized honest communication as an important coping mechanism for maintaining their marriages after disclosure. Although bisexuality is not incompatible with monogamous, mixed-gender partnerships, the stigmatization of bisexuality led many heterosexual spouses in Buxton's (2001) sample to feel pain or mistrust in response to their bisexual partners' disclosure. Naming honest and open communication as a key mechanism for "maintaining" a marriage with a bisexual person suggests that withholding one's bisexual identity is somehow deceitful.

Certainly, valuing open and honest communication is not exclusive to bisexual parents. However, straight parents in mixed-gender relationships and gay parents

in same-gender relationships do not have to come out in order for their children to know the "truth". Bisexual parents, on the other hand, must wrestle with the question of whether or not they are being dishonest by withholding their identities from their children. When Kate said that she did not want "to hide or lie" about who she was, she was demonstrating an experience that is unique to bisexuals and "closeted" gay parents in mixed-gender relationships. Like Buxton (2001) demonstrates, people often feel betrayed when someone close to them comes out as bisexual, even though bisexuality is not incompatible with monogamy or parenthood. In contrast, if a straight woman were to come out to her husband as straight, it is unlikely that he would feel betrayed or lied to. Thus, many of my respondents who prioritized honest and open communication with their children have likely received feedback from others (for example, friends, family, or the media) that withholding information about their sexuality would be dishonest.

Conveying solidarity

> When the time is right and [my son] is exploring his identity, I will disclose to him so that he can know it is normal and he has someone he can talk to.—Fred, a 36-year-old, White, cisgender, bisexual father, not out yet

> My children have given some indication they might be bi like me. I want them to know that one can be bi and have a normal life, if that's what they want.—Claire, a 40-year-old, White, cisgender, bisexual mother, already out

> We want our kids to celebrate and appreciate their orientation, regardless of what it turns out to be, so we have to model that behavior.—Naomi, a 25-year-old, White, cisgender, bisexual mother, already out

The second most common reason that bisexual parents in my sample offered when discussing their plans to come out was a desire to convey solidarity and support for their children who might also identify as bisexual or queer. Fred, Claire, and Naomi each anticipated that their children might grow up to identify as non-monosexual. As a result, they hoped to normalize and model acceptance of bisexuality through the coming out process. Overall, 20% of bisexual women, 23% of bisexual men, and 22% of genderqueer or non-binary bisexuals emphasized "solidarity" in their reasons for coming out to their children. In comparison, only 5% of lesbians, 6% of gay men, and no gay genderqueer or non-binary individuals in my sample emphasized "solidarity" as a reason for discussing their sexual identity with their children.

Because of bisexual erasure, people are rarely assumed to be bisexual (Yoshino, 2000). Instead, they are perceived as straight or gay, depending on the gender composition of their relationship (Ross and Dobinson, 2013; Ulrich, 2011). This means that children of bisexuals will not automatically know their parents'

identities—especially if their parents are in relationships which "look" straight. However, when children do know that their parents are bisexual, there are often positive outcomes. When parents come out, it is especially beneficial for LGBTQ+ kids whose mental health and well-being is directly affected by their parents' approval of their orientations. Queer youth report lower levels of depression when their parents support their sexualities (Floyd et al., 1999). In contrast, LGBTQ+ kids with disapproving parents often experience relationship conflict in their adult lives (Reczek, 2016). Furthermore, parents who come out as queer to their children create environments in which children feel more comfortable identifying as LGBTQ+. For example, queer children of lesbian and bisexual mothers report feeling more comfortable coming out as queer when their parents talk openly about their own queer identities (Kuvalanka and Goldberg, 2009). Children of bisexuals in different-gender relationships may not readily view their own queerness as acceptable if their parents' relationship reflects the societal norm of heterosexuality. Children of bisexuals in same-gender relationships might have a narrow view of what constitutes "acceptable" queerness, unless parents openly discuss bisexuality as an option. Living in a world steeped with bisexual erasure, the bisexual parents in my sample who discussed topics related to solidarity recognized these barriers and prioritized coming out in order to communicate to their children that being bisexual is okay.

Needing to come out for logistical reasons

> We are two women raising children. The topic will have to be addressed early on.—Helen, a 39-year-old, White, cisgender, queer mother, not yet out

> [My children] have two moms. It is a daily conversation. They tell everyone about our family.—Sidney, a 31-year-old, White, cisgender, bisexual mother, already out

> We already have [told our children]. We can't 'hide' it since we're two men together.—Michael, a 47-year-old, White, cisgender, queer father, already out

Lastly, many bisexual, gay, and lesbian parents in same-gender relationships explained that coming out is not really a "choice". Living in a society which upholds heterosexuality as the norm, parents in same-gender relationships are forced to discuss sexuality with their children from an early age. Helen, Sidney, and Michael, each of whom are in same-gender relationships, demonstrated this reality. For some parents, this may involve correcting heteronormative values and assumptions which their kids learn from non-family members. For example, children sometimes learn from their peers at school that families are supposed to have one mom and one dad (Breshears, 2010). Because of these common challenges to gay and lesbian family identities, parents are put in the position to explain their

sexualities to their children (Breshears, 2010). However, for many gay and lesbian parents, there is no recollective coming out moment (Breshears, 2010).

As Tasker (2005) explains, children of parents in same-gender relationships often learn about their parents' sexuality gradually as they observe the ways their families differ from the norm. Rather than having a momentous coming out conversation, children learn about their parents' sexuality through mundane, everyday conversations. Because same-gender parents are still a minority, these families must regularly navigate discussions around their unique family identities—sometimes, these discussions are prompted by heteronormative misinformation or homophobia, but often these conversations are casual and routine (Breshears, 2010; Tasker, 2005). In contrast, parents in different-gender relationships have more control over their coming out experience because they are not regularly faced with these challenges to their family identity. Needing to come out for logistical reasons was the most common response among the lesbian and gay respondents in my sample—39% of lesbians, 45% of gay men, and 40% of gay genderqueer or non-binary parents said that they must discuss their sexuality with their children for logistical reasons. In contrast, 18% of bisexual women, 12% of bisexual men, and 19% of bisexual genderqueer or non-binary parents said they must discuss their sexuality with their children for logistical reasons.

Avoiding stigma, remaining closeted

The vast majority of respondents (93%) indicated that they either planned to come out to their children or already had come out to their children prior to taking the survey. However, some parents said they were undecided or that they would only come out in certain situations (3%), and others said that they would never talk to their kids about their sexuality (4%). In a representative sample of US bisexual parents, there would likely be less individuals planning to come out to their kids, and more parents expressing indecision or a desire to remain closeted. According to the Pew Research Center (2015), less than a third of bisexuals have come out to all or most of the important people in their lives, and there are many reasons why bisexuals might choose to remain closeted. For instance, bisexuals are significantly less likely than gays or lesbians to describe their sexuality as being an important part of their identity (Pew Research Center, 2015). However, many parents may also choose to remain closeted in order to avoid stigma and binegativity. Two major misconceptions surrounding bisexuals are that they are disproportionately unfaithful in their romantic relationships and that they have higher rates of sexually transmitted infections (Dyar and Feinstein, 2018). Stigma of this nature has even been used to discriminate against bisexual parents in child custody and visitation cases, as well as throughout the adoption process (Ross and Dobinson, 2013). Jane, a 45-year-old, White, bisexual, cisgender mother who previously came out to her son reflected this sentiment when she wrote, "[My] child's father sees my sexuality as a problem and thinks I should not have told my son [about] my sexual orientation . . . [He] may try to use it against me in court for custody". Because the

parents in my sample were found primarily in LGBTQ+ Facebook groups which required some level of openness (names and profile pictures were often visible to other members of these groups), it makes sense that these individuals were more likely than the average bisexual parent to be open about their sexuality with their kids. Nevertheless, through the process of analyzing and coding survey responses, I did identify various reasons why some parents said they would come out circumstantially or not come out at all. Parents who said they would come out circumstantially indicated that they would come out (1) if asked, (2) if their child was LGBTQ+, and (3) if they began dating a partner of their same gender. Parents who said they would not come out described their sexuality as (1) private, (2) shameful, (3) confusing, or (4) obvious. Thus, in addition to avoiding stigma and remaining closeted, these parents were able to maintain privacy, mitigate feelings of shame, and evade their children's confusion. Due to relatively small sample sizes in these subcategories, I describe these responses more generally in the following sections.

Might come out

The majority of parents who described their coming out as hypothetical or conditional ($n = 16$) said that they would only come out if their kids specifically asked them about their sexuality (56%). For example, Nancy, a 38-year-old, White, cisgender, bisexual mother wrote, "I'm a woman married to a man... There's no reason to discuss anything. I don't feel my sexual orientation is my children's business unless they ask, or if they're struggling with their own". Other parents in this "maybe" category described themselves as simply undecided (25%). Some said they would come out if their kids identified as queer (9%) or if they began dating a person of the same gender (4%). The responses from these parents were sometimes similar to those who indicated that they planned to come out in order to convey solidarity with their LGBTQ+ kids. However, instead of preemptively coming out to show their support, these parents relied on their kids to initiate this conversation. Kuvalanka and Goldberg (2009) found that some of their LGBTQ+ participants believed they would never have come out as queer if their parents had not also openly identified as LGBTQ+. Therefore, although the parents in this category shared a similar sentiment of wishing to provide support for their queer kids, they may have been less effective in creating a space where their kids felt comfortable coming out and initiating a conversation about sexuality in comparison to the parents who disclosed their bisexuality prior to their kids coming out. Approximately 3% of bisexual women ($n = 236$), 12% of bisexual men ($n = 60$), 2% of genderqueer bisexuals ($n = 47$), and 0.5% of lesbians ($n = 188$) said they might come out to their kids. In Bowling et al.'s (2017) sample, some parents also said they had not come out because their kids had not asked yet, implying an assumption that they would eventually be asked. The parents in their sample appeared to be very focused on the idea of age-appropriateness, and the majority planned to talk about sexuality when their kids were deemed mature enough to

handle the conversation (Bowling et al., 2017). However, like Nancy, the parents in my sample did not imply that they expected to be asked, nor that their opinion would change when their kids aged. Rather, they were willing but not planning to have a conversation about their sexuality.

No plans to come out

Although most parents were open to the idea of coming out to their children, some said they would never talk to their kids about their sexuality ($n = 22$). Of these respondents, 32% provided no explanation for their decision. In contrast, 32% said their sexuality was private, 18% said they were in different-gender relationships and did not want to confuse their kids, 14% said they were ashamed of their sexuality, and one lesbian mother said her sexuality was obvious and did not require a conversation. Like Nancy, who said she would come out if asked, many of these parents described their sexuality as being "nobody's business". It is unsurprising that some parents felt their sexuality was too private or personal to discuss with their children, given that historically many people across cultures have been raised with limited dialog about sex and a belief that women's sexuality, in particular, is a taboo subject (Montemurro et al., 2014; Robson, 1990). Whereas often these reasons for not coming out reflected a value in privacy, some participants were clearly ashamed of their sexualities. For example, Mark, a 70-year-old, White, cisgender, bisexual father exemplified his shame when he wrote, "I don't want [my children] to know that I am a cocksucker". In his explanation, he called himself a slur and suggested that having sex with someone of his same gender was inherently inappropriate and unacceptable. Mark's response reflected the reality that bisexuals report higher rates of internalized heterosexism and homophobia than gays and lesbians, which often result in more intense feelings of shame (Hequembourg and Dearing, 2013). Some of this shame stems from the fact that bisexuals are frequently perceived more negatively than other sexualities (Dodge et al., 2016). And bisexual men may be particularly inclined to feel ashamed of their sexualities, given that research suggests they are also perceived more negatively than bisexual women (Dyar and Feinstein, 2018). In their nationally representative study, Dodge et al. (2016) found that many people assumed all bisexuals, but especially bisexual men, were at a heightened risk for HIV. Taking into account the history of shame surrounding sexually transmitted infections and diseases, it is understandable why bisexual men in particular might be hesitant to disclose their identity, even though they are no more likely than heterosexual men to be diagnosed with HIV (Dodge et al., 2016). Approximately 3% of bisexual women ($n = 236$), 15% of bisexual men ($n = 60$), 2% of lesbians ($n = 188$), and 11% of gay men ($n = 37$) said that they would not come out to their kids for the various reasons listed above.

Nevertheless, the majority of bisexual parents in my sample, regardless of gender, still indicated a desire to come out to their children. This preference toward coming out despite the knowledge that bisexuality is more stigmatized

than other sexualities (Dodge et al., 2016) demonstrates that most parents in my sample were willing to sacrifice their own safety and security for the perceived betterment of their relationships with their children. However, it is currently unclear whether parents might be more inclined to come out than non-parents due to a desire to support and educate their children, or whether they may be less likely to come out due to the specific stigmas concerning infidelity and STDs (Dyar and Feinstein, 2018). Given that data from nationally representative samples suggest less than one-third of bisexual people are out to the important people in their lives (Pew Research Center, 2015), it is reasonable to assume that many bisexual parents in the US are not out to their children. Responses from the parents in this sample who explained their reasonings for either conditionally coming out, or not coming out at all, provide insight into the concerns that a more nationally representative sample of bisexual parents might voice when asked about their thoughts on coming out to their children. See Table 3 for the percentages of parents in each subcategory of planning to come out, considering coming out, or planning not to come out based on gender and sexuality.

Table 3. Percentage of parents who provided each reason for planning to come out, considering coming out, or not planning to come out by gender and sexuality.

	Bisexual women ($n = 236$)	Bisexual men ($n = 60$)	Bisexual genderqueer individuals ($n = 47$)	Lesbians ($n = 188$)	Gay men ($n = 37$)	Gay genderqueer individuals ($n = 10$)
Yes (%)						
Teaching diversity	14	5	25.5	10.1	5.4	10
Encouraging allyship	6.8	0	6.4	2.7	2.7	10
Combatting bi erasure	2.1	0	4.3	0	0	0
Being honest	35.2	23.3	25.5	19.7	10.8	20
Conveying solidarity	19.1	15	21.3	4.8	5.4	0
Necessity	18.6	13.3	19.1	38.3	40.5	40
No explanation	20.3	25	12.8	31.9	32.4	30
Maybe (%)						
If asked	2.1	5	0	0.5	0	0
If LGBTQ child	0.4	1.7	0	0	0	0
If same-gender partner	0.4	0	0	0	0	0
Undecided	0	5	2.1	0	0	0
No (%)						
It is private	0.4	8.3	0	0.5	0	0
It is shameful	0.4	3.3	0	0	0	0
It is confusing	0.8	1.7	0	0	2.7	0
It is obvious	0	0	0	0.5	0	0
No explanation	0.8	1.7	0	0.5	8.1	0

Conclusion

Bisexual parents are faced with the unique decision of choosing whether or not to disclose their sexuality to their children. Regardless of whether they are in same-gender or mixed-gender relationships, bisexuals risk stigma and mistreatment upon coming out as bisexual (Erickson-Schroth and Mitchell, 2009). Nevertheless, the majority of bisexual parents in my sample planned to come out to their children. In this article, I explore the various reasons that openly bisexual parents chose to risk the safety of "passing" as either straight or gay for the stigma associated with bisexuality.

The most common reasons offered by bisexual parents in my sample when discussing their plans to come out to their children were related to the themes of "honesty" and "solidarity". Many bisexual parents saw their sexualities as integral to their identities, meaning they would be lying if they did not come out to their children. Valuing honesty impacts bisexuals differently than straight or gay parents—whereas all might uphold honesty as a family value, only bisexuals grapple with how living day-to-day in a monogamous relationship might be interpreted as deceitful unless they disclose their bisexuality to others. Concurrently, bisexuals are uniquely situated to contemplate how coming out might impact their children's own self-exploration. Children of gays and lesbians in same-gender relationships learn about non-heteronormative identities from a young age, primarily because their parents feel a need to explain how their family differs from the "norm" (Tasker, 2005). As a result, research shows that children of gays and lesbians feel more comfortable identifying as LGBTQ+ (Kuvalanka and Goldberg, 2009). There are few logistical reasons why a bisexual parent would need to come out to their children—but those who do come out foster a similarly accepting environment to the environment created by gay and lesbian parents (Kuvalanka and Goldberg, 2009). Many of the bisexual parents in my sample recognized the stigma associated with their identities, and as a result, these parents prioritized teaching their children about various sexualities, encouraging their children to be LGBTQ+ allies, and making sure their children knew that it was okay to identify as queer or bisexual.

Although the majority of bisexual parents in my sample planned to come out to their children, there are many bisexual parents who do not. For example, a minority of parents in my sample felt that their sexuality was private, confusing, or shameful, and thus they preferred not to disclose their identity to their children. My sample overrepresents a small subset of non-monosexuals who have been exposed to bisexual-acceptance through various LGBTQ+ Facebook groups. As a result, the parents in my sample were likely more "open" than bisexual parents who have not received these positive messages. Furthermore, White, college educated, and high-income cisgender women were disproportionately represented in my sample. Thus, for many of my participants, contending with a minority sexual identity was one of their only experiences of marginalization. There were no notable racial or class-based distinctions in how sampled parents explained their

reasons for coming out, or not coming out, to their children. However, samples with greater diversity across these categories would likely reflect a more realistic and comprehensive understanding of bisexual parenthood. Future research should center the perspectives of "closeted" bisexuals, bisexuals of color and low-income bisexuals—although, sampling from these groups will be challenging. Finding a large group of "closeted" bisexuals will likely only be achieved through random sampling—and because bisexuals occupy a minority identity, collecting enough responses will be immensely time consuming. Additionally, research suggests that queer people of color are less likely to seek LGBTQ+ communities for support because these spaces are perceived as white-dominated and racist (Logie and Rwigema, 2014). Therefore, LGBTQ+ groups, online or in person, may not be the best sampling frame for researching bisexuals of color.

With these sampling limitations in mind, this article demonstrates that bisexual parents occupying various genders and relationship formations think critically about how coming out might influence their children. Whereas straight parents in mixed-gender relationships and gay parents in same-gender relationships occupy identities that are virtually self-explanatory, bisexual parents must combat the erasure of their identities on a regular basis. The careful attention that bisexual parents pay when coming out to their children is also applicable to how bisexuals navigate coming out to various people in their lives. Occupying a sexuality that is rarely assumed by others due to erasure, bisexuals must regularly assess whether or not to come out, knowing they will be misclassified as either straight or gay if they choose not to disclose their identity. When discussing the process of coming out as LGBTQ+, scholars should attend to this complexity of the bisexual experience.

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