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The Significance of Support for Prospective Parents in LGBTQ Family Formation Processes

ABSTRACT

Prospective parents in LGBTQ families often require donated gametes, fertility clinic or adoption agency services, or one or several new co-parenting partners. In addition to this, various support networks can play a meaningful role for prospective LGBTQ parents during family formation processes. In this study, we investigate how parents' relationships with former families, kin, and others are reconfigured. Although some of the support networks in this study are referred to as "family" or "kin", the terms are used to describe a broader set of relationships than those generally included in the terms. Limited research has been conducted on the significance of close relationships in the transition to parenthood for LGBTQ people. The present study addresses the following questions: How do close relationships affect prospective LGBTQ parents' family formation processes? From whom do prospective parents receive support, and what kind of support do they receive? How do they describe these supportive relationships? Data were collected through interviews with parents in LGBTQ families in Finland. Face-to-face interviews (n = 18) were conducted using a semi-structured interview protocol, and the data were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed via reflexive thematic analysis. In the study, "inner circle relations" is the term used to describe LGBTQ parents' close relations. Prospective LGBTQ parents were found to receive emotional, instrumental, financial, informational, and appraisal support from their inner circles during the family formation process. They defined family not only in terms of legal ties or biological kinship but also

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based on emotional connections with others, viewing kinship as a relationship based on individual choice. Intergenerational assistance was relevant, but close friends of the prospective parents also performed tasks typically associated with family members. Conversely, a lack of support from inner circles also affected the family formation process.

Keywords: LGBTQ family, family formation process, inner circle, support, configurational approach

THE FAMILY FORMATION process for prospective LGBTQ parents begins with the desire to have a child, but as the process unfolds, the involvement of various parties becomes necessary (Anttila et al. 2023a). Planning for and subsequently having a child are major life events, and prospective parents often seek support from their families of origin (Almack 2008) and friends (Leal et al. 2021) during the transition to parenthood. Understanding LGBTQ individuals and LGBTQ families with children requires recognizing the importance of families of origin (Pralat 2016). These familial relationships can be supportive but sometimes also strained, marked by low quality and prone to conflict (Rezcek & Bosley-Smith 2022). Thus, the impact of other close relations may be just as relevant as those with families of origin.

In the past, coming out as gay or lesbian could result in rejection by one's family of origin, leading many to view the LGBTQ community as family. Thus, "chosen families" enabled a wide variety of lifestyles, including those that diverged from societal norms (Weston 1991). In the twenty-first century, the rights of LGBTQ individuals within nuclear families have been strongly promoted in political decision-making in Western countries (Eng 2010; Moring 2013). At the same time, other types of close queer relationships have been increasingly marginalized (Kuosmanen 2007). The similarities between same-sex and heterosexual couples when it comes to familial relationships are often emphasized and may be seen as conditions for acceptance (Lahti et al. 2020). This perspective relates to the concept of homonormativity, which refers to policies that reinforce prevailing heteronormative assumptions and institutions (Duggan 2002).

In general, the cultural understanding of intimate relationships as diverse and flexible – including the roles and evolving meanings of friendship in personal communities – has increased (Spencer & Pahl 2006). Neither the family of origin nor friendships and other kinds of close relationships can be overlooked, as they are complementary and may partially overlap. Thus, a comprehensive understanding of LGBTQ individuals' families, intimate lives, friendships, and communities is essential. The significance of close relationships for LGBTQ individuals' during the transition to parenthood, in particular, is underresearched.

The understanding of close relationships is constantly evolving, necessitating new ways of defining and naming these connections (Wahlström & Goedecke 2021). Given that close relationships are often ambiguous and complex, we adopted a configurational approach in this study. This approach involves empirically mapping relationships without predefining which relationships are essential and which are not (e.g., Elias 1978; Castren & Ketokivi 2015; Widmer 2021). In this qualitative study, we referred to LGBTQ individuals' close relationships – comprising families of origin, close friends, and key support networks – as inner circle relations. We examined how these inner circle relations affect the family formation processes of prospective LGBTQ parents in Finland.

Multifaceted close relationships

It is important to note that relationships between family members are not always close, and understanding the significance of other close connection reveals that the distinction between given and chosen relationships is often ambiguous (Spencer & Pahl 2006). Close relationships may be legally and/or biologically regulated, or they may exist outside normative boundaries (Wahlström & Goedecke 2021). Therefore, it is essential to determine how close relationships are defined and to consider the implications of these definitions (Eng 2010). Indeed, close relationships involve interconnections between the private and the public and may relate to emotional, spatial, or physical closeness, or to the sharing of meaningful experiences (Wahlström & Goedecke 2021).

The concepts of family and kin have proven troublesome when used to analyze close LGBTQ relationships. In Weston's (1991) anthropological study, LGBTQ communities were found to employ the notion of "chosen families" to describe family groups constructed by choice rather than by biological or legal ties. Suoranta (2004) examined the everyday social networks of female same-sex couples living with children and concluded that these families are not automatically accepted, with their legitimacy often questioned. As a result, they must actively work to build family and kinship connections. Similarly, Moring's (2013) research indicates that close relationships in LGBTQ families are continuously created and refined through various situations, as well as temporal and local transitions.

Spencer and Pahl (2006) use the term "personal communities" to describe groups of people on whom individuals can rely for support and approval. In personal communities, there is often an overlap between the concepts of friendship and family, as these groups may include nonrelatives and exclude certain family members. They tend to be based on various combinations of familial relationships and friendships. Personal communities are not networks in themselves but may contain networks. Morgan (2011, 6) suggested that families cannot be defined as "relatively static structures or sets of positions or statuses." Instead, researchers should refer to family practices oriented toward those designated as family members.

This study relies on Elias's (1978) concept of configurations, which proposes that society is not an object external to individuals and independent of them, but is instead composed of complex relationships, dependencies, and power dynamics among people (Elias 1978, 15, 129). A person is not a separate entity from others but a multidimensional being whose identity is formed in relation to other people. Society consists of individuals, and an individual's self-perception is formed only in relation to others – that is, society (Elias 1978, 113, 129).

Ketokivi (2012) studied individuals living with or without a partner through the concept of an "order principle," organizing close relationships into exclusive or inclusive configurations of intimates. Within this

framework, she used a circular pattern to describe the inner and outer circles of intimates. Family can thus according to this model be viewed as an empirical setting of relationships rather than as a fixed category. In line with this idea, we posited that planning for and subsequently having a child would lead to new configurations of close relationships.

We defined family, kin, and close relationships based on the relatedness and connections that the interviewees in this study have experienced and regard as relevant. The bonds between individuals were viewed as part of a broader network of relationships (Castrén & Ketokivi 2015). Furthermore, all close relationships, including familial and other personally significant connections, are tied to time and place and therefore subject to change (Widmer et al. 2008; see also Elias 1978, 136). In this study, the configurational approach served as both a theoretical and methodological tool for analysis.

Categorizations of family members, friends, relatives, and nonrelatives can be problematic for LGBTQ individuals because they carry the historical baggage of binary gender understandings, heteronormativity, and heterosexual privilege (Oswald et al. 2009). However, it is impossible to disregard these categorizations entirely, as they underpin both contemporary social norms and the legal recognition of intimate relationships and family forms, which often exclude LGBTQ social, psychological, and practical parents (Bremner 2021).

LGBTQ individuals navigate relationships with members of their families of origin who do not share their minority identities and may not understand the typical paths of LGBTQ life (Farr et al. 2017). Additionally, it should be noted that related individuals do not always choose to remain close; these relationships may be products of convention, norms, or law (Wahlström & Goedecke 2021). Rezcek and Bosley-Smith (2022, 14) defined compulsory kinship as "a straightforward concept that calls attention to the fact that most people stay in parent–adult child relationships not by individual choice but because of intense social forces that constrain us so much that we don't have much choice at all."

During LGBTQ family formation processes, family and kin relationships are reconfigured, and the child sometimes becoming a unifying

bond (Almack 2008; Moring 2013; Nordquist & Smart 2014). LGBTQ family formation is significant not only to families of origin and other relatives but also to close friends and various support networks (Anttila et al. 2023a). Although LGBTQ individuals often define biological and legal relatives as family members, chosen family members complement their definitions of family (Hull & Ortyll 2019). According to Blair, Holmberg and Bukall (2018), chosen families formed by friends may at times provide LGBTQ couples with greater social support than their families of origin. In any case, social support from both family and friends is crucial for LGBTQ couples, helping them strengthen their mutual relationships and improve their well-being.

Edenheim argued that "marriage, monogamy, and children are never queer – no matter with whom you are married or how your children were conceived" (Edenheim 2020a, 117). However, we adopt a less controversial perspective: the identities of queer families are often linked to individuals or couples whose LGBTQ identities form the basis of the family's queerness (Fish & Russell 2018). Queer families have redefined the phrase "families of origin," moving away from assumptions of heterosexuality, as kinship narratives of those raised by LGBTQ parents are rooted in social stories of queer culture and LGBTQ histories (Garwood 2023). In addition, it is essential to examine how LGBTQ parents themselves reproduce and challenge the concept of kinship in contexts where kinship categories have historically been heteronormatively gendered (Dahl & Gabb 2019).

Translating the concept of queerness to the Finnish context has been challenging, but it encompasses sexualities and genders that exist outside or in opposition to the cisgender, heterosexual norm (Taavetti 2018). Queer is a symbolic position (Edenheim 2020a), and can thus be used as a tool to analyze diverse experiences and describe families outside heteronormative binaries (Fish & Russell 2018). The influence of queer theory extends beyond expanded definitions of family, challenging fundamental beliefs about close relationships and questioning heteronormativity (Oswald et al. 2009), and this is how we defined the concept for the present study.

In-depth interviews with LGBTQ parents

An invitation to participate in this study was shared in both open and closed groups on social media platforms used by LGBTQ families. Two Finnish NGOs also distributed the invitation via their e-mail lists, as it was likely that LGBTQ parents were among their members. The invitation included information about the study and stressed that participation was voluntary.

The first author (S.A.) conducted semi-structured individual and paired interviews (n = 18) in the summer of 2017. These face-to-face interviews were held across the country, from the Helsinki metropolitan area to northern Finland, and were audio-recorded (11 hours and 42 minutes in total) and transcribed. Interviewees were asked to provide basic information about their residence, family structure, age, and occupation. Heteronormative relationship categories frequently appear in LGBTQ+ family research, both in research questions and in analytic strategies, often overlooking emotional complexities and distinctions such as sexual/nonsexual, parent/partner, and friends/family (Dahl & Gabb 2020). Therefore, we paid particular attention to each interviewee's definitions of family structure, close relationships, and gender and sexual orientations. Interviewees were not given predefined options; instead, they were encouraged to describe their close relationships, family structure, and parenting in their own terms.

After the basic information was gathered, interviewees were asked how belonging to a sexual or gender minority had affected their opportunities to have children. The formulation of additional questions depended on each interviewee's family structure, but the same themes were discussed with everyone. The themes included choices made, compromises, saving, planning, deliberation, state of mind, decision-making, and close relationships.

Ten interviewees (four of whom were interviewed as couples) were female, in a registered partnership or married to a woman, and had children under the age of 18. Their family structures are recognized in official family statistics. Additionally, six other interviewees who identified as women had family structures different from that of a female

couple. Further, two interviewees identified as men, one as genderqueer, and one chose not to define their gender. The family structures included a one-parent LGBTQ family, a two-parent co-parenting family, and a four-parent co-parenting family. Two interviewees' families appeared in official contexts as heteronormative nuclear families; however, one was a polyamorous family, and in the other, the interviewee had her child with a female partner before marrying a man.

The interviewees self-identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or nonbinary. One interviewee did not belong to a sexual or gender minority, but the other parent of her child did. The word *sateenkaari* (meaning "rainbow") is used in Finland as an umbrella term for people, identities and practices that fall outside the cisgender, heterosexual norm (Taavetti 2018), and all interviewees self-identified as "parents of a rainbow family." The Finnish NGOs Sateenkaariperheet (meaning "Rainbow families") and SETA (a national LGBTQ+ organization) use the term "rainbow" in their communications, and the term *sateenkaariperhe* (rainbow family) has also been established in the media, making LGBTQ topics more approachable in an otherwise heteronormative society (see also Moring 2013).

Seven interviewees lived in the Helsinki metropolitan area, nine lived in a city or medium-sized community outside this area, and two lived in smaller communities. The interviewees represented diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and income levels (see also Anttila et al. 2023b). They ranged in age from 23 to 49 and all had one to three children under the age of 6; three interviewees also had school-aged children. Ensuring the interviewees' anonymity was essential throughout the study, so all identifying information has been removed and pseudonyms are used in this paper. Ethical considerations were prioritized at every stage of the research process, in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity (2019).

Reflexive thematic analysis with a configurational approach

Following Braun and Clarke (2006, 2022), we conducted a reflexive thematic analysis of the data. Initially, our aim was to understand how

the interviewees' close relationships had affected their family formation processes. However, the significance of inner circle relations for prospective LGBTQ parents remains under-researched. As the analysis progressed, it became clear that the inner circles themselves needed to be defined – specifically, who belonged to them and how they were formed during the LGBTQ family formation process.

In this study, close relationships and family were not defined strictly by institutional criteria, and "the impact that individuals' identity, perceptions, and projects have on family configurations" (Widmer et al. 2008, 6) was acknowledged. As family boundaries could not be taken for granted, we adopted a configurational approach as a theoretical and methodological tool to analyze close relationships as broad networks of interdependencies (Widmer 2021).

To identify the respondents' inner circles, the data were first coded "diversely, without paying attention to the themes that previous research on the topic might have identified" (Braun & Clarke 2006, 84). In accordance with the configurational approach (Widmer et al. 2008), all individuals mentioned by the interviewees in response to open interview questions were then systematically listed for analysis. Once their inner circles were defined, the analysis became more theoretically driven. The significance of the inner circle during the family formation process was studied using House's (1981) four types of supportive behaviors: emotional support (e.g., empathy, caring, love, and trust), instrumental support (e.g., money, labor, and time), informational support (e.g., assistance in coping with personal and societal problems), and appraisal support (e.g., providing affirmation and feedback, social comparison, and self-evaluation). Leal et al. (2021) found these four types of supportive behaviors useful in their systematic literature review on the role of social support during the transition to parenthood among individuals belonging to sexual minorities. As financial support can be critical for prospective LGBTQ parents, it was distinguished from other forms of instrumental support in the present study (Anttila et al. 2023b).

In the first two rounds of data coding, the basics of the phenomenon were clarified (Table 1), but the research question required further

analysis. The third round of coding involved a latent reading to uncover the underlying meanings within the text (Braun & Clarke 2006). Consequently, three interpretative themes were derived: (1) Inner circle support in forming parental identity in a heteronormative society; (2) The child's interest first, and (3) The strengthening of emotional connections during inner circle reconfigurations. The results are presented in the order in which the analysis was conducted, with each theme illustrated by selected quotes defining the inner circle and its various meanings.

Inner circle relations and types of support

The configurational approach allowed us to identify the constantly evolving close relationships that might otherwise remain hidden (Castrén & Ketokivi 2015; Elias 1978, 128). Since families and individuals have various types of close relationships, and those examined in this study were specifically linked to having a child, we used a special term to describe them. Drawing on the configurational approach, we used the term "inner circle relations" to refer to the close relations of LGBTQ parents in the process of having a child. Some inner circle members were already present in the prospective parents' lives, while others became involved during the actual process of having the child. These nominal circles are not fixed or stable but vary across time and place, as LGBTQ individuals often negotiate and resist norms and hierarchies in their close relationships.

Bonds between people, and the tensions arising from their reconfigurations, which can either support or limit individuals, were identified using the configurational approach (Castrén 2014, 165). Interviewees reported that they had informed members of their inner circles early on about their intention to have a child or that a child would soon join the family. They sought help from these inner circle members or received support without asking during the family formation process. The support given and received was closely tied to the trust within these inner circle relationships. In some cases, the support obtained – and the need to keep certain individuals within the inner circle – was influenced by conditions arising from societal structures. Indeed, previous

studies have found that the well-being of prospective LGBTQ parents improves when their circumstances and close relationships are acknowledged within societal structures (Leal et al. 2021).

Table 1 shows the people included in the interviewees' inner circles and the types of social support that the prospective parents received during their family formation process. The entries in the table are based on data obtained from our analysis. Among all sources of support, friends, siblings, and parents of the interviewee or their spouse were mentioned most frequently. Only one interviewee mentioned support received from neighbors.

The inner circles included participants' parents, with whom the relationship could, in some cases, be defined as compulsory kin (Rezcek & Bosley-Smith 2022). Parents did not necessarily accept or even know about their adult child's orientation or family structure. Despite the disagreements that arose, relationships with parents were meaningful to the participants, and the hopes that their future children would have a relationship with their grandparents were also significant. Notably, compulsory kinship can also contribute to well-being: previous research has shown that even parents who provide only nominal support to their adult LGBTQ children may still offer emotional or instrumental support (Stone 2021). It is also important to consider that children who have newly entered a family may be affected if their parents are not open about their belonging to a gender or sexual minority. While it is possible to work on understanding one's queer kinship story as an adult, exposure to LGBTQ history, culture, and the sociopolitical context surrounding family practices can strengthen an individual from childhood through adulthood (Garwood 2022).

When inner circle relations were based on trust, interviewees received emotional support in the form of empathy, care, and love. All of the inner circle members mentioned above could provide emotional support, and interviewees also had positive experiences with maternity counsellors and representatives from other organizations. The LGBTQ parents' communities included contacts made through the organization Sateenkaariperheet and other LGBTQ parents whom the interviewees

Table 1

Inner circle support received by prospective LGBTQ parents' during the family formation process

Type of support / support provider	**Emotional**	**Appraisal**	**Instrumental**	**Financial**	**Informational**
Friends	X	X	X	X	X
Parents	X		X	X	
Siblings	X		X	X	
Known donor	X	X	X		
Other relatives	X		X		
LGBTQ parents' community	X	X			X
Ex-partner(s)	X		X		X
Workplace	X				X
Maternity counsellor	X				X
Other organizational actor	X	X			X
Neighbours	X		X		

had intentionally sought out when planning to have children. While they initially hoped to receive peer and informational support, they also received emotional support and affirmation. Appraisal support was present only in close relationships founded on trust. Friends, known donors, and members of the LGBTQ parents' communities offered affirmation and feedback, enabling social comparison and self-evaluation. For two interviewees, nurses at their maternity clinics also provided affirmation and feedback.

In our analysis, we defined instrumental support as voluntary assistance in terms of either work or time. The instrumental support given by service providers in their professional roles was not included when we defined the various types of support received. Instrumental support was diverse and included helping out with housework or yard work, sorting out various issues, and offering car transports. Additionally, known donors contributed their time by arriving for gamete donation and home insemination.

The data showed that respondents received financial support from their parents, siblings, and friends. In some cases, parents contributed funds for fertility treatments or offered loans, as did siblings and friends. Financial support could also be indirect; for example, one interviewee's parents booked a vacation to cheer up their adult child and her spouse, who had spent considerable amounts of money on fertility treatments. Informational support for coping with personal and societal challenges was provided by the prospective LGBTQ parents' friends, community, ex-partners, workplaces, maternity counsellors, and, for two interviewees, fertility clinic staff. The data indicated that a diverse inner circle strengthens the family formation processes of LGBTQ individuals.

Inner circle support in forming parental identity in a heteronormative society

At present, being queer is not equated with childlessness; however, it can be argued that LGBTQ individuals' desires to have or not have children challenge normative assumptions (Pralat 2020). Heteronormativity is

still strongly associated with parenthood and family life, and LGBTQ families challenge these patterns (Homanen 2021). Our findings show that inner circle members supported the development of unique parental identities among LGBTQ interviewees' and reinforced the notion that parenting can take many forms. Unfortunately, some respondents had the opposite experience and lacked the support they needed, making it difficult for them to define their families or themselves as parents. This lack of support hindered the formation of their parental identities, and, for some interviewees, it could even be said that inner circles had not fully developed.

The interviewees' emphasized the need to be recognized as a family "like everyone else" while at the same time having the specifics of the family structure acknowledged. LGBTQ family relationships have often been framed through the lens of the heteronormative nuclear family model, especially in the fight for legal family rights. However, this framing has led to the increasing invisibility of diverse LGBTQ families (Kuosmanen 2007). All types of supportive behaviors from inner circle members allowed the LGBTQ individuals to resist and navigate the pressure of heteronormative assumptions.

The role of social support in the transition to parenthood is significant, and the relationships between prospective LGBTQ parents and their families of origin may be enhanced upon their becoming parents (Leal et al. 2021). Close familial relationships allowed interviewees of this study to joke about heteronormative expectations related to parenting. Gentle humor fostered emotional support within families of origin, symbolizing family members' acceptance of the LGBTQ individuals for who they were. Mutual trust and the knowledge that family members loved, cared for, and wanted the best for them provided opportunities for humor. Support from loved ones is especially important for transgender individuals as society often does not regard them as potential parents (Honkasalo 2018). The situation described below provides an example of such insider humor: Leo's brother commented on Leo's changing appearance while he was pregnant, before undergoing gender reassignment:

> My brother commented when I had a big belly. [laughs] He said, "Hey, you look like a man with a one pack!" You know, a big beer belly. [laughs] That was a good, funny comment. (Leo, one child)

The interviewees themselves sometimes used humor to highlight their family structures in relation to normative thinking. When the social support from family was strong, it became possible to joke about the heteronormative assumptions directed at the family. Mona and Berit's parents, along with Mona's grandmother, supported the couple in their family formation process. In the situation described by Mona below, the nuclear family of the female couple appeared both conventional and respectable (Moring 2013), while, conversely, the divorced parents of the other mother had confused the grandmother by being on unexpectedly good terms with each other:

> And then my grandmother was told after the first ultrasound, when Berit was pregnant, so granny immediately bought yarn and started knitting clothes of all kinds, and she was just terribly happy. After the christening she wondered at being such an old-fashioned person because she was amazed that Berit's parents, who are divorced, could still attend the same party. Then I asked, well, did you notice that you were at the christening of a lesbian couple's child! So, you may not be such an old-fashioned person after all! [laughs]. (Mona, one child, registered partnership)

As Oswald et al. (2009) heteronormativity is simultaneously reproduced and resisted by everyone, as exemplified by Tara's description of her mother's reaction to the news of a future grandchild. The mother was delighted and immediately began considering the types of instrumental support she could offer her adult child, who was expecting. In addition, she provided emotional support and resisted heteronormativity by demonstrating an understanding of her child's nonbinary gender expression:

> My mother got excited and went to the attic "to look for suitable maternity clothes." I was already thinking, oh my god, is she going to bring

> some of her maternity dresses, and how can I refuse? [laughs] But she returned with my father's old flannel shirts, trousers, and suspenders! [laughs]. (Tara, one child, married)

By contrast, the inner circles of some interviewees remained modest. The lack of emotional and appraisal support, in particular, affected two interviewees in co-parenting arrangements. As Elias (1978, 135) noted, when we talk about a sexual bond, we distinguish and emphasize a central but relatively short and transient aspect of human relationships, and there are many kinds of strong emotional bonds that lack sexual overtones. Nonetheless, the norm of associating parenthood with romantic relationships influenced how members of potential inner circles perceived the parents. Friends who were co-parenting a child encountered assumptions from several close relations that they were romantically involved or had previously been in such a relationship:

> We were introduced to new people as a couple when I was pregnant or received comments such as "you have really managed to agree on everything", the assumption being that we were divorced. We are – or were at the time – good friends, and it confused friends and relatives. I don't know why it was so confusing that some people only share parenting. (Jenny, one child, co-parenting with a male friend)

Some co-parenting friends even considered getting married because they had a child together, reflecting the so-called respectability requirement noted by Suoranta (2004) and Moring (see also Dahl & Gabb 2019). Assumptions about the nature of their relationship ultimately caused stress and conflict between the co-parents. Because many parties did not recognize their family structure, the co-parenting partners were deprived of inner circle support and lacked trusting relationships with loved ones. Furthermore, service providers did not recognize them as a family, instead offering services aimed at divorced parents. Laura describes the heteronormative nuclear family as the "basic order" and explains the consequences when her family structure does not meet such expectations:

> However, she [Sebastian's mother] had known about her son's homosexuality since he was a young adult. So, when this format [co-parenting] came about, I guess she started hoping for some basic order, a relationship for us, and marriage. […] At the fertility clinic, they called me a single mother and Sebastian a donor, even though we told them we would both be parents. I don't know if they describe the parties of a hetero couple like that or as mother and father. And when we later needed help with our problems, we were referred to services for divorced couples. Of course, I tried to explain that we had a two-home family arrangement from the beginning, but no such services were available. (Laura, one child, co-parenting with her male friend Sebastian)

Interviewees who received support from their inner circles in forming their parental identities coped better with the adversities they faced. They were also able to challenge society's heteronormative parenting assumption and develop their own individual parental identities. However, lack of recognition of their family structures from both loved ones and service providers, along with the absence of a supportive inner circle, greatly undermined LGBTQ parents' well-being and hindered the formation of their parental identities.

The child's interest first

Some interviewees had experienced such a strong desire to have a child that it had led to the end of their romantic relationships – either because their partners had decided against having a child, or because attempts to have a child had been unsuccessful. However, in some of these cases, the former spouse remained part of the interviewee's inner circle despite the romantic relationship having ended. This transition from romantic relationship to friendship can also be seen as challenging heteronormative assumptions and social norms (Weeks 2007). Griffith, Gillat, Zhao, and Martinez (2017) suggest that LGBTQ individuals often maintain friendships with their ex-partners after a breakup for security and practical reasons, which can enhance their well-being. In this study, ex-partners provided the interviewees with emotional support, practical assistance during the process of

having a child, and help in their daily lives before and after the birth of the child; one former partner even supported an interviewee during childbirth. Melissa described her decision to end her romantic relationship and focus on having a child instead, mentioning that maintaining a friendship with her former partner felt natural and almost self-evident:

> I understood my age and the fact that I needed to have a child now. I then informed my girlfriend how it was, and yes, she immediately understood. And I knew that she didn't want a child, at least not in that situation, and it was clear that the relationship could no longer continue. But we stayed friends. She is still a good friend, you know. (Melissa, two children, single parent)

Previous research has shown that relationships between adult LGBTQ individuals and their parents can be complex (Stone 2021). On the one hand, rejection from families of origin can cause significant stress for LGBTQ individuals; on the other hand, families of origin can be major sources of support and acceptance (Farr et al. 2017). The interviewees in this study expressed a strong desire for the involvement and support of their own and/or their spouse's parents in the family formation process.

Rezcek and Bosley-Smith (2022, 68) describe the "conflict work" undertaken by LGBTQ individuals as an "effort done to manage severe conflict in a way that ensures the family functioning." LGBTQ adults often engage in intensive conflict work when their parents reject their LGBTQ identity. For some of the interviewees in this study, relationships with parents were a source of sadness, and one interviewee was not in contact with their parents at all. When it came time to have a child, these interviewees were prepared to do conflict work, setting aside past disagreements and their parents' negative attitudes toward their same-sex or transgender spouses. However, they were unable to discuss their parents' difficulties accepting their relationships. The issue was too painful for them, and the silence left many interviewees confused about why their parents could not accept their family structures. Lena describes how she and her spouse Maria set aside their own chal-

lenges with Maria's parents, prioritizing the children's right to have a relationship with their grandparents, and vice versa:

> Well, we thought that, in a way, we didn't want to be a barrier between Maria's parents and their future child, or their relationship. So, we left it to Maria's parents to decide whether they wanted to be in contact with the child. And if they didn't want to, then so be it. (Lena, one child, married to Maria)

The birth of a child served as a unifying factor in the relationships between interviewees and their parents. Grandchildren may symbolize normality for grandparents in a way similar to marriage, with previously rejected LGBTQ relationship now viewed as respectable (Rezcek & Bosley-Smith 2022). For instance, Katarina's parents wholly ignored her relationship with her female partner until the couple had their first child. The grandparents' attitudes changed completely upon the birth of a grandchild, and they became an important part of the family's inner circle prior to the second child's birth:

> Maybe it's a bit strange (laughs) that we were barely talking before and are now all very cordial after the child is born. But this is how it is now, and even though I might want to talk to my parents about why this is so […] maybe I'll be careful not to tear it apart and let them enjoy their grandchildren, and let the children enjoy their grandparents. (Katarina, two children, married)

In Almack's (2008) study, some parents of interviewed lesbian mothers were shocked and horrified when their adult children told them about their intention to have a child. In Suoranta's (2004) study, some relatives viewed female couples having children as against God's will, while others held a negative attitude toward female couples and their children for unknown reasons. None of the interviewees in the present study encountered specific negative attitudes from their families of origin regarding having children. However, if an interviewee had not

previously disclosed their sexual orientation to their parents and had a child as a single parent, they chose to continue keeping this information private. Maintaining good relationships with parents was considered more important than openness, and the interviewees prioritized their children's close relationships with their grandparents. Similarly, in Suoranta's (2004) study, female couples tolerated tense and difficult family relationships to support their children's connections with relatives.

This effort to reduce their parents' discomfort with their lives can also be seen as a form of "comfort work" (Stone 2021). At the time of the interviews, the children of these single parents were still very young; this may explain why the parents had not yet reflected on what their concealment might mean to their children. However, given the results of this study and previous research, it is important that future research critically examines why adult LGBTQ children continue to accept their parents' behaviours and maintain problematic, and sometimes even hurtful, relationships (see also Rezcek & Bosley-Smith 2022).

The strengthening of emotional connections during inner circle reconfigurations

The family formation process and transition to parenthood shaped each interviewee's inner circle and strengthened emotional connections, even with those who had not previously been particularly close. In a way, these close relationships involved boundary work, as several discursive processes and practices established boundaries between those who were, and were not, considered close relations (Wahlström & Goedecke 2021). In forming personal social relations, configurationality is essential alongside general context-relatedness, as existing significant social relations influence the creation of new ones (Suoranta 2004; see also Widmer et al. 2008). In this study, close relationships not based on biological or legal ties – such as those with a co-parenting partner's parents, close friends, or neighbors – led to uncertainty about how the relationships should be defined in the reconfigurations brought about by having a child. "Can I say they are my family?" one interviewee asked himself when describing his relationship with his co-parenting partner's mother. "They are close.

So close [...] I can trust them completely, and they are like my family," another interviewee said when describing her closest friends.

LGBTQ individuals' descriptions of family are often both cutting-edge and conventional, leading to expansive family definitions (Hull & Ortyll 2019). Based on this study, LGBTQ parents' descriptions of their families could be considered traditional and biolegally defined in many respects, as several interviewees first defined their children and, if applicable, their spouse as family members. However, they quickly expanded this definition to include the children's other potential parents, close friends, or members of their families of origin. Individuals who provided social support were not always explicitly included in definitions of family, but the essential roles they played in the interviewees' inner circles emerged in other contexts.

A prospective parent always has to negotiate the nature, shape, and form of their relationship with a known donor, as this type of relationship or kinship is inherently unique and, therefore, does not follow any predefined model (Nordqvist & Smart 2014). Except for one interviewee in this study, each of the women and female couples using a known donor had chosen their donor after knowing him for a long time and giving the matter careful consideration. As the process progressed, the women grew closer to the known donor and received both instrumental and emotional support from him. In cases where the pregnancy did not progress as hoped, or the interviewee or their spouse experienced a miscarriage, this relationship grew even stronger. Emmi described how her and her wife's relationship with a known donor deepened and took on new meanings during the family formation process:

> It was an important moment for him, too, when the pregnancy test showed a positive result. And he has mourned with us in a way, and it's somehow so wonderful, how he felt so strongly for us. It was somehow comforting in that situation, as we were alone, just me and my spouse when the miscarriage happened. He shared in our grief, feeling so deeply that it was terrible, what had happened. So, in a certain way, it has increased our trust in him even more. (Emmi, one child with a known donor, married)

Support from the workplace was also significant. In practice, this support included compassionate and emotional encouragement, practical help in arranging shifts to ensure the interviewee's access to fertility treatments, organizing holidays around parental leave, gifts in celebration of future parenthood, and an overall positive atmosphere for the LGBTQ family. The study's interviewees spoke explicitly about their work communities as a whole, rather than about individual coworkers or supervisors. Mona and her spouse Berit underwent fertility treatments for more than a year before a successful pregnancy. Mona's close-knit work community was part of her inner circle, and she described their support as follows:

> As soon as we started trying for a child, I talked about it at work, and we have an excellent team. And then, we thought about those [pregnancy test] lines together every month, and my colleagues hoped for that child just as much as I did. (Mona, one child, registered relationship)

The family practices defined by Morgan (2011) proved significant in the reconfigurations of family relationships. Newly formed close relationships had broad impacts within these networks, reshaping ties bilaterally. When two same-sex couples – one female and one male – were planning for a child together as co-parents, the parents of the prospective mothers became significant figures for Jonas, one half of the male couple. This newfound closeness with the parents of the co-parenting partners partly strengthened the couples' decision to try to have another child with the same parenting arrangement. Family practices refer to specific actions directed toward others identified and treated as fellow family members (Morgan 2011). In this case, examples of family practices included positive encouragement from the older generation, organizing joint meetings, and offering practical support, which further strengthened the relationships between the co-parenting partners:

> My parents are already dead, and I was in the closet with them until the end. I guess the most significant thing is that they [co-parenting part-

> ners' parents] have known about my orientation from the beginning, and it hasn't been a problem in any way. So, this is the first time in my life that there are such close people of the older generation who openly know what I am, and it was not a problem for them. (Jonas, one child with his male spouse and a female couple)

Only one interviewee mentioned receiving support from neighbors, but the emotional and instrumental assistance provided in this case was significant. The neighbors offered support similar to that typically given by parents of an interviewee or their spouse. They took an interest in the young couple living next door and became close acquaintances when they noticed the couple was expecting a child. The neighbors provided practical help by doing yard work and bringing food and pastries. In addition, the prospective parents received emotional support and felt they could trust their neighbors and rely on the help they offered.

Discussion and conclusions

The various family formations and close relationships of prospective LGBTQ parents, and the interactions between families and society, emerge through the continuous negotiation of networks (see also Moring 2013) which we have termed inner circle relations. The configurational approach used in this study allowed for the integration of diverse insider perspectives on the lived close relations of prospective LGBTQ parents, highlighting multiple social and societal interdependencies (Castrén & Ketokivi 2015). The concept of the inner circle is a contribution of this study, and defining it proved meaningful, as it enabled us to investigate the social relations and overall support available to prospective LGBTQ parents.

As Homanen (2021) states, the invisibility and unrecognizability of LGBTQ family structures can sometimes facilitate the dismantling of normativity and create space for creativity. However, heteronormativity is still simultaneously reinforced. As Oswald et al. (2009) note, defining what can be called "family" is an exercise of power, often based on heteronormative assumptions. In this study, the support received from the

inner circle helped the interviewed LGBTQ parents challenge societal norms surrounding parenting and family.

Studying the family life and relationships of LGBTQ people not only expands the literature on the needs of sexual and gender minorities but also broadens our understanding of how human relationships function and the power dynamics they embody (Farr et al. 2017). In this study, inner circle relations were based on trust, compulsory kinship (e.g., Rezcek & Bosley-Smith 2022), or other forms of compulsory relations. It is essential to consider compulsory relations beyond kinship in the inner circles of prospective LGBTQ parents, which may also include service providers on whom LGBTQ individuals feel dependent. Notably, the power dynamics in interactions with service providers shape the options available to those pursuing parenthood (Anttila et al. 2023a), highlighting the need for further research into how these power relations manifest and impact outcomes.

Parents' supportive behaviors and acceptance of their adult LGBTQ children contribute to mutual well-being, emotional support, and symbolic significance for the adult children (Stone 2021). The interviewees were a heterogeneous group in terms of their family structures, the children they had, and the type of social support they received from their inner circles during the family formation process. It should be noted that the study findings are only indicative, specifically based on the family formation processes of these interviewees and what they shared during the interviews. All interviewees had positive, close relationships with their known donors or co-parenting partners, a factor to consider when interpreting the results of this study. Data collected through a qualitative online questionnaire (Anttila et al. 2023a) indicated that the experiences of LGBTQ parents may also involve ambiguities in the division of parenting responsibilities or disagreements following the child's birth.

Some sharp conclusions can however be drawn from the results of this study regarding the role of social support in the family formation processes of LGBTQ parents. Notably, a diverse range of inner circles appears to support prospective parents on their path to parenthood. While interviewees actively sought and often received support, there

were instances in which their efforts proved unsuccessful, leaving them without the necessary support or with support that was ill-suited to their needs. This lack of adequate support seems to stem from misunderstandings about the prospective parents' family structures. Raising awareness of diverse family structures is essential, both within society and among various service providers.

The decision to have children led to an unexpected reconfiguration of close relationships for prospective LGBTQ parents, even with individuals not originally intended to become close, such as a known gamete donor or the relatives of parenting partners. The results of this study highlight various aspects of family and other close relationships, including family practices (Morgan 2011), conflict work (Reczek & Bosley-Smith 2022), and comfort work (Stone 2021), which often intersect and overlap. Some interviewees in this study were willing to set aside difficult relationships with their parents to ensure their children could maintain connections with their grandparents. Similar findings were reported in Suoranta's (2004) study, and interestingly, this study, conducted twenty years later, produced comparable results. In accordance with Castrén's (2009) concept of a primary bond, it appears that in LGBTQ+ families, the child(ren) occupy the role of the primary bond that organizes other relationships. This suggests that LGBTQ+ families tend to be child-centered, with the child(ren) serving as a unifying factor across various family and kinship communities. Families of LGBTQ parents require an understanding of the LGBTQ specific issues related to their family and parenting, and they deserve the same level of support, service, and acknowledgement as anyone else planning for or expecting a child.

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