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Tolerance Versus Support: Perceptions of Residential Community Climate Among LGB Parents

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Abstract

Objective—To understand which aspects of residential communities are most salient for determining whether sexual minority parents classify their residential community climates as tolerant versus supportive.

Background—Metropolitan hubs for lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) parents are well established, but less is known about nonmetropolitan community climates for LGB parents. Residential community climate toward nonmetropolitan LGB persons may be particularly important to LGB parents because of the potential influences on child and family well-being.

Method—Open- and closed-ended survey data from a sample of 55 LGB parents were collected along with publically available data regarding their residential communities. Self-reported residential community climate (tolerant vs. supportive) and community involvement, as well as objective county and municipal climate were analyzed.

Results—Compared with LGB parents who perceived their communities to be tolerant ($n = 38$), parents who considered their residential communities to be supportive ($n = 17$) were more likely to live in counties characterized by legal support and broad social acceptance, were personally more likely to participate in LGB-focused social and political activities, had children with more exposure to other LGB families, and attended church less frequently.

Conclusion—Having basic features of equity such as city ordinances and LGB organizations provides a foundation for tolerance in a community; however, individuals in a community must access personal and social supports and activities beyond work and church to feel truly supported.

Implications—LGB parents' perceptions of climate reveal specific community features that need to be strengthened to promote family well-being.

Keywords

Community climate; community involvement; LGB families; LGB parents; religion; support; tolerance

The United States is increasingly tolerant of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) parents and their children (Twenge, Carter, & Campbell, 2015). Tolerance is the belief that stigmatized groups should be allowed public expression and that social differences should be allowed even when viewed as disagreeable (Twenge et al., 2015). Recent Supreme Court rulings such as *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015) that granted marriage rights to same-sex couples, and *V.L. v. E.L.* 577 US (2016) that ordered states to uphold legal parentage established through adoption, are indicators of this shift in social attitudes. Same-sex couples have the right to marry and establish parentage regardless of any individual's disapproval of their relationship choices.

Although tolerating difference may be an important goal in a diverse society, tolerating differences is not the same as supporting differences (Twenge et al., 2015). To support difference is to believe that individuals, families, and communities are better off when people are valued *for* their differences, rather than despite them (Twenge et al., 2015). The purpose of this article is to document whether LGB parents perceive the social climate in their residential communities as tolerant or supportive and to explore the reasons behind their perceptions. Research has documented a link between social climate and well-being for LGB parents (e.g., Goldberg & Smith, 2011) and their children (e.g., Lick, Tornello, Riskind, Schmidt, & Patterson, 2012). This study extends our knowledge by exploring the factors that contribute to perceptions of community tolerance versus support within this population.

Specifically, this article focuses on LGB parents in nonmetropolitan communities, an often-overlooked context. Despite the fact that LGB parents are likely to live in less urban communities (Gates & Ost, 2004), most studies of this population have used samples based in major metropolitan areas (see review by Goldberg, Gartrell, & Gates, 2014). Studies that focus on urban contexts perpetuate the myth of "metronormativity" (Gray, 2009), which implies that smaller communities are negative environments for LGB individuals and families. An alternative narrative suggests that place is important for LGB individuals and families, especially in smaller communities where there are fewer alternatives, but not necessarily in negative ways (Jones, 2015). Thus, we designed this study to counterbalance metronormative trends in existing research by focusing on the subjective reports of tolerance and support by nonmetropolitan LGB parents.

Review of Literature

Perceived Residential Community Climate

Tolerance and support are aspects of community climate (Oswald, Cuthbertson, Lazarevic, & Goldberg, 2010), which refers to the amount of support for sexual minority persons and issues within a specific place (Holman, 2016; Oswald et al., 2010). Perceived community climate is the subjective assessment of climate by an individual (Oswald et al., 2010). An

overall rating of climate may incorporate perceptions of both LGB-specific networks and resources (e.g., the existence of a local LGB community center) as well as more general community characteristics (e.g., population density) and attitudes (e.g., prevailing theologies). Individuals' perceptions develop as they interact across a multitude of community contexts (e.g., schools, the legal system) and social networks. Through these interactions, individuals are exposed to, and interpret, messages of support and rejection regarding sexual orientation (Oswald et al., 2010).

Perceiving a more negative climate may have deleterious effects. For instance, in a study of LGB adults who fought against anti-LGB political activism in their residential communities, participants reported distress from encountering homophobia from multiple public sources (Russell & Richards, 2003). Similarly, in a content analysis of open-ended responses from LGB adults, individuals reported that state-level antigay politics negatively affected their psychological well-being (Rostosky, Riggle, Horne, Denton, & Huellemeier, 2010). A study of Black lesbian couples found that pastors and congregants were alienating toward couples and their children, even as they expressed support for the lesbians as individuals (Glass & Few-Demo, 2013). As a result, the women felt alienated and that their families were not supported.

Conversely, perceptions of a more positive climate seem to promote well-being. For example, lesbian and gay parents reported a tremendous sense of relief and family security associated with gaining the right to adopt in Florida (Goldberg, Moyer, Weber, & Shapiro, 2013). Further, adoptive sexual minority parents who perceived that their neighborhoods were more "gay-friendly" were less likely to perceive that instances of mistreatment were motivated by anti-LGB bias (Goldberg & Smith, 2014). Similarly, in an ethnography of Black gay women in New York City, most of whom were mothers, Moore (2011) described how the women sought out specific community settings because they provided support for the mothers' identities and families. Taken together, this research suggests that both community characteristics (e.g., access to church) and LGB parents' involvement in the community (e.g., political activism) can shape the perception of climate.

Nonmetropolitan Community Characteristics

This complexity of perceived climate may be especially true for LGB parents living in nonmetropolitan communities that lack "gayborhoods" (Ghaziani, 2014). Although these communities may offer child- or family-oriented amenities such as parks, good schools, affordable housing, and religious congregations, they may not provide the LGB-specific resources of support that are common in major metropolitan areas (Gates & Ost, 2004). LGB parents in nonmetropolitan communities may face challenges managing disclosure because there is less anonymity and a greater overlap of social networks than in more urbanized places (Holman & Oswald, 2011). As such, a more negative perceived climate may leave parents feeling vulnerable to stigma and discrimination (e.g., Goldberg & Smith, 2011). The resources and social limitations of nonmetropolitan communities may thus render social climate more salient for nonmetropolitan LGB parents compared with their urban counterparts (Oswald & Holman, 2013a).

Nonmetropolitan communities vary in terms of their economic base, legal rights and protections, prevailing religious and political ideologies, community-based services and resources, educational policies, and social networks (Flora & Flora, 2013). In the present study, we are specifically concerned with variation in community characteristics such as access to nondiscrimination laws that include sexual orientation as a protected class, LGB-specific organizations and social networks, political support for LGB rights, religious support for LGB identities, and employment associated with LGB-affirming workplace policies and practices. Each of these has been shown to have an impact on the well-being of LGB parents, their children, or both (for a review, see Oswald & Holman, 2013a). Thus, in this analysis, we aim to understand which of these nonmetropolitan community characteristics contribute to LGB parents' perceptions of tolerance and support.

LGB Parents' Community Involvement

Community characteristics, however, provide only a partial understanding of what influences parents' perceptions of climate. The extent to which LGB parents are actively engaged within that context is also important. Existing research suggests that sexual minority persons are more involved when they perceive the climate as *less* supportive, presumably because they are trying to improve the social climate. Indeed, a study of how the LGB community changed after gaining a legal protection in Colorado found that involvement declined because they had won what they were fighting for (Russell, Bohan, McCarroll, & Smith, 2011). Looking specifically at parents, Goldberg and Smith (2014) found that LGB parents were more involved in their children's schools when they perceived those schools as less supportive. Also, Holman and Oswald (2011) found that negative attention regarding LGB parents' sexuality was most likely to occur in organizational settings such as schools, hospitals, courtrooms, and workplaces. As such, the parents were concerned about establishing resources that specifically addressed their children's needs for organized support as members of LGB families. In a study of two-father families, gay fathers were able to create support structures by participating in local parent groups that were traditionally labeled as "mother groups" (Tuazon-McCheyne, 2010). Through their group involvement, the fathers were able to create support structures that were inclusive and were able to spread awareness about the diversity of families. Thus, in this study, we examine LGB parents' involvement in local LGB resources, as well as the amount of contact they and their children have with other LGB-parented families.

In addition to LGB-specific resource involvement, we also examine religious participation. Religious congregations have heightened importance in nonmetropolitan communities because they are often a primary source of religious and social support (Dillon & Savage, 2006). Further, religious involvement is important to many LGB parents. For example, one study of LGB and transgender (LGBT) adults found that parents were more than twice as likely as nonparents to participate in LGBT religious groups (Paceley, Oswald, & Hardesty, 2014). Additionally, a qualitative study found that about one-fifth of LGBT and queer (LGBTQ) parents involved their children in supportive religious or spiritual congregations, and did so primarily to enhance familial connection to the community while still reinforcing their specific beliefs and values (Rostosky, Abreu, Mahoney, & Riggle, 2016).

Statement of the Research Problem

The present study uses a sample of LGB parents who live in a nonmetropolitan region of Illinois. Our overall objective is to examine the aspects of residential communities that are most salient to sexual minority parents' perceptions of community climate as either tolerant or supportive. Specifically we ask, how do these LGB parents rate the social climate in their residential communities? To what extent are their perceptions of community climate associated with indicators of more supportive public attitudes, the existence of LGB-specific community resources, the local LGB community, and the parents' own involvement with such resources?

Clarifying what aspects of community life lead LGB parents to perceive a community as tolerant versus supportive can strengthen our understanding of residential community climate. It can also inform policymakers by revealing what community features need to be strengthened or developed in tolerant communities to promote family well-being.

Method

We employed a triangulated mixed-method design (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2007) that combined three data sources: (a) publically available municipal- and county-level data to measure public attitudes and community resources, (b) closed-ended survey data from LGB parents in which they rated their residential community climate as either *tolerant* or *supportive* and reported their level of involvement community resources, and (c) open-ended survey data from the same parents regarding the *best* and *worst* aspects of their lives, as well as the desired improvements for their residential communities.

Sample

The open- and closed-ended survey data were collected in 2010–2011 as part of the Rainbow Illinois 2010–2011 study. Inclusion criteria required individuals to be 16 years of age or older, identify as LGB (transgender persons were included if they also reported a sexual minority identity), and reside in Illinois south of Interstate 80 (which was intended to exclude metropolitan Cook County and the surrounding Chicago suburbs). Messages inviting individuals to participate were sent to all known organizations serving the LGB population in the targeted geographic region. In addition, respondents were recruited at community events (e.g., local Pride festivals), and flyers with contact information were posted at community centers, bars, and other local organizations. Further, invitations were extended through Facebook posts, as well as personal and professional networks and listservs. Because of these recruitment strategies, it is unknown how many people received an invitation to participate, and thus the response rate cannot be reported.

The entire Rainbow Illinois 2010–2011 sample size is 458 (see Oswald & Holman, 2013b). A subsample of those respondents with children 18 years or younger who indicated their residential community climate to be tolerant or supportive ($n = 55$) were selected for inclusion in the present study. Two parents who rated their residential community climate as hostile were not included in this analysis. LGB parents lived in five counties, four of which were classified by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Economic Research Service at the

time of data collection as “small urban; in a metro area with fewer than 1 million residents” (Economic Research Service, 2007a). One of the counties was “noncore; adjacent to a small metro with town of at least 2,500 residents.” Within these counties, parents lived in nine communities: Five parents (14.5%) lived in communities with fewer than 13,000 residents; the remainder (85.5%) lived in communities with between 115,000 and 130,000 residents. At the time of data collection, Illinois had statewide protections against sexual orientation discrimination. However, neither civil unions nor legal marriage were available to same-sex couples in Illinois at that time. Second-parent and joint adoption were available, but dependent on petitioning a supportive judge.

The sample was primarily White, college-educated, middle-aged, lesbian or bisexual cisgender females who were employed full-time and financially secure. Many had two children, some had fewer and some more; the youngest child was approximately 9 years of age. Most were coparenting with a current or former partner. These families had lived in their residential communities for a mean of about 12 years. Parent and family demographics are reported in Table 1.

Measures

Residential community—Residential community was determined by each participant’s residential ZIP code. Municipal- and county-level data regarding community climate were also obtained using each participant’s ZIP code.

Perceived residential community climate—Respondents were asked to rate the climate in their residential community as hostile, tolerant, or supportive toward LGB people. For this analysis, this item was scored *tolerant*=0 ($n=38$; 69.1%), and *supportive*=1 ($n=17$; 30.9%).

Community characteristics—Both municipal-and county-level indicators were examined. This was due to the constraints of publically available data (much is only available at the county level) as well as the reality of nonmetropolitan contexts in which people travel to the more urbanized county centers for employment, church, shopping, health care, social opportunities, and other activities.

First, we assigned each residential municipality a 1 if it had a local human rights ordinance at the time of data collection that included sexual orientation as a protected class and a 0 if it did not. Second, dummy coding was also used to capture the presence (1) or absence (0) of a non-alcohol-oriented LGBT organization (i.e., not a “gay bar”) within each municipality. For example, community centers and meet-up groups were considered nonbar LGBT organizations. This information was determined using Internet searches.

Four county-level characteristics were combined to create a county-level measure of community climate (see Oswald et al., 2010). The first, political support for LGB issues, was measured as the percentage of votes for Barack Obama in the 2008 U.S. presidential election, which ranged from 39% to 58% (Leip, 2012). Second, the percentage of jobs classified as bohemian or creative class measured employer support for LGB concerns (Florida, 2005). Scores ranged from 0.004% to 0.013% (bohemian) and 0.15% to 32.00%

(creative class; Economic Research Service, 2007b). Third, we counted the percentage of religious adherents in 2010 who belonged to denominations that had made official statements of support for LGB people or same-sex marriage; scores ranged from 0.006% to 0.078% (computed from the Association for Religious Data Archives [ARDA] data using criteria described in Oswald et al., 2010). Fourth, the presence of LGB people was measured as the percentage of households counted in the 2010 census that were headed by male–male couples, which ranged from 0% to 0.003%, and female–female couples, which ranged from 0.001% to 0.003% (Gates & Cooke, 2010).

Publicly available data were used for each indicator and then attached to individual respondents using Federal Information Processing Standard county codes. To compute the index for each county, indicators were standardized then summed (see Oswald et al., 2010). The standardized and summed objective climate distribution for this sample ranged from –14.86 to 4.44 ($M = 0$, $SD = 3.53$). Higher scores indicate a more supportive social climate for LGB people at the county level.

Parental community involvement—This indicator was measured in four ways. First, we presented parents with a list of nine *LGB community activities* (0=*no* and 1=*yes* for each activity). Approximately 31% belonged to a professional LGB group and 40% to a LGB religious group. We kept these as individual measures of parental involvement in organizational activities.

Second, we then summed parental involvement across the seven remaining social, political, or personal activities ($M = 2.62$, $SD = 1.33$). These were combined due to their similarity as informal activities.

Third, *contact with other LGB families* was assessed with a single question: “How often does your youngest child spend time with kids from other LGB families?” Response options were *never* (1), *rarely* (2), *sometimes* (3), *very often* (4), and *daily* (5). Responses covered the entire range ($M = 2.8$, $SD = 1.1$).

Fourth, we assessed frequency of church attendance with a single item: “How often do you attend religious services or rituals?” Response options were *never* (1), *less than once per month* (2), *at least once per month but less than once per week* (3), *once per week* (4), *more than once per week* (5), and *daily* (6). The mean response was 4.5 ($SD = 1.3$).

Open-ended questions—Parents were asked to describe the *best* and *worst* aspects of their lives as LGBT people specific to living in downstate Illinois. They were also asked: “What would improve your life?” and “What else would you like us to know?” Respondents could write as much as they wanted.

Procedures

The online survey asked respondents a series of closed-ended questions covering topics such as demographics and residential ZIP code, family and partner relationships, employment, residential community, religion, and LGBT community. Respondents were also asked a set of open-ended questions regarding their perceived quality of life and strategies for

improvement. Completion of the survey took between 15 and 30 minutes, and those who completed it were entered into a lottery for five \$25 gift certificates redeemable at [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com).

Data Analysis

For each indicator of community involvement, group differences were examined with the descriptive statistic appropriate to the measurement level to compare features of tolerant and supportive communities (chi-square or *t* test) and assess our statistical power to detect differences (Cramer's *V* or Cohen's *d*). IBM SPSS Statistics 24 was used for these analyses.

Thematic analysis was used to interpret the open-ended survey data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is a qualitative technique whereby patterns within a phenomenon are identified and linked to a specific research question. Perceived community climate was our phenomenon of interest, and we read the data to identify within-group similarities and between-group differences. Thus, our analysis began deductively (starting from the construct of perceived climate). We grouped data from the four open-ended prompts by perceived climate rating and then compared what parents wrote about the "best" aspects of their lives related to their residential communities by whether they rated their community as tolerant or supportive; these steps were repeated for each of the open-ended questions. The first two authors conducted multiple readings to familiarize themselves with the data in each column. Because the open-ended responses were short answers to specific prompts with no opportunity to probe further, we decided to treat the data as self-evident—that is, as mirroring rather than creating reality (Braun & Clarke, 2006). With this orientation, we summarized the data for each prompt and tolerant or supportive rating using the respondents' own language. Our summaries used overall statements to describe common themes (e.g., "Fifteen parents described stigma as a daily concern. ..") with qualifying elaborations (e.g., "Stigma manifested itself as disapproving looks. ..") and illustrative quotes (e.g., "Schools are not more welcoming. ..").

After reaching consensus that our summaries were comprehensive and true to the data, we then compared the summaries across the "tolerant" and "supportive" groups. That comparison enabled us to identify more abstract constructs to characterize the data, which ultimately allowed us to identify key differences in how parents experience their residential community when they perceive it as tolerant versus supportive.

Results

Parents lived in nine communities: A land-grant university community ($n = 28$), a teacher's college community ($n = 14$), an agricultural-industrial community ($n = 4$), a government-oriented community ($n = 1$), and small towns or villages ($n = 8$). We began our analysis by considering whether perceived climate is associated with the community itself. If this were true, then we would expect parents living in the same communities to rate the climate similarly. We would also expect the likelihood of parents rating their communities as supportive (rather than tolerant) to be higher among those living in communities with higher levels of county- and municipal-level indicators of support. We found partial support for this.

Perceived Residential Community Climate

Parents' perceptions of residential community climate were not uniform across those living within the same community. For example, half ($n = 14$) of the university town residents described it as *supportive* and the other half described it as *tolerant*. One resident of a teacher's college town described it as supportive, but the remaining 13 rated it as tolerant. Two agricultural-industrial residents rated their town as supportive and two rated it as tolerant. The government-oriented resident, and those living in small towns, all rated their communities as tolerant. Thus, although there were some consistencies in the ratings of a given community, people living in the same place perceived it differently.

Community Characteristics

Although perception of climate within the same community varied, the ratings were associated with community characteristics. The county indicators were highest in the university town (see County Index in Table 2) where the majority of people (14 of 17) who rated their community as supportive lived. Additionally, every person who rated their community as supportive lived in a community with a municipal ordinance and at least one non-alcohol-oriented LGB organization.

Taken together, these findings suggest that political, employer, and religious support; inclusive ordinances; the presence of other LGB people; and access to a non-alcohol-oriented organizations are necessary features of a supportive social climate. However, they may not be sufficient for all, or even most, LGB persons to see the climate as supportive. Therefore, we turned to the open-ended survey responses to examine additional themes indicative of tolerance or support.

Open-Ended Responses: Tolerance Versus Support

Our analysis of the open-ended data provides insight into why LGB parents may rate the same community differently. Parents who rated their community as supportive described it in the open-ended comments as a place where their overall experience was one of unconditional support as an LGB person—a place where they fit in without hiding. As the indicators we described earlier suggest, most of these parents lived in the university town where they had more opportunities to experience affirming rather than rejecting messages. LGB parents living in places they perceived to be supportive described their communities as “accepting,” “supportive of a diverse population,” erecting “no barriers to being who I am,” and providing “family-oriented activities.” Further, these LGB parents either felt that they were “protected enough to be out all the time” or appreciated that they lived in a community where “my sexuality is a nonissue.” One parent wrote that she was “very comfortable being out at my children's schools, work, with neighbors, etc.” Despite greater community support, there may still be pockets of hostility in these communities. For example, two parents reported that their children were bullied at school for having LGB parents. This stigma, however, was an exception to their overall positive experience.

By contrast, parents who rated their communities as tolerant used adjectives to indicate the limits of acceptance they experienced in their residential communities. Many used positive but tempered phrases such as “pretty tolerant,” “largely gay friendly,” “feel pretty

comfortable,” “for the most part people are tolerant,” “I can blend in,” and “the acceptance is pretty good.” These parents also described stigma as an ongoing concern, whether from neighbors, strangers, employers, educators, or church. Stigma manifested itself as disapproving looks, fears of or actual discrimination or harassment, lack of legal rights, isolation, and invisibility. For example, one parent wrote: “Schools are not more welcoming and do little to nothing to directly address the antigay bullying.” As depicted in Table 2, the eight parents who lived in small towns (all rated as tolerant) did not have access to local laws prohibiting discrimination or an LGB organization. The other parents who rated their community as tolerant, did live in places with these supports, and yet they were still experiencing stigma. Further, compared with the university town, all other communities rated as tolerant had more conservative political voting patterns, fewer sources of religious affirmation, fewer same-sex couples households, and less employment in sectors known to be LGB supportive. Within this context of overall tolerance, LGB parents in this group described specific places of affirmation. For example, parents mentioned “tight-knit group of friends,” “access to a more-light [theologically affirming] church,” “social activities that keep me connected to the gay community,” and specific businesses and support professionals.

In sum, it appears that a community is perceived as supportive when the parent is consistently exposed to messages of support and inclusion and when those messages are strong enough to override occasional experiences of stigma. Tolerance is perceived when the parent is consistently exposed to conflicting messages that lead to unease or insecurity about whether they are accepted or safe. Specific sites of support are important sources of comfort and inclusion within a perceived tolerant context, but they are not enough to override the overall experience of mixed messages encountered within the community.

Parents’ LGB Community Involvement

The fact that different parents perceived the same communities differently suggests that the parents’ positionality within that community is important to consider. Specifically, the perception of community support seems to be related to parental social networks within the community. Although some communities, such as the university town, may offer more opportunities to experience LGB affirmation, not all participants experienced that context as supportive, and some participants experienced objectively less supportive environments as supportive.

Thus, we considered whether perceptions of climate were linked to the parents’ specific experiences and the opportunities available in different contexts. From survey data, we examined professional, religious, and personal or political LGB community involvement (see Table 3). Although not a statistically significant difference, our participants who lived in tolerant communities were more likely to participate in LGB professional organizations than those who lived in supportive communities. This is consistent with the open-ended data finding that there are pockets of support within otherwise tolerant environments.

Next, in the arena of religion, we found that persons in both tolerant and supportive communities were equally likely to report involvement in an LGB-specific religious group. There were no churches in the studied area that ministered solely to sexual minorities, so

these groups were either online, private, or within larger mainstream congregations. Looking beyond the binary measurement of involvement to frequency of attending services, church attendance was more frequent among those who perceived their residential communities as tolerant rather than supportive. There was a moderately sized ($d = 0.58$; Cohen, 1988) and statistically significant group difference in frequency of church attendance (see Table 3). This makes sense in light of the open-ended data in which parents in the tolerant group described open and affirming congregations as important sources of support within a broader community context that was less supportive. One parent in this group wrote that access to an “intimate church environment” was among the best things in life.

Further, we summed involvement in personal, social, and political LGB-specific activities to make an index of personal LGB community connection that extended beyond work and church. Parents who were more involved in the indexed activities were more likely to classify their community as supportive. This was also the case among participants within the university town alone, where resources were more accessible.

Overall, our survey data suggest, much like the objective community data, that aspects of a community that might seem necessary for it to be seen as supportive, such as affirming workplace groups and LGBT-inclusive churches, may not actually be sufficient for an individual to perceive the climate as supportive. Involvement in multiple personal, social, and political LGB-specific activities distinguished participants’ assessment of their communities’ supportiveness.

The open-ended data provide a more nuanced understanding of interaction with LGB-specific resources. In the open-ended data, parents who rated their community as supportive mentioned that LGB resources were available but did not talk specifically about being involved in those organizations or events. They valued the existence of these resources but did not necessarily feel compelled to participate. Alternatively, their involvement may be so normalized that it was not worthy of comment. However, parents who rated their community as tolerant expressed a desire to be involved but offered many criticisms of their local LGB community that functioned as barriers to involvement. For example, parents wrote that the local LGB community was “too small” and “everyone knows everyone,” had “a lot of drama,” and was “all about sex,” or “everyone seems to be in their own clique.” Others stated that there are “no good places to get together except [alcohol-oriented venue]” and “not many opportunities to meet other men interested in long-term romance.” In response to the “What would improve your life?” prompt, parents in the tolerant group listed numerous resources and activities that they wished were available. Those in the supportive group made fewer requests, and many left it blank or wrote “nothing.”

Time With Other LGB-Parented Families

There was a large ($d = 1.25$; Cohen, 1988) statistically significant difference between groups in time spent with other LGB-parented families (see Table 3). Parents who rated their communities as supportive reported that their children had more frequent contact with other LGB-parented families. In the open-ended data, parents in both groups expressed a desire for more LGB-family-oriented activities. For example, one parent from the tolerant group wrote that life would be improved if there were more “opportunities to participate as a

family in LGB events.” Similarly, a parent in the supportive group wanted “more family events, or if those are happening regularly, more creative advertising that reaches more people.”

Discussion

The results of this mixed-method study show that community-level characteristics are associated with parental perceptions of climate. LGB parents feel more positive about where they live when that place is more legally, politically, and religiously supportive of LGB people; when there are more LGB-friendly employers; and when there are other LGB-headed households. In addition to contributing to the substantive literature on LGB families in context, this finding suggests that structural and ideological support for LGB families can be used to promote community viability. People who feel positively about where they live are more likely to stay there (Flora & Flora, 2013). Hence, this study has value for family scholars, as well as community development professionals who seek to retain residents or encourage in-migration.

Community characteristics alone, however, do not determine perceived climate, as LGB parents living in the same communities rated them differently. The differences seemed to hinge on whether parents experienced a fit between themselves and their communities. Those perceiving tolerance described numerous barriers to social involvement and connection; those perceiving support did not. This finding suggests that theorizing about community climate should be expanded to include the construct of belonging.

Psychological belonging occurs when a people feel that they fit within a larger group and also that they are valued or needed by that group (Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, Patusky, Bouwsema, & Collier, 1992). There is a growing literature on sense of belonging as it relates to depressive symptoms among LGB populations. For example, a sense of belonging to the general community and to the LGB community each have been found to independently protect against depressive symptoms for gay male (McLaren, Jude, & McLachlan, 2008) and lesbian (McLaren, 2009) adults, as well as LGB youth (McCallum & McLaren, 2010). Further, belonging to the general community has been found to mediate belonging to the LGB community for both gay men (Morris, McLaren, McLachlan, & Jenkins, 2014) and LGB adolescents (McCallum & McLaren, 2010). Research on belonging has not yet focused on LGB parents or their children, nor has it linked belonging to the community characteristics and involvement that were examined in the present study. It does, however, provide a strong rationale for studying belonging by linking it to mental health outcomes. Thus, future research that situates LGB parents and their children within residential contexts should examine the links between belonging and perceived community climate.

Perceived climate and a sense of belonging may be further complicated by intersectionality—the idea that one’s unique configuration of privileges and disadvantages within a web of social hierarchies has an impact on how one perceives, and is able to maneuver within, a particular context (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013; Crenshaw, 1989). Parents who perceived residential support, versus tolerance, were more likely to have greater involvement with local adult-oriented LGB resources and more frequent contact with other LGB families.

Contact with other LGB-headed families has been found to protect adolescents with lesbian mothers from the effects of heterosexism (Bos & van Balen, 2008), and thus it is important to understand how and why it varies. Variations in LGB family contacts may be rooted in intersectionality that cannot be reduced to demographic averages. Namely, contact may depend on both personal inclinations and structural opportunities within the matrices of geography, social class, race, and gender (see Goldberg, Frost, Manley, & Black, 2017). Some LGB parents live in communities where they are, or they perceive themselves to be, the only sexual minority residents. Even when they have access to other LGB individuals and groups, it is clear from the open-ended comments that those who perceive tolerance experience barriers to connecting with these resources.

Our use of secondary data prevented us from exploring barriers in depth, but the extant literature suggests that social class, race, and gender pose ongoing challenges for LGB parents with minority or disadvantaged statuses and identities who wish to connect with other families. Holman and Oswald (2011), for example, found that social class differences contributed to the demise of a LGB local parenting group. Moore's (2011) ethnography brought attention to the importance of Afrocentric resources for Black sexual minority mothers (resources not readily available in our study location), and Acosta (2013) described the struggles of queer Latina women, many of whom were living on low incomes while trying to access affordable and culturally appropriate parenting supports. The gay fathers in Tuazon-McCheyne's (2010) study were able to shape their local "mothers" group to become more inclusive, but this may be an example of male privilege that is not replicable by others in a less advantaged position (see Berkowitz, 2011). Future research using an intersectional lens is needed (Cho et al., 2013) to understand how LGB parents interact with local LGB and parenting resources.

In addition to contact with other LGB-parent families, the results of this study shed light on the importance of affirming religious congregations for LGB families, especially in less supportive communities. LGB parents who rated their communities as tolerant had more frequent religious attendance and described in their open-ended comments how affirming congregations were central sources of support in a broader context of stigma. The extant research on religion and sexual minorities is individual in focus; emphasizing psychological processes related to identity and belonging in response to religious bigotry (e.g., Rodriguez, 2010). There are also studies of primarily LGB congregations such as the Metropolitan Church of Christ that describe how such congregations provide support to LGB individuals (Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000) and studies of anti-LGB religious groups and their impact on LGB members (e.g., Barton, 2010). Research is needed on the positive interrelationship between religious congregations and LGB-parented families.

Similarly, supportive work environments seem to play an important role in LGB parents' perceptions of overall community support; less support in the workplace may contribute to an overall sense of tolerance in the community. Again, research shows that support in the work context can benefit the individual, with studies finding that employees who felt more supported professionally were less secretive about their sexual minority status at work (Ragins, Singh, & Cornwell, 2007) and reported better mental health (Goldberg & Smith, 2013; Riggie, Rostosky, & Horne, 2010) and more job satisfaction and commitment (Griffith

& Hebl, 2002; Huffman, Watrous-Rodriguez, & King, 2008). However, this line of research rarely places sexual minority employees within the context of their family or community. Future studies should take a more cross-contextual approach to examine these linkages between the work context, community climate, and family well-being (Holman, in press).

Limitations

As with all research, this study is constrained by several limitations. It is embedded within a larger study of sexual minority persons' quality of life within nonmetropolitan areas. Thus, we were limited by using secondary data (Cheng & Phillips, 2014); we had to adapt our research questions to fit the preexisting data.

Further, because the larger study was not initially focused on parents (our population of interest), our sample is small for quantitative analyses (Cheng & Phillips, 2014). The sample is however, a good size considering the specificity of the population (LGB nonmetropolitan parents). Importantly, we did have adequate statistical power to detect differences in our bivariate descriptive statistics (see Table 3). Given the small community sizes in nonmetropolitan environments and the relatively low proportion of LGB parents in the general population, it is unlikely that any study of nonmetropolitan LGB parents could ever produce adequate within-group numbers to conduct controlled community-level analyses on this specific population.

Because we sampled within one region, we have multiple participants from within each of several communities. This provides an important cross-check of perceptions within the same community, as referenced to objective indicators. However, the analytic concern of nonindependence cannot be adequately controlled given that the sample is not large enough to conduct multilevel modeling, which would correct the error variance associated with nonindependence within community groups (Grawitch & Munz, 2010). To address this concern, we used the community as the primary level of analysis in Table 2.

Finally, our open-ended responses are intended to supplement the survey data examined in the present study. However, these open-ended responses do not substitute for an in-depth qualitative study of community perceptions among nonmetropolitan LGB parents (Charmaz, 2006).

Implications

The present study deepens understanding of community climate, highlighting which aspects of the community contribute to parents' perceptions of supportiveness. Further exploration is needed to understand how both community features and parental involvement can be enhanced. To promote LGB-parent agency and activism, advocates and practitioners may need to consider different strategies depending on whether those targeted perceive more support or more tolerance in their residential communities. Each strategy presents a double bind. Parents who perceive tolerance feel social exclusion and have a heightened need for identity-specific support. However, they experience barriers and therefore may need help finding points of entry into the community. Community activists should be mindful of potential cliquishness and seek to be welcoming of diverse people who wish to be involved. Parents who perceive support may not need or want identity-specific resources even though

they value the availability of these resources in their communities. This group may need to be convinced that their involvement is valuable so that the resources they take for granted can be sustained and made more accessible. Pacey et al. (2014) found that generativity was the primary motivation for involvement in LGBT organizations. Campaigns that target “giving back to the community” or “concern for others” may motivate this group.

In addition to strengthening LGB-parent agency, community stakeholders who can be advocates for LGB-parent families from their unique vantage points should be engaged. Given the importance of supportive churches and workplaces for LGB parents who perceive their communities as tolerant, clergy and employers can use their public authority to promote affirmation and advocate for inclusion not only within their organizations but in broader community settings as well.

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Table 1

Sample Characteristics (N =55 Parents)

Variable	N	%
Sexual orientation		
Lesbian	31	56.4
Gay	6	10.9
Bisexual	17	30.9
Queer or pansexual	1	1.8
Gender identity ^a		
Female	46	83.6
Male	8	14.5
Queer or androgynous	1	1.8
Race: White	48	87.3
Education: bachelor's degree or higher	47	85.5
Employment: full time	45	81.8
Annual household income		
\$0–\$40,000	8	14.5
\$40,001–\$80,000	21	38.2
\$80,000+	26	47.3
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Age (31–58 years)	43.3	6.4
Years in community (0.5–50 years)	12.6	10.1
Number of children (1–5 children)	2.0	1.0
Youngest child's age (1–18 years)	9.5	4.8

Note. There are no statistically significant demographic differences between parents who perceive their residential community climate as tolerant versus supportive (results not shown).

^aTwo parents identified as transgender (one male to female, one female to male); we have included them in their self-identified gender category.

Table 2

Perceived Climate by Residential Location and Municipal and County Indicators

	Perceived climate						LGBT organization	County index
	Tolerant			Supportive				
	<i>n</i>	%		<i>n</i>	%			
Residential community	<i>n</i>	%		<i>n</i>	%			
University town (<i>n</i> = 1)	14	50		14	50	Yes	Yes	4.44
College town (1)	13	93		1	7	Yes	Yes	-0.06
Agricultural-industrial (1)	2	50		2	50	Yes	Yes	-1.31
Government oriented (1)	1	100		0	0	Yes	Yes	-3.01
Small town/villages (5)	8	100		0	0	No	No	-2.75 ^a

^aMean county index of the five (range: -14.86 to 4.44).

Table 3

LGB Parent Community Involvement

	Total (<i>n</i> =55)		Tolerant (<i>n</i> =38)		Supportive (<i>n</i> =17)		<i>t</i> or χ^2	<i>p</i>	<i>V</i> or <i>d</i>
	<i>M</i> or <i>n</i>	<i>SD</i> or %	<i>M</i> or <i>n</i>	<i>SD</i> or %	<i>M</i> or <i>n</i>	<i>SD</i> or %			
LGBT professional	17	30.9	14	36.8	3	17.6	χ^2 (1) = 1.23	.27	.30
LGBT religious	22	40.0	15	39.5	7	41.2	χ^2 (1) = 0.00	1.00	.00
Index of LGB involvement	2.62	1.33	2.37	1.26	3.18	1.33	<i>t</i> (45) = -2.16	.04	0.63
YC time with LGB family	2.81	1.07	2.53	1.06	3.53	0.72	<i>t</i> (43.84) = -4.27	<.01	1.25
Religious attendance frequency	4.47	1.30	4.72	1.10	3.93	1.49	<i>t</i> (45) = 1.99	.05	0.58

Note. All chi-square values are for 2×2 tables, and thus the continuity correction is reported. LGBT = lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender; YC = youngest child.