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The Importance of Partners to Lesbians' Intergenerational Relationships

The strong likelihood of parental disapproval of a daughter's lesbianism indicates that for gay women intergenerational dynamics may be uniquely challenging and complex. In this qualitative study, 40 lesbians in 20 couples were interviewed about their relationships with their parents and their partner's parents. Respondents reported that since coming out, their parents' atitudes about their lesbianism shifted over time from profound disapproval to ambivalence. Partners emerged as a beneficial influence on most of the respondents intergenerational relationships. Social workers assisting lesbians with intergenerational difficulties are advised to include the client's partner in treatment. Additional clinical implications are discussed.

In describing family relationships, Bowenian theory delineates the need for balance between the life forces of individuality and togetherness (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Practitioners of Bowenian family therapy use the term differentiation of self to describe how an individual establishes autonomy from his or her family members while also maintaining meaningful connections with them (Bowen, 1978). Problems arise when family members sublimate their own needs to avoid conflict, or distance themselves by emotionally cutting off from one another. In turn, unresolved emotional issues from problematic, family-of-origin relationships are often projected onto spouses, resulting in marital strain (Kerr & Bowen).

The available research sheds some light on the connection between intergenerational relationships and heterosexual marriage. Good relationships with parents (Lewis, 1989) as well as frequent intergenerational contact (Burger & Milardo, 1995) have been found to be associated with harmonious marital relations. On the other hand, parental disapproval may be associated with being distrustful, critical, and negative toward one's spouse (Driscoll, Davis, & Lipetz, 1972); can influence mate choice (Jedlicka, 1984); and may impede the progression of a relationship from dating to marriage (Leigh, 1982). Compared with those who had maintained relationships with their parents, adult children who were emotionally cut off from their parents were found to be less satisfied with their marriages (Dillard & Protinsky, 1985).

Some have postulated that coming out may be an important component of the differentiation process for lesbians (Iasenza, Colucci, & Rothberg, 1996; LaSala, 2000). Nevertheless, in applying Bowen theory and the aforementioned findings to the families of lesbians, one must consider how parents feel about their daughters' sexual orientation. On coming out, lesbians have been known to face parental reactions from guilt and disappointment to rejection, verbal threats, and even physical violence (D'Augelli, Hershberger, & Pilkington, 1998; "Results of Poll," 1989; Warshow, 1991). Whereas parent-child relationships have been found to improve with time following the initial disclosure, parental disapproval often persists (Beeler & DiProva, 1999; Ben-Ari, 1995; Bernstein, 1990; Cramer & Roach, 1988; Muller, 1987; Warshow, 1991). These findings suggest that parental attitudes toward a daughter's lesbianism are complex and warrant further study.

Not surprisingly, parental feelings may affect lesbians and their unions. For young lesbians, self-esteem and comfort with being gay have been found to be correlated with maternal acceptance (Floyd, Stein, Harter, Allison, & Nye, 1999; Savin-Williams, 1989a, 1989b). Among a sample of 124 coupled lesbians, relationship quality was found to be significantly associated with parental acceptance (Caron & Ulin, 1997). Conversely, parental negativity can have adverse affects on gay women and their relationships. Among a sample of 1,925 lesbians, Bradford, Ryan, and Rothblum (1994) discovered that difficulties with family was one of the top five problems listed by their respondents and the second most common reason for seeking mental health services. In a sample of 706 lesbian couples, women listed problems with relatives

as the third greatest challenge to their relationships (Bryant & Demian, 1994), In a qualitative study of 20 partnered lesbians, 20 percent reported that their parents' disapproval adversely affected their relationships (Murphy, 1989).

The available clinical and empirical literature begins to explain the variety of ways coupled lesbians might cope with parental disapproval. From a Bowenian perspective, family therapists have described how some lesbians might react to parental disapproval by sublimating their own independence needs and prioritizing their relationships with their parents, resulting in conflict with their partners (Iasenza et al., 1996; Krestan & Bepko, 1980). Parental hostility also might lead lesbians to distance themselves from their families, which in turn could result in couple difficulties, as unsettled intergenerational problems get projected onto partners (LaSala, 2000). Kurdek and Schmitt (1987) compared samples of 79 heterosexual, 50 gay male, and 56 lesbian couples and discovered that, in contrast to heterosexuals, gay and lesbian couples were less likely to list family members as major sources of support. In a follow-up study, Kurdek (1988) found that emotional support from friends was more important than that of family to the relationship satisfaction and psychological well-being of gays and lesbians. These findings suggest that lesbians (and gay men) cope with family disapproval by finding alternative sources of support. However, it is also possible that they are disavowing the importance of family. Although it may be possible to compensate for a lack of closeness to one's family by cultivating supportive friendships, Bowenian theory would suggest that those who distance themselves from their parents and deny the importance of parental relationships may be prone to dysfunctional interactions with partners or friends who restimulate unresolved issues with parents (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Most likely, it is desirable to have a network of good relationships that includes not only friends, but also family. Clearly, more research is needed to better understand how gay women cope with parental attitudes toward their lesbianism and relationships.

The purpose of this exploratory research was to develop new understandings that would add to the knowledge describing the intergenerational dynamics of coupled lesbians. More specific research questions included: How do coupled lesbians perceive their parents' feeling and opinions about their lesbianism? How do coupled lesbians respond to or cope with their parents' attitudes? What, if anything, helps lesbians and their parents maintain relationships that are meaningful and developmentally appropriate? I anticipated that the results of this study could suggest how to intervene with lesbians and their families sensitively and effectively.

METHOD

To obtain "thick descriptions" of lesbians' family dynamics in all of their complexity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), qualitative methods were used.

Participants

The sample consisted of 40 self-identified lesbians in 20 couples. All of the women lived in the New York City metropolitan area; 17 couples resided in central and northern New Jersey; one couple lived in Brooklyn, another on Staten Island, and a third on Long Island. Thirty-five of the 40 women were non-Hispanic white, three were African American, and two were Latina. Household incomes ranged from $12,000 to $240,000 with a median of $80,000. The age range of the respondents was 26 to 49 years with a mean of 37 (SD = 5.10). The lengths of time couples were together ranged from one to 22 years with a mean of 6.5 (SD = 3.65). For the

purpose of this study, coming out to parents was defined as explicitly telling a parent she was gay, and by this definition all but one woman had come out to at least one of her parents. The intervals from the coming-out disclosure to the time of the interview ranged from two to 27 years with a mean of 11 years (SD= 6.17).

Criteria

To be included in this study, both members of each couple had to agree to participate. The respondents needed to be living together and to have been in their relationship for at least one year. In addition, at the time of the interview both members of the couple needed to have at least one living parent.

Data Collection

A convenience sample was gathered (Fortune & Reid, 1998). Researchers have recommended that those who study lesbians recruit respondents from multiple sources to maximize the potential diversity of their samples (Institute of Medicine, 1999). An advertisement for this study was placed in a newsletter received by members of a gay/lesbian community center that serves central New Jersey. In addition, flyers were distributed at a dance for lesbians sponsored by this community center. This advertisement also was posted on a listserv subscribed to by lesbian and gay male graduate students, faculty, and alumni of a large public university in central New Jersey. To attract respondents who did not own computers, were not members of a gay organization, and were not affiliated with the university, an announcement was posted in restaurants and coffee shops in central New Jersey and New York City.

Potential participants contacted the interviewer by telephone or e-mail, at which time they were screened to determine if they met the study criteria. The primary reason for a couple not meeting the criteria was that one or both women's parents were deceased. Potential participants were told that their identities and responses would be kept confidential. In addition, each respondent was informed that she would be paid $20 for participating.

Only one couple canceled a scheduled interview appointment, stating that they did not have the time to participate. All others who scheduled an interview completed the study.

My assistant, a lesbian and first-year MSW student, and I, a gay man, collected data over a five-month period. I developed a standardized interview protocol of open-ended questions (Patton, 1990). Women were asked their perceptions of their parents' attitudes about their lesbianism, how their parents and in laws felt about their partner relation ships, and how their parents' and partner's parents' opinions affected their relationships. We took thorough notes during the interviews, which also were audiotaped.

I anticipated that members of a couple might disagree about the intergenerational effects on their relationship and that a participant might censor certain responses in the presence of her partner. Therefore, partners were interviewed privately in separate rooms of each couple's home.

Data Analysis

Coding of Data. Once we collected all the data, I read the quoted responses to a related set of questions. After reviewing the answers of eight to 10 interviewees, I

was able to establish initial codes. Examples of these preliminary codes were as follows: parental shame, parental fear, parental guilt, parental support, assertive coping, partner encouraging parental contact, partner acting as buffer, and partner helping to set boundaries. I sorted quoted responses by code using word processing software. As coding of responses within and across targeted areas continued, it became apparent that several codes could be combined to form secondary or axial codes (Glaser, 1978). For example, partner encouraging contact and partner acting as a buffer could be combined into a broader code called partner facilitation.

Glaser (1978) defined memos as "the theorizing write-up of ideas about codes and their relationships as they strike the analyst while coding" (pp. 83-84). Toward the end of the coding process, I wrote memos to identify and elaborate emerging themes, such as the role of the partner in parental relationships. Memos also served as drafts of the Results section of this article.

Reliability. Several authors have described the benefits to data collection and analysis if the researchers and respondents share demographic and social similarities (Lofland & Lofland, 1984; Martin & Knox, 2000). Because we had common experiences and could speak the language of the gay culture, it was relatively easy to establish the necessary rapport to encourage participants to discuss these potentially painful areas of their lives. However, we ran the risk of allowing our views of gay life to bias our perceptions. To minimize this possibility, coded segments of the interview transcripts were reviewed regularly with gay and heterosexual clinical and research colleagues throughout data collection and analysis. As a result of these reviews, I revised several codes. For example, after some preliminary coding, I was alerted that I might have been bringing a bias to my analysis that might have led me to judge parents too dichotomously, categorizing them as either disapproving or supportive. I was advised to more thoroughly review the segments of the transcripts describing perceived parental reactions and, in doing so, I became aware of how most of the respondents saw their parents as having a complicated mix of feelings about their lesbianism.

The research assistant independently sorted written and tape-recorded data into key codes that emerged during the data analysis. Although codes were not changed as a result of these reliability checks, there were a few incidents when our sorting choices for a particular response did not agree. At these times we both reread entire transcripts of the interview in question and then discussed the responses. As a result several responses were recoded. The final overall agreement between her codes and mine was 92.3 percent with a range of 8 percent to 97 percent across key codes.

FINDINGS

Shift in Parental Reactions

On coming out, lesbians are almost certain to face parental and in-law antipathy. This has been reported in earlier research (D'Augelli et al., 1998; "Results of Poll," 1989) and by the women of this study. Thirty-four of the women encountered disapproval on coming out to their parents, with 23 women experiencing hostile or rejecting reactions. However, as time passed, their parents' attitudes seemed to improve. Most of the respondents indicated that their parents' feelings at the time of the interviews were a blend of support and disapproval. When parents were negative, it was because they felt guilty, embarrassed, or ashamed of their daughters' lesbianism. Furthermore, participants reported that parents worried for their daughters' well-being, fearing that the respondents would grow old alone or

that they would experience discrimination. Nevertheless, respondents stated that their parents liked their partners and supported their relationships. As a matter of' fact, besides feeling relieved about not having to hide their lesbianism, these women reported that the support and validation offered by their parents was a primary benefit of being out to them.

As stated by a 31-year-old respondent who had been out to her parents and also with her partner for five years:

They would say they like her but they'd rather me be married with children. My mother would say she's embarrassed. She's said this.

However, she reported that her parents included her partner in family events and that this benefited her relationship with her partner. Another respondent who was 37, out to her parents for eight years, and currently in a three-year relationship reported:

My mother claims she is embarrassed in her natural surroundings. They're [mother and father] only open in her immediate family ... They're afraid of what others would think.

Nevertheless, this same respondent described how her father bought her a plane ticket so she could relocate to be with her lover. Also, she reported that her mother allowed her teenage sister to visit the couple overnight and she perceived this to be evidence that her parents had accepted her lesbianism. A 33-year-old respondent who had been out to her parents for nine years and was currently in a two-year relationship noticed that neither her mother nor her mother-in-law had told their extended families about their daughters' lesbianism. She believed this to mean they both were ashamed. Still, both sets of parents included both partners in family events. She reported: "Family is important to me, and being accepted as a couple helps by knowing we have our family to support us." Thus, although most of the women perceived their parents to be embarrassed about their lesbianism or worried for their well-being, their parents also demonstrated support for their relationships, and this support benefited their unions.

Parental Disapproval and Boundary Setting

The majority of women indicated that parental disapproval did not substantially affect their relationships. In all but two couples, there was at least one member who described how she protected the relationship from parental or in-law disapproval. In response to a minor incident, such as if a parent said something insensitive, couple members might ignore it or discuss it among themselves. However, when parents were perceived to be invalidating the relationship, the women responded assertively. For example, one respondent's mother wanted to visit her for an extended stay but requested that her daughter and her partner sleep separately for the duration of the visit. The interviewee adamantly refused, telling her mother, "This is our house and we'll do it by my rules."

Several women mentioned that a partner assertively affirming the couple's relationship to her parents was seen as a sign of her love and commitment: "The fact that she took that stand with her parents showed me how much she cared for me."

For many of these women, their relationship with their partners catalyzed the developmentally appropriate restructuring of their intergenerational relationships.

The following woman who had been out for four years and with her current partner for one year, stated,

They used to have expectations of me. They would expect I would stay with them on vacations and to come stay with them. Ever since I was with Fran, I don't do that anymore. They've adjusted to it. They accept I can't spend a lot of time with them.

After being out and with her partner for 13 years, this woman described what appeared to be a developmentally appropriate change in her relationship with her parents:

It's become stronger. I'm not so much their "daughter" anymore as much as their adult friend. This is due to me being happy with Cheryl.

Some of the women gave examples of how their partners actively encouraged or helped them to set boundaries with their parents. A 41-year-old graduate student who had two children from her heterosexual marriage, and who was currently in a four-year relationship, recounted:

Mom took pictures and made an album with no pictures of Marie. Marie and I talked about it and decided how we would deal with her. I wrote her a letter and told her I was offended.

In speaking of her parents' and her partner's parents' disapproval, she stated, "Our relationship is sealed against outside influences. Our primary commitment is absolutely to each other, and nobody fucks with that. If anybody tries... we deal with it." Early in their relationship, the following couple had argued because one of the women's parents insisted that the couple spend all of the holidays at their home. As stated by one of the women: "If we were a straight couple, her [partner's] family wouldn't mind her splitting the holidays with her in-laws."

At her urging, her partner asserted herself to her parents: "As I got older and when I realized Lisa was the one, I made it clear to them. That changed me. I will not allow anything to cause us problems."

Partner Facilitates Parental Relationships

The positive influence of partners went beyond merely providing a reason to set boundaries with parents. Anger or guilt in response to parental disapproval could potentially lead a gay woman to excessively distance and even cut off from her family of origin. However, 27 of the women reported that their relationships with their parents had improved since they had been with their partners, and 35 of the women described specific ways their partners facilitated parental relationships. This facilitation could simply be urging the partner to contact her parents: "She thinks I should go see my mother more than I do."

In addition, partners often acted in ways to buffer the problematic parental relationship. The following 33-year-old respondent pushed her partner of two years to "lighten up" on her own mother: "I am more tolerant of her mother. I feel she is very short with her at times. I have told her." In speaking about her relationship with her father, whom she described as homophobic, this 29-year-old women stated:

My father and I had a terrible relationship when I was a teenager. It's evolved since then because my father has worked really hard on it. Toni is a good buffer between us... she puts up with his irritability and temperament. She's very calm and patient

with him and tries to get special things for him; bake him things .... [As a result] he's always asked about her feelings. He's including her in family finances. Now my relationship with him is good, loving, and supportive.

Another woman talked about how she convinced her partner to soften her position regarding her own mother:

When Kathy and her mother and her sister have conflict, I try to explain Mom's point of view. I remind Kathy her mother is mourning [her heterosexual image of] her daughter, and I tell her to be more patient as she mourns.

She went on to say: "It makes me feel good that I can act as a buffer between Kathy and her mother."

For a 45-year-old respondent, her relationship with her partner helped her work: through her anger at her mother for not protecting her from childhood sexual abuse perpetrated by her stepfather. For years, she and her mother were unable to speak without arguing about her childhood. When asked how her relationship with her parents had changed since she had been with her partner, she replied, "in a positive way. I am not as furious with her [mother]. Marge and I had a daddy-girl relationship, and I worked through my dad issues."

At times, a partner's actions could create some mild conflict, as it did for the following couple. One partner reported, "I keep telling her not to shout at her mother." And this was echoed in the responses of her partner who said, "If I say something nasty to my mother, she says: 'You can't say that to your mother!' I do the same." Even though she sometimes got slightly annoyed at her partner for seeming to take her mother's side, she conceded: "I like the fact that my partner respects my mother."

Thus, on the basis of the reports of these respondents, it seems that a partner's encouragement and coaching might have prevented the distancing that would be expected between disapproving parents and their lesbian daughters.

Couple and Family-of-Origin Discord

Sometimes the partner's involvement resulted in conflict, particularly when parents were strongly disapproving of their daughter's lesbianism. In couples in which one woman had a profoundly negative relationship with her parents, pushing the partner to have more contact or to improve her relationship with her parents resulted in conflict. one respondent described how her partner urged her to have contact with her rejecting mother and how this created tension between them: "We argue weekly, she wants me to call my mother. I'll say no, and we go back and forth with that." Another described her partner's mother as very hostile, yet she implored her partner to call her mother:

I think Julie's missing a lot, and I would like her to make an attempt [to contact her disapproving mother]. On Mother's Day I bug her all day to call her mother, and by the afternoon she docs it. By the end of the call she is so upset, and she's saying, 'Why do I subject myself to this?'"

Thus, although pushing for contact and intergenerational harmony benefited most of the couples in this study, for women with the most negative parents, this action could strain the couple's relationship.

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DISCUSSION

According to Bowen (1978), individuals in functional families are intimately connected yet allow each other the autonomy to define or differentiate themselves and develop relationships with significant others. Because they are able to distinguish between thoughts and feelings, differentiated family members arc able to disagree without letting their emotions interfere with their ability to negotiate and compromise. As a result, differing points of view can be tolerated without threatening family relationships (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

Conversely, fusion describes the inability to separate thinking from feeling (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). The fused person is immersed in emotionality, as are her or his relationships, and is unable to understand accurately or tolerate the discomfort that arises when family members disagree. Attempting to control others through destructive arguments, distancing, or sublimating one's needs for the sake of harmony are ways family members undermine their own and each other's independence and maintain a fused homeostasis. Conceptually, fusion as defined by Bowen is not to be confused with the high levels of intimacy found in many lesbian relationships (Green, Bettinger, & Zacks, 1996). Fusion actually impedes intimacy; people struggling with fusion are so overwhelmed with their own anxiety and dependency needs that they are unable to recognize and attend to the needs of their partners.

Bowen (1978) and Kerr and Bowen (1988) believed that even the healthiest family's differentiation levels could diminish in a crisis, and the profoundly negative parental reactions experienced by the respondents on coming out suggest that such a regression may have occurred. However, despite their ongoing shame and worry about their daughters' lesbianism, many parents' attitudes improved to the extent that they were able to support their daughters' relationships. Maintaining connections despite differing points of view, as these parents did, is a hallmark of differentiation. In a related manner, lesbians who come out could be seeking to differentiate themselves because they are defining who they are and risking parental disapproval in the hopes of eventually establishing a more honest closeness. Asserting oneself when necessary, as did the women in this study, could be seen as one way a lesbian avoids the pitfalls of fusion and maintains appropriate intergenerational boundaries.

Boszorymenyi-Nagy and Spark (1973) claimed that for marriages to flourish individuals must place their relationships with their spouses ahead of those with their parents. However, it is reasonable to imagine that in the face of parental disapproval, gay women might hide or minimize the importance of their long-term partner relationships to maintain intergenerational peace. Such prioritization of parents would, in turn, be expected to lead to conflict in the partner relationship. However, for the women in this study, parental disapproval did not affect their relationships, thanks to their own boundary-setting behavior. In addition, the respondents' partners seemed to facilitate functional intergenerational relationships by helping the interviewees affirm appropriate intergenerational boundaries when parental hostility threatened to interfere with the partner relationship.

Furthermore, partners pushed respondents to maintain contact with family when, presumably, they perceived too much strain or distance between generations. For some women, their partners helped them see their parents in a more objective way: Thus, partners may have functioned in ways to minimize the potential for fusion and encourage healthy, intergenerational relating. According to Bowen (1978)

differentiation describes an appropriate balance between connection and autonomy among family members, and the partners' support of not only protective intergenerational boundaries but also harmonious parental connections could be interpreted as efforts to help the respondents establish or maintain appropriate levels of differentiation.

The emergence of the women's partners as an important resource in the respondents' parental relationships was somewhat surprising considering that the literature on coming out to parents generally does not address how partners can help or hinder intergenerational relationships. In addition, according to Bowenian theory, a person's differentiation level is a product of past family relationships (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). The findings from this study raise the possibility that a strong partner relationship might increase the basic level of differentiation and improve an individual's relationship with her parents. Certainly, this is an important topic for future research.

Fusion was evident in some of the respondents' parental and partner relationships. It seemed that parents who were continuously antagonistic were unable to put aside their own feelings to have meaningful relationships with their daughters, and this suggests a lack of differentiation. Several of the women with hostile parents were emotionally distant or cut off from their families. However, their partners pushed them to relate to their parents, even when this seemed to hurt their relationships with each other. Bowen (1978) believed that fusion was transmitted across generations by the tendency of people to marry others whose low differentiation levels matched their own. Some of the women from troubled families may have pushed their partners to the point of conflict because they were projecting their own unresolved issues with their parents onto their partners and in-laws. In addition, putting herself between her partner and her partner's hostile parents by arguing the parents' viewpoint could have given the troubled partner an outlet to express her anger without threatening the homeostasis of the problematic intergenerational relationship. In these circumstances, partner encouragement did not help parental relationships and actually strained partner relationships.

Additional research is needed to determine the relationships between parental disapproval, intergenerational discord, and relationship satisfaction for lesbian couples. In the meantime, social workers and other clinicians helping lesbians heal their relationships with their parents need to understand that whereas parental feelings and opinions about a daughter's lesbianism may improve from the initial disclosure, parental shame and worry can persist. Even if her parents never fully accept her sexual orientation, helping a lesbian client set intergenerational boundaries can assist her in maintaining healthy relationships with her parents and her partner. In addition, the often helpful but at times problematic role of the partner in encouraging intergenerational relationships found in this study suggests that social workers and family therapists need to assess the partner's potential as a resource for their lesbian clients' parental relationships carefully.

Caution should be taken in generalizing the findings from this small, mostly white sample. The family dynamics of lesbians of color may differ from those of their white counterparts. For example, Greene and Boyd-Franklin (1996) pointed out that for African Americans, the family serves an important protective function by buffering its members against the economic and psychological burdens of racism. As a result, an African American lesbian might be less willing to risk the family rejection that can occur if she chooses to live outside of the closet. An African American respondent from this study decided to terminate her relationship in the face of intergenerational

pressure, and perhaps her fear of loosing this special, protective family support contributed to her decision.

Research findings suggest that Latinos, African Americans, and Asian Americans may be more reluctant to come out to their parents, fearing that the antigay sentiment within their cultures makes parental rejection likely (Chan, 1989; Merighi & Grimes, 2000; Tremble, Schneider, & Appathurai, 1989). Clearly, more information is needed regarding family issues that are unique to lesbians of various races and ethnicities.

These findings support and in some ways add to those of earlier studies (Ben-Ari, 1995; D'Augelli et al., 1998) that found that parental attitudes toward their daughters' lesbianism that were initially very negative seemed to improve as time passed from the initial disclosure. However, the qualitative methods used in this study helped add to this information by identifying the blend of perceived parental feelings that included shame, fear, and support. It should be noted that this was a study not of actual parents' attitudes but of their daughters' perceptions of those attitudes. Interviews with parents could better elicit their feelings and opinions about their gay daughters. The qualitative approach also was useful in identifying what may be the important facilitative role of the partner in improving relationships with parents.

Researchers who study the issues and concerns of lesbians have called for more investigation of the effects of family relationships on lesbians' well-being (Institute of Medicine, 1999). Clearly, more quantitative and qualitative examination of how lesbians negotiate intergenerational family dynamics is needed to inform family scholars about this variant family form and to help social workers and other mental health professionals understand the distinct clinical needs of this understudied population.