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“The Three Musketeers”: A Triadic Analysis Of Parenting Responsibilities Within UK LGBTQ+ Three-Parent Families

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ABSTRACT

Within the UK, alongside many other countries, it is legally and socially assumed that every child is born with two parents. Recently there has been an increased societal interest in intentional multi-parent families, where more than two adults are actively involved in co-parenting a child, yet little research has explored experiences within these families. This study addresses this gap, exploring the way in which parenting roles and responsibilities are negotiated within LGBTQ+ intentional three-parent families in the UK. This article draws upon a unique data-set of three-parent families, including interviews with twelve LGBTQ+ parents in four families in the UK. Data were analysed using a novel analytical approach, qualitative triadic analysis, which allows for the analysis of participants' experiences at an individual and family level. Family systems theory, and the underutilised theoretical concept of emotional triangles, were used to make sense of the data. Three themes were identified in the data, all addressing the research question 'How do three-parent families negotiate parenting roles and responsibilities?'. Findings highlight that participants managed their parenting arrangement in two different ways, either sharing parenting responsibilities equally or dividing parenting roles, with primary and secondary caregivers taking on different responsibilities. Participants discussed the importance on flexibility and communication in managing their arrangement and all participants reported positive co-parenting relationships. This study has a number of implications: methodologically and theoretically, this study highlights the usefulness of systemic qualitative approaches to studying diverse families. Legally, findings highlight the restrictiveness of two-parent models.

Keywords: co-parenting, multi-parenthood, LGBTQ+, family diversity

INTRODUCTION

It is legally and socially assumed that every child born in the UK has two parents, with birth certificates only allowing for the inclusion of two parental figures (Brenner, 2021). Research has explored experiences in families where there is one parent from birth (i.e. single parents by choice) but research has seldom explored experiences in families with more than two parents from birth. Within the UK and the US, it has been suggested that multi-parent families are becoming more common (Chen, 2020) and there has been an increased societal interest in multi-parenthood. Academically, lawyers have discussed the sociolegal implications of multi-parenthood (Joslin & NeJaime, 2022) and philosophers have suggested that multi-parent families may be a solution to the climate crisis (Gheaus, 2019). Multi-parenthood has been discussed in the media (e.g. Chen, 2020) and parents have published memoirs about their multi-parenthood journeys (e.g. Jenkins, 2021). Despite this increasing interest, we lack empirical research on multi-parent families.

Multi-parent families can generally be defined as more than two adults deciding to raise a child together. For instance, a same-gender female couple might decide to raise a child with a male acquaintance or friend. Increasingly, multi-parenthood families are being formed online, via a growing array of co-parenting matching websites. Despite these novel methods of family formation, multi-parent families are not new – many parents separate and have to negotiate multi-parenthood with step-parents (Joslin & NeJaime, 2022). In terms of intentional multi-parent families, LGBTQ+ individuals have often formed families with multiple parents, owing to biological necessity and a rejection of traditional family norms (Herbrand, 2018a). Moreover, there is a long tradition of multi-parenthood within different cultures across the world (Keller, 2014), and anthropologists have highlighted the evolutionary benefit of ‘alloparenting’, where additional caregivers are invested in the upbringing of non-biological offspring (Emmott, 2021).

Within the UK, intentional multi-parent families tend to take on two forms, elective co-parenting families and polyamorous parenting families (polyfamilies). Elective co-parenting families are families in which two (or more) individuals decide to have a child together, outside the context of a romantic relationship. Elective co-parenting families often include a couple co-parenting with another couple or a single person, and thus some elective co-parenting families are also multi-parent families. Polyfamilies are families in which parents have multiple partners, and thus if multiple partners are involved in raising the child, then these families can also be considered multi-parent families.

A number of societal changes, including access to assisted reproduction and increased awareness of multi-parenthood, means that multi-parent families are becoming more common. Moreover, as LGBTQ+ individuals are pursuing parenthood in greater numbers (Family Equality, 2019) and consensual non-monogamous relationships are becoming more visible (Scoats & Campbell, 2022), multi-parent families are likely to become increasingly common in the future. It is therefore important to explore experiences within multi-parent families, and this study aims to address this research gap, providing one of the first insights into the way in which LGBTQ+ three-parent families navigate parenthood. Drawing upon a unique data-set, involving separate interviews with three parents in four elective co-parenting families (twelve parents in total), within this paper we explore the research question ‘How are parenthood roles and responsibilities negotiated in three-parent families?’.

Research On Multi-Parent Families

UK legislation allows for two parents to be registered on a child’s birth certificate: the birth parent is registered as the mother (despite their legal gender), and if this person is married, then the mother’s partner will be listed as the second parent (Surtees & Bremner, 2020). This ‘two-parent model’ is cisnormative, in prohibiting trans and non-binary parents from identifying as

they would like (Bower-Brown, 2022), and heteronormative, in generally assuming that each child has a mother and father (Shaw et al., 2022). Wider societal stigma is known to have an impact on LGBTQ+ individuals, with minority stress theory theorising the link between stigma, stress and the poorer health outcomes identified in LGBTQ+ populations (Frost & Meyer, 2023). Sociolegal research has focussed on the way in which restrictive legislation ignores the realities of LGBTQ+ multi-parent families, and creates barriers for individuals wishing to parent in this way (Brenner, 2021; Surtees & Bremner, 2020). One study explored the experiences of multi-parent families in Belgium and the Netherlands, finding that the lack of legal recognition of multi-parenthood created unequal power dynamics between parents (Cammu, 2021). Indeed, Gahan (2019) notes that non-biological parents may be in a precarious position if the co-parenting arrangement breaks down.

Research has explored parents' motivations for undertaking elective co-parenting, finding that individuals choose co-parenting arrangements so that the child has a mother and father, and a relationship with both biological parents (Bower-Brown et al., 2023; Gahan, 2019; Herbrand, 2018a, 2018b; Jadvá et al., 2015). Although elective co-parenting is becoming more prominent amongst cisgender, heterosexual parents, co-parenting might represent a 'second best' route to parenthood, after parenting in the context of a romantic relationship (Bower-Brown, Foley et al., 2023). As LGBTQ+ individuals may not be able to biologically conceive within a romantic relationships, elective co-parenting arrangements may be more attractive to LGBTQ+ individuals (Jadvá et al., 2015). Indeed, research has highlighted that LGBTQ+ parent families are more likely to be intentional, meaning that parents are particularly motivated, well-resourced and resilient (Golombok, 2015). Such reasoning also applies to elective-co-parenting families more broadly, and a recent article on family functioning in elective co-parenting families found that parents and children had good psychological wellbeing (Foley et al., 2024).

Managing Multi-Parenthood

Some research has explored the way in which multi-parent families manage their parenting arrangements. Schadler (2021) identified that polyfamilies with three or more parents organised their parenting in either a hierarchical or egalitarian way. Within hierarchical families, participants reported that there were ‘main parents’ and ‘co-parents’, with a clear division of roles, whereas in egalitarian families, childcare and responsibilities were divided equally amongst parents (Schadler, 2021). Within elective co-parenting families, some parents have been found to manage their arrangements flexibly (Herbrand, 2018b), given that the demands of parenting change at different developmental stages, with birth parents taking on more day-to-day parenting in the early years, due to parental leave and/or breastfeeding. In other cases, parents have been found to draw up non-legally binding contracts, both as an important discursive tool and a way to protect the rights of all parents (Bower-Brown et al., 2023; Cammu, 2021; Surtees & Bremner, 2020). This may be particularly important within multi-parent families (compared to two-parent co-parenting families) due to the biological and legal inequality that likely exists within these families.

Although co-parenting offers parents the possibility of reimagining parenthood outside of traditional norms, co-parenting arrangements often follow gendered patterns, with research noting that mothers and/or birth parents tend to take on primary caregiving roles, with fathers more often involved as part-time parents (Bower-Brown et al., 2023; Gahan, 2019; Herbrand, 2018b, 2018a). Some research has also identified a gendered power imbalance, in that mothers may engage in maternal gatekeeping, and fathers might be more likely to agree to non-ideal arrangements (Bower-Brown et al., 2023; Herbrand, 2018b). It is important to understand whether gendered patterns are prevalent within three-parent families specifically, where the ‘one mother-one father’ family model is not applicable.

Co-parenting in two-parent families

A large body of research has explored co-parenting within two-parent families (McHale et al., 2004). Different-gender couples who want to parent equally may struggle to achieve equality, due to the employment and policy structures that limit these arrangements (Twamley & Faircloth, 2023). In terms of LGBTQ+ couples, some research has identified an equal division of household and childcare labour (Tornello, 2020), whereas other research highlights that plans for parenting equality are not always achieved, due to birth parents taking on more day-to-day parenting (Shaw et al., 2022). This highlights the complex negotiation of parenthood roles and responsibilities in two-parent families, which is likely to be even more complex in three-parent families.

Many families start out as a two-parent family, undergo parental separation, and then form a multi-parent family with step-parents. This negotiation of new parental responsibilities and multiple parent-child relationships is complex (Sanner et al., 2022). For instance, research has identified that step-parents may not see themselves as having parental responsibility for their step-children, relying on traditional understandings of parenthood as biological (Russell, 2014). Gahan (2019) explored the post-separation parenting of elective co-parenting families, outlining the challenges that parents faced when sharing parenthood across three homes, rather than two. Notably, post-separation arrangements tended to privilege biological, two-parent family models (Gahan, 2019), suggesting that traditional notions of family remain prominent.

Family Systems Theory

The negotiation of parenthood roles and responsibilities in three-parent families can be understood in more depth using a systemic theoretical lens. Family systems theory is a key psychological perspective, suggesting that the family is an interconnected system, where the experience and behaviours of one family member are connected and influential to all family members (Bowen, 1966; Lerner et al., 2002). This theory has been applied to multiple types of

non-traditional family forms, where it has been utilised to highlight that family processes are more important for child development than family structure (Golombok, 2015).

One underexplored aspect of the family systems theory is the concept of ‘emotional triangles’. Bowen (1966) suggests that the triangle is the smallest emotional unit within the family, and that families are formed of multiple, interlocking sets of triangular relationships. Bowen argues that emotional triangles allow for tension to be resolved within the emotional system, as tension can be passed around between different members of the triad. Most commonly, this triangle refers to the mother, father and child unit, with Feinberg (2003) distinguishing between dyadic parent-parent interactions, dyadic parent-child interactions, and triadic parent-parent-child interactions. Therapeutic literature has explored the way in which tensions are managed within the mother-father-child triad (Klever, 2009), yet in many families more than two adults are involved in childrearing and thus parenting responsibilities must be negotiated in a triad, rather than a dyad. For instance, one study on step-parenting found that step-fathers negotiated a complex parental positioning, respecting the biological father’s unique position whilst also trying to build a parental relationship with their step-child (Blyaert et al., 2016). Such negotiations are likely to be different in intentional multi-parent families, as all three parents are present from the start of the journey to parenthood. Utilising Bowen’s perspective on emotional triangles, parenting triads could potentially be more sustainable than parenting dyads, as parenting tensions might be managed more effectively in a parenting trio, rather than a duo. For instance, research on parenting dyads has highlighted that conflict in the couple subsystem can spillover into the co-parenting subsystem (McRae et al., 2021). Having a defined three-parent co-parenting subsystem could reduce spillover of couple conflict, resulting in more positive co-parenting relationships in multi-parent families.

Bowen (1966) suggests that individuals may occupy insider and outsider spaces within emotional triangles, with insiders having an emotional alliance that excludes the outsider. A

previous study with three-parent families found that co-parenting arrangements involving a couple and a single person, experienced a ‘two-against-one’ dynamic (Cammu, 2021), suggesting that managing a co-parenting arrangement as a three can be challenging. Additionally, when we consider that children generally have two biological parents, in three-parent families the non-biological parent might feel like an outsider. This has been identified in literature on LGBTQ+ motherhood, where non-birth mothers report feelings of insecurity about their parent-child relationship (Shaw et al., 2022). Three-parent families might organise their families in different ways (Schadler, 2021), and family systems theory is therefore useful when exploring the negotiation of parenthood roles and responsibilities.

This study therefore aims to address the research question ‘How are parenthood roles and responsibilities negotiated in three-parent families?’ utilising a systemic theoretical and analytical approach. Drawing upon Bowen’s (1966) concept of emotional triangles, in this article we analyse data from twelve parents in four elective co-parenting families, to understand the complexities of negotiating parenthood in a triad.

METHOD

Sample And Interviews

Participants were recruited for a co-parenting study through relevant co-parenting websites and mailing lists (e.g. Pride Angel, Modamily, Pollentree), social media, and via snowballing. This study was not pre-registered. Participants were invited to take part if (a) they had a child aged 0-12 within a co-parenting arrangement, and (b) defined themselves as raising the child with involvement from a co-parent. There were no geographical restrictions to participation. Interested participants emailed the research team, and were provided with detailed information about the study. We report how we determined our sample size, all data exclusions (if any), all manipulations, and all measures in the study. The data for this article come from a subsample

of the original data-set (see Foley et al., 2024), and this sub-sample includes three-parent families in which i) three parents took part in individual interviews, and ii) all three parents had been involved in the parenting journey from conception. This subsample was created so that it would be possible to include the perspectives of all three parents in analysis.

This subsample consisted of twelve parents in four families. Three families had one child and one family had two children: children were aged between four months and three years old. All participants in the subsample identified as LGBTQ+, and had a diversity of gender identities, including cis men, cis women, trans women and a non-binary person. All parenting arrangements were constructed of one couple co-parenting with an additional co-parent that they did not live with. All participants lived in the UK and co-parenting arrangements were formed on co-parenting websites (3 families) or with a friend (1 family). All participants were white and most had an undergraduate degree, with incomes ranging from less than £10,000 to £50,000. Further demographic information has not been provided to protect anonymity.

The study received ethical approval from the University of Cambridge Psychology Research Ethics Committee. All participants gave written informed consent, and each parent took part in a separate, semi-structured interview at home or online, between 2019 and 2021. Families received a £30 participation voucher. Despite potential differences in data quality between online/in-person interviews, this participant-centred approach maximised flexibility and, as the analysis prioritised semantic content over interactional nuances, this strategy was deemed appropriate. The interview protocol was designed and developed by the research team, building from their previous research on diverse families and elective co-parenting. Participants were asked about their decision to become a co-parent and the journey to parenthood (e.g. ‘Can you tell me when you first decided you would like to try and have a child with a co-parent?’). Questions also focused on the way in which they managed daily parenting tasks, and their feelings about their family (e.g. ‘How satisfied are you with your current arrangement with

[co-parent]?’). Finally, participants were asked about their social experiences and the societal context (e.g. ‘Do you think that co-parenting is generally acceptable in today’s society or not?’). Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by a professional transcriber.

Studying Multi-Parenthood

Existing literature of multi-parenthood often relies on the participation of one or two parents in a family, and this may mean that the published research on multi-parenthood does not account for the experiences of all parents. This study therefore aimed to address this gap, by focussing on families in which all three parents participated in the study. Given this unique data-set, it was important to use an analytic method that would allow for the exploration of parents’ unique experiences at an individual level, as well as understanding broader family processes at a systemic level.

A small body of health literature has outlined dyadic approaches to analysis, where two separate interviews can be integrated within the analytic process (see e.g. Collaço et al., 2021). Given that family systems theory suggests that the triangle is the ‘emotional molecule’ of the family (Klever, 2009), expanding dyadic analysis to triadic analysis may be particularly useful when studying families. Few studies have conducted triadic analyses, although Van Parys et al.’s (2017) study of three sister-to-sister egg donation families is an exception. Within this study, the authors interviewed three sets of parents, donors and children, integrating these different perspectives to explore the co-construction of shared family realities. The authors outline an analytic method inspired by interpretative phenomenological analysis and dyadic interview analysis (Van Parys et al., 2017). Such a method is therefore suitable for phenomenologically analysing data within small samples, but might be less appropriate for studies with more participants, in which phenomenology is not the overarching perspective.

Therefore, a new analytic method was developed for this project, triadic qualitative analysis, which involves analysing participants' experiences at both an individual and family level. Drawing upon a number of existing analytical methods, including reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021), qualitative comparative analysis (Guest et al., 2014), and thematic coding (Flick, 2014), as well as previous research using dyadic and triadic analytic methods (Collaço et al., 2021; Van Parys et al., 2017), a 7-step process was devised.

In the process of data familiarisation (Step 1), each interview was read and re-read, and notes were made on key aspects of participants' experiences. Focusing on one family at a time, we then coded the data line-by-line on NVivo (Step 2), coding semantic content that was relevant to the research question. Detailed case summaries were then created for each family member (Step 3), drawing out key quotations and identifying important narratives and experiences. We then engaged in a concurrent reading practice (Step 4): as the interviews were semi-structured, each participant answered similar questions, and so the three interviews were read side-by-side, paying particular attention to nuances within each parent's experiences. A 'triadic family summary' was then created for each family (Step 5), which outlined participants' individual perspectives alongside their experiences at a family level. Having completed steps 2 – 5 for each family, we then compared and contrasted the family summaries, and re-examined the codes and interview data, to draw up preliminary themes (Step 6), which were revised upon reviewing the data. The integration of code lists, individual case summaries, and triadic family summaries at this stage meant that the themes therefore attuned to participants' experiences at an individual level, at a family level, and at a sample level. This process was both inductive and deductive: data were coded without a preconceived theoretical framework, but in Step 6 themes were revised in light of relevant theory. The data were then written up (Step 7), and during this process the themes were further refined.

This analytic method aligns with systemic family theories and a critical realist perspective, which combines aspects of ontological realism (an understanding that an objective reality exists) and epistemological relativism (an understanding that our subjective realities are socially constructed) (Willig, 2016). Therefore, the aim of this approach is not to search for inconsistencies in participants' narratives, but to understand each participant's subjective experiences of their family life, and how this is shaped by multiple intersecting factors. In accordance with the critical realist approach, researcher positionality was important to consider. The primary author is an LGBTQ+ non-parent, and as such occupied an insider-outsider positionality (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009), perhaps having more insight into participants' LGBTQ+ identities than parenthood experiences. All authors are psychologists with a wide range of training and experience in researching diverse family forms. It is recognised that other researchers, with different identities and academic backgrounds would have analysed the data in a different way.

A key aspect of any research project is protecting the confidentiality of its participants. It has been highlighted that the strengths of multi-family member studies are often not fully realised, due to concerns around within-family confidentiality (Van Parys et al., 2017). Within triadic studies, it is particularly challenging to preserve the 'loop of confidentiality' (Ummel & Achille, 2016) where individuals may recognise their own words, and thus their co-parents' words. In order to benefit from the richness of the triadic data, whilst also protecting participant anonymity, a confidentiality strategy was created. No pseudonyms have been assigned, minimising the possibility of 'tracing' one participant's story using multiple quotations. Where quotations on the same point are from co-parents in the same family, this is made clear, to allow the reader to see multiple perspectives from one family. Data have been anonymised and within some quotations the pronouns that have been used to refer to the child (e.g. she/he/they) have been changed. This 'smoke screen' strategy (Saunders et al., 2015) was chosen as it did not

alter the quotations' meaning, but further protected the internal confidentiality of participants. No other details have been changed and below, data are presented verbatim, with some repetitive or filler words (e.g. you know, like) removed for clarity.

RESULTS

Three themes were identified within the data, all relating to the research question 'How do three-parent families negotiate parenting roles and responsibilities?'. Theme 1 was relevant to all families in the sample, whilst Theme 2 and 3 describe strategies that were used in different families: two families managed parenting roles and responsibilities as described in Theme 2, and two families managed parenting roles and responsibilities as described in Theme 3.

Theme 1 ("Uncharted territory": Creating life as a multi parent family) describes the way in which participants approached co-parenting, which was viewed as a new form of parenthood with no-road map. Participants reported navigating fears and anxieties as they drew up contracts, prioritised clear communication and built trusting co-parenting relationships. Participants' friendship with their co-parents allowed them to manage the arrangement in a flexible way, and this allowed them and their children to enjoy the benefits of co-parenting

Theme 2 ("The three musketeers": Sharing responsibilities equally) describes how some families aimed to share parenthood responsibilities equally between all three parents. Participants spoke about managing their co-parenting arrangement with the guiding principle of equality, and aimed to involve all parents in day-to-day parenting and decision making. Participants reflected on the benefits and challenges of spending time away from their child, and the legal and societal barriers that they encountered as an involved three-parent family.

Theme 3 ("We make all the decisions": Dividing parenting roles) describes how some families delineated different roles and responsibilities for each parent. The division of responsibility was often based on gender, with mothers being primary caregivers and decision makers, and

fathers being involved on a less regular basis. Participants described negotiating boundaries with their co-parent, balancing the desire for their co-parent to be involved with their child and their desire to protect their own parenting role.

Theme 1: “Uncharted Territory”: Creating Life As A Multi-Parent Family

In general, participants considered a number of routes to parenthood, including using or being a sperm donor, but co-parenting was chosen as it allowed all biological parents to be involved in their child’s upbringing:

I think we preferred the idea of co-parenting because then there isn’t any element of an outside party, it’s everyone agreed and is happy with the scenario and is going to be there for the child’s life and so as long as we can get on with the co-parents.

This echoes previous research on co-parenting motivations (Jadva et al., 2015) and also highlights that ‘getting along’ with the co-parents is seen as a potential barrier. Most families described meeting their co-parent online, via co-parenting matching websites: “it was me that found [co-parent]’s profile... I got such a positive feeling from it”. Participants reflected on the benefits of meeting someone online, rather than co-parenting with a friend: “we don’t really want our relationships impacted, we still want them to be our friends”. This demonstrates a benefit of constructing a novel parenting triad, in managing potential emotional tension and preventing conflict in other relationships. Alternatively, one participant described the benefits of co-parenting with someone they already knew:

It was more just finding a co-parent who we already knew, who we already had a good relationship with and already felt we could trust at that point so it was none of the questions of having to do background checks on anyone.

This highlights that trust may be built more easily when co-parenting with a friend, although quantitative analyses from this study have identified no differences in family functioning

between co-parenting families formed online and with a friend (Foley et al., 2024). Participants noted that the start of the journey could be challenging, given the lack of guidance and resources available to co-parents:

It was how to go about that, how to do that, and then it was first of all finding someone, and then it was how much involvement, how are we going to do this, it's really difficult because there's no not really any guidance it's just up to you to figure it out.

Regardless of the way they met, all participants described a long period of discussing their potential co-parenting plans: "I was so keen to ask a lot of questions, and answer a lot of questions". This demonstrates the high level of preparedness that multi-parent families may have, and during this initial period, participants noted the importance of open communication: "We did a lot of touching base and I think that's so important, open, like any relationship there's open communication, honesty and just having a 'hey let's chat, how are things going?'".

Participants reported fear and anxiety at the start of their co-parenting journey, as for many participants "this was uncharted territory, we didn't know anybody that had done it":

At the back of your mind, you're thinking this could really go wrong, what if he tries to take custody of the kids at some point...you're wary of what you're doing.

For non-birth parents, this anxiety was related to feeling involved in the journey: "I was anxious, I want to make sure that we are co-parenting and not just being a donor for them and like wanting to be a parent and involved". This highlights that sperm providers might feel like an 'outsider' in the triad, with less power than birth parents, due to gendered expectations around parental involvement. Participants noted that discussing and sharing their anxieties with their co-parent was helpful, demonstrating the strength that triadic arrangements may offer:

I could say things like “this is so weird” and they went “I know!” and “I’m scared it’ll go wrong,” “me too!”, “Er I didn’t really wanna say this but I’m really worried you’re gonna just turn your backs on us, on me,” “I know, same here”.

Most participants drew up contracts, although some described that legal costs were a barrier: “[the lawyer] came back to us with a price and we were like ‘we can’t really afford that’”. For those who did draw up agreements, participants recognised the process as useful in setting out expectations: “We did have an agreement written up... it had a lot of questions on it which they answered and I answered as well, just to see we were on the same level”. Therefore, participants described that their co-parenting arrangement was an ongoing negotiation: “it’s not without difficulties...you need to be willing to communicate [and] talk things through”. This highlights that the establishment, and maintenance, of triadic arrangements requires high levels of reflexive communication.

Over time, participants noted that their fears decreased as their trust and friendship grew with their co-parent: “I think it’s really developed into what I refer to as a modern family [laughs]...I think we just get along so [well], just on every level”. Many participants described not referring back to the contract that they drew up:

We don’t refer to it as a bible in any way...in fact I don’t think I have even referred to it once, I think everything’s just been so amicable between us that we haven’t had to refer to it, which has been really good.

One participant therefore described that this trust allowed them to approach things differently for their second child: “when we were talking about [second child], I said ‘look we need to do a contract for [them] as well’ and you know what we’ve never printed it or signed a contract cause it’s just gone that well”. This demonstrates the way in which the emotional triangle

became stronger over time, with trust and experience minimising the need for contracts and other relationship management tools.

One factor that could be challenging was defining family boundaries. One co-parent's partner was referred to as "kind of a dad" by one parent, a "fun uncle" by another, and the third co-parent noted that "he isn't called anything, he's just [name]". Moreover, participants described that negotiating parenthood roles became challenging if one parent met a new partner: "There was a bit of a communication issue with that. I think there was an assumption without asking me that [co-parent's partner] would become a parent figure...so that caused some tension I think. We worked through it and we discussed it". This highlights that family transitions could be challenging (Gahan, 2019), potentially threatening the parenting triad and sense of trust, thus demonstrating the importance of reflexive and open communication.

In general, participants described feeling like "one big family...the kids love it". They noted that their children received "double the love, you know, she has three sets of parents and grandparents and cousins that love her" and they described joy in their unique family set-up:

We take [child] to the park obviously, she's holding hands with myself and her mummy and I'm holding hands with [partner], and she's holding hands with her partner, so there's a big long daisy chain with little [child] in the middle! I suppose you get a few looks but no, no one really questions it, they just see a big happy family.

Theme 2: "The Three Musketeers": Sharing Responsibilities Equally

Two families described viewing themselves as entering into a co-parenting partnership with three equal parents: "we're there to help each other at the end of the day and we're there to make sure [child] gets the best that you can get, we're all the three musketeers...all for one, one for all [laughs]". Another parent in this family also stated "it's all quite fairly split really".

One parent described parenting “half the week on, half the week off” and another parent in this family noted that “we can share the burden of parenting, we can share difficult parts”. This highlights the potential for triadic arrangements to ameliorate parenting stress and challenges cisheteronormative expectations around parenting roles. Participants noted that the division of labour was affected by birth parenthood, with birth parents doing more hands-on parenting in the early months: “Practically they’re going to have [child] more overnight...certainly when [child] was still breastfeeding...he didn’t stay overnight here as much”. Birth parents can therefore be seen as having an ‘insider’ position in the emotional triangle, and they described being aware of this, and aiming to include their co-parents: “We do see her a lot more than [co-parent] does. Don’t want [co-parent] missing out on anything...when [child]’s doing new stuff and new noises... [co-parent] needs to experience all that as well”.

Participants noted that their child benefited from having multiple involved parents: “we all have our own interests and skills and personalities and I think that diversity is great for [child]”, and this echoes research on the benefits of polyfamilies (Alarie, 2023). These arrangements also benefitted participants, in allowing them to be highly involved parents, whilst also having time to themselves: “We constantly joke about how we don’t know how people manage just two people looking after a child full time. We just don’t understand how it works, how anyone has got the energy”. Therefore, having a three-parent family allowed parents to rest and recover from the demands of parenting:

If you involve all of the parents...it’s a lot easier, there’s not just two of us being tired all the time, we can sort of say ‘oh come and grab [child] for a bit, I just need some sleep’...it takes that pressure off you as well, and everything’s shared out.

This demonstrates that equal parenting triads may be particularly well placed to effectively manage the demands of modern parenting, minimising emotional tension resulting from stress

or tiredness. Although participants noted downsides to sharing parental responsibility with a co-parent (“it’s difficult missing [child]”), they noted that overall there were benefits: “I definitely feel the benefit of the break. More so, then of the other, the difficulties of the break. Having more energy, being able to just maintain my old life”. Couples also described having time as a pair, highlighting that separate, triadic arrangements can potentially strengthen couple relationships, minimising the spillover of tension from the couple dynamic: “[co-parent] can have them and we can still have time as a couple as well, just to go out without worrying and finding babysitters”. This aligns with the quantitative analyses from the current study, with elective co-parents in romantic relationships reporting average to above-average couple satisfaction scores (Foley et al., 2024).

Despite these benefits, participants described legal barriers in becoming a three-parent family:

It seems impractical that we’re only allowed two parents on the birth certificate and I think that leaves... a massive insecurity for the non-biological parent...we were quite upset about that ...we’re all equally parents on this journey, and yeah I think that should be recognised.

Participants therefore described constructing parenting connections through surnaming practices and marriage, representing a creative approach to kinship: “Me and [co-parent] would go on the birth certificate, [partner] would be my wife and with that become effectively legal [parent] to [child]”. However, this experience was challenging for the non-legal parent, who occupied an outsider position in the parenting triad: “even though he’s got my name...it is very complicated because I’m not entitled, you know, I’ve got no parental rights really”. This echoes prior research on the legal barriers experienced by multi-parent families (Cammu, 2021; Surtees & Bremner, 2020) and highlights the difficulties in building families that challenge

traditional expectations. Alongside legal barriers, healthcare institutions and pregnancy spaces were not found to be inclusive:

The NHS scans they would only allow you in with one person... they didn't recognise that there were three parents as opposed to being two...that was quite upsetting in a way for me, just that 15, 20 minutes of your heart in your mouth outside just hoping everything was OK.

Despite legal and practical barriers, participants noted that "I think we make a good family really" and expressed enjoyment at their unique family situation:

I don't think you'll find many parents that probably go on holiday together and have days out together...and I suppose doing it the way we've done it as well, it's a lot easier because we weren't a couple and then split up.

Theme 3: "We Make All The Decisions": Dividing Parenting Roles

In contrast to the families described in Theme 2, the two other families in the sample described dividing parental roles within their family, with some parents being more involved on a day-to-day basis:

[My partner and I] make all the decisions basically, but [co-parent is] a presence in her life, every couple of weeks we meet up and see him, so yeah, but we're her main guardians and we make the decisions revolving around [child]'s needs.

Participants distinguished between being a parent (parental role) and doing parenting (parental responsibility): "[Partner and I] do the parenting...but we want [child] to have the best relationship possible with their Dad, to have him in their lives". This parent's partner also agreed that "[co-parent] doesn't have any role in decision making", and this made defining their family challenging:

We didn't want a co-parent, so we don't call [co-parent] a co-parent we just we say it as we are their parents legally and just generally, but [co-parent] is their Dad still, so he's a parent and we'll say to [child], that's your parent but if you know what I mean.

This highlights the complexity of defining non-traditional family arrangements and these quotations demonstrate that some parents did not seek triadic arrangements to share the burden of parenting, but instead due to the desire for their child to have a father (Herbrand, 2018a). Another parent stated that they wanted a co-parent "who wanted contact, but as I say, wasn't wanting custody". Participants spoke about the importance of outlining this in a contract: "[the contract said] that we didn't expect any money from him. That we would have full custody... but he has a right to see them". This highlights the importance of agreeing parenting terms prior to having a child, and whilst both families drew up an formal contract, they then managed their arrangement in a flexible way, with one participant describing their arrangement as "very much child led...we just say to [child] if you're missing [co-parent] at any point, just tell us and we'll organise something". This approach allowed participants to centre the needs of the child, and demonstrates that flexibility at different stages of child development is an ongoing negotiation. In both families, this meant that there was more involvement of all co-parents than initially expected: "It wasn't until I actually met [co-parent] and they said 'oh, we'd really love for you to be part of [child]'s life'...that was just a sure winner for me as well...because I was going down the route of just being a donor in the end".

Participants described having different parental roles in the family. One participant, who was not the primary caregiver for their child, distinguished between different types of responsibilities: "basically [my co-parents] have full responsibility but I've always said they have the parental responsibilities, I have emotional responsibilities". Therefore, whilst the practical burden of parenting might not be shared, this parent highlighted that emotional

responsibilities can be shared between three parents, demonstrating a complex and nuanced approach to defining parenting responsibilities in a triad.

Participants who were secondary caregivers noted that their parental relationship with their child differed to those of primary parents, with one participant describing himself as “good cop, fun Dad”. This different parent-child relationship was also recognised by primary parents: “It’s more like [co-parent]’ll visit and it’s mainly play. Plays with [child] all the time...but [co-parent] doesn’t try to or doesn’t kinda have any role in erm decision making”.

Whilst participants recognised the benefits of this for their child (“[child] absolutely loves it because she’s got this undivided attention and somebody to play with 24/7”), this difference in parental responsibility could also be challenging for primary parents (“it can be quite hard work”). This highlights that dividing parental roles offers unique challenges, and due to this division, primary caregivers described balancing closeness and distance with their co-parent. For instance, participants described trying to include all co-parents in the pregnancy journey (“he came to the scans with us...we both wanted him to be included”), but also tried to ensure that there was some distance, through asserting their role as a primary parent: “Obviously, I mean it is another person involved and yeah you’ve gotta be careful...they don’t impose too much on your family life, so you gotta be careful I think, get the balance right”.

This balance could also be challenging for secondary caregivers, with one parent describing themselves as “not satisfied” with the amount that they saw their child, “not in a ‘resentful against parents’ [way] but in a ‘I would love to see [child] more’”. This demonstrates that secondary, non-resident caregivers may feel like outsiders in the emotional triangle. Relatedly, one father described being “a bit annoyed” about not being on the birth certificate, reflecting that “I suppose it was something that I should have really mentioned a bit more prior to having [child]”. Parents may therefore benefit from support when having conversations around legal

parenthood, and these experiences demonstrate that emotional tension in triads may result from a lack of communication.

Despite negotiating these challenges, all participants reported joy in how the arrangement had worked out: “It’s passed expectations, yeah. I wasn’t expecting this level, no. And it’s been great”. Participants reflected on their friendship with their co-parent making the arrangement successful, highlighting that strong triadic relationships were key: “I think we’ve pretty much hit the jackpot as far as we could go with meeting someone.”

DISCUSSION

This article has explored the research question “How do three-parent families negotiate parenthood roles and responsibilities?” using triadic analysis of interview data with LGBTQ+ intentional three-parent families. Participants described co-parenting in a multi-parent family as highly rewarding, and across the sample, participants described building close parenting partnerships, demonstrating that triadic arrangements can allow parents to manage the demands of parenting in a sustainable way. Findings highlight that participants managed their arrangement in two different ways, either aiming to share parenting responsibilities equally or dividing parenting roles, with primary and secondary caregivers taking on different responsibilities. This echoes Schadler’s (2021) typology of polyparenting families, suggesting that there are similarities in the way that polyparents and elective co-parents manage parenting. Findings add to our understanding of the way in which parenthood roles and responsibilities are negotiated in multi-parent families, highlighting their complexity and nuance. Below, findings are explored in more depth and discussed in relation to literature and theory.

Triadic parenthood

This article explored experiences in three-parent families using Bowen’s (1966) concept of emotional triangles. Bowen suggests that triads are the smallest, stable emotional unit within a

family, and as such three-parent families may be particularly well suited to manage parenting tension (Cutas, 2011). Indeed, all participants reported satisfaction with their arrangement and positive relationships with their co-parents, suggesting that flexible, triadic arrangements can be a successful solution to the demands of intensive parenting, work and life (Herbrand, 2018b). The study's findings challenge heteronormative understandings of family systems, highlighting that effective co-parenting systems can be triadic rather than dyadic (McHale et al., 2004). Emotional triangles therefore seem to be a relevant theoretical concept, and it would be useful for future research to explore the factors associated with stronger and weaker triadic arrangements, such as communication and flexibility.

The study's unique data-set and analytical approach extends previous research on multiparenthood, which has sometimes relied on the narrative of one or two parents (e.g. Gahan, 2019; Schadler, 2021), meaning that the voices of some parents may be missing from the literature. Indeed, non-birth and non-legal parents may be less likely to participate in research. Findings highlight that participants reported negotiating insider and outsider positions, with birth parents being 'insiders' and non-biological/non-legal parents being 'outsiders'. Prior research has reported a 'two-against-one' dynamic in three-parent families with a couple and a single person (Cammu, 2021); in the current study such a dynamic was not identified in many families, perhaps because 'single' parents often had partners who were involved in parenting to various degrees. It would be beneficial for future research to explore parenting dynamics within other co-parenting arrangements, including polyfamilies and families with more than three parents, to understand how insider and outsider dynamics differ in larger parenting units. It is also important for future research to explore the way in which parenthood roles and responsibilities are re-negotiated in the context of family transitions or a co-parenting arrangement breakdown, as this may be uniquely challenging when there are more than two parents (Cutas, 2011).

Constructing Connections And Building Boundaries

Within this study, participants engaged in a complex, ongoing negotiation of parenthood roles and responsibilities. Participants described that connections and boundaries were particularly salient at certain moments. In particular, participants reported trust-related anxieties when meeting their co-parent online and or when a new adult (e.g. a co-parent's partner) entered the family unit. This demonstrates that transitions and changes in parenting arrangements could be challenging, echoing research on step-parent families (Sanner et al., 2022). This may be experienced differently in polyfamilies – as each parent may have multiple partners, family transitions are likely to be more frequent – and research would benefit from exploring how frequent family transitions are managed.

In order to manage anxieties and build trust, participants reported drawing up detailed contracts with their co-parents. However, in practice, many participants described managing their arrangement flexibly, and this was made possible due to strong co-parent friendships. These findings are consistent with family systems theory, which posits that changes and transitions within the family unit can lead to stress or adaptation, depending on the family's resources (McCubbin & Patterson, 1983). Within the current study, participants' positive relationships with their co-parents and their strong desire and preparedness for parenting, meant that they felt well equipped to deal with potentially challenging situations.

Within families that reported a division of parenting roles, primary parents balanced including their co-parent with maintaining boundaries and protecting of their parental role. This negotiation of parental roles could be challenging, and echoes therapeutic literature on the tension that romantic couples might experience between autonomy and interdependence (Anderson, 2020). Division of roles was often based on gender, with mothers taking on primary responsibility and fathers being secondary parents, and non-birth and/or male parents reported

experiencing less power in the parenting arrangement than birth parents and/or mothers. Such findings echo prior research on elective co-parenting families patterns (Bower-Brown et al., 2023; Herbrand, 2018b, 2018a), demonstrating that traditional expectations of family remain prominent for some three-parent families.

For those families that decided to share parental responsibility equally, participants took a number of steps to construct strong parent-child and parent-parent connections. Given the lack of legal recognition of three-parent families, parents constructed these connections in creative ways, via surnaming practices and marriage, highlighting that a variety of strategies can be used to display parental legitimacy (Dempsey & Lindsay, 2017). Within these families, parental gender was less relevant to the division of labour, and the study's inclusion of LGBTQ+ parents with diverse gender identities highlights that co-parenting may allow LGBTQ+ parents to reimagine parenthood outside of cisheteronormative structures. In particular, trans and non-binary parent families have been found to prioritise equal parenting (Bower-Brown, 2022; Tornello, 2020) and as such, co-parenting may be a particularly attractive route to parenthood for trans people. In this study, participants did not aim for an 'equal' division of labour, and birth parents took on more parenting when the child was very young. Notably, within this study, families that shared parenting responsibilities equally had younger children than those who divided parenting roles, suggesting that child age is not necessarily a barrier to equal parenting responsibilities. Overall, children in this study were young (4 months-3 years) and triadic parenthood will likely differ at different developmental stages. Longitudinal research that incorporates children's voices would be beneficial in exploring how co-parenting arrangements change over time, and how parents/children navigate new challenges, such as children starting school and spending more time with friends.

Societal Inclusion Of Multi-Parent Families

Findings suggest that two-parent legislative models do not reflect the social reality of three-parent families (Cammu, 2021; Surtees & Bremner, 2020). Notably, not all participants desired parental recognition for all parents: some families found that the two-parent model protected the parental rights of primary parents, and allowed secondary parents to have no legal responsibility. However, other parents, who hoped to share parenting equally, found restrictive legislation to be challenging, as it introduced inequality and uncertainty (Cutas, 2011). The current study identified that healthcare spaces (e.g. pregnancy scans and birth) were not inclusive of three-parent families. Non-inclusive pregnancy spaces are stressful for LGBTQ+ pregnant people (Bower-Brown, 2022) and, taking a minority stress perspective (Frost & Meyer, 2023), this increased stress may lead to poorer pregnancy outcomes and experiences, highlighting the importance of updating healthcare policies to be inclusive of multiple parents.

The findings from the current study should be considered in light of the UK context, and it would be beneficial for psychologists to explore multi-parenthood within different contexts. In the Netherlands, legal recognition of multi-parenthood is being considered (Brenmer, 2021), and in the US and Canada, some states already recognise multi-parenthood (Joslin & NeJaime, 2022). Lima (2024) notes that different jurisdictions take different approaches. In some cases, parenthood recognition is retrospective and in other cases (such as Ontario, Canada) recognition is prospective, allowing multiple parents to be legally identified prior to conception. Prospective multi-parenthood legislation may reduce inequality within multi-parenthood families whilst also promoting family stability in traditional families, via the inclusion of step-parents or grandparents on the birth certificate. Exploring parents' experiences in these permissive jurisdictions would be beneficial. In the global context, multi-parenthood may vary considerably, based on varied cultural norms around parenting, and the literature on multi-parenthood would be strengthened by cross-cultural research that challenges the Euro-American lens (Raval, 2023).

Conclusion

This article has explored the way in which parenthood roles and responsibilities are negotiated within three-parent families. This article highlights the usefulness of systematic approaches to qualitative analysis, and has outlined and utilised a novel analytic approach, triadic qualitative analysis. This analytical approach enables the integration of individual and family-level perspectives, and is of relevance to many different family forms. As families deviate further from the two-parent model, either due to parental separation or intentional multi-parenthood, multi-parent families will be increasingly common. Triadic methods will therefore be useful in exploring experiences within complex family systems. This study has a number of strengths, including the rich dataset, unique sample and systemic approach to exploring experiences within an under-researched group. Findings are limited by the inclusion of a small sample of LGBTQ+ parents in the UK – findings may therefore not be generalisable to other three-parent families in other contexts, and cisgender, heterosexual co-parents may have different experiences. Future research could explore parenting in diverse multi-parent families internationally.

Results highlight that multi-parenthood can be a positive and successful way of doing family, and participants discussed the importance of trust, flexibility and communication as guiding principles. Participants managed their arrangements in different ways, highlighting that some three-parent families may adhere to more traditional gendered understandings of parenthood, whilst others might aim to share parenting responsibilities equally. Findings highlight the importance of improving societal inclusion of multi-parent families. As multi-parenthood families become more visible in the UK and across the world, it is important for researchers to further explore the experiences of parents and children in this increasingly common family form.

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