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“The Three Musketeers”: A Triadic Analysis of Parenting Responsibilities Within U.K. LGBTQ+ Three-Parent Families

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Within the United Kingdom, 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 multiparent families, where more than two adults are actively involved in coparenting 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 lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer and questioning intentional three-parent families in the United Kingdom. This article draws upon a unique data set of three-parent families, including interviews with 12 lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer and questioning parents in four families in the United Kingdom. Data were analyzed 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 underutilized 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 of flexibility and communication in managing their arrangement and all participants reported positive coparenting 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: coparenting; multiparenthood; lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer and questioning; family diversity

It is legally and socially assumed that every child born in the United Kingdom 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 United Kingdom and the United States, it has been suggested that multiparent families are becoming more common (Chen, 2020), and there has been an increased societal interest in multiparenthood. Academically, lawyers have discussed the sociolegal implications of multiparenthood (Joslin & NeJaime, 2022), and philosophers have

suggested that multiparent families may be a solution to the climate crisis (Gheaus, 2019). Multiparenthood has been discussed in the media (e.g., Chen, 2020), and parents have published memoirs about their multiparenthood journeys (e.g., Jenkins, 2021). Despite this increasing interest, we lack empirical research on multiparent families.

Multiparent 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, multiparenthood families are being formed online, via a growing array of coparenting matching websites. Despite these novel methods of family formation, multiparent

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families are not new—many parents separate and have to negotiate multiparenthood with stepparents (Joslin & NeJaime, 2022). In terms of intentional multiparent families, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer and questioning (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 multiparenthood 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 nonbiological offspring (Emmott, 2021).

Within the United Kingdom, intentional multiparent families tend to take on two forms, elective coparenting families and polyamorous parenting families (polyfamilies). Elective coparenting families are families in which two (or more) individuals decide to have a child together outside the context of a romantic relationship. Elective coparenting families often include a couple coparenting with another couple or a single person, and thus some elective coparenting families are also multiparent 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 multiparent families.

A number of societal changes, including access to assisted reproduction and increased awareness of multiparenthood, mean that multiparent families are becoming more common. Moreover, as LGBTQ+ individuals are pursuing parenthood in greater numbers (Family Equality, 2019) and consensual nonmonogamous relationships are becoming more visible (Scoats & Campbell, 2022), multiparent families are likely to become increasingly common in the future. It is therefore important to explore experiences within multiparent 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 coparenting families (12 parents in total), within this article, we explore the research question “How are parenthood roles and responsibilities negotiated in three-parent families?”

Research on Multiparent Families

U.K. 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 nonbinary parents from identifying as they would like (Bower-Brown, 2022), and heteronormative, in generally assuming that each child has a mother and a father (Shaw et al., 2023). Wider societal stigma is known to have an impact on LGBTQ+ individuals, with minority stress theory theorizing 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+ multiparent families and creates barriers for individuals wishing to parent in this way (Brenner, 2021; Surtees & Bremner, 2020). One study explored the experiences of multiparent families in Belgium and the Netherlands, finding that the lack of legal

recognition of multiparenthood created unequal power dynamics between parents (Cammu, 2021). Indeed, Gahan (2019) noted that nonbiological parents may be in a precarious position if the coparenting arrangement breaks down.

Research has explored parents’ motivations for undertaking elective coparenting, finding that individuals choose coparenting arrangements so that the child has a mother and a father and a relationship with both biological parents (Bower-Brown et al., 2024; Gahan, 2019; Herbrand, 2018a, 2018b; Jadvá et al., 2015). Although elective coparenting is becoming more prominent among cisgender, heterosexual parents, coparenting might represent a “second best” route to parenthood after parenting in the context of a romantic relationship (Bower-Brown et al., 2024). As LGBTQ+ individuals may not be able to biologically conceive within a romantic relationship, elective coparenting 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 coparenting families more broadly, and a recent article on family functioning in elective coparenting families identified that parents and children had good psychological well-being (Foley et al., 2024).

Managing Multiparenthood

Some research has explored the way in which multiparent families manage their parenting arrangements. Schadler (2024) identified that polyfamilies with three or more parents organized their parenting in either a hierarchical or an egalitarian way. Within hierarchical families, participants reported that there were “main parents” and “coparents,” with a clear division of roles, whereas in egalitarian families, childcare and responsibilities were divided equally among parents (Schadler, 2024). Within elective coparenting 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 nonlegally binding contracts, both as an important discursive tool and a way to protect the rights of all parents (Bower-Brown et al., 2024; Cammu, 2021; Surtees & Bremner, 2020). This may be particularly important within multiparent families (compared to two-parent coparenting families) due to the biological and legal inequality that likely exists within these families.

Although coparenting offers parents the possibility of reimagining parenthood outside of traditional norms, coparenting 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., 2024; Gahan, 2019; Herbrand, 2018a, 2018b). 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 nonideal arrangements (Bower-Brown et al., 2024; 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.

Coparenting in Two-Parent Families

A large body of research has explored coparenting 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, 2024). In terms of LGBTQ+ couples, some research has identified an equal division of household and childcare labor (Tornello, 2020), whereas other research highlights that plans for parenting equality are not always achieved, as birth parents tend to take on more day-to-day parenting (Shaw et al., 2023). 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 multiparent family with stepparents. This negotiation of new parental responsibilities and multiple parent-child relationships is nuanced (Sanner et al., 2022). For instance, research has identified that stepparents may not see themselves as having parental responsibility for their stepchildren, relying on traditional understandings of parenthood as biological (Russell, 2014). Gahan (2019) explored the postseparation parenting of elective coparenting families, outlining the challenges that parents faced when sharing parenthood across three homes, rather than two. Notably, postseparation 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 experiences and behaviors 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 nontraditional family forms, where it has been utilized 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) suggested that the triangle is the smallest emotional unit within the family and that families are formed of multiple, interlocking sets of triangular relationships. Bowen argued 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 stepparenting found that stepfathers negotiated a complex parental positioning, respecting the biological father’s unique position while also trying to build a parental relationship with their stepchild (Blyaert et al., 2016). Such negotiations are likely to be different in

intentional multiparent families, as all three parents are present from the start of the parenting journey. Utilizing 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 spill over into the coparenting subsystem (McRae et al., 2021). Having a defined three-parent coparenting subsystem could reduce the spillover of couple conflict, resulting in more positive coparenting relationships in multiparent families.

Bowen (1966) suggested 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 coparenting arrangements involving a couple and a single person experienced a “two-against-one” dynamic (Cammu, 2021), suggesting that managing a coparenting arrangement as a three can be challenging. Additionally, when we consider that children generally have two biological parents, in three-parent families, the nonbiological parent might feel like an outsider. This has been identified in the literature on LGBTQ+ motherhood, where nonbirth mothers report feelings of insecurity about their parent-child relationship (Shaw et al., 2023). Three-parent families might organize their families in different ways (Schadler, 2024), 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?” utilizing a systemic theoretical and analytical approach. Drawing upon Bowen’s (1966) concept of emotional triangles, in this article, we analyze data from 12 parents in four elective coparenting families, to understand the complexities of negotiating parenthood in a triad.

Method

Sample and Interviews

Participants were recruited for a coparenting study through relevant coparenting websites and mailing lists (e.g., Pride Angel, Modamily, Pollentree), social media, and via snowballing. This study was not preregistered. Participants were invited to take part if (a) they had a child aged 0–12 within a coparenting arrangement and (b) defined themselves as raising the child with involvement from a coparent. 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 subsample includes three-parent families in which (a) all three parents took part in individual interviews and (b) 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 the analysis.

This subsample consisted of 12 parents in four families. Three families had one child, and one family had two children: children were aged between 4 months and 3 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

nonbinary person. All parenting arrangements were constructed of one couple coparenting with an additional coparent that they did not live with. All participants lived in the United Kingdom and coparenting arrangements were formed on coparenting websites (three families) or with a friend (one 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, semistructured 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-centered approach maximized flexibility, and as the analysis prioritized 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 coparenting. Participants were asked about their decision to become a coparent 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 coparent?”). 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 [coparent]?”). Finally, participants were asked about their social experiences and the societal context (e.g., “Do you think that coparenting is generally acceptable in today’s society or not?”). Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by a professional transcriber.

Studying Multiparenthood

Existing literature of multiparenthood often relies on the participation of one or two parents in a family, and this may mean that the published research on multiparenthood does not reflect 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 coconstruction 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 analyzing 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 analyzing 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 seven-step process was devised.

In the process of data familiarization (Step 1), each interview was read and reread, and notes were made on key aspects of the 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 semistructured, 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 reexamined 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 were 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+ nonparent and, as such, occupied an insider–outsider positionality (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009), perhaps having more insight into participants’ LGBTQ+ identities than their parenthood experiences. All authors are psychologists with a wide range of training and experience in researching diverse family forms. It is recognized that other researchers, with different identities and academic backgrounds, would have analyzed 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 multifamily member studies are often not fully realized, 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 recognize their own words and thus their coparents' words. In order to benefit from the richness of the triadic data, while also protecting participant anonymity, a confidentiality strategy was created. No pseudonyms have been assigned, minimizing the possibility of "tracing" one participant's story using multiple quotations. Where quotations on the same point are from coparents in the same family, this is made clear to allow the reader to see multiple perspectives from one family. Data have been anonymized, 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, while Themes 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 multiparent family) describes the way in which participants approached coparenting, which was viewed as a new form of parenthood with no road map. Participants reported navigating fears and anxieties as they drew up contracts, prioritized clear communication, and built trusting coparenting relationships. Participants' friendship with their coparents enabled them to manage the arrangement in a flexible way, and this allowed both parents and children to enjoy the benefits of coparenting.

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 coparenting arrangement with the guiding principle of equality and they 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 coparent, balancing the desire for their coparent to be involved with their child and their desire to protect their own parenting role.

Theme 1: "Uncharted Territory": Creating Life as a Multiparent Family

In general, participants considered a number of routes to parenthood, including using or being a sperm donor, but coparenting 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 coparenting motivations (Jadva et al., 2015) and also highlights that "getting along" with the coparents may be seen as a potential barrier. Most families described meeting their coparent online, via coparenting 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 coparenting 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 coparenting 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 coparenting with a friend, although quantitative analyses from this study have identified no differences in family functioning between coparenting 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 coparents:

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 coparenting 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 multiparent 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 coparenting 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 nonbirth parents, this anxiety was related to feeling involved in the journey: "I was anxious, I want to make sure that we are coparenting 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 coparent 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 recognized 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 coparenting 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 coparent: “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 minimizing the need for contracts and other relationship management tools.

One factor that could be challenging was defining family boundaries. One coparent’s partner was referred to as “kind of a dad” by one parent, a “fun uncle” by another, and the third coparent 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 setup:

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 coparenting 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: “we can share the burden of parenting, we can share difficult parts.” This highlights the potential for triadic arrangements to ameliorate parenting stress and challenge cisheteronormative expectations around parenting roles. Participants noted that the division of labor 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 coparents: “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, 2024). These arrangements also benefitted participants, in allowing them to be highly involved parents, while 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, minimizing emotional tension resulting from stress or tiredness. Although participants noted downsides to sharing parental responsibility with a coparent (“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, minimizing 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 present study, with elective coparents in romantic relationships reporting average to above-average couple satisfaction (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 nonlegal 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 multiparent families (Cammu, 2021; Surtees & Bremner, 2020) and highlights the difficulties in building families that challenge traditional expectations. Alongside legal barriers, health care 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 nontraditional 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

coparent "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 while both families drew up a 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 allows participants to center 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 coparents 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, while 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 from those of primary parents, with one participant describing himself as "good cop, fun Dad." This different parent-child relationship was also recognized 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."

While participants recognized 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 coparent. For instance, participants described trying to include all coparents in the pregnancy journey ("he came to the scans with us ... we both wanted him to be included"), but they 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, nonresident 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 coparent 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 coparenting in a multiparent 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 (2024) typology of polyparenting families, suggesting that there are similarities in the way that polyparents and elective coparents manage parenting. Findings add to our understanding of the way in which parenthood roles and responsibilities are negotiated in multiparent 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 suggested 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 coparents, 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 coparenting 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 extend previous research on multiparenthood, which has sometimes relied on the narrative of one or two parents (e.g., Gahan, 2019; Schadler, 2024), meaning that the voices of some parents may be missing from the literature. Indeed, nonbirth and nonlegal 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 nonbiological/nonlegal 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 present 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 coparenting 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 renegotiated in the context of family transitions or a coparenting 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 coparent online and/or when a new adult (e.g., a coparent’s partner) entered the family unit. This demonstrates that transitions and changes in parenting arrangements could be challenging, echoing research on stepparent 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 navigate anxieties and build trust, participants reported drawing up detailed contracts with their coparents. However, in practice, many participants described managing their arrangement flexibly, and this was made possible due to strong coparenting 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 present study, participants’ positive relationships with their coparents 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 coparent with maintaining boundaries and protecting their parental role. This negotiation of parental roles could be challenging, and it 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 nonbirth 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 coparenting family patterns (Bower-Brown et al., 2024; Herbrand, 2018a, 2018b), 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 when constructing strong parent–child and parent–parent connections. Given the lack of legal recognition of three-parent families, parents built 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, 2018). Within these

families, parental gender was less relevant to the division of labor, and the study's inclusion of LGBTQ+ parents with diverse gender identities highlights that coparenting may allow LGBTQ+ parents to reimagine parenthood outside of cisheteronormative structures. In particular, trans and nonbinary parent families have been found to prioritize equal parenting (Bower-Brown, 2022; Tornello, 2020), and as such, coparenting may be a particularly attractive route to parenthood for trans and nonbinary people. In this study, participants did not aim for an exactly "equal" division of labor, 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, the 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 coparenting 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 Multiparent 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 present study also identified that health care spaces (e.g., pregnancy scans and birth) were not inclusive of three-parent families. Noninclusive 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 health care policies to be inclusive of multiple parents.

The findings from the present study should be considered in light of the U.K. context, and it would be beneficial for psychologists to explore multiparenthood within different contexts. In the Netherlands, legal recognition of multiparenthood is being considered (Brenner, 2021), and in the United States and Canada, some states already recognize multiparenthood (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 multiparenthood legislation may reduce inequality within multiparenthood families while also promoting family stability in traditional families, via the inclusion of stepparents or grandparents on the birth certificate. Exploring parents' experiences in these permissive jurisdictions would be beneficial. In the global context, multiparenthood may vary considerably, based on varied cultural norms around parenting, and the literature on multiparenthood 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 systemic approaches to qualitative analysis and has outlined and utilized 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 multiparenthood, multiparent 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 data set, unique sample, and systemic approach to exploring experiences within an under-researched group. Findings are limited by the focus on a small sample of LGBTQ+ parents in the United Kingdom—findings may therefore not be generalizable to other three-parent families in other contexts, and cisgender, heterosexual coparents may have different experiences. Future research could explore parenting in diverse multiparent families internationally.

Results highlight that multiparenthood 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, while others might aim to share parenting responsibilities equally. Findings highlight the importance of improving the societal inclusion of multiparent families. As multiparenthood families become more visible in the United Kingdom 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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