

BEING WITH DIFFERENCE:  
PARENTING EXPERIENCES OF GAY ADOPTIVE FATHERS

By

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Abstract

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Increasingly more gay men are becoming parents or desire to become parents. Families headed by openly gay fathers live in environments that are still largely homophobic and heterosexist. This study describes the challenges, opportunities, and rewards gay adoptive fathers experience at home and in their communities. In-depth phenomenological interviews were conducted with gay adoptive fathers from 20 families (18 gay couples and 2 single gay men). Fathers adopted children through both domestic and international routes. The children of the fathers ranged in age from 9 months to 22 years. Using a social constructionist lens and descriptive phenomenological analysis, themes within each interview and across interviews were identified.

The men in this study became parents in a society dominated by the beliefs that all children need a female mother, gay men cannot and should not be parents, and homosexuality is morally wrong. Their parenting stories illuminate social landscapes dotted with evolving attitudes towards gay parenting, structural inequities against LGBT communities, and entrenched beliefs about gender, sexuality and family. While some fathers worked with adoption professionals who challenged these attitudes and advocated for same sex parenting, many fathers regularly encountered heteronormative biases in the adoption system.

When asked what it was like to parent as gay men, fathers explained that in many respects their day to day experiences were very similar to those of heterosexual parents, and particularly to other adoptive parents. At the same time, they often faced reminders at home and in public spaces that they were not part of a heterosexual order. From sidewalk to airport, hospital to playground, classroom to café, gay fathers and their families drew attention. Fathers regularly encountered questions and comments about the nature of their family. They had to decide if and how to explain themselves or correct others' assumptions, while modeling honesty and pride about their families to their children.

Research on families headed by same sex parents has largely focused on the “impacts” gay and lesbian parents have on children’s social, emotional and psychological adjustment and the degree to which their families are similar to families with heterosexual parents. The stories shared in this study move beyond such questions and dive into the heart of being with difference and the meanings difference has for gay fathers, their children and those around them. The fathers provide a vivid picture of their emotional bonds with their children and the strengths and resiliencies they and their children develop living in environments that are largely homophobic and heterosexist. With the information provided by this dissertation, practitioners can challenge heteronormative biases in social work practice, education, and public policy. By revealing the insidious ways heteronormativity “shows up”, the results prompt social workers to investigate their beliefs about gay male sexuality and intimacy, the primacy of the heterosexual nuclear family, and conventional notions that a child needs both a female mother and a male father. The father’s experiences raise provocative practice questions about nurturing and child rearing. The stories urge practitioners to investigate complex and taken for granted notions about gender and parenthood, and help them engage more sensitively with families headed by same sex parents.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>CHAPTER I</b>	
<b>INTRODUCTION AND PROBLEM STATEMENT</b>	1
Introduction	1
Problem Statement	3
Relevance for child welfare and adoption practice	3
Social policy landscape for same sex parents	6
Heteronormativity in social policy	9
Research questions	13
<b>CHAPTER II</b>	
<b>THEORETICAL INFLUENCES</b>	15
Mechanisms of Social Construction	15
Exposing the discourses	16
Shifting the gaze	17
Making Relationality Central	19
Who can/should nurture?	20
Relational competence and resilience	21
Emotionally engaged research	22
<b>CHAPTER III</b>	
<b>REVIEW OF THE EMPIRICAL LITERATURE</b>	25
Introduction	25
Confronting the Discourse of Difference	25
Towards a New Research Paradigm	29
Parenting and gay identity	30
Traditional and transformative: Family relationships and processes	33
Stigma, discrimination, and disclosure	37
Summary	41
<b>CHAPTER IV</b>	
<b>RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY</b>	42
Purpose and Overview of the Proposed Dissertation	42
Rationale for a Phenomenological Qualitative Inquiry	42
Co-creating a reflective space	43
Uncovering the less visible	45
Respecting intentionality	46
Research Methodology	47
Sampling plan	47
Recruitment of participants	47
Sample characteristics	48
Data collection	49
The interview guide	49

The interview process	50
Descriptive phenomenological analysis	52
Key steps in data analysis	54
Being in bewilderment	54
Reflexivity	57
<b>CHAPTER V</b>	
<b>ON THE ROAD TO BECOMING PARENTS</b>	61
Desire, Possibility, and Expectation	61
I had always wanted children	61
I had never, never thought about it	63
A child without a parent and a parent without a child	66
Rejecting the need to have a child biologically	68
Suddenly the sun rose when I realized I could do that	72
Responses from Families of Origin	79
Support and affirmation	79
From puzzlement to disapproval to rejection	82
A mix of reactions	84
Summary	89
<b>CHAPTER VI</b>	
<b>GAY FATHERS IN SOCIAL SPACES: NEGOTIATING FORMAL SYSTEMS</b>	91
Navigating the Adoption System	92
You have to consciously make an effort to have a child	92
How open can we be as gay men?	95
We were afraid to look too loving	95
Don't ask, don't tell	98
The point is to play the game	101
You have to know the landscape	104
Why would a mother choose us?	108
I kept expecting to get dirty looks	114
Disclosure, Diversity, (and Integration?):	
Navigating the School Systems	118
Finding the right school for your kid	118
What's important is that your kids be safe	119
Screening schools for heteronormativity	121
Everybody had something interesting or different	122
Two dads is a good thing	126
Interfacing with schools	129
Running into homophobia	129
Opening up a can of worms:	
Children's disclosure in the schools	133
Summary	138

<b>CHAPTER VII</b>	
<b>GAY FATHERS IN SOCIAL SPACES: NEGOTIATING THE UNPLANNED (AND UNINVITED)</b>	140
Your Wife Must Be at Home	140
To correct or not to correct	143
When my child is present	148
Two Men Cannot Be Part of the Same Family	150
Daddy and papa	150
They realized there were two men with a child	152
That's weird but cool	155
Look, they're looking	157
It Can Be a Hostile World for Two Men with a Kid	158
If Somebody Gets Pissed Off and Something Bad Happens	162
Little Flecks of Heteronormativity	167
Summary	172
<b>CHAPTER VIII</b>	
<b>WHERE'S MOMMY? THE DOMINANCE OF THE MOTHER IN GAY FATHERING</b>	173
Wait a Second, Where's Mommy?	174
Can We Parent Without a Woman?	179
An Adopted Kid with No Mother	184
Who's the Mommy and who's the Daddy: Parenting Roles	187
The maternal and the paternal	188
Good cop-bad cop/ the feminine and the masculine	191
Summary	196
<b>CHAPTER IX</b>	
<b>IT'S SO IMPORTANT TO TALK AND TALK: PREPARING CHILDREN FOR A HETERONORMATIVE WORLD</b>	197
There Are Many Places We Wouldn't Be Welcomed	198
Is it an Adoption Issue or a Gay Dads Issue?	203
Eventually the story is going to be hers	205
And now it gets complicated	207
Summary	209
<b>CHAPTER X</b>	
<b>PARENTING AND GAY IDENTITIES, COMMUNITIES AND CULTURES</b>	211
From Surprise to Disapproval to Celebration	211
Does Parenting Trump Gayness?	216
A More Openly Gay Man with A Kid	220
Summary	224

<b>CHAPTER XI</b>	
<b>ANOTHER LAYER OF DIFFERENCE: DOES RACE TRUMP GAYNESS?</b>	225
One More Thing to Contend With: Adopting a Child of Color	225
White Guy with a Black Baby	229
Being Gay Helps: Knowing What It's like to be an Outsider	232
It Had More to Do with Race than Having Two Dads	235
Summary	240
<b>CHAPTER XII</b>	
<b>DISCUSSION</b>	241
Introduction	241
The Possibilities of Parenting as Gay Men	242
Interacting With Formal Systems: The Visibility and Invisibility of Gay Parents	244
Navigating the adoption process	244
Allowing two men to adopt jointly	246
The power of presence	248
Parent-Child Relationships: Communication, Connection and Cohesion	249
Anticipating a wider world	250
It's about communication	251
Relationships in the Community: Everyday Reminders of Heteronormativity	255
Relationships to Gender: The Dominance of Motherhood	258
Challenging ideologies of mothering	259
Transforming (queering?) social roles	261
Relationships to Identities: What's Being Gay (Not) Got to Do with Being a Parent?	263
Decentering gayness	263
Parenting and social status	265
Limitations of the Study	267
Implications for Social Work	267
Suggestions for Future Research	270
Conclusion	271
<b>APPENDICES</b>	
Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer	273
Appendix B: Informed Consent Form	274
Appendix C: Audio Consent Form	276
Appendix D: Interview Guide	277
Appendix E: Demographic Questionnaire	279
Appendix F: Sample Demographics	282
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	288

## LIST OF TABLES

		Page
TABLE 1	Descriptive Characteristics of Adoptive Fathers	283
TABLE 2	Descriptive Characteristics of Adopted Children	285
TABLE 3	Descriptive Characteristics of Sample	286

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

#### Introduction

Increasingly more gay men are entering into parenting or desire to become parents (Gianino, 2008). Families created by openly gay fathers are part of an ongoing evolution and expansion of family forms (Brown & Perlesz, 2007; Fairtlough, 2008; Tasker & Patterson, 2007). Despite these changes in family structures, there has been little research on the families of gay men who choose to parent within openly gay relationships (Barrett & Robinson, 2000; Gianino, 2008; McCann & Delmonte, 2005; Millbank, 2003; Tasker & Patterson, 2007). A gay man nurturing his children flies in the face of two widely held socially constructed beliefs: women are innately better nurturers than men and gay men cannot be successful parents. Gay fathers and their children often face the pressures of living within environments that are still largely homophobic and heterosexist (Ryan & Berkowitz, 2009). These pressures show the power of heteronormativity, “a vast matrix of cultural beliefs, rules, rewards, privileges, and sanctions that impel people to reproduce heterosexuality and to marginalize those who do not” (Oswald, Blume, & Marks, 2005, p. 144).

Using the results of a qualitative study, in this dissertation I discuss the challenges, opportunities, and rewards gay adoptive fathers experience parenting within largely heteronormative environments. Using a phenomenological methodology, I conducted 20 in-depth interviews with gay adoptive fathers about their experiences as parents both at home and in their communities. The vivid and diverse stories these fathers shared indicate that heteronormativity is present in their lives and in their children’s lives, but varies markedly in its forms, intensity, and significance. When asked what it was like for them to parent as gay men,

fathers explained that in many respects their day to day experiences were the same or very similar to other (i.e. heterosexual) parents, and particularly to other adoptive parents. At the same time, they said that they often faced “reminders”, both at home and in public spaces, that they were not part of a heterosexual order. Exploring how these encounters affected fathers’ relationships with their children and others reveals a complex picture of how they and their children experience gay parenting in their lives and how people in their environments respond to this difference from “the norm.” Their experiences show the overt and insidious ways ideologies about sexuality, gender, and family surface in everyday social interactions. The findings of this study are part of a growing body of research on the day to day lived experiences of gay fathers (see Gianino, 2008; Goldberg, Downing, & Moyer, 2012; Lewin, 2009; Mallon, 2004; Tornello, Farr, & Patterson, 2011).

Before proceeding further, I would like to say something about language. As families evolve, so does the language used to describe them evolve (Benkov, 1995; Dunne, 2000; Perlesz, Brown, Lindsay, McNair, de Vaus, & Pitts, 2006). According to Brown and Perlesz (2007), “language [is] a powerful medium through which to convey or conceal the meaning of relationships” (p. 277). Numerous terms have been used to describe families headed by non-heterosexual parents. These terms include: gay and lesbian parents, gay fathers, lesbian mothers, lesbigay families, same sex parents, LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) families, and queer families. For the purposes of this paper, I will primarily use the terms “gay and lesbian parents”, “gay and lesbian families”, “gay fathers”, and “same sex parents.” With just a few exceptions, the research cited in this paper refers to families headed by lesbians and gay men, and does not include families with bisexual or transgender parents.

## **Problem Statement**

### **Relevance for child welfare and adoption practice**

LGBT people have parented children for centuries; what is new is the greater visibility with which gay men and lesbians are pursuing parenthood within the context of expressing openly gay identities. Over two million children are being raised by an LGBT parent (Family Equality Council, 2011). Same sex couples raising children live in 96% of counties in the U.S. (Bennett & Gates, 2004; Gates, Lee Badgett, Macomber, & Chambers, 2007). Using data from the 2000 Census, it was estimated that of the over 600,000 same sex couples identified, 27% had children under 18 living with them. Among these couples were 301,000 same-sex male-partnered households, 22% of whom were raising children in their household (Gianino, 2008). Due to the methods by which same sex couples were identified in this census, these numbers are likely to be significant underestimates (Bennett & Gates, 2004). Based on data from the 2000 Census and the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) from the National Center for Health Statistics, it was estimated that 65,500 adopted children are being raised by gay and lesbian parents, which represents about 4% of adopted children in the US (Gates et al., 2007). 52% of gay men (compared to two-thirds of heterosexual and bisexual men) and 41% of lesbians (compared to 54% of heterosexual women and 59% of bisexual women) have considered adoption (Gates et al., 2007). These demographics suggest that gay and lesbian parents and their children are a sizable population that warrants attention from social work practitioners.

There has been growing interest among politicians, policy makers and analysts, and social service providers about the rights and experiences of gay and lesbian families. Adoption and foster parenting by gay and lesbian individuals and couples, along with same sex marriage, has become part of the discourse on both national and state levels (Cooper & Cates, 2006; Gates,

et al., 2007). As these debates progress, the number of children and adolescents in need of loving and stable foster and adoptive families continues to grow (Gianino, 2008; Mallon, 2004; Riggs, 2006). As of 2009, there were more than 423,000 children in foster care, approximately 115,000 of whom are waiting in need of adoptive homes (Family Equality Council, 2011).

Gay men and lesbians use multiple avenues for parenting including adoption, surrogacy, alternative insemination, and new models of co-parenting. Regardless of their path to parenthood, same sex couples will likely encounter adoption, whether through adopting a child as a couple or by filing for second parent adoption. Gay men wanting to adopt children either domestically or internationally encounter barriers in becoming parents (Patterson & Tornello, 2010). Many have reported numerous challenges throughout the adoption process as a result of negative attitudes towards gay male parenting (Gianino, 2008). To advocate effectively for gay men and lesbians aspiring to adopt children and for the numerous children waiting for adoptive homes, social workers need to become more attuned to the day to day experiences of gay and lesbian parents, and to their own beliefs about parenting and family and how these beliefs impact their work (Mallon, 2004). Without these competencies, social workers will likely base their practice decisions on assumptions, myths, and stereotypes about families headed by same sex parents.

Adoption practices have broadened over time. Groups who have historically been excluded from becoming adoptive parents – single individuals, older individuals, individuals with disabilities, and families with lower levels of economic resources – are being given the opportunity to adopt children (Mallon, 2000). Child welfare has historically rejected policies and practices that restrict prospective adoptive and foster parents from parenting based solely on their demographic characteristics (Cooper & Cates, 2006). A number of child welfare agencies

and other private and public agencies responsible for finding adoptive families have already been placing children with gay and lesbian adoptive parents (Matthews & Cramer, 2006).

Despite a wealth of empirical evidence showing that children raised by gay and lesbian parents are not only doing as well as children raised by heterosexual parents, but in many cases are thriving, myths and discomfort about same sex parenting run rampant in schools (Crowl, Ahn, & Baker, 2008) and among social service providers (Mallon, 2000, 2004; Ryan, Pearlmutter, & Groza, 2004). A number of adoption professionals, including agency directors, do not know their own state's laws concerning the legality of foster parenting and adoption by gay and lesbian individuals and couples (Brodzinsky, Patterson, & Vaziri, 2002). Even in states where adoption by gay men and lesbians is protected by law, there still may be considerable variation among adoption professionals in their attitudes towards and treatment of gay and lesbian applicants (Boyer, 2007). Professionals' beliefs about the meaning of family, their level of knowledge about the experiences of children raised by gay and lesbian parents, their sensitivity towards the multiple levels of stigma gay and lesbian parents and their children face, and their awareness of resources available to gay and lesbian adoptive families all can influence an applicant's experience of the adoption process (Boyer, 2007; Brodzinsky et al., 2002). Professionals need to become competent in exploring how homophobia and heterosexism influence all stages of the adoption process for gay men and lesbians (Boyer, 2007; Gianino, 2008). Guidelines and suggestions to agencies seeking to broaden their views on gay and lesbian parenting and adoption policies are becoming more readily available (for examples, see Boyer, 2007; Howard & Freundlich, 2008; Mallon, 2006). These agency policies, however, need to be understood within the context of state and national policies on gay and lesbian parenting.

## **Social policy landscape for same sex parents**

Laws and social policies concerning gay and lesbian parenting need to be understood within the context of civil rights struggles of LGBT individuals and communities. Attention to the rights of gay and lesbian parents and their children arose in the 1970s with the rise of custody disputes between parents who came out as gay or lesbian and their heterosexual partners. Lobaugh, Clements, Averill, & Olguin (2006) describe landmark events in the advancement of civil rights for LGBT people in the U.S. These events include the removal of homosexuality as a mental health diagnostic category from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) in 1973; the expansion of protections against discrimination for gay men and lesbians in 1996; the U.S. Supreme Court's striking down of antisodomy laws in 2001; and the emergence of civil union and marriage rights for same sex couples in several countries and U.S. states in the early part of the 21st century. Fifteen states and the District of Columbia offer marriage or comprehensive relationship recognition for same sex couples (Family Equality Council, 2011). At the same time, in several states opponents have put forward referenda to limit or restrict recognition for same sex couples, the most notable being California in 2008. Clearly, political and legal landscapes for LGBT communities are dynamic.

Policies, regulations, and laws concerning adoption and foster parenting by gay men and lesbians vary markedly from state to state (Family Equality Council, 2011; Lobaugh et al., 2006)<sup>1</sup>. Many decisions on child custody, adoption, and foster parenting are made on a local level by judges and child welfare authorities. It is still far more difficult for gay men and lesbians to adopt children as couples than as individuals (Cooper & Cates, 2006). Joint adoption for same sex couples is allowed in 17 states and the District of Columbia and effectively banned

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<sup>1</sup> For a comprehensive summary of laws state by state, see "All Children Matter: How Legal and Social Inequalities Hurt LGBT Families" (2011), a report by the Family Equality Council.

in 5 states. In 28 states, state laws are silent on same sex couples' rights to adopt children. While it is possible in most states for LGBT individuals living alone to adopt a child, some states prioritize married couples and ban unmarried couples from adopting children, which effectively restricts LGBT individuals and couples from adopting. In contrast, a handful of states ban discrimination against gay men and lesbians from being adoptive and foster parents (Lobaugh et al., 2006). Only 19 states permit second-parent adoption by an unmarried partner of an existing legal parent, while a handful of states expressly prohibit such adoptions (Family Equality Council, 2011). Two-thirds of children raised by same sex parents live in states that have not yet guaranteed second parent or joint adoption (Bennett & Gates, 2004). Due to these inconsistencies in state and local regulations, legal and economic protections for these families are, for the most part, not secure.

Given the large number of children in need of stable foster and adoptive homes, the consequences of restricting opportunities for gay men and lesbians to be parents are significant (Cooper & Cates, 2006; Howard & Freundlich, 2008). A number of prominent children's health and welfare organizations oppose restrictions on parenting by gay men and lesbians including the Child Welfare League of America and the American Academy of Pediatrics. Other prominent organizations such as the National Association of Social Workers, the American Medical Association, the American Psychiatric Association, the American Nurses Association, and the American Psychological Association have all opposed restrictions on gay and lesbian parenting. The American Psychological Association (APA) has gone even further by adopting a resolution committing itself to taking a leadership role in combating discrimination based on sexual orientation on matters pertaining to adoption, foster care, child custody and visitation, and reproductive health services (American Psychological Association, 2004). The Child Welfare

League of America (CWLA) affirms that gay, lesbian, and bisexual parents are as well suited to raise children as their heterosexual counterparts. CWLA asserts that families with LGBT members deserve the same kinds of supports as other families and that any efforts to restrict the ability of gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals and couples to parent are not in the best interests of children (Child Welfare League of America). The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) opposes discrimination against lesbian, gay, and bisexual people in a number of arenas, which include relationship rights, such as the right to child custody and the right to marry (National Association of Social Workers, 2005).

Several prominent adoption organizations, including The North American Council on Adoptable Children and the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, actively support recruiting gay and lesbian people as adoptive parents. The Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute recently issued its “Policy and Practice Perspective” on eliminating legal and practice barriers to gay men and lesbians adopting children from the foster care system (Howard & Freundlich, 2008). In this report, the institute describes gay and lesbian adults as “part of the solution” (p. 8) to finding families for the large number of children in need of stable adoptive homes. The report also offers recommendations for eliminating policy and practice barriers on both state and agency levels and for best practices in recruiting, assessing, and supporting gay and lesbian adoptive parents. Any efforts to remove these barriers must consider the ideological underpinnings of social policies.

### **Heteronormativity in social policy**

One of my primary aims in this inquiry was to explore how the experiences of gay adoptive fathers both shape and are shaped by a social context in which the heterosexual nuclear family is idealized. Therefore, it is important to examine how this particular family form has

been socially constructed. In the United States, the concept of the nuclear family ideal dominates social and political life. This ideal is often couched in terms of the erosion of “family values” (see Smith, 2001). These concerns reflect heterosexist and patriarchal beliefs about gender roles, parenting, and sexuality (Scourfield, 2001). Dominant messages from the government, policy makers, the media, and popular culture equate being normal and healthy with being heterosexual, married, and loyal to prescribed male/ masculine or female/feminine sex roles. The idealized conception of family in the United States is the heterosexual married two-parent household. The dominant discourse in this country about “family values” and the “traditional family” deems being gay or lesbian and raising children as antithetical. At the same time, this discourse creates the conditions for the emergence of family formations that do not conform to the heterosexual norm. As a result, the meanings of family and heteronormative assumptions about family structures and processes are challenged and transformed.

Arguments concerning the meanings and consequences of gay and lesbian parenting for families and society play out through debates on social policies. Social policies reflect different ideological conceptions of social problems. Ideologies are “ideas serving as weapons for social interests” (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 6). Advances in lesbian and gay rights movements, including policies and practices that support gay and lesbian parenting, need to be understood within a larger context of multiple and often contradictory developments in family policy in the United States. The concept of family and the regulation of family formations have become central to the economic, moral, and political fabric of the United States (Abramovitz, 1996; Carlson, 2004; Mullaly, 1997). Smith (2001) states that as non-traditional family structures become more common, legal and legislative victories are being made in the sexual liberation movement. At the same time, as popular opinion towards gay and lesbian people and their

families becomes more tolerant, there has been a strong campaign from right-wing social movements against the liberalization of family policies. This pushback has been directed at seemingly disparate policies such as granting marriage rights to same sex couples and providing assistance to families through the welfare system. What these campaigns reveal is a movement to further solidify patriarchal, heterosexist structures by regulating the family through court decisions and public policy initiatives (Smith, 2001). These public policy initiatives include faith-based, marriage promotion and fatherhood initiatives, and restrictions on discussing homosexuality in sex education programs in schools (see Lind, 2004).

The functions of the family, according to Carlson (2004), can be classified as either instrumental or expressive. Families serve productive, protective, educational, and psychological purposes. With the rise of industrialism and factory labor, the educational, productive, and protective functions of the family diminished. This shift in family function was inextricably linked with the decline of male authority within the family and the rise of public or social patriarchy (Carlson, 2004). According to Abramovitz (1996), this rise of social patriarchy changed the state's relationship to private family life. The state began to assume greater regulatory functions in arenas such as marriage, child custody, and inheritance. As a result, policies concerning marriage and child custody began to serve as mechanisms by which the state could guarantee the perpetuation of particular family constellations that reproduce desirable social and economic relations. The question is, desirable for whom? One needs to ask why certain family arrangements are preferable over others and why particular families are perceived as posing a threat to societal stability.

This larger family policy context is helpful for understanding why opposition to gay and lesbian parenting is so fierce, despite demographic shifts and mounting scientific evidence that

show these family units in a favorable light. Opposing parenting by same-sex parents, like public policy initiatives in marriage promotion, welfare reform, and abstinence-only sex education, strengthens and perpetuates a heterosexual nuclear family model which further preserves the gendered division of labor. The state, by way of public policies, becomes an instrument of social patriarchy and heterocentrism (see Dodd, 2008).

Heterocentrism or heteronormativity refers to an implicit moral framework that supports the practice of heterosexuality (Oswald et al., 2005). The operative word here is “practice”, which exposes heterosexuality as something that is performed and enacted, rather than as an innate quality of human beings. Dodd (2008) explains that heteronormativity is closely aligned with heterosexism. Heterosexism is prejudice against individuals who do not conform to heterosexual behaviors and identities. Both heteronormativity and heterosexism need to be distinguished from homophobia, which is fear, aversion to, and discrimination towards homosexuals. Homophobia narrows the spotlight on individual reactions towards non-heterosexual people and away from societal and structural manifestations.

Heterosexism manifests in visible and tangible forms through discriminatory, oppressive, and exclusive behaviors and policies. This prejudice is imbued with institutional and societal power, as expressed through social policies, inclusion and exclusion in social groups, social regulations and public scrutiny (Dodd, 2008)<sup>2</sup>. Dodd argues that heteronormativity is more inclusive than heterosexism, in that it expands the notion of heterosexism beyond sexuality to include all aspects of behavior, including gender presentation. Oswald et al. (2005) explain that heteronormativity maintains three pairs of binary opposites: “real” males and “real” females versus gender deviants, “natural” sexuality versus “unnatural” sexuality, and “genuine” families

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<sup>2</sup> For a number of descriptive definitions of heterosexism, see Berkman & Zinberg, 1997; Herek, 2000; Herek, Kimmel, Amaro & Melton, 1991, as cited in Dodd, 2008.

versus “pseudo” families. Heteronormativity points to the self-sustaining nature of heterosexism, that is, the mechanisms through which heterosexism is maintained and strengthened (i.e. socially reproduced). Whereas heterosexism points to more overt expressions of dominant groups (i.e. heterosexuals) in society, heteronormativity points to how these acts of domination have been internalized by all groups (the oppressors and the oppressed) through personal beliefs, everyday practices, concepts, and social norms that have been taken for granted. These norms often seem impervious to ongoing demographic shifts in society.

Heteronormative biases affect LGBT individuals and families in numerous social and economic arenas including tax law, access to health care, medical decision making, survivor benefits, and access to public assistance programs, to name just a few (Family Equality Council, 2011). Many social policies are overtly designed to target LGBT individuals as abnormal or deviant and use heterosexist definitions of family that exclude the experiences of LGBT individuals (Dodd, 2008). Examples of such policies are the state-level Defense of Marriage Acts (DOMAs). DOMAs range from defining marriage exclusively as a union between a man and a woman to denying same sex couples any of the rights granted to married couples. Some policies are based on the assumption that sexual minorities, because they do not all have children, are affluent and therefore do not need services to remedy poverty (Dodd, 2008).

Social workers are in a prime position to uncover and challenge heteronormativity in social policies (Dodd, 2008; Lind, 2004). While social workers are likely to advocate individually for the rights of LGBT people, as a profession they have not sufficiently challenged heterocentrist bias both within social work practice and within society as a whole (Dodd, 2008; Hicks, 2008; McPhail, 2004). As a group and as a profession, however, they have been wary of embracing this mission. Hicks (2008) sees social work’s wariness to embrace this mission as a

symptom of the profession's reluctance to interrogate and challenge its own role in perpetuating dominant conceptions of sexuality and gender. Doing so requires greater awareness and knowledge of the day to day experiences of families headed by gay and lesbian parents.

### **Research questions**

The purpose of this dissertation was to explore how gay adoptive fathers experience parenting in largely heteronormative environments. The primary research questions guiding this study were:

1. How do gay fathers who have legally adopted children experience daily life within their family and in their communities?
2. What conflicts do gay fathers encounter parenting in a family constellation that does not conform to dominant norms?
3. How do these conflicts influence gay fathers' feelings, behaviors, and relationships in their family and in their communities?

I used a qualitative methodology with a phenomenological orientation for this study. A phenomenological approach gives the participant license to describe their relationships in different arenas of their lives and invites the researcher and the participants to explore progressively deeper layers of their experiences in these relationships. Relationships are the vehicles by which people develop a sense of family and social connectedness, which in turn influences their feelings of connectedness with self. It is through relationships that people interact with social institutions such as the family, peer groups, school, work settings, and other community settings. These institutions have been socially constructed within a context of heteronormative ideas about parenting, sexuality, gender, and family. Given the above purpose

and research questions, I used several theoretical perspectives to guide the design and implementation of this study.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **THEORETICAL INFLUENCES**

The underlying theories guiding research on gay and lesbian parenting have largely been unarticulated and unacknowledged (Hicks, 2005; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). Charmaz (2008b) claims that researchers need to make explicit both the content of the theories they employ and the methods they use to generate theories. Themes from social constructionism, relational theory, and phenomenology informed and guided the design and implementation of this dissertation study. I used these theoretical perspectives as sensitizing lenses to understand how gay fathers experience their day to day lives as parents and the ways heteronormativity shapes the social spaces they inhabit. This chapter describes key tenets of social constructionism and relational theory. The main principles of phenomenological research are discussed in Chapter 4.

#### **Mechanisms of Social Construction**

What are the mechanisms by which dominant social structures become enacted, embodied, reinforced, and challenged in the fabrics of people's lives? Jackson (2001) explains that the process of social construction involves four intersecting levels of human experience: social structures, cultural meanings, everyday practices in social interactions, and individual subjectivities. Families headed by gay fathers live within environments that prescribe and reinforce compulsory heterosexuality, patriarchal norms, and the gendered division of labor. Heteronormative structures become institutionalized through laws, social policies and regulations. These structures then get enacted and bolstered in people's everyday lives.

People's choices, behaviors, and practices become imbued with cultural meaning through definitions of masculinity and femininity, mothering and fathering, and family. These definitions prescribe whose lives and relationships are meaningful, real, and "normal." They are

reinforced and challenged through people's everyday practices in what Jackson calls routine social interactions. These include the day to day dynamics of a family; social interactions in schools and other formal community settings; and socialization with family members, friends, and community members. These also include seemingly simple acts such as walking down the street or going to the corner store to buy groceries. Gay fathers have reported that such events can be challenging because of others' curiosity, scrutiny, and/or hostility towards gay male parents (Gianino, 2008; Mallon, 2004). An analysis of how experience is socially constructed must explore people's subjectivities, which include their identities, desires, expectations, hopes, and fears. In this study I was curious about gay fathers' sense of authenticity, aliveness and "realness" in environments that may question, celebrate, marginalize, and/or discriminate against them.

### **Exposing the discourses**

Three key themes in social constructionism are the roles of language, the functions of narrative, and the power of discourse (Gregory & Holloway, 2005). A narrative is a story that performs social functions (Fook, 2002). Narratives are ways in which people describe their lives and, consequently their positions in society and in social relationships. Narratives both produce and are produced by discourses, which are instrumental devices that reflect changing socio-economic, political and philosophical contexts. These devices can be used to challenge or reinforce prevailing norms (Gregory & Holloway, 2005). Discourses are enacted and perpetuated through the language people use to think about and describe themselves and also through the "gaze" of those who wield power. Gay fathers and their children live with and within discourses of gender, sexuality, and family. These discourses privilege heterosexual desire and relationships and claim institutions such as marriage and child rearing. Discourses are

organizing constructs that can shape the ways people think, feel and speak about the most intimate arenas of their lives.

As a result, discourses arise from and reproduce standards of “normality.” Freud (1999) argues that from both a moral and ethical basis, social workers need to examine the concept of normality and its influence on their work. Standards of normality influence social work practice on multiple levels, including social problem definitions, assessment and diagnostic labeling of presenting problems, decisions and judgments about what interventions are warranted and effective, and choices of theoretical perspectives (Freud, 1999).

Scholars have critiqued research on gay and lesbian parenting as being largely based on heteronormative assumptions (Gabb, 2004; Hicks, 2005; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). By framing the discourse about gay and lesbian parenting around whether same sex parents have a positive or negative “impact” on their children, both opponents and advocates of gay and lesbian parenting have portrayed the existence of gay and lesbian parents as the social problem. Such a perspective has led researchers to focus on the effects of family structure (impacts of having a gay or lesbian parent) rather than the complex dynamics of family processes. A Foucauldian perspective would suggest that the social problem to focus on is the “gaze” through which gay and lesbian families are viewed by dominant groups in society (Foucault, 1969). These groups include policymakers, religious leaders, human service professionals, social science researchers, politicians, and the media.

### **Shifting the gaze**

Much of the rhetoric and professional discourse about gay and lesbian families highlights the “absence” of a male or female parental figure in the child’s life. Coates and Sullivan (2005) argue that family systems theories and family therapy approaches are constrained by assumptions

based on traditional gender roles. Researching the lived experiences of gay adoptive fathers provides an opportunity to challenge prevailing theoretical assumptions and develop new ways of thinking about the meanings of family and community and the significance of parent-child relationships. Riggs (2006) argues that the very notion of developmentalism needs to be challenged. He describes developmentalism as “the logic that surrounds dominant accounts of childhood, wherein children (and the families they live in) are presumed to follow a relatively proscribed pathway to reach maturity” (Riggs, 2006, p. 58). Riggs argues that this logic portrays children as largely helpless and in need of certain adults who are positioned as their “natural” protectors. Other adults (e.g. single unwed mothers, gay fathers, adoptive parents), by default, fall outside this category and thus may be deemed deficient and deviant. By reifying ideas about gender, sexuality and family through the language of morals and values (Hicks, 2008), families are pigeonholed into whether they are acceptable or unacceptable in the eyes of dominant societal groups (Oswald et al., 2005).

Perpetuating the idea that only certain intimate arrangements constitute a viable family identity allows particular individuals and groups to maintain heterosexist and patriarchal privilege. Truly embracing the diversity of family forms in this country, with all of their strengths, struggles, perspectives, and meanings might lead to the crumbling of patriarchy. What norms, then, would we hold on to as a society? Being with this discomfort and uncertainty allows new and liberatory meanings of family to emerge, take hold, and pervade our consciousness and daily lives. Gay men have historically been objectified, categorized, and seen as a group or type of person rather than as individuals. Exploring the subjective experiences of gay adoptive fathers is a step towards uncovering new forms and meanings of family and relationship for gay men.

### **Making Relationality Central**

Through this study I wanted to know about the relationships gay adoptive fathers develop and nurture with their children and how social contexts influence these relationships. Becoming a parent as an openly gay man is not straightforward. Research has suggested that one of the most important qualities gay and lesbian parents bring to parenting is the fact that they made a very deliberate choice to become parents, a choice that was fueled by a strong desire to be parents (Boyer, 2007; Matthews & Cramer, 2005). Gay men must often go to great lengths in our society to parent a child. Their journeys have been poignantly documented in documentaries such as *Fatherhood Dreams* (Ivanova, 2007) and *Daddy and Papa* (Symons, 2002). Gay men's journeys towards parenthood emphasize our need for relatedness and desire for connection. Consequently, as a researcher on gay fatherhood, I was mindful and steadfast in focusing on the many relationships in gay fathers' lives both before and after becoming parents. Relational Cultural Theory provides a useful lens to keep this focus.

One of the central tenets of Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) is that human beings are driven towards relatedness, connection, and community. Consequently, RCT treats relationality, rather than the individual self, as the primary unit of analysis in understanding human growth and development (Jordan, 2004a). This framework posits that individual growth and relational growth are inextricably linked. It challenges the assumptions of traditional developmental theories that view the ultimate goal of development as separation and individuation from others (Comstock et al., 2008).

Relationships are slippery. Though it is easy to say that relationality is important, it can easily slip through our fingers as we speak to our clients and research participants. In my own work as a social work practitioner and researcher, I notice how easily I can slip from open and

fluid questions about relationships to narrowly framed questions about individual mental health. Perhaps, psychological variables more easily lend themselves to measurement (albeit flawed) than relational processes. Perhaps it is safer to keep the lens narrower and avoid focusing on the larger social structures in which relationships are encouraged or thwarted. RCT sensitizes the researcher to become aware when his line of inquiry is drifting heavily towards a focus on individual behaviors and away from questions about relationship, mutuality, and experiences of connection and disconnection.

### **Who can/should nurture?**

A gay man nurturing his children flies in the face of the socially constructed belief that women are innately the better nurturers. Using the words of Hicks and McDermott (1999), there is something extraordinary yet ordinary about a gay father parenting his child. How have parenting skills, activities, and attributes come to be dichotomized as those ascribed to women and those ascribed to men? The belief that women have an innate capacity to nurture is a double whammy against both men and women. At once, women are confined to and men are excluded from one's desire and capacity to nurture.

Intertwined with gendered beliefs about nurturing are norms of masculinity and femininity. Gay men are discouraged from becoming parents on two accounts – being a man and being gay. Questions are raised such as: Can two men teach a girl how to be a woman? Can gay men raise a boy to be masculine enough (i.e. will he be too feminine)? Preserving gendered divisions in nurturing maintains patriarchal norms around dependence and independence. To embrace our capacity to nurture means to acknowledge and to own one's own deep-seated need for nurturance. Our dependence on others highlights our vulnerabilities, which under masculinist ideologies have often been equated with weakness. Once again, both women and men are

harmed. Women are relegated to a position of inferiority in which they must deny the enormous strength that comes from acknowledging one's vulnerabilities, while men are compelled to maintain a facade of hyper-independence and power. Both injunctions contribute to further alienation and separation among people. Asking gay fathers about the intimate details of their family life can illuminate the grip these norms hold over people's feelings, thoughts, and behaviors in the most intimate corners of their lives. By spotlighting how value systems based on norms of masculinity and male dominance have been used as tools of oppression, RCT provides tools for surfacing how these forces of heteronormativity affect family life and family members' experiences of difference.

### **Relational competence and resilience**

RCT scholars stress that one's movement through and toward relationship is vitally linked with one's racial, cultural, gendered, sexual and social identities (Comstock et al., 2008). RCT explicitly places human potential and adaptation within a sociopolitical context. A central tenet of RCT is that chronic interpersonal and societal disconnection is a primary source of human suffering. At the same time, engaging with these feelings and experiences of disconnection is the very vehicle for healing and individual and societal change (Comstock et al., 2008). The ways gay fathers and their children negotiate overt and subtle forms of stigma and discrimination can be seen not as a weakness or cause for alarm, but rather as a strength. By bringing human relatedness from margin to center, RCT offers a model for individuals, groups, and communities to view their own development and potential for connections differently. Such connections can bring about both personal and societal transformation.

By de-centering notions of the self as independent, autonomous, and central, RCT challenges the idea of competitively defined competence. Jordan (2004b) explains that the goal

of development, which is an ongoing accomplishment, is not to strengthen and bolster the individual self, but rather to nurture and enact one's relational competence. RCT defines relational competence as the ability to move and be moved by others and the awareness and appreciation of one's ongoing potential to do so. In a similar way, RCT reframes the concept of resilience. Resilience can be viewed not solely as an attribute within an individual, but as arising in an interpersonal process. Using the concept of relational resilience, one can ask what enables people to overcome and transform from experiences of isolation and disconnection (Jordan, 2004b).

Psychological growth and mature functioning, according to RCT, are characterized by an increase in relational competence and relational resilience. One develops these competencies by growing toward relationship, developing diverse relational networks, cultivating mutual empathy, recognizing one's contributions to developing growth-fostering relationships, and becoming more authentic in and through relationship (Comstock et al., 2008). These concepts lead us to questions about gay fathers' support systems, their chosen families, the ways they navigate schools and other community institutions, and how they see themselves affecting their communities and society.

### **Emotionally engaged research**

Incorporating a feminist theoretical framework such as RCT has important methodological implications for my stance as a researcher. I am a gay man who plans to adopt children. While I feel inspired and hopeful in my journey towards parenthood, I also feel constrained as a gay man by norms and values I have internalized about being gay and who constitutes an appropriate family. At times I question myself: Can I nurture? Who am I to think I can be a parent as a gay man? Are my desires real? How will I and my children be treated?

These feelings stem from my family history and from living in environments steeped in patriarchal and heteronormative values.

Hiding behind the veil of research, I can avoid these difficult feelings and lose emotional connections with myself and with my research participants. In designing and conducting this study, I have noticed how easily I can become emotionally disengaged in my pursuit of academic rigor and avoid my own discomfort. I have realized that left unacknowledged and unaddressed, these feelings and beliefs can severely constrain my ability to authentically engage with research participants so that they feel encouraged to tell *their* stories.

Throughout this dissertation I wrestled with being as open as possible to the difficult emotions that arose in the research process. Engaging in this struggle challenges the notion that emotions are an impediment and threat to seeing the data clearly. Avoiding my own emotions, however, I become blind to the ways they affect how I think, ask questions, listen, and interpret. Blakely (2007) explains that working through the difficult issues of how to engage with one's own emotions can help the researcher more attentively and authentically address issues of responsibility and representation with respect to one's research. Our emotions as researchers, according to Blakely, can be a wealth of information.

Engaging with my emotions in an authentic way confronts some of the central values of positivist oriented research – maintaining control as the researcher, believing in the possibility and virtues of objectivity, maintaining the separation of self from reality, and allowing the intellect to rule over emotion and intuition. These tenets reflect and reinforce masculinist notions of power and control. Interestingly, the very value systems I am challenging as a researcher are those that I must contend with as a gay man and that gay adoptive fathers face in their lives. In this way, there are parallels between the experiences of the research participants,

my own experiences, and my choices about the methodology and theoretical orientation that guide my research process.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **REVIEW OF THE EMPIRICAL LITERATURE**

#### **Introduction**

Research on gay and lesbian parenting has been evolving for three decades and continues to grow. This dissertation addresses two gaps in this body of research. Empirical research on gay fathers continues to be sparse but has in recent years been growing (e.g. Lewin, 2009; Mallon, 2004; Stacey, 2006). Many conclusions about families headed by gay fathers have been inferred from studies on lesbian mothers and their children (Mallon, 2004). Given the pervasiveness of traditional beliefs concerning homosexuality, masculinity, and appropriate mothering and fathering, gay adoptive fathers may experience the pressures of parenting in unique ways from lesbian mothers. A second gap in research is the lack of understanding of how gay men and lesbians parent in heteronormative environments and how these experiences affect them socially and emotionally in their everyday lives. To place this dissertation in the context of these gaps, in this review I first discuss how researchers on gay and lesbian families have handled the issue of “difference.” I will then describe recent research that sheds light on the ways gay and lesbian parents and their children experience difference in their day to day lives.

#### **Confronting the Discourse of Difference**

Much of the political, social, and academic discourse on gay and lesbian parenting has focused on the “impacts” gay and lesbian parents have on their children. These impacts have been framed as research questions on children’s psychological and emotional development, the effects of the parent’s sexual orientation on the sexual orientation of their children, and bullying and other forms of harassment children face in school and other community settings. Critical

work has been done on these issues. Extensive reviews of research conducted over the past three decades have unequivocally shown that children of gay and lesbian parents are as emotionally, psychologically, and socially healthy as children raised by heterosexual parents (see Anderssen, Amlie, & Ytteroy, 2002; Crowl, Ahn, & Baker, 2008; Patterson, 2006; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001; Tasker & Patterson, 2007). Findings from numerous studies confirm that children raised by gay and lesbian parents are well adjusted psychologically and socially (Bos, Van Balen, & Van den Boom, 2007; Brewaeys, Ponjaert, Van Hall, & Golombok, 1997; Chan, Raboy, & Patterson, 1998; Erich, Leung, & Kindle, 2005; Erich, Leung, Kindle, & Carter, 2005; Golombok et al., 2003; Leung, Erich, & Kanenberg, 2005; MacCallum & Golombok, 2004; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001; Tasker & Golombok, 1997; Wainwright, Russell, & Patterson, 2004), have strong self-esteem (Gershon, Tschann, & Jemerin, 1999), develop healthy and robust family relationships (Bos, Van Balen, & Van den Boom, 2007; Erich, Leung, & Kindle, 2005; Erich, Leung, Kindle, & Carter, 2005; Leung, Erich, & Kanenberg, 2005; MacCallum & Golombok, 2004; Wainwright & Patterson, 2006, 2008;) and peer relationships (MacCallum & Golombok, 2004; Rivers, Poteat, & Noret, 2008; Tasker & Golombok, 1995; Wainwright et al., 2004; Wainwright & Patterson, 2008), and are functioning well in school (MacCallum & Golombok, 2004; Wainwright et al., 2004). Consistent with earlier studies (e.g. Bailey, Bobrow, Wolfe, & Mikach, 1995; Golombok & Tasker, 1996), recent studies have shown that children raised by gay and lesbian parents are no more likely than children of heterosexual parents to have a non-heterosexual sexual orientation (MacCallum & Golombok, 2004; Wainwright et al., 2004). Recent studies have revealed that children raised by lesbian and gay parents are more fluid and flexible in their sexual attractions (Goldberg, 2007) and gender behaviors and identities (Fulcher

Sutfin, & Patterson, 2008; Goldberg, 2007; Sutfin, Fulcher, Bowles, & Patterson, 2008) than children raised by heterosexual parents.

Changes in society often bring about changes in research practices (Plummer, 2005). Research on gay and lesbian families has been occurring against a backdrop of rapid and pronounced social and political change. Hicks (2005) observes that much of the discourse on gay and lesbian families perpetuates a “difference paradigm”, that is, an assumption that gay and lesbian families can only be understood in terms of being similar or different from families with heterosexual parents. Researchers have called for challenging this no-difference hypothesis that has dominated research on gay and lesbian parenting (Andersen, Amlie, & Ytteroy, 2002; Clarke, 2002; Hicks, 2005; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). Questions are being raised about the differences between families headed by gay and lesbian parents and heterosexual-parent families (Golombok et al., 2003) and about the consequences of adopting theoretical and methodological frameworks that perpetuate rigid constructs defining sameness and difference among families (Clarke, 2002; Hicks, 2005).

Stacey and Biblarz (2001), in an insightful and provocative analysis of 21 studies, claim that, while many studies report no differences between children of lesbian and gay parents and children of heterosexual parents, these studies downplay findings that show statistically significant differences regarding children’s gender behaviors and identities and sexual preferences. By silencing these differences, the authors claim, crucial opportunities to propose and address important theoretical questions about child development, gender, sexuality, parenthood, and family processes are lost. Stacey and Biblarz call for a less defensive and more sociologically informed analytic framework to investigate the possible sources and meanings of these differences.

Hicks (2005) argues that this “difference paradigm” has been perpetuated through two seemingly disconnected trends, the emergence of the Christian opposition to lesbian and gay parenting in the United Kingdom and the development of a liberal equality approach to gay parenting in the United States. Hicks shows how both sets of arguments are based on a positivist perspective of sexuality and gender. Positivists argue that it is possible to separate behaviors, thoughts, and feelings from the people who perform and experience them (Duffy, Gillig, Tureen, & Ybarra, 2002). Positivistic thought is dualistic and creates a sharp distinction between the personal/individual and the communal/social dimensions of experience. From a positivist standpoint, a person is seen to possess a fixed and determined sexuality and gender (McPhail, 2004). Hicks suggests that sexuality and gender need to be viewed not as variables that can be isolated and tested, but rather as socially constructed ideas.

Theories from developmental psychology and social learning theory do not predict that a parent’s sexual orientation would in any way determine a child’s sexual orientation (Patterson, 2008). By focusing on the “impacts” a (gay) parent’s sexual orientation may have on his children, attention is deflected from intimacy and relationships in gay families. These family dynamics manifest through the emotional bonds in the parental dyad and between parents and children, communication processes among family members, the strengths and resiliencies parents and children develop to cope with stressors, and the gendered division of labor and distribution of resources in families. Showing how gay families “do things differently” in these areas can expose how heteronormative constructions of family, gender, and sexuality may shape the experiences of parents and children in all families. To this end, Tasker and Patterson (2007) have called for further research that builds on recent studies on the quality of parental relationships (Meezan & Rauch, 2005), the distribution of childcare and household tasks

(Fulcher et al., 2008), parental mental health (Patterson, 2001), and parents' family networks (Oswald, 2002).

While suggesting that researchers explore areas of difference further, Stacey and Biblarz (2001) note the possible political costs of these lines of inquiry for the rights of lesbian and gay parents in policy and custody battles. Gay and lesbian parents, facing legal and economic inequities and intense scrutiny regarding the efficacy of their parenting, may understandably feel compelled to portray themselves in the most positive light to researchers and not openly discuss how their experiences may be different from other families (Crowl, Ahn, & Baker, 2008). At the same time, embracing and exploring difference can potentially liberate all families from the hegemonic grip of heterocentrist bias (Dodd, 2008). For this reason, researchers need to take this risk and confront these threats on an academic, political, and legal level (Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). Doing so requires interpretive methodologies that explore the lived experiences of lesbian and gay parents and their children. Uncovering these complexities can dismantle notions of difference and reveal ideas about who "counts as a family" (Hicks, 2005, p. 165). The current inquiry into the lives of gay adoptive fathers is a step towards building this new paradigm of research on gay and lesbian parenting.

### **Towards a New Research Paradigm**

An important development over the past decade is the emergence of qualitative studies exploring the lived experiences of gay and lesbian parents. Researchers have examined parents' paths to parenthood (Chabot & Ames, 2004; Gianino, 2008; Mallon, 2004; Stacey, 2006), their child rearing practices and goals (Dalton & Bielby, 2000; Dunne, 2000; Mallon, 2004), the meanings gay men and lesbians attribute to parenthood (Ben-Ari & Livni, 2006; Dalton & Bielby, 2000; Dunne, 2000; Hequembourg & Farrell, 1999; Mallon, 2004; Silverstein & Levant,

2002; Stacey, 2006), challenges parents face raising a family (Hequembourg & Farrell, 1999; Mallon, 2004), socially constructed meanings of motherhood (Ben-Ari & Livni, 2006; Brown & Perlesz, 2007), the intersections of gender ideology and parenting (Dalton & Bielby, 2000; Dunne, 2000; Lapidus, 2004), the construction of parental identity (Brown & Perlesz, 2007; Hequembourg & Farrell, 1999), and the relationships between intimacy, identity and the transition to parenthood (Mazor, 2004). In this review I will highlight several key studies from this body of research.

### **Parenting and gay identity**

Two recent ethnographic studies shed light on the social context of gay fathering. Lewin (2009) interviewed 95 gay fathers who became parents through various routes including heterosexual marriages, adoption, surrogacy, and co-parenting arrangements. Fathers who became parents as openly gay men had a number of concerns that centered around: the sources of their desire to parent, relationships between parenthood and morality, the degree to which they conformed to and resisted heteronormative models of family, and navigating paternal and gay identities. Stacey (2006), in an ethnographic study on families headed by gay men, conducted in-depth life history interviews with 50 self-identified gay men (50% of whom were fathers) and with members of their designated kin, community, and affinity groups. The majority of the fathers became parents through adoption, foster parenting, surrogacy, and co-parenting arrangements. Stacey examined the phenomenon of fatherhood both within the gay male community and within the general population. She was interested not only in gay men's desire to parent, but also the motivations of some gay men not to enter into parenting. Stacey found that parenting by gay men transforms and reconfigures notions of fatherhood, masculinity, parenthood, and contemporary family life.

Schacher, Auerbach, and Silverstein (2005) came to similar conclusions. Using qualitative interview data they collected as part of a larger project on fatherhood, the authors examined the paths to fatherhood for 21 men who became fathers as openly gay men. The majority of these men became fathers through adoption. What fathers experienced in becoming and being parents revealed ways they transformed norms of fatherhood, family, and masculinity, and provided models for “conscious parenting” (p. 48), and in so doing created opportunities and possibilities for all parents. The authors argue that further research is needed on how gay fathers and their families transform social roles.

In an early study on gay parenting, Crosbie-Burnett and Helmbrecht (1993) argued that gay fathers and gay families comprise an invisible minority population, in that they are not fully accepted by either gay or heterosexual communities. They discussed gay fathers’ experiences of the “double closet”, where fathers do not fit into the norms for fatherhood nor for being a gay man. It must be noted that this study was conducted in the early 1990s, when tolerance and acceptance of LGBT individuals and communities were less prevalent. Armesto (2002), in an insightful review of literature on gay parenting, suggests that gay men’s experiences of parenting are influenced by the ability to come to terms with a homosexual identity and to negotiate the ongoing stress of living in a homophobic and heterosexist society. Consequently, it is reasonable to expect that fathers who become parents as openly gay men may experience fewer difficulties integrating their identities as gay men and their identities as fathers. Based on qualitative interviews with 10 gay men who became fathers after establishing a gay identity, Brinamen and Mitchell (2008) offer a six-stage model of identity development that reflects how gay men felt about themselves and how they perceived others’ reactions towards them as they transitioned into parenthood. Their model suggests that this group of gay men are moving towards

integrating their parental and gay identities and their involvement with both gay and heterosexual communities.

Similar research has been done with lesbian mothers. Dalton and Bielby (2000) examined the intersection between gender ideology and parenting practices as lesbians socially construct their roles as parents. Using a neo-institutionalist approach, the authors analyze 14 in-depth interviews with lesbian mothers that were conducted as a part of a larger research project on the experiences of lesbian and gay parents who were seeking second-parent adoptions or who were biological or non-biological parents in co-parenting partnerships. A neo-institutionalist analysis surfaces interrelationships between cultural and historical forces, the shaping of societal institutions such as the family, the choices and preferences individuals make (and believe they can and cannot make) within these institutions, and the influences of these choices on reshaping social institutions (Dalton & Bielby, 2000). The results of this study suggest that lesbian mothers challenge heteronormativity through a two-step process. First, they consciously employ shared cognitions to create and describe their own families. Second, they actively negotiate their family status with those around them, which challenges institutionalized “scripts” of mother/father and male/female configurations in the family. At the same time, they incorporate dominant gender-based scripts about provider and caregiving roles within their families (see also Perlesz et al, 2006).

Dunne (2000) draws on research on 37 cohabiting lesbian couples with at least one dependent child through donor insemination. She describes the experiences of lesbian co-parents through the lenses of gender practices, sexuality, division of labor in the household, and parenting roles. Dunne argues that lesbian parenting be viewed as a challenge to heterosexual norms that govern parenting roles and identities. Using the stories of three couples, the author

highlights several themes that emerged across the sample. Parents exhibited creativity and cooperation in the parenting experience, reorganized their kinship ties, expanded meanings of motherhood, and reorganized and redefined their everyday experiences of nurturing, housework, and breadwinning. Dunne argues that the visibility of lesbian (and gay) parents in the mainstream creates a cognitive dissonance that enables others to evaluate and interrogate the taken for granted nature of heterosexuality.

### **Traditional and transformative: Family relationships and processes**

Numerous studies on gay and lesbian families have shown that the nature of parent-child relationships and other family dynamics are more predictive of children's social, psychological, and emotional adjustment and well-being than the sexual orientation of the child's parents. In recent years, researchers' conceptual and operational definitions of parenting and child adjustment within gay and lesbian families have become richer and more nuanced (Bos et al., 2004; MacCallum & Golombok, 2004; Erich, Leung, & Kindle, 2005; Erich, Leung, Kindle et al., 2005; Fulcher et al., 2008; Gershon et al., 1999; Golombok et al., 2003; Leung et al., 2005; Sutfin et al., 2008;). Researchers have begun to more comprehensively explore family dynamics in gay and lesbian families using family systems conceptual frameworks (Erich, Leung, & Kindle, 2005; Erich, Leung, Kindle et al., 2005; Leung et al., 2005; Matthews & Cramer, 2005; Perlesz et al., 2006; Ryan, 2007). Findings from these studies reveal the complex interplay between parental characteristics, child rearing goals and practices, and children's adjustment and well-being (Bos et al., 2007; Patterson, 2001). Using qualitative methods, researchers are investigating differences in the subjective experiences among members of lesbian and gay families (Bailey et al., 1995; Bos et al., 2007; Brown & Perlesz, 2007; Lindsay et al., 2006; Mallon, 2004; Matthews & Cramer, 2005; Perlesz et al., 2006).

Investigators are becoming more comfortable focusing on both the strengths and struggles of gay and lesbian parents and their children (Fulcher et al., 2008; Goldberg, 2007; Hequembourg & Farrell, 1999; Lindsay et al., 2006; Mallon, 2004; Mercier & Harold, 2003; Perlesz et al., 2006; Ryan, 2007). To this end, some have begun to take a dialectical approach to family life, recognizing that having gay and lesbian parents presents children with both challenges and opportunities. In a dialectical approach contradictions are resolved by being absorbed in a more comprehensive system (Ben-Ari, 1995). Constructs such as “marginal-mainstream identities” (Hequembourg & Farrell, 1999) point to how gay and lesbian families negotiate challenges living in a heterosexist society while seizing opportunities to transform it. Hicks (2005), using the stories of lesbian and gay foster and adoptive parents, argues that social work researchers and practitioners need to move beyond dichotomous depictions of gay parenting as either assimilating to a heteronormative order or radically opposing that order. By “tak[ing] full account of heteronormative contexts within which lesbian and gay families live out their everyday lives” (Hicks, 2005, p. 303), we can begin to understand and challenge how social work as a profession reproduces heteronormative constructions of sexuality, intimacy, and family.

Several recent studies have made significant strides towards investigating family processes in gay and lesbian families. Perlesz, Brown, Lindsay, McNair, de Vaus, and Pitts (2006) explored the experiences of multiple family members in 20 lesbian families. This sample included both planned lesbian families and lesbian stepfamilies. The investigators interviewed lesbian parents, their children and the children’s grandparents and asked them to define and describe their family. Perlesz and her colleagues found that family members’ conceptions and feelings about their families were both traditional and transformative, and were strongly

influenced by heteronormative beliefs about what makes a family. These norms were evident in participants' struggles with language. Family members reported not having the adequate language to describe their roles and relationships. Family members also struggled with their decisions concerning disclosure and openness with others outside their family unit. The children, in particular, differed widely in how comfortable they were in interacting with their peers about their families and their parents' sexual orientation. Children reported that their feelings of comfort shifted over time as they transitioned into and through adolescence.

Using a life course perspective, Matthews and Cramer (2005) took an intimate look at the mechanisms and processes by which gay and lesbian adoptive parents support their children. The authors propose that certain life events and transitions experienced by gay and lesbian adoptive parents parallel those experienced by adoptive children. They identify similarities in identity management between gay and lesbian individuals and their adopted children and draw parallels between how parents and children manage difference. Gay and lesbian parents, because they have to manage a stigmatized identity, are more accepting and open to difference and are thus better equipped to help their children cope with and grow from managing stigma associated with being adopted. Matthews and Cramer discuss ways to use the concept of parallel process in clinical work with gay and lesbian adoptive parents. Boyer (2007) similarly describes several advantages for adoptive children of having gay and lesbian parents. These include being raised by adults who have put a great deal of thought and care into becoming parents, being exposed to flexible gender roles, and having parents who model pride and self-acceptance while contending with a stigmatized identity.

Ryan (2007) examined the parenting styles of 94 gay and lesbian adoptive parents and the strengths of their children. Roughly half of the parents were gay men. Ryan examined the

relationships between different aspects of parenting style and parents' perceptions of their difficulties in caring for their child and of their child's strengths. Ryan found that gay and lesbian adoptive parents saw strengths in their children in a number of domains, including interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, family involvement, school functioning, and affective strengths. The researchers found that certain aspects of parenting style influenced parents' perceptions of their difficulties in raising their child and of their child's strengths. Much of the research on gay and lesbian parenting to this point has focused on biological children, either through heterosexual relationships or donor insemination. This study is one of the first to examine the parenting styles of gay and lesbian adoptive parents, and thus contributes to knowledge about both adoptive families and gay and lesbian families.

Using a rich conceptual framework, the Process Model of Family Functioning, Erich, Leung, Kindle, and Carter (2005) studied family functioning in 47 gay and lesbian adoptive families with 68 adopted children. Many studies involving gay and lesbian families have focused on the psychological and social adjustment of parents and children separately. This is one of few studies that have examined the overall functioning of gay and lesbian families. The Process Model of Family Functioning measures the family's ability to achieve basic, developmental, and crisis tasks related to the development of each individual in the family. It also measures the family's ability to ensure security for its members, to create a cohesive unit, and to function effectively as part of society. The families studied by Erich and his colleagues were found to be able to meet all of the demands for effective family functioning. Children in these families were reported to exhibit few behavioral difficulties, and their gay and lesbian parents were able to access needed social supports. In a related study, Leung, Erich, and Kanenberg (2005) examined factors associated with family functioning for three groups of

adoptive families: families with children who have special needs, families with gay and lesbian adoptive parents, and families with heterosexual adoptive parents. Their findings suggest that gay and lesbian families not only provide viable and healthy adoptive family environments, but also may offer unique strengths to adopted children with special needs.

### **Stigma, discrimination, and disclosure**

Investigators have been exploring how gay and lesbian parents and their children handle stigma, discrimination and oppression in community settings (Bos et al., 2004; Gershon et al., 1999; Goldberg, 2007; O'Connell, 1993; Tasker & Golombok, 1995). Recent work has explored how lesbian-parented families interface with mainstream society using schools as an example (Crowl, Ahn, & Baker; 2008; Lindsay et al., 2006; Mercier & Harold, 2003; Ray & Gregory, 2001; Vivien, 2001). How family members in same sex families make decisions about disclosing information about their families is an area of growing research.

Mallon (2004), using grounded theory methods in a qualitative study of 21 gay adoptive fathers, made a significant step towards our understanding of the day to day experiences of gay adoptive fathers and their children. Through his interviews, Mallon found that gay fathers must help their children handle the pressures of being different from other children on multiple levels, including being adopted, not knowing their biological parents, and being raised by homosexual parents. In addition, many of these children must cope with the loss of their birth family and their wish to have a mother. The findings of this study suggest that gay fathers and their children show resilience in the ways they cope with the stigma associated with being a non-traditional family and with the fathers' sexuality. The ways in which gay fathers foster these resiliencies through their parenting practices is an area in need of research.

A recent quantitative study on lesbian families illustrates how the impact of stigma can be operationalized. Bos, Van Balen, Van den Boom, and Sandfort (2004) examined the effects of minority stress on lesbian mothers' experience of parenthood and their children's adjustment in 100 planned lesbian families created through donor insemination. The investigators considered three aspects of parenthood: parents' feelings of burden, their need to justify themselves as parents, and their perceptions of their parental competence. Children's adjustment was determined by measuring the level of children's internalizing and externalizing behavior problems. Researchers measured minority stress using three dimensions: negative experiences parents actually experienced as a result of being in this minority group (i.e. ridiculing, marginalizing and exclusion), parents' expectations of rejection and discrimination, and parents' internalized homophobia. Findings from this study showed that overall lesbian parents experienced low levels of minority stress and that their children were generally well-adjusted. Almost all dimensions of minority stress were significantly correlated with the parents' need to justify themselves.

This need for justification is likely to apply to gay men as well, given societal messages insisting that gay men are not entitled to be parents (Mallon, 2004). Bos and her colleagues found significant correlations between parents' experiences of rejection and their feelings of parental competence and parental burden. The only aspect of minority stress that was significantly correlated with their children's adjustment was parents' experiences of rejection. The researchers note that several variables may be contributing to this group of parents' relatively low levels of minority stress: a sociopolitical climate that has become more accepting of gay men and lesbians, the parents' class status, and their initial levels of self-acceptance prior

to parenting. Research is needed about these contextual factors may shape gay fathers' experiences.

The topic of peer relations for adolescents raised by gay and lesbian parents provides an example of how research on gay and lesbian families has begun to shift towards more context-rich investigations. Early research focused almost exclusively on adolescents' experiences of bullying. Both critics and proponents of gay and lesbian parenting were concerned about the harassment children experience in school and other settings when their peers become aware that they have same-sex parents. The ways in which "bullying" has been conceptualized in most of the research on gay and lesbian parenting have been problematic (Clarke, Kitzinger, & Potter, 2004; Ray & Gregory, 2001). Young people have been portrayed as predominantly victims and targets of harassment and discrimination. What have been lacking are conceptualizations that take into account the sociopolitical and moral contexts in which certain families are marginalized and the ways in which heteronormative values support and encourage this marginalization. Similarly, discourses around victimization have often failed to account for dominant values and social environments that ignore or tolerate such abuse.

More recent research (Rivers et al., 2008; Wainwright & Patterson, 2006) has explored the many ways children and adolescents raised by gay and lesbian parents receive support from their parents, develop peer relationships, and build their social networks. Researchers have begun to investigate the effects of perceived stigma, decisions around disclosure, and the ways in which children cope with experiences of discrimination and victimization. The adolescent is seen as having agency in the friendships s/he forms, in whom she discloses to, and how and when she discloses. She is seen as being capable of developing the strengths to cope with harassment, discrimination, and alienation, as well as the creativity and resiliencies to forge new

and different kinds of relationships. Also, the adolescent is viewed as a participant creating a complex web of relationships between herself, her parents, other family members, peers, and other adults in her communities (see Perlesz et al., 2006). Some have remarked that the struggles of young people raised by same sex parents need not be seen as a form of pathology or disturbance (Stacey & Biblarz, 2001; Lindsay et al., 2003; Rivers et al., 2008; Ray & Gregory, 2001). In fact, actively and openly engaging in this struggle by building support networks with family members and peers is a sign of health. Further research is needed on how gay and lesbian parents communicate with and support their children through these experiences.

Recent work has illuminated the opportunities and challenges gay men and lesbians experience in the adoption process and in the transition into parenthood. Through in-depth interviews Gianino (2008) explored the experiences of 8 adoptive gay male couples in three phases of the adoption process: coupled life before adoption, the adoption process, and the transition into parenting post-adoption. Gianino found that, living outside of traditional family structures, couples faced negative stereotypes based on their sexual orientation and disparaging beliefs about their parenting capabilities as men both during the adoption process and post-adoption. Despite and perhaps because of these challenges, couples were committed to being open and proud of their families and the ways they were both similar and different from other families.

Downing, Richardson, Kinkler, and Goldberg (2009) examined the factors that influenced the choice of adoption path for 32 adoptive male same sex couples who were in the process of adopting a child. While this group of men had similar concerns as heterosexual couples, being a gay male couple presented particular pressures and issues in the adoption process. These included concerns about their legal standing as an adoptive family given the

uneven state laws for same sex adoption and the need to gauge how open they wanted to be and could be as a gay couple in the adoption system. This study portrays the “intersection of personal desires and societal pressures and constraints” (p. 268) for gay men aspiring to adopt children. Ryan and Whitlock (2007), in a cross sectional study of 96 lesbian adoptive parents, found that lesbian women by and large experienced overwhelmingly positive and supportive treatment from adoption agencies. In contrast, Goldberg, Downing and Sauck (2007), in a larger study on the transition to adoptive parenthood among lesbian, gay and heterosexual couples, found that many of the 35 lesbian couples in this study encountered and challenged numerous barriers in relation to being “out” as lesbians in the adoption process. The ways in which heteronormative attitudes, policies and practices among adoption agencies and professionals may impact gay men and lesbian women differently is an area in need of research.

### **Summary**

Research on gay and lesbian parents and their children is growing with the times. One major development over the past decade is deeper exploration into the social contexts in which gay and lesbian families live. Nevertheless, there continues to be few studies on families headed by gay men. Little is known about parent-child relationships in gay and lesbian families and how these relationships help both parents and children manage the pressures of living within heteronormative environments. Recent research has shown us the tremendous potential of qualitative methods for teaching us about the richly textured lives of gay and lesbian families. In the next chapter I describe the design and methodology for the present qualitative study on gay adoptive fathers.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

#### **Purpose and Overview of the Proposed Dissertation**

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore how gay adoptive fathers experience parenting in heteronormative environments. The primary research questions guiding this study are:

1. How do gay fathers who have legally adopted children experience daily life within their family and in their communities?
2. What conflicts do gay fathers encounter parenting in a family constellation that does not conform to dominant norms?
3. How do these conflicts influence gay fathers' feelings, behaviors, and relationships both in their families and in their communities?

#### **Rationale for a Phenomenological Qualitative Inquiry**

A qualitative methodology is appropriate for this study for several reasons. First, little research exists about gay adoptive fathers and their children. Exploratory studies such as the present study are needed to identify issues and questions that can guide empirical research on this population. Secondly, qualitative methods are appropriate for eliciting, describing, and analyzing individuals' subjective experiences (Paul & Frieden, 2008). Third, qualitative methods are consistent with social work ethics and values concerning promoting social justice for silenced and marginalized groups (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005). Finally, these methods offer frameworks for analyzing social problems, posing research questions, and engaging with research participants that can challenge dominant theories, concepts, and ideologies.

Adoptive families headed by gay men are an emergent population. Charmaz (2008a) discusses how qualitative methods are well suited for studying emergent social phenomena. Emergence, Charmaz (2008a) explains, refers to the arising of new phenomena in the present that not only are products of the past, but that have qualitatively different properties than the past. Emergence means movement, process and change. Emergent methods provide researchers with the attitudes and skills to pursue what they could not have anticipated. Charmaz (2008a) states that not only are unexpected data emergent, but also the theoretical and methodological tools to handle these data. Charmaz (2008a) poses a critical question: To what extent do research practices support and/or hinder emergence? I argue that qualitative methods support the continued emergence of both gay families in society and the research methods used to study them. There are three primary reasons I chose phenomenology as my orienting tradition for this inquiry. I wished to co-create a reflective space with participants; to acknowledge, name, and explore the less visible aspects of human relationships; and to view gay fathers as intentional beings.

### **Co-creating a reflective space**

In a phenomenological tradition, researchers explore in detail participants' lived experiences and the meanings these experiences have for individuals (Van Manen, 1990). Through this study I aimed to understand the day to day experiences of being a gay adoptive father. According to Van Manen (1990), phenomenological research treats others' experiences and their reflections on these experiences as windows into the deeper meaning or significance of aspects of human experience, within the context of the whole of human experience. Phenomenological reflection is not introspective, but retrospective; reflection on lived

experience is always recollective (Van Manen, 1990). In this study, participants were asked to give a retrospective account of their experiences being a gay adoptive father.

Phenomenological inquiry is particularly well-suited for exploring participants' cognitions and thought processes as reflected in the language they use. A phenomenological approach is concerned with unraveling the interplay between a person's account of an experience, her behaviors, and her cognitions. A phenomenologist is curious about how something comes to be grasped as known. Thinking is considered not as reflection detached from the world, but rather an aspect of being in the world (Eatough & Smith, 2006).

Phenomenological analysis takes a light constructionist stance towards language and assumes a link between what people describe and their inner subjective experience (Alexander & Clare, 2004). A light constructionist stance views individuals' lived experiences as "much more than historically situated linguistic interactions between people" (Eatough & Smith, 2006, p. 485). It is concerned with how individuals use language to shape and reflect on their experiences and, thus, views language as the window to exploring and understanding individuals' cognitive and emotional lives (Eatough & Smith, 2006).

A phenomenological approach allows for the subjectivity of the researcher to mingle with the subjectivity of the participant (Meek, 2007; Touroni & Coyle, 2002). Both researcher and participant become co-creators of knowledge that arises from both an inductive and deductive process. In this study I came to each interview with background experiences, sensitizing concepts, orienting theories, assumptions, and expectations. At the same time, I entered the research encounter with the desire to open myself up to the participant's experiences and to allow a space to emerge where I and the participant can make sense of experiences together.

What I aimed to create with the participant is a reflective space, not unlike the intersubjective space between therapist and client (Mitchell & Black, 1995).

### **Uncovering the less visible**

Qualitative inquiry is useful for uncovering the less visible aspects of a phenomenon. Few studies to date have explored the meanings and functions of relationships for gay adoptive fathers. Relationships are something all of us experience. We somehow “know it” when we are relating to someone. They are at the core of our social, emotional, psychological and spiritual development as human beings. Because they are so central and ubiquitous in our lives, relationships are often taken for granted. Through this study, I wanted to surface the less visible and less tangible aspects of the relationships gay fathers have with their children and others and the processes by which they develop, sustain and grow these relationships.

Phenomenological research gives a precise, yet expansive, meaning to the word experience. One experiences cognitive and emotional aspects of relationships, even though these aspects may not be apprehendable by the senses, such as real objects (e.g. tables, trees, dogs). Husserl (1982) refers to these as presences that carry the index of reality with them. In other words, we somehow know it when we are in relationship with someone. We can sense and feel the relationship in the moment and we can think about the relationship retrospectively. Yet, what is the “it” that we sense, feel and know when we are experiencing a relationship with another human being? How can we identify and describe the presences that Husserl refers to that make these relationships real to us?

Perhaps a reason there has been little research on gay fathers’ relationships is the assumption that because many aspects of relationships are not readily observable or measurable, one cannot understand them. As a result, many aspects of relationship building are

unacknowledged and even silenced. A phenomenological approach allows one to challenge this assumption by compelling the researcher to view the investigation of relationships not merely as an exercise in obtaining data, but rather as a process of accessing experiences (Fook, 2002). As a result, the researcher is compelled to confront and acknowledge his stance with regards to the very questions he is asking and the degree to which he is invested and committed to truly understanding participants' experiences.

### **Respecting intentionality**

Phenomenological assumptions about human proclivities are consistent with the purposes of this study and support the goal of understanding the intentionality of gay men who have chosen to adopt children. In this study, I explored the cognitive and emotional lives of gay fathers as they experience relationship. Going inwards emotionally is not a way of detaching from the world, but rather a way of deepening our connections to the world. Phenomenological analysis views the emotional life of an individual as an imaginative enterprise that is concerned with the individual's human potential and development. Thinking is not detached reflection, rather part of a basic attitude to the world (Eatough & Smith, 2006).

From a phenomenological standpoint, the nature of human consciousness and human actions is practical. Individuals act in order to implement goals based on their typifications. Consciousness, as an intentional process, is composed of thinking, perceiving, feeling, remembering, imagining, and anticipating directed towards the world (Van Manen, 1990). Phenomenological research, according to Van Manen (1990), can further personal insight and contribute to one's thoughtfulness and, thus, enable one to act more purposefully in the world. Giorgi (1997) outlines the key aspects of a phenomenological approach to research in human sciences. This approach directly addresses the role of consciousness in human experience.

Consciousness is seen not as a neutral mechanism that presents objects to one's awareness, but rather is the medium through which a relationship between a subject and an object is given meaning (Giorgi, 1997). For Husserl (1982), this is the principle of intentionality, which is an essential feature of consciousness. From a phenomenological point of view, to do research is always to question the way we experience the world and this questioning is the intentional act of attaching ourselves to the world, to become more fully part of it, or better, to *become* the world. Phenomenology calls this inseparable connection to the world the principle of 'intentionality'?(Van Manen, 1990, p. 5). Exploring what gay fathers think, feel and do both within and outside their families can give us a glimpse of their sense of *being* in the world.

## **Research Methodology**

### **Sampling plan**

Fathers from twenty families (18 couples and 2 single fathers) were interviewed for this study. The participants for this study met several inclusion criteria. All participants legally adopted one or more children as an openly gay single man or within the context of an openly gay relationship. In the case of couples who are parenting together, at least one of the fathers must have legally adopted their children. Adoptive fathers who had a biological relationship with their adoptive children were excluded from this study.

### **Recruitment of participants**

I recruited participants for this study between February 2011 and November 2011. I recruited participants through local and national organizations, adoption and child welfare agencies, and social work/mental health practitioners throughout the United States that have contact with gay and lesbian parents and their children. I also recruited participants through local and national conferences for LGBT families. I distributed electronic and hard copies of

recruitment flyers and posted recruitment calls on organizational listservs and websites. I also placed recruitment calls in “Gay Parent”, a magazine for LGBT parents. The final sample was a result of these recruitment efforts and snowball sampling, where some participants referred me to other potential participants.

### **Sample characteristics**

Fathers from 20 families (18 couples and 2 single fathers) were interviewed for this study. Descriptive characteristics about each father/couple and their children are presented in Tables 1 and 2 (see Appendix F). Descriptive information about the sample in aggregate is presented in Table 3 (see Appendix F). The fathers range in age from 30 to 64 and are raising a total of 30 children (7 boys, 22 girls, 1 transgender child) ranging in age from 9 months to 22 years. The children represent all developmental phases from infancy through young adulthood. Sixteen of the children were adopted within the first month of life. The age at which fathers adopted their first child ranges from 29 to 56.

One of the limitations that has plagued research on gay and lesbian parenting is the relative homogeneity of samples (Crowl, Ahn, & Baker, 2008; Ryan, 2007). Like samples in previous studies on gay and lesbian parents, the sample for this study is by and large comprised of middle to upper middle class Caucasian parents. Fathers are well educated – 21 fathers have a masters, doctoral, or professional degree – and are economically well off – 12 families have annual household incomes of \$150,000 or greater. Fourteen of the two parent households have two Caucasian fathers. Three couples are interracial, with one father being Caucasian. One of the single fathers is African American and the other single father is Caucasian. The children of the fathers in this sample are racially and ethnically diverse: 21 children are African American, Hispanic/Latino, or Biracial; 9 are White/Caucasian.

When considering the experiences of members of the LGBT community, it is important to consider the type of setting – urban, suburban, or rural – where they live. Settings differ in the size of their LGBT community, resources for becoming parents, and openness and acceptance of LGBT individuals and families. Eighteen families live in the Northeastern United States; 2 families live in San Francisco. The majority of families in this sample live in urban areas. Thirteen live in large urban areas (11 from New York City and 2 from San Francisco), while 4 live in small urban areas. Two families live in a suburban community, while one family lives in a rural area. Despite efforts to recruit parents from various parts of the country, the majority of participants live in or around the New York City area.

Fathers used a variety of routes to adopt their children. Eighteen families adopted their children domestically while only 2 adopted internationally. Five families adopted their children through a domestic private agency that places newborns who are being given up for adoption. Seven families used a private attorney. Five families adopted through the foster care system. Two families adopted their children internationally through an orphanage in another country. Finally, one family adopted a baby born to one of their friends.

### **Data collection**

**The interview guide.** I used an interview guide for this study with questions pertaining to participants' experiences in their families and in community settings (see Appendix A). I developed the questions for this guide from an extensive list of questions I formulated based on the research literature, my own curiosities, and sensitizing concepts from social constructionism. I then condensed these questions into a shorter list of questions and probes that I felt could elicit the richest and most comprehensive responses about fathers' parenting experiences.

In an interview guide approach, the topics and issues to be covered are specified in advance; however, the researcher can decide in what order and to what depth to ask the participant questions in these areas (Patton, 2002). Patton (2002) outlines some of the strengths and drawbacks to this approach to interview instrumentation. An interview guide can make data collection more comprehensive and systematic, while providing enough flexibility so that interviews can be conversational and sensitive to each participant's situation. Drawbacks include the possibility that the interview guide may limit the range of topics covered in the interview which may fail to cover important topics salient to the participant and the phenomenon being investigated. Also, variations in the sequencing and wording of questions across interviews may make it difficult to compare participants' responses. Despite these drawbacks, the interview guide I developed provided an optimum balance between structure and flexibility. It allowed me to incorporate salient themes and sensitizing concepts from the empirical and theoretical literature and provided both me as the researcher and each participant opportunities to move more deeply into areas that were particularly salient. While keeping the focus and general structure of the interview, I developed new questions, discarded some, and modified existing questions throughout the interview process and particularly during the early stages of interviewing.

Participants were also asked to complete a brief demographic questionnaire about demographics about which they were not asked during the interviews. Participants were emailed the questionnaire after their interviews. Eighteen participants completed the questionnaire; two participants did not return the questionnaire.

**The interview process.** In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with fathers from 20 families. Each interview lasted between 90 and 150 minutes. Of the 18 two parent

households, the interview was conducted with both parents in 11 households and with only one parent in 7 households. In the cases where only one parent in a couple was interviewed, the primary reasons were that only one parent was interested and willing to be interviewed or due to scheduling/logistical constraints the parents felt it would be easier to have only one parent be interviewed.

To facilitate being able to interview participants from different parts of the country and to accommodate participants' scheduling and child care needs, I conducted interviews at their homes, at their workplaces, in my office, by phone, or by Skype. I did face to face interviews with 13 participants. Of these I interviewed 9 participants in their home and 4 participants at their workplace. Of the remaining 7 participants, I interviewed 5 participants by phone and 2 participants by video conferencing via Skype. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim by a transcriber I hired for the project.

Interviewing was challenging for a number of reasons. One of the struggles I faced was balancing being sufficiently open ended and giving participants space to talk about what was important to them, while retaining enough control over the interview process so that I could remain close to the purpose of my study. Another struggle was balancing my need and wish for rich responses, while fearing that participants would become too emotionally vulnerable in a short time-limited interview session. I cared about the participants as people and was concerned that I would not be there to follow up and support them. Throughout the interview process I became more and more attuned to my role as an interviewer and to the important and sometimes fuzzy distinction between being a phenomenological researcher and being a therapist. The concept empathic neutrality came to life for me as I faced these issues.

## **Descriptive phenomenological analysis**

The transcripts from these 20 interviews contained over one thousand single spaced pages of text. I used NVivo qualitative analysis software to help sort and organize this large volume of data. Using a social constructionist lens and descriptive phenomenological analysis (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003) as guideposts, I identified themes within each interview and across interviews. After discussing the key ideas of descriptive phenomenological analysis, I will describe my steps in the data analysis process. While I present these steps in a linear fashion, data analysis was an iterative process. While my analysis and writing evolved, I continually revisited earlier stages.

Phenomenological research begins in the lifeworld of the individual, the world of the natural attitude of everyday life. Accessing a person's lifeworld requires what Eatough and Smith call a "dual process" (p. 485) of sense making between participants and researchers in which the researcher tries to make sense of the participants making sense of their world. This sense-making takes place through an iterative process of repeatedly reading and reflecting on the participant's account, generating interpretations of this account, and then allowing the participant's words to repeatedly transform these interpretations. As the analysis progresses, the researcher can challenge, modify, or endorse preconceived concepts or theory (Eatough & Smith, 2006). In this way, the analytical process is both deductive and inductive.

One first reads the text as a whole. Phenomenological analysis adopts a holistic perspective; thus, it is not possible to analyze a description of an experience until one has a sense of the whole description. The researcher then rereads the description and divides the text into meaning units. Every time he experiences a shift of meaning in the reading, a mark is made in the text. Meaning units have to be large enough to have an explorable significance and small enough to be manageable. Through the process of free imaginative variation, the researcher

allows himself to discover and articulate the meanings being lived by the participant as expressed through these meaning units. The purpose of this task is to arrive at transformations that reflect the participant's meanings as honestly as possible. According to Giorgi and Giorgi (2003), "As one begins the effort to transform the participant's language, certain intuitions begin to arise in the researcher's consciousness. These first meanings cannot be simply accepted, but they must be critically evaluated by means of free imaginative variation" (p. 257). This research process mirrors the iterative, interpretive, and imaginative qualities of good clinical practice (Frogget & Chamberlayne, 2004). Free imaginative variation allows the researcher to surface new insights, while identifying and filtering out biases.

For each meaning unit, the researcher reads the corresponding transformation and then compares these words with those of the participant (the raw data). The researcher imaginatively removes, adds and modifies words (which represent the researcher's ideas and concepts) and then compares the modified transformation again with the participant's words. Through this iterative process, the researcher arrives at transformations that mirror the meanings being lived by the participant. The phenomenological researcher must continually assess what Alexander and Clare (2004) call the "goodness of fit" (p. 73) between these evolving themes and the original data. It is important to note that phenomenological themes are not categories or conceptual abstractions. According to Van Manen (1990), "grasping and formulating a thematic understanding is not a rule-bound process but a free act of 'seeing' meaning" (p. 79). Themes are tools that give control and order to research and writing and, thereby, point to the notion under investigation (Van Manen, 1990). Themes give voice to experiences that are fundamentally beyond form and language.

### **Key steps in data analysis**

After reading each transcript for the first time, I reflected and wrote about how the participant's narrative related to the purpose of the study. At this stage what I wrote was impressionistic and broad stroke and was not grounded in the specifics of the data. In my second read of each transcript, I noted the thoughts and feelings that were being triggered by the participant's words. I noted my emotional reactions to the participants' words, reflections about my own life, thoughts about how what they said related to the empirical literature, and theoretical insights. The purpose of this step was to begin surfacing and documenting my opinions, biases, and assumptions. This was the beginning of a bracketing process which I continued throughout the data analysis and writing process.

I then read each transcript several more times and began dividing segments of data into meaning units. This was the beginning of a continual and rigorous process of sorting, collecting, organizing, and writing about meaning units within each interview and across interviews (Seidel, 1998). I came to see meaning units as sieves that provided different lenses on the data. I began with an intracase analysis and organized the data in the interviews so that they can be analyzed across cases. I paid attention to the tone, flow, and transitions in each fathers' narrative. A tension I experienced throughout the analysis was balancing my need to deeply explore each father's story while telling a story about this group of fathers. I realized that to serve the purpose of my study I needed both intra and inter case analyses (Patton, 2002). Using both types of analyses, I saw how themes about the group emerged from a deep understanding of each individual story.

**Being in bewilderment.** As I analyzed the data, I became curious about why some interviews were "easier" to analyze than others. They seemed more straightforward and seemed

to have fewer “issues”. The flow of the interview seemed more linear and the circumstances less complex. Was this because I felt like I “knew” what the text was “about?” Patton (2002) cautions that just because one can identify and perhaps name something does not mean that one understands it. Conversely, just because one cannot name something does not mean one cannot understand it.

At a certain stage, I realized that the meaning units I was identifying were heavily influenced by preconceived categories from my conceptualization of the research problem and the empirical literature. As an initial stage in analysis, meaning units provided useful anchoring points; however, my thinking about the data felt prescriptive. I became acutely aware of imposing a theoretical perspective and concepts on the data rather than letting the data speak for themselves. I struggled with the process of using my own words to talk about what the participant was saying. I realized that through this process I assumed I “understood” more than I did. Using words to describe or name something may mostly reflect my own concepts, which may have nothing to do with the actual words and experiences of the participants.

Corbin and Strauss (2008) explain that concepts are inescapable regardless of one’s chosen research methodology. Concepts provide tools for thinking, describing, analyzing, and communicating. Charmaz (2008b), in discussing the roles of sensitizing concepts such as hegemony and domination in social justice research, cautions researchers to not “past[e] [such concepts] on the realities in the field” (p. 210). She emphasizes that concepts need to be treated as problematic and researchers need to explore how their characteristics are “lived and understood” (p. 210) by participants in the field. These points resonated for me throughout data collection, data analysis, and writing. A number of sensitizing concepts, such as stigma, heteronormativity, and oppression, have influenced my thinking in this study. While not

diminishing their importance and potential usefulness for this inquiry, I remained open to finding out whether these concepts were salient or even relevant for the gay adoptive fathers I interviewed.

After a consultation with one of my advisors, I realized that I was allowing myself to be controlled and confined by my research questions. I felt theoretically, conceptually, and emotionally confined by these questions. I saw the danger in reading any theory or preconceived idea into the data and fitting the data to that model, rather than providing a space for meaning to arise out of the data. I wondered how I could loosen the grip of "conceptual incarceration" (Hotep, 2008, p. 3). I asked myself: How do I get out of the way so that the stories about participants' experiences emerge? With this awareness, I then subdivided content in each meaning units into smaller meaning units and then sorted these meaning units from across the interviews into groups. Using thematic maps (Braun & Clarke, 2006), I then began to see how these groups of meaning units clustered together into themes and how these themes interrelated with each other.

At a certain point in the analysis, I listened again to the interview recordings. I felt the need to re-connect with the participants by hearing their voices and listening to their stories in entirety. The process of analyzing the text of the interviews required breaking apart, collecting, sorting and naming pieces of narratives. I felt the need to return home if you will to the raw data, the full narratives, and the participants, having in mind the work I had done in the analysis thus far. As I listened to the interviews, I segmented their narratives into excerpts that were examples of possible themes I had identified. I was open and willing to modify and discard these working themes. I also was vigilant for data that did not fit these themes and pointed to new themes. As I

listened to the interviews, I noticed I was able to listen with a more focused openness that arose from the analytical work I had done in the months prior.

I felt bewildered at many stages of the analysis and writing process. Charmaz (2004) encourages qualitative researchers to see bewilderment as a sign that one is entering the phenomenon: "Through struggling with ambiguity and bewilderment, you may sense hidden meanings and gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon." (Charmaz, 2004, p. 981). My research questions were leading me down an alley that was getting narrower and narrower, while the data with which I was getting more and more familiar were pushing me to move outwards and beyond my research questions. Charmaz explains that "[w]e start with general research questions but they may lead us in new, unanticipated directions." At this stage of the analysis I truly began to experience the dialectic between inductive and deductive thinking in the generation of knowledge.

**Reflexivity.** Surfacing the researcher's preconceptions and biases is not only an essential tool, but is also an objective of phenomenological analysis. The subjectivity of the researcher is not seen as a hindrance to understanding a phenomenon, but rather a crucial part of understanding this phenomenon and of developing greater appreciation for lived experience. Qualitative researchers challenge the notion that an investigator can be objective and neutral in his observations and interpretations of people and social phenomena.

Because my own subjectivities as a human being color the lenses through which I listen to and interpret participants' stories, I engaged in an ongoing process of uncovering my own beliefs, assumptions, and feelings throughout the process of data collection and data analysis. To facilitate this self-reflective process, I wrote hundreds of pages of memos throughout the interviewing, data analysis, and writing process. These memos have been invaluable for

documenting in the moment thoughts and feelings about the topic, the participants and myself in relation to the data.

In doing this study I saw the research process as an opportunity to generate new kinds of interpersonal spaces where both the participant and the researcher have the opportunity to reflect on their experiences. Like Kondrat (1999), I believe that such a research process supports reflective social work practice. Reflexivity is the researcher's ability and willingness to reflect on and actively engage the self in the research process. Krueger (2002) calls this method of research a process of self-in-action. A reflexive stance is more than mere self-awareness of one's assumptions and belief systems. The researcher also actively situates this awareness historically by reflecting on how the self has been constructed over time and in different contexts. Kondrat (1999) describes this reflexive awareness as a more macro-level approach to professional self-awareness. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) remind us that the personal biography of the researcher, who speaks and thinks from particular gender, class, sexual, cultural and ethnic perspectives, shapes all activities in the qualitative research process. These activities reflect the researcher's beliefs about the nature of reality (ontology), relationships between the knower and the known (epistemology), and the most effective means to develop knowledge (methodology).

In the course of designing and implementing this study, I have realized how at every stage my work as a researcher has been informed by own experiences as a gay man who wishes to adopt and raise children. I am a gay man who has struggled with homophobic and heterosexist attitudes from my family of origin and other community members. To a large extent, I have internalized these discriminatory and oppressive messages and am engaged in an ongoing process to dismantle them and to live life as authentically as possible. I am a social worker and a teacher committed to promoting social justice. I recognize that I embarked on this

inquiry having had considerable privilege and access by virtue of my socioeconomic class and educational status in U.S. society. I am an immigrant who has experienced both racism and alienation and, at the same time, has garnered considerable power and prestige within my own Indian immigrant community and within society. My work with children in foster care and my interest in parenting and family are fueled largely by my own process of healing and personal and professional transformation. As a result of these experiences, I am fascinated by the extraordinarily diverse expressions of affection, connection, struggle, and resilience in all kinds of families. I recognize that my personal experiences have both contributed to and hindered my effectiveness as a researcher, and that embracing and understanding these experiences helped me to connect more deeply with the participants, with the interview data, and with my writing. At the same time, I have sought to be continually vigilant about how these experiences may bias the ways I ask questions and analyze data.

In doing this study I have a greater appreciation for what it means to say that knowledge is local, context specific, and subjective. Throughout analysis and writing I have felt humbled by the power of words and text. After conducting the interviews, I had only my memory of the participants and the participants' words. These words are symbols that represent what fathers said during an interview in a given space and time with a specific interviewer asking certain questions in particular ways based on his own interests, biases, and blindspots. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) claim that there is no such thing as objective observations, only observations that are socially situated in the space between the observer and the observed. The fathers' stories were based on their memories, thoughts, and feelings that emerged at the time of the interview, which they then put into words in the moment. In reading, re-reading, and reflecting on the transcripts I then noticed what the fathers' words told me in the moment and used my own words

to construct a "story" about the threads I saw running through them. What follows in the upcoming chapters is this story.

## CHAPTER V

### ON THE ROAD TO BECOMING PARENTS

The purpose of this chapter is to describe how the men in this study decided to become parents and the responses they received from their families of origin. A number of the men knew that they wanted to be parents from a young age. Others began thinking about parenting only after they entered a relationship with their partner. Like many heterosexual people considering parenthood, they faced a host of questions and concerns; however, the questions become more complicated for them as openly gay men in a predominantly heterosexually oriented society.

#### **Desire, Possibility, and Expectation**

##### **I had always wanted children**

Some fathers knew early in their lives that they wanted to be parents. For Edward<sup>3</sup>, the wish to be a parent had “always” been there:

I had always wanted children. So it was always in the back of my mind.

For other fathers, this early wish stemmed from growing up with many siblings, as described below by Richard:

Ever since I was young, I always wanted to be a parent. I come from a large family, there are six of us. I have three sisters and two brothers and I was always interested in having children. But I had planned on doing it alone if I didn't meet the right person. I was going to do it either way.

Marcus, who also grew up in a large family, said that children “were always a natural part” of his life:

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<sup>3</sup> The names of the fathers and their children have been changed to pseudonyms to maintain their confidentiality.

I've lived on both sides of the fence. I'm bisexual and I'm living a gay-identified life out of choice now. I always wanted children. I grew up around children. I grew up in a gigantic family...I always grew up around lots of cousins, aunts, great aunts, great grandmothers, and children were always a natural part of my life.

Some men had enjoyed playing parenting and fathering roles with other children in their lives.

Randy, who adopted as a single parent explained:

I've always felt like I wanted to be a parent. At times I've felt like a parent, cause I've worked with kids in an educational setting for so long; especially in a boarding school, they really get attached to you. Certainly, I've been a father figure to many, many kids and have enjoyed that aspect of it and was fulfilled by it, but there was a point at which...I really wanted to have a kid of my own.

The wish to be parents was always present for some couples. Daniel stated:

When we met actually, very soon afterwards, we started talking...about having a child. That was one of our fairly early discussions. That was always somehow on the radar.

Daniel was attracted to his partner Martin in part because Martin wanted to have children:

I feel like it was something I definitely wanted, and an attraction of [Martin was] that he wanted it as well.

Likewise, for Sheldon and Henry:

[Parenting] was always something we had talked about and planned about. I don't remember...it was never like...I remember that moment was very quick. Ok, let's do this. Ok, let's go. It was a never big, "Do we want to have children?" That was always a given.

Jonathan describes his partner Ely's openness when they met about his wish to have children:

On our first date, [Ely]told me [he was] going to be a father to twelve kids. It's a testament to me that we're still together because, you know, you don't tell anybody on a first date that you want to have twelve children!

For some men in this study, becoming parents fulfilled their picture of the “family” they had envisioned, a picture which included having children. Jeremy said:

I think just, you know, in my mind I just pictured being with a partner and having a family. That was just what I pictured for myself. I never really thought about it differently than that.

Ben described how he and his partner Gordon “both wanted to have a family”, the word “family” implying a unit with children:

Well, the first night I met [Gordon]...we both talked about how we both wanted to have children...I know it's sort of strange, but we did, and I think that was part of what attracted me to him and him to me was the fact that we both wanted to have a family.

These findings stand in direct contrast to dominant stereotypes about gay men as largely uninterested in having children and a family. Instead, for some of the men in this study the wish to parent seemed to have an “always” ever present quality. The above excerpts show this wish to be a parent had both an emotional component – the feeling of wanting something in your life – and an element of envisioning or imagining something for oneself.

### **I had never, never thought about it**

In contrast to the fathers who “always” felt they wanted to parent, others had not given parenting much thought until they met their partner. Even then it took time before they decided to become a parent. Jonathan said:

I hadn't really given it any thought until I connected with [Ely] and then it took him seven years to convince me.

Shane talked about how his partner Jordan "brought him along":

I think the deal was that if it weren't for [Jordan], I wouldn't have pursued it; if he hadn't brought it up, I wouldn't have either. Then he did bring it up, and I would do one of those, "Yeah, yeah, we'll talk about it later" deals. And he kept doing the research and brought me along little by little.

Victor and Philip show how having a partner who clearly wanted kids can shape a person's decision making regarding parenting:

Philip: I had just had in my mind that one day it would be nice to have a family, and I guess after I met [Victor]; it wasn't really a possibility until I had a partner, a long-term partner. It was just something I had always thought about. I don't know if that was the case for [Victor].

Victor: I had never, never thought about it...never thought about it and was not interested...it was not a situation where he sort of wore me down. It was sort of like after a period of years, you just sort of...one thing leads to another.

Philip: You just sort of think about what your life is going to be like.

Like many prospective parents, fathers like Jason considered and discussed the commitment involved in becoming parents and how life altering this choice would be:

I just knew that it was a big, huge, life-changing commitment and I wanted to let it cook for a while before I said yes. I really wanted to take that time to do that. And also during that time, I thought that maybe it would be good for him to think about it too, a little bit longer, just to make sure he was really on board.

Daniel spoke about the multiple "life choices" he and his partner Martin made to adopt a child:

We made all these life choices towards having a child...A lot of the steps caused a lot of upheaval and we had to work through all those -- so we really made conscious decisions

towards parenthood, like changing careers, changing locations, changing countries. I just wanted to say that – that we thought a lot about the issues beforehand!

Age also played a role. Some fathers in their forties realized that if they wanted to become parents they needed to do so quickly. Anthony had a life changing illness that sparked his decision to go forward with becoming a parent:

I wound up with a tumor on my spine...It was a life-changing thing. I thought, “What if this had been it?” ...After that turned out okay and these other friends of ours were adopting, then [my partner Stan] and I thought, “That’s a possibility.” At that point, I was already into my forties. I was forty-six when we adopted [Austin]. I was already mid-forties, so I mean, it had to be “now or never.”

Jason said that timing was the biggest concern he and his partner had in their process of adopting a child:

Biological link was not important and racial difference was not an issue for us. Timing was really the most paramount concern because we were so aware of the clock ticking. We really wanted to get the family started.

Like many heterosexual couples, for many of the men in this study deciding to become parents evolved from their individual growth and development and from their relationship with their partner; at the same time, they also had to consider the impact of living in a heterosexual social landscape. Heterosexual couples typically receive support if not pressure to want to have children and for remaining in a long term relationship. Donald points to a heterosexist social landscape that does not necessarily promote growth in his intimate relationship with his partner Adam:

[Adam and I] wanted children for several reasons...[We believed] that one reason that gay couples didn't stay together as long as straight couples is because there's no progression in the relationship. I mean it's very easy for the relationship to stagnate because this was in the early nineties, right? So you couldn't...You met someone; you couldn't get married, you couldn't have children; most didn't, and so it was kind of like, "Alright. So we've been together for five, seven years, like what's next?" So there was no "what's next?" So I think [Adam] and I viewed having children a little as an opportunity to stay together.

### **A child without a parent and a parent without a child**

When asked how they came to decide on adoption as their route to parenting, more than a few of the fathers indicated that they chose adoption because there were children who needed homes:

We decided we would adopt because there were, you know, children that need homes in the world. We were gonna provide a home; we would do that. (Ben, father of 18 year old Nathan and 14 year old Abigail)

Donald and Adam, who adopted two children from birth through a private domestic agency, saw becoming a parent as a contribution:

We viewed it as a way to...contribute to the world not in terms of who [our children] are going to become, that's the difference in my head, not in terms of how our children are going to grow up and what they will become but contribute in the sense of there are children who need homes. Let's help that way. I don't think it was until we started raising them that we thought about... everything you do, it's like how is this going to impact them as a child; how is this going to impact them as an adult... You do really work hard to make sure they are contributing members of society.

Other fathers just found the “idea of adoption” appealing. Sheldon, who with his partner Henry adopted two children through an international orphanage, stated:

Adoption just appealed to me. I mean I just thought it seemed like the most obvious situation...somewhere there was a child in the world without a parent, and I was a parent without a child. It seemed like a natural way to...work it out.

When asked what about the idea of adoption was exciting to him, Jeremy poignantly responded:

Helping is such a poor word to use because it sounds so insignificant, but that you're helping a child that needs help, that needs a family, that needs a home...needs someone to bring them up and give them their entire life...adoption to me is so purposeful and so thoughtful and so planned that it just makes it beautiful, you know, that that like you have that specific goal that you're aiming for and working towards. As I said that lots of people who have a child biologically do as well, but adoption, to me, is like almost always that and so it's just really cool in that way.

Three couples and both single fathers adopted their children through the foster care system. Richard and Peter specifically wanted to adopt an older child from foster care:

We were willing to take any age...A lot of people aren't interested in that – they only want little children. We were open to any age, really; we weren't closed to the idea of any child.

Richard attributed his openness to adopting an older child in part to working with disadvantaged children:

I have worked with children my whole life – disadvantaged children, average children, emotionally disturbed children, children who really struggled in school, delinquent children, children with multiple disabilities and children with substance abuse issues. I've

seen a lot of difficulties children have encountered in their lives. Many of them, you know, we don't get to choose our families, but I think with the right direction, and the right support, and with good parenting, we can't just give up on kids when they're ten. Marcus, who is African American, explicitly sought to adopt a Black boy from the foster care system because he did not want to see Black boys languishing in the system. His own experience as an African American man figured prominently in his decision to adopt:

I also had my political reasons. I wanted to take a child of color out of the system.

Because I know what the system is like. I used to work for the Department of Social Services also, and I worked as a social worker. The system is broken – it's very broken. America has some very significant issues with adoption across the board – Americans will spend hundreds of thousands of dollars to adopt little white babies and Chinese babies...But they won't look in their own backyard and adopt here.

### **Rejecting the need to have a child biologically**

Gay men are increasingly turning to surrogacy as their route to parenthood (Patterson & Tornello, 2010). A number of the fathers in this study had considered this possibility but choose not to do so for a number of reasons including ethical objections, the high cost, possible complications, and rejecting the need to have children biologically. Conrad, who with his partner Mario adopted their children from birth through a private attorney, explained:

I just didn't want to do surrogacy. I found it almost – ethically questionable. I find women selling their eggs and uteruses to have other people's kids somehow problematic.

Similarly, Richard said:

Surrogacy never really entered the picture because there was something about [it] that didn't sit comfortably with me from the very beginning. The idea of paying someone to

have your child, I don't know, I wasn't comfortable with that. I respect people who choose that option, but I wasn't personally comfortable with that and I thought it would be complicated. Also, one of us would have to father the child. And maybe there would be some incredible complication.

A number of the men were concerned about the high cost of surrogacy. Joey and his partner Thomas adopted a newborn through a domestic agency. Joey said:

The financial costs were a factor in this. Surrogacy would have been two or three times more expensive [than adoption].

Alan rejected surrogacy because he did not want someone involved just to have a child biologically:

The notion of getting involved with surrogacy seemed completely out of the question to me. Partly the expense, I think, but also the idea of getting... somebody else involved. ...that expressing my genes was going to be so important that I'd ask somebody unrelated to spend nine months of her life helping me express my genes just so that she could disappear.

A number of fathers such as Randy recognized that as gay men they would inevitably face "complications" with any parenting route they chose:

I think definitely [being a gay man has] made it easier and more complicated. I think it made it more complicated in terms of how will I become a parent. Just the logistics of becoming someone's biological parent as a gay [man] was something that I had to think a lot about, even in my younger twenties. Something like surrogacy is very expensive unless you know a friend who is willing to carry it out for you which I had those conversations with someone as well. Adoption is certainly a path to parenting, but you

do miss that biological piece, and it is different being an adoptive parent and a biological parent, I'd imagine. So it's certainly complicated in those respects.

Jeremy and Juan anticipated facing particular complications if they were to have a child biologically:

When we...got more serious about having a child, we kind of toyed around with the idea of different biological options. [Juan] actually has a lot of female cousins...that we are close with. And a few that I think that even to this day who would be open to the idea of either donating an egg or being a surrogate or whatever...and so I think that we toyed with that idea briefly, but I think for us like that idea felt like a little too scary, too many possible complications and heartache. I mean, of course, that exists with adoption, too,

In discussing why they chose not to do surrogacy, some fathers expressed different feelings about the need to have children biologically. Sheldon felt it would be “indulgent” to have a child biologically:

The surrogacy was also very much more expensive. And just sort of seemed to us very indulgent a little bit...Selfish isn't the right word, but just...just indulgent. So that's why we chose adoption.

Mario objected to having biologically-related child given how important it was for him to provide a home to a child in need:

I wanted to give a family to a kid who didn't have one. I didn't want to create a life artificially, especially because in the [United States] it is very easy to adopt from birth.

Similarly, Martin felt it would be “narcissistic” to “create a new life” when there were already children living who needed help:

With all these children in the world who are already being born who need a loving home and family, it just felt kind of narcissistic to go through all that work and expense to create a new life when there was going to be a life already. We could be there and help.

Richard considered the number of children in foster care waiting for adoptive families:

So we explored [surrogacy], and I said to myself, there are 25,000 children in foster care ...and a good percentage of them, I think thirty-nine percent of them, are free for adoption, and chances are that another thirty-plus percent would be eventually free for adoption.

In speaking about having children biologically, several participants were explicit about not needing to have a genetic connection to their children. Ely explained: "... at least for me...it really didn't matter to me whether it was my sperm or not. She's still my child." According to Philip:

Neither of us felt the need to have our genes contained within this individual that we were going to have in our family. It just never...It wasn't important to us.

Thomas and Joey had conflicting views about the need to pass down a genetic heritage to their child. Thomas stated: "...originally I wanted to go another route, for me because of the idea of a family lineage and passing down a genetic heritage. It was very important to me, so I was looking at surrogacy." His partner Joey differed. He explained that he was adopted which made adoption very important to him: "I was also very partial to adoption because I was adopted. I was emotionally involved -- I was like, 'a hundred twenty thousand kids aren't adopted per year in this country!' And the financial side helped sway that decision." Thomas stated: "So it was basically a compromise. I came to understand and appreciate [Joey's] needs and wants in this

regard, so we decided that that was going to be it.” For Jason, not “needing” to have a biological link with his child was connected to satisfying what a child in the world needed:

This is going to sound judgmental, but it wasn’t important for either one of us to have a biological link with the child. That was part one. Part two was that we felt that there were a lot of needy kids in the world who needed homes and why not let our home be one of them? I wouldn’t call it altruism, but it just wasn’t what we needed.

Still other fathers reported that as gay men they did not or should not expect to have a child biologically . For example, Conrad shared:

I think as a gay man, I’m not going to be having sex with women, so I’m not going to be creating a child biologically. I don’t want the whole laboratory child creation thing – it just strikes me as unethical, to be honest.

Similarly, Alan said that as a gay man, he did not see having a child biologically as something he could expect:

I see these young guys walking around with blonde kids that look like them. I can sort of see why they wanted it, but I still can’t see how you could expect it...I still don’t really look at biological parenting anymore as a thing you can necessarily demand in life.

### **Suddenly the sun rose when I realized I could do that**

For more than a few fathers societal expectations regarding the possibility of gay male parenting made their decision to adopt children all the more significant. Kyle spoke about undoing years of repressing the idea of becoming a parent:

I had been doing for years for other people's children. It was nothing to me. But, you know, I really...I had to undo years of, call it, repression of that idea of becoming a parent

or years of not thinking about it. Kind of unshape my life from one way of thinking about being into another way.

Kyle then described the social environments he experienced as a gay man:

It was impossible to grow up as a gay person in this country and not feel like any man who wants to become a parent is probably a pedophile or something like that. I mean even straight men...used to have to accept a certain kind of role in order to be seen as normal fathers, and as a gay man I didn't see even any possible [way] to find a role that would allow them to be seen as a normal father, or at least that was the impression I got...If I had [thoughts of parenting] I had put them deeply aside.

Previous researchers have commented on widely held stereotypes, myths, and biases about gay men being harmful to children (Lobaugh et al., 2006; Mallon, 2004), myths that have been perpetuated in the adoption and child welfare fields (Mallon, 2004; Ryan, 2007). While Kyle placed himself in the context of how society views *all men* who want to become parents, Shane said that initially he “wasn’t as gung ho” about having children and “didn’t think he wanted them.” When asked if this had to do with being a gay man, he replied:

It’s all inter-related. Because I was a gay man, I didn’t go down the path of meeting a nice girl and having a baby. It just wasn’t the path I was going down. Maybe if I were heterosexual - I think there are a lot of straight men who might not even think about it if they weren’t straight. There are guys who are married who would just as soon watch football games and not have kids, and the women are the nurturing ones who bring up the topic. But I think it’s part of just being a guy, and part of it is who I am, and part of it is circumstances...as a gay couple, whether you’re two women or two men, you have to consciously make an effort to have a child.

As they were coming out some fathers received messages that being gay and being a parent were incongruent. Kyle described his parents' reactions when he came out:

When I came out to my parents, this is almost a cliché, my mother's sadness, as she explained it, had to do with not having grandchildren. So there you have it. You know, somewhere very strongly and deeply built into people's idea of gayness at the time is that you don't have children, certainly not men, and I didn't know anyone, any gay man who had kids...in the 80s and early 90s.

Donald described having children as a “gift” that he could give his parents, and remembered their sadness when he came out to them:

One of the reasons that I wanted to have children was because, to me, this was a gift I could give my parents...one of the things that they were sad about was that I wouldn't get to experience being a parent, that I wouldn't get to experience getting married...I guess both parts it never even occurred to me that I wouldn't have the opportunity to do...I hadn't really thought about children, but I also heard in that they wouldn't get to be grandparents. So this was really a way for me, a gift for me to give to them, a way for me to erase that missing piece for them.

Theo, a single father whose mother died before he became a parent, was sad that she could not be involved in his life as a parent:

One of the things [my mother] said to me when I came out to her was that she loved me; she would support me no matter what, but the fact that I was gay made her sad in some ways...one thing was that she thought I would be discriminated against in life, and the other thing she was sad about was that I would never have a chance to be a parent. So she died about six or seven years after that when I was in my early thirties. So she didn't

get to have that conversation with me about being a parent, but I can't help but think that she would be wonderfully supportive of that.

Some men's partners influenced their ideas about the possibility of becoming a parent as a gay man. For Daniel, the desire to be a parent and his realization that it was possible was "sparked" when another man he was dating talked about wanting to have children:

Then I met someone...and that person actually talked about wanting to have children. It was the first time and a very short relationship, but that was the first time I realized that it might be possible even though I hadn't ever met any men with children or realized how they did it. But just that another partner talked about that sparked it in me. Though he actually ended up not having children...But I started thinking about that as something I really wanted.

In a similar way, his partner's determination to be a parent helped Robert to "visualize" parenting as being possible:

[Josh] was particularly determined. And he was a very good influence on me in that way in that I had not visualized it as being possible, and [he] said it is possible, and we are going to do it. And so we did.

Some fathers, like Shane, found that their decision to become parents helped some of their gay male friends that they could be parents as well:

One of my really good friends that is gay that we're visiting this weekend thought it was great. I think there is an element in his case – and in others, probably – which is "Gee... you're having a kid... maybe I should have a kid. How come I'm not, or can't?" So I think there's an element of that, because it makes a gay person who really never thought about it think, "Maybe I could do that."

Martin's "natural" desire to become a parent was strengthened by other gay men around him:

I guess I always liked children... in my mid-twenties, some of my gay friends started to have them, and so it was very present [and] because they're older, they were already thinking about it, making their own decisions and doing their own research about it, so I was around that and I saw that it was possible.

When asked if he had not previously thought it was possible for him to have a child, Martin replied:

I don't know if it was just that it would never have occurred to me, because I was younger at that point, but I probably didn't realize how possible it was for a man, at least...I would say that it was present...as a possibility, so it already informed what I was already naturally occurring for me.

The men's thoughts about the possibility of parenting as gay men were also influenced by events in their communities and in wider society. Daniel (47), who came of age as an openly gay man in the 1980s in a European country, said:

When I came out, there was no gay adoption at all. It didn't exist. It was not even something you could think about. So that it is why it wouldn't even occur to me that that was a possibility.

Edward, who is 49 years old, explained that his thoughts about becoming a parent moved "to the forefront of [his] mind" due to changes in the courts and seeing other men successfully adopt children:

I don't think that [Marshall and I] directly talked about it. It was an indirect kind of, sort of, hopefully that would be possible, but, you know, back when we were younger and first met each other, gay adoption wasn't a thing. We didn't even think it was possible. I,

at least, didn't think it was possible, and then as things went through the courts, and other men started to have children. It moved to the forefront of my mind.

Ben (56 years old), who came out in the 1970s, found that having a supportive community encouraged him to think of parenting as possible:

Part of the reason...I knew I could be a parent was because I came out, it was very lucky, in a supportive community...Even in the early 70s, I knew women, lesbian women and gay men who were becoming parents, not through adoption... And so I knew it was possible, and I knew people were doing it long before.

In contrast, Anthony who came of age as a gay man in the 1960s and 1970s, had thought that becoming a father “wasn't in the cards” for him:

I always saw myself as becoming a father, and when I realized that that wasn't in the cards, I became a teacher...I came of age as a teenager in the sixties and then met [my partner] when I was in my twenties in the seventies...[and] there were not a lot of gay relationships, a lot of gay families... of gay people living out in the open, period... being gay had a lot to do with being in the shadows and in the margins. So the idea of becoming a parent was really a more recent kind of possibility.

In contrast, Ben, who also came of age around the same time, saw “lots of possibilities” for gay people:

There are lots of possibilities for gay people, and I was very fortunate that I came out in a gay community where all the possibilities seemed to be open to you as a gay person.

There was no idea that you could not do something because you were a gay person.

In some cases, state laws denied gay men the right to have a child. Peter lived in Florida, which at the time banned homosexuals from adopting and foster parenting children <sup>4</sup>:

I think I always wanted to [be a parent]. I'm originally from Florida so choosing being gay over ... well, I always loved children, but in Florida, being a gay man, you really can't adopt. I kind of put it out of my head... But I've always had a desire, from a very young age.

Theo, who adopted his son as a single parent, moved from Virginia to be able to fulfill his wish to adopt a child:

[I] started to explore parenting, and contacted the local social service organization there and had an intake interview with a social worker and was told at that point because of Virginia's family laws if I was an openly gay man that I wouldn't be allowed to adopt in that state. So I had a choice of either hiding my sexuality or not adopting and that didn't feel quite right to me, and so I explored the options of moving out of state and into one of the surrounding states...that had more open adoption and parenting laws.

It is clear that a range of relationships as well as structural inequities shaped what fathers constructed as “possible” for them. Their stories about the “possible” illustrate what Jackson (2001) describes as the interlocking levels of social construction, where ideologies and cultural meanings that perpetuate inequalities in social structures manifest themselves through social policies and then into people’s everyday interactions and subjective experiences. Alan’s comments nicely illustrate this interplay:

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<sup>4</sup> Florida until very recently required that prospective foster and adoptive parents sign an affidavit stating that they were not homosexual. Recently, Florida’s ban on lesbians and gay men becoming foster and adoptive parents was lifted.

I had been thinking about parenting for a long time, although not in any substantive way because I really didn't know anything about parenting, but I always felt it was going to be my fate, and it was one of my problems with coming out in my teens, and my twenties, and even my thirties. I wondered how was I going to come out and still become a parent. Somewhere along the line in there, I was around enough liberated gay people that I began to hear of gay men that were adopting, and it sort of fell into place that it was something I should do... Suddenly, the idea of adoption was like the sun rose when I realized that I could do that.

### **Responses from Families of Origin**

Little has been written about how gay men's relationships with their families of origin change as they become parents. Fathers received a wide range of responses from their families to their decision to adopt children, including support, disapproval, affirmation, and surprise.

#### **Support and affirmation**

Some fathers' families of origin were supportive and affirming about their decision to become a parent. Henry reported that his family was "incredibly supportive and excited." When asked how they showed this, he said:

Advice. Items that they know. You know, that you'll hear something like, when I was a parent, this was a huge help that nobody will tell you about. Here's toys that kids love that they don't advertise at all, but kids love it.

Shane, who adopted three children with his partner Jordan, spoke about how involved his family became with his children:

My mother and my sister and my uncle and my father (my parents are divorced) all have been very involved. My sister babysits, my mother babysits, and my kids even before

they were adopted were their own. My family is like that. My brother is out of state, but he's still involved. We're still close.

Edward and Marshall were pleasantly surprised about the “outpouring of support” they initially received upon the adoption of their son Colin:

We have been nothing but pleasantly surprised since we've had him with the reaction and the acceptance and community in raising him. It's really surprising cause you write scripts of what's possible, what could happen...[that] people might look down...you know, maybe, “expect the worst, hope for the best”...especially initially, the kind of like outpouring of support and just love that we got from not just our immediate family and circle of friends, but just periphery that we would get letters from or phone calls from.

Other fathers similarly said that they expected negative reactions to them as parents, and were surprised to receive affirmation. For Edward and Marshall, affirmation took the form of baby showers:

We had three baby showers...it was so kind of affirming....My cousin threw the family one. We had one upstate, that one of our good friends up there threw, so it was the family, the gay boys. And then I had a work shower...so lots and lots of gifts and support, anything we needed.

Baby showers or forms thereof are highly meaningful events in many communities. For this couple, they represented support and affirmation. On another level, baby showers make more visible the decision and process the men are going through. On this matter of visibility, Daniel spoke about the moment when he and his partner Martin announced to several family members that they were in the process of adopting a baby:

We announced it at a dinner somehow...that we were doing it and that it was happening now and so we were basically kind of pregnant. And they were excited about it... [our daughter Lisa] has a cousin that was born around the same time, so it was kind of funny that suddenly, [Martin's stepbrother and his wife] had a child and we had a child. But they had a pregnancy and we didn't so it was different. It was not as visible to some people...that we really would have a child. They knew that we were dealing with it but we didn't tell everything.

Jason and Scott did not tell their families until it was imminent they were going to have a child, not because they feared negative reactions but because they did not want their families to get too involved:

We didn't really share too much about it until it was imminent. Our whole decision process, we kept to ourselves. Even when we started doing the private adoption stuff, the ups and downs of that we really didn't share with our families too much... [Our parents] were always pretty supportive on the gay side of things... We just didn't want to have people's expectations aroused and to have to deal with a lot of questions, like, "When's the baby coming?" until we had to. So we played it pretty close to the vest until we were pretty deep in process with [our son]... When people are pregnant, they go through the same thing, where everyone asks about the baby. It's like "nine months! Let's leave it at that."

For a few fathers, like Richard, their family of origin reflected back to them their desire to become a parent:

[My parents] were very happy. Because I think part of the thing is that they always wanted that for me. Like it fit. When I told them, they said, “I think that’s fantastic.”

They knew I always wanted it.

Richard’s parents related to their son’s individuality and his personal desire to have children, and this was deeply meaningful to him.

### **From puzzlement to disapproval to rejection**

In contrast to the celebratory reactions described above, Thomas, who came out to his father soon before adopting his daughter Mary, was told by his father not to “bring any of it home”:

It wasn’t worst-case scenario because he didn’t disown me, but it wasn’t best-case scenario, either, like, a hug and “I love you.” It was: “I love you, but you’re going to Hell.”... [My dad] doesn’t want me to bring any of it home, and they haven’t acknowledged [Mary] directly. They don’t call her by her name, they don’t say “Thomas’ daughter” or “Thomas and Joey’s daughter” – they call her “the baby.”... My father won’t talk to me about it, period... That is what [his whole side of the family] has done – completely ignored it for all intents and purposes. This causes problems, because everyone loses out. It’s hurtful. I would love for [Mary] to be able to interact with that side of the family. It causes some pain during the family holidays, because I can’t go home with [Joey and daughter].

Alan’s mother had strong reactions to him walking with his son in public with a baby carriage, as shown in the following interchange with his partner Kyle:

Kyle: You told me this story about one of your friends and your mother being worried that you would walk down the Promenade in a dress with the perambulator.

Alan: I don’t remember the dress part, but she did seem very hung up on that. She said,

“Are you going to walk the baby in a carriage on the Promenade?”... There's a, you know, a pedestrian walk that looks over the harbor...it's a place where people congregate. They sit around, or they promenade; they stroll. And I didn't ask her. I wish I'd asked her what she was thinking about. She kept saying, “Are you going to walk him on the Promenade?” as if that was somehow some kind of great embarrassment to her.

What was Alan's mother concerned about? What would she be embarrassed about? The reference to a dress and walking with a baby carriage may indicate that she was embarrassed that her son would be too feminine; that is, if he were to walk in public with a baby that he would need to be more like a woman, and this was uncomfortable for her. This is striking given that she is a woman and she is a mother. What is most significant, however, is that Alan *did not know* what his mother was referring to and *wished* he had asked her what she was thinking about. I sensed sadness as Alan spoke about how his mother eventually “came around”:

[My mother] died in June...when [our son Leon] was 16 months old. She got to know him. She got to like him. She got to put him in her will...she did come around, but unfortunately she was old and feeble. There wasn't a great deal by then. I didn't know her.

At times deciding to become parents triggered strong responses from family members that involved multiple beliefs and attitudes related to being gay. For Mario's sister, being gay and having kids was “so strange for her that she didn't understand it. It just wasn't within the realm of what she knew.” Mario goes on to describe his family's reactions:

It went from puzzled to outright disapproval. Puzzlement from my siblings and strong disapproval from my parents. I don't think they believed it was going to happen, especially my parents. The response from my parents when both adoptions actually happened was like, “Oh my god!” At that point, I didn't understand why they were upset – I mean, I can understand being upset when I told them, but after?

When considering what may have been behind his parents' reactions, Mario said:

I still think that they think I have some sort of psychological issue... They're where America was in the 1950s. Gay people are damaged, not capable of being around children.

The sentiments of Mario's parents are consistent with stereotypes and myths that gay men are harmful to children. His parents eventually came to accept both of his adopted children:

They were really upset when it actually happened. But then the moment they met [Lucy], they just became grandparents, so that has been great.

In contrast, Ben, speaking about not being accepted by his partner's family and having few supports in his own family, said the following:

[Our families have] never been there for us so we haven't expected it... We've never had like close family members nearby who are doing stuff... Your family are your family you make, not your biological family.

### **A mix of reactions**

At times family members' reactions were quite mixed. Daniel was surprised by how his brother and sister reacted when they found out he was adopting a child:

[My sister] went through in vitro fertilization in order to have her child, so she had to do a lot more other labor than most heterosexuals have to do. She eventually had the child, but it was very hard... I wouldn't say she was negative [towards me adopting a child]. She wasn't positive. Weirdly enough, my brother was the one who was positive. He's very heterosexual and yet he was the one who was like, "this is great." My sister was not negative, but she didn't fully embrace it in the way I expected her to, since she and I are really close.

Clearly, the adoption of children by a gay family member pushed buttons, for lack of a better phrase, in Daniel's family. Ben and Gordon received an almost bewildering mix of reactions from both of their families. Gordon's mother had an unexpected reaction when he and Ben had to return their first potential adoptive child:

When [we] had to give the baby back, [Gordon's] mother went storming around, saying, "This is a stupid idea. They'll never let you adopt." And started throwing away the baby stuff, and [Gordon] took it out of the trash. [My family was] just really mixed.

Somewhat supportive... once we adopted, distant relatives came to see the baby...they initially started a little bit of an account for [our son], but in [Gordon's] family... our kids became second class kids...My mother was not supportive at all. When I told her we were adopting, that [our son] was coming home, she said to me, "I didn't think they let people like you adopt." My father, on the other hand, was very supportive.

Given that becoming a parent is a rite of passage and important step in the life course trajectories for many adults, the decision to parent is often met with joy, affirmation, and both physical and emotional support. As the above excerpts show, some gay men who are planning to adopt children may not receive this support and may instead face a mixed and even confusing collection of responses from their families of origin. It should be noted that regardless of how their families responded, the fathers were steadfast in their quest to adopt children. Gay men and lesbians have shown great resolve and determination to become parents even in the face of societal stigma, restrictive policies and laws, and lack of support (Mallon, 2004; Lewin, 2009).

This strength and resiliency is shown by the ways some fathers responded to their parents' negative reactions. Alan described how he responded to his mother after he and his partner Kyle adopted their first child:

I kind of put it in front of her and said something like, “You know, you can act like a crazy lady and not have anything to do with us just because it doesn't match your values or you can be a grandmother again. So you decide what you want to do.” And the next time I heard from her, she was talking about catering the bris. ... that was her way of accepting the arrangement.

Joey took a similar stand with his family:

I gave them an ultimatum before they could give me one. I said, “you raised me to judge you by how other people are treated. I'm not treating you any different now because I'm coming out.” It was the same thing with the child – either, “you accept this, or thank you for everything you've done, but I don't need you in my life.” They always think I'm a little drastic that way. At least that way then I don't get the ultimatum. They're very forward, and that's how they taught me to be.

In taking this position with his family, Joey challenged their concerns about him adopting a child as a gay man:

At first, they were concerned. “Do you know how hard it is to be a parent?” But the subtext was: “Do you know how much more difficult it will be being a gay parent?” ... It's not like we're in the middle of Idaho. We're in an area of the world that is accepting and in an area of the country that is extremely accepting. So I said, “Yeah, but nothing is easy.” You have to continue to live. You have to follow your desires. ... They should have known better. Whenever they'd try to challenge me, I'd always prove them wrong.

Josh, who adopted a child with his partner Robert more than twenty years ago, shared a poignant story about his mother asking him not to bring his newly adopted son to a family gathering:

My family was not open to the idea at all. They loved [Robert]. They came to love [him]. They accepted the two of us in a relationship, but when it came to the idea that we were going to be parents, that was very hard for my family to handle. It was hard for my sisters to conceive of a woman giving up her child, let alone giving a child up to two gay men. My mother and a lot of my family were in the closet as far as not telling anyone that they had a gay son or gay brother, that [Robert] was my partner. It was very hard for them to wrap around the idea of us adopting a child, and my mother was so uncomfortable that she actually asked us when [Warren] was, I don't know, maybe two months, two and a half months old, to not bring him home for my sister's wedding. Even though another sister had a son two weeks older than my son; she didn't tell her not to bring her kid home. She actually asked me not to bring [my son] home.

What was it about the idea of Josh and Robert becoming parents that made Josh's mother so uncomfortable that she would ask her son to not bring his own child to a family gathering, despite the fact that she "loved" his partner? What was it like for Josh to experience this with his mother? Josh goes on to describe how he took his baby to the family gathering and how he handled his mother's reactions:

I didn't accept her request and forced the situation. She wouldn't come downstairs for the first few hours that he was there, and when she did, the first few comments she made about [Warren] were oh negative ones. "Oh, he has no eyebrows. Oh, he doesn't have much hair." And I just said, "You know, those are all very negative comments; everyone else says what a beautiful baby he is, what beautiful skin he has, what beautiful blue eyes." I said, "You're clearly having trouble with this." She came to love him very quickly and lovingly.

As fathers spoke about their experiences with their parents and families of origin, I was struck by their yearning to remain connected to and build their relationships with their families. We often rely on and are affected by the responses we get from others in our lives, especially those we feel closest to and are most important to us. We often want to feel supported, validated and valued for the lives we are living, and the choices we are making; and, often we seek that positive reflection from our families of origin. The yearning for connection to family and to one's history comes through so poignantly in Marcus' description of going with his son Tyson to a family reunion. In listening to Marcus, I heard the satisfaction and contentment he felt being with his son at the reunion and seeing that his son was accepted into his clan:

We have a family reunion every two years on my father's side of the family and I was really happy to be able to take [Tyson] last summer... I was really happy to be able to bring [him] to the family reunion because everyone in my family knows I'm gay and I wanted him to be received by the larger clan. That's a very important rite of passage. And they did what I expected them to do – they stuck to him like glue immediately, accepted him, and he is now an official part of the clan. That made me feel wonderful.

For some fathers, family members who were initially discouraging, apprehensive, or unsupportive became more supportive and involved once a child came into the picture. Daniel poignantly described how his mother's attitude changed towards his daughter as she approached the end of her life. Daniel's story conveyed contentment, sadness, and acceptance:

My mother was very skeptical of it. Only when [Lisa] was born and she met her was she truly happy and open for it. But it was really complicated because my mother died when [Lisa] was six months old. We actually had to be [with my mother] for the last month or so of her life...and so while my mother was dying, [Lisa] was actually there. It was really

important and really good for [my mother] that [Lisa] was there. She was really happy at the end, and she said so. She was really, really happy.

Daniel's and other fathers' accounts beg us to think about what happens to people's attitudes as they move from an idea to a concrete experience of something or someone which at first makes them deeply uncomfortable.

### **Summary**

The fathers in this study came to the decision to parent along different routes. Some knew from a young age that they wanted to parent, while others started to seriously consider parenting only after meeting their partner. One of the primary reasons many of the men chose adoption as their route to parenting was that they wanted to provide a home for a child who needed one. Fathers chose not to have a child biologically through surrogacy for a number of practical, ethical, and financial reasons. Many fathers rejected the need or desire to have a genetic connection to their child.

A number of influences shaped the men's thoughts about the possibility of parenting as gay men, including societal expectations and messages that being gay and being a parent were incongruent, discriminatory state laws and structural inequities, and seeing other LGBT people become parents. As a group, fathers received a wide range of responses from their families of origin towards their decision to become parents from strong affirmation to strong disapproval. These responses reflected multiple beliefs and attitudes related to being gay. For some fathers, family members who were initially discouraging, apprehensive, or unsupportive became more supportive and involved once a child came into the picture.

As fathers spoke about the roads they travelled to becoming parents, I was struck by the strength, energy and care they brought to their relationships with each other and with their

families of origin. Transformation cannot happen in isolation, but rather in relationship with others. In the relational space that fathers share with those around them, desire, possibility and expectation may collide and possibly transform each other, and in so doing both perpetuate and challenge social norms.

## CHAPTER VI

### GAY FATHERS IN SOCIAL SPACES: NEGOTIATING FORMAL SYSTEMS

This dissertation explores the “different dynamics” adoptive fathers experience in the relationships they develop in both public and intimate spaces. Little to no research exists about the relational dynamics in gay adoptive families and about how experiences outside the home may influence these dynamics. The stories of the fathers I interviewed demonstrate that living as a sexual minority in predominantly heteronormative environments, and more specifically as openly gay male parents, blurs the public and the intimate. What is intimate becomes public because it is incongruent in some ways with prevailing norms and attitudes. Conversely, what is public seeps into and plays out in fathers’ intimate lives. Shane, a father of three children adopted from foster care, described what it was like for him and his partner to become parents:

Once we had children, it was unlike anything we’d ever experienced before. It was very challenging, no question, but, y’know, but with [our first son], I immediately took to it even though I had reservations about being a dad. I just kind of dove in and did all the things that parents have to do...it was very hard, very challenging. But it was no different than when I talked to other friends, both heterosexual or gay or whatever, who are in similar situations – they say the same exact thing. Our stories are really no different...The challenges of being a parent in the sense of doing all the things you do: the meals, the diapers, the schedules, the activities. All those things are the same.

*Socially, there are some different dynamics you have to contend with, I suppose.* (italics added by author for emphasis)

The social spaces fathers entered include formal settings like adoption agencies, courts, school systems, and work settings, where interactions are anticipated and occur within a defined

social institution. They also entered informal settings where interactions are often unplanned or spontaneous, such as walking down the street, sitting in a café, riding the subway, being at the playground, and travelling through an airport. Throughout this study I was curious about how fathers' experiences in the "outer" world of social interactions and navigations and their inner world of intimate relationships and attachments affected and shaped one another. The next two chapters provide a picture of the social environments fathers navigate in their day to day lives. Entering these social spaces we get closer to the love and attachment fathers have with their children as they face myriad choices and circumstances as gay parents.

### **Navigating the Adoption System**

When a gay man or a gay male couple enters the journey of adopting a child, what are they likely to face? While experiencing many of the same issues prospective heterosexual adoptive parents face, fathers in this study encountered particular challenges, concerns, opportunities, and decisions as gay men working within an adoption system that is largely shaped by heterosexist attitudes and norms.

#### **You have to consciously make an effort to have a child**

According to Shane, becoming a parent as a single gay man or a gay couple requires consciously making an effort. As discussed in the prior chapter, sometimes this effort involves wrestling with conflicting messages about whether one as a gay man should or can become a parent. Sometimes the effort requires facing less than affirming messages from friends, family, and society. In the absence of being able to produce a child biologically, part of the effort in becoming a parent is finding a child through an external system or bureaucracy:

As a gay couple, whether you're two women or two men, you have to consciously make an effort to have a child. I don't care... even if you're two women, you have to

consciously do it. You can't just have sex and have a baby. It would be similar to having a male/female couple where one of them couldn't have children physiologically, and they knew it. You have to consciously make the effort to do it. In the case of a gay couple, just about every time, you have to consciously make an effort to do it...it takes some organizing and some machinations.

In this section, I will report on the kinds of "organizing and machinations" the men in this study faced in the adoption process. By necessity, prospective adoptive parents must make their decision to become parents public and, consequently, must interact with numerous others. They and their decision become the focus of review, inquiry, scrutiny, and eventually approval. This is common to all prospective adoptive parents, and is one of the features that distinguish the path of adoption from having a child biologically within the context of a heterosexual relationship. In that arena, having a child is and remains a private act not subject to outside review.<sup>5</sup>

The adoption process involves an intense level of examination and evaluation for all prospective parents. Fathers interacted with a number of different people who are part of various arms of the adoption system including social workers, children's birth families, adoption attorneys, judges, staff from adoption placement agencies, staff from orphanages in other countries, foster care professionals, nurses, and foster parents. While being subjected to many of the same standards and evaluations that other prospective adoptive parents must meet, many of the men were directly and indirectly subjected to additional scrutiny being a same sex couple or a single gay man.<sup>6</sup> Thus, navigating a system that is still shaped by heterosexist ideas and

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<sup>5</sup> There are of course exceptions. Black women in the United States have historically faced regulation of their reproduction (see e.g. Dorothy Roberts' *Killing the Black Body*)

<sup>6</sup> This issue has been written about in regards to families who are involved in the child welfare system. In that case, of course, the state, via local or statewide child welfare organizations, intervenes when it is deemed that a child is at risk. Parents and children then are thrust into a system and process where they become scrutinized, managed, helped, and perhaps even controlled. African-American families and other families of color are disproportionately

homophobic attitudes required that they be strategic in various ways. One way the men were strategic was in obtaining adoption resources.

Fathers varied in how and from whom they obtained information and resources about adoption. Through other male parents, lesbian parents, and informational and support groups for prospective adoptive parents, a number of fathers sought out people and agencies who they knew were sympathetic and supportive of gay men adopting and also knowledgeable about working with gay men in the adoption process. Martin, who with his partner Daniel adopted a newborn girl through a private attorney, stated:

One of my closest friends from my previous work life recommended an attorney to us, whom they had used for their adoption. They are also a gay couple who had successfully adopted.

A key player in any adoption is the social worker. Fathers obtained information about social workers who were skilled at placing children with gay people. Alan, a father of two teenagers whom he adopted domestically from birth, explained:

I don't know how I learned about this social worker, but I learned about a social worker... [who] did home studies for gay people. And I called her up and said, "Oh, well, I don't know what I'm doing, but I want to adopt so I better have a home study."

Some fathers sought out agencies that were known to help gay men adopt children, as explained by Victor and Philip, who adopted a newborn boy through a domestic agency:

It was clear to us from what we knew of this agency that they were sort of the go-to agency for gay men...I don't know that we knew that much about the lawyer in the

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represented in the child welfare system, a sign that they are being unfairly subjected to scrutiny by public authorities. The type of scrutiny that a prospective adoptive family goes through, of course, is different given that they are voluntarily seeking a child.

beginning, but we just knew one couple in particular who had used them, and they were sort of known within the community as the go-to for the gays.

Fathers said that many of the challenges they experienced in the adoption system were the same as what they thought straight people go through, and had much to do with the complexities of the system. At the same time, they described how being a same sex male couple influenced how they navigated the adoption system. The conscious and deliberate process fathers followed was shaped in part by their own desires, values, and expectations and in part by the options and restrictions they encountered. Of the many adoption issues fathers faced, two stand out: their decisions about being open as gay men in the adoption process, and their expectations about being “chosen” to be parents.

### **How open can we be as gay men?**

Heterosexist and homophobic attitudes and policies in the adoption system make many prospective gay and lesbian parents have to consider if and how much to be open about being a same sex couple. The degree of openness and how the men in this study thought and felt about decisions of disclosure varied greatly.

**We were afraid to look too loving.** Some couples were advised by their social workers, attorneys, or other parties not to disclose their relationship. Jonathan, father of 9 year-old Linda, describes the scene in the courtroom when he and his partner Ely went to adopt their newborn girl:

I remember you [speaking to Ely] were sitting in the back [of the courtroom]. This was a big day for us...And the judge asked us if we were together. We were trying to downplay it.

Jonathan then described what happened when the judge went off record:

And then he asked us if we were gay. We didn't know how to answer, because we didn't know what was going to happen...And then he asked if we were together, and we said yes. And then he said he wished he could do a joint adoption but that he was risking losing election...so he didn't want to.

Jeremy, father of 2 year-old Simon adopted from birth, remembers being conscious of not showing any physical contact with his partner Juan when they took a picture for the court to finalize their adoption. Jeremy explains how he and his partner were afraid to look like a couple:

When we moved into finalization, we had to like submit a picture of the household, right? So everyone living in the house. And so I remember, we had a friend over; and we're like, "Oh, could you take a picture of the three of us?" But like it's so ridiculous, but like we stood there, and literally like we talked about it how we purposefully didn't have our arms around each other; like I was holding [Simon] and [Juan] was standing next to me because we again were like should we look like a couple or should we just look like [Juan] is just a guy that lives here? And we took a, like in my mind, a really boring picture because we were afraid to like look too loving...we didn't want to push it.

These scenes are reminiscent of situations when a gay couple may be reluctant to hold hands or show any kind of emotional or physical affection towards each other in certain public spaces.

Even though Jeremy and Juan were never asked by the courts about the nature of their relationship, there was always a fear throughout the adoption process about the possible ramifications of others finding out that they were a same sex couple:

At the time it was just unsettling and nerve-racking cause like you never knew, you know, well what if they, whoever they is, what if they find out, you know, and what if they look at the home study and have questions about who [Juan] really is, and he doesn't

seem like he's just a household member, whatever that means, you know. So it was all these questions that were like a whole other layer of stress.

In contrast, other fathers did not experience stress and fear of being too open as a same sex couple in the adoption process. This was particularly true for men who adopted children from the foster care system. Richard and Peter, fathers of Steven and Jacob, had a very positive experience as a gay couple in the family court system:

The experience, the court system was very respectful, and we had no problems there...Absolutely a positive experience once we got there. I don't think we experienced anything different – at least, we haven't gotten the impression of experiencing anything different, and I didn't feel that anybody was discriminating against us.

Some foster care agencies not only had no problem with gay couples being open but also advocated for removing obstacles to LGBT people adopting children. Marcus, who adopted his son Tyson with his partner James, worked with one such agency:

We went through a third party adoption agency...and it happened that the woman who ran that agency was an out lesbian and a professional associate of mine that I had worked with before. So we got really good treatment from them. She has been one of the people that has been at the cutting edge of getting gays, lesbian, and transgender folk to adopt in this region... [and] made it her business to break down the doors to make sure that gays and lesbians and bisexual and transgender folk know that they have an option for adoption.

Richard and Peter had glowing things to say about the foster care agency from which they adopted their children. The agency was not just affirming and supportive, but also placed their story on the agency's website to recruit both straight and LGBT foster and adoptive parents:

First of all, I'll tell you that [agency name] welcomed us. They really did – we're on their website and [our son Steven's] story is also on the website... They've been extraordinary from the very beginning. They were receptive to the idea, and they were kind, considerate, respectful, appreciative... the people there are wonderful. Not one negative thing to say about them. Their parent recruiter and their parent trainer... great. Plus we partner with them now, so from my perspective, it's really an opportunity for the greater community. We're doing recruitment seminars with them.

**Don't ask, don't tell.** Several couples described going through what one father called a “don't ask, don't tell” experience in their adoption process. The two couples who adopted their children internationally through orphanages had to first do a single parent adoption. Henry, father of Bernie and Maggie, said that “we would never lie, but we also said we wouldn't necessarily say everything.” His partner Sheldon described the issue of disclosure as part of jumping through hoops:

You have to jump through some hoops...you're not out loud and proud when you're adopting as a single male, and depending on who in the [name of country] government is reviewing your particular case at any time, they might raise some eyebrows or not.

In describing their first visit to the orphanage, Sheldon vividly brings to life how they delicately negotiated their conversations and interactions with adoption staff:

It was a “Don't ask, don't tell”...I would call [name of social worker] and say, “I would like to adopt a child.” And she'd say, “Are you married?” “No.” “Ok.” And then she'd said, “Ok, we'll do all the paperwork.” And then [we] got all of the paperwork down there, and [our son Bernie] was referred to us within a day...So we go to the orphanage door and just walk in, “Hi, [Henry].” And then I just said, “Hi.” He introduced me as

[Sheldon]. There was no, “This is my partner...And then [the social worker] took him aside, and said, “I know what's going on, you know. It's fine. With me, it's fine.” That was nice...But in terms of the system, going through the [name of country] paperwork, it was just a single straight male.

The statement “There was no, ‘this is my partner’”, like the courtroom scenes described earlier, is an example of the silence imposed by the adoption system on same sex couples. In contrast, Jason and Scott, who also adopted internationally through an orphanage after having tried to adopt through domestic agencies, “never hid the fact” that they were a gay couple:

The orphanage we were dealing with was extremely supportive. We never hid the fact that we were gay or a couple. They were happy to help us make a family. I never had any problems at all on that...Once we got hooked up with this agency or this orphanage in [name of country], and started with them, it was a mirror image opposite of what we experienced before [with domestic agencies]. We were supported, things moved quickly. We got two wonderful kids.

Some couples were not willing to hide the fact that they were a gay couple and insisted on being open about who they were throughout the adoption process. This swayed their decision as to what adoption route they would take. Richard rejected the international route because it meant giving up being open as a gay couple adopting a child:

[We explored] international adoption, which is highly restrictive for gay men. Firstly, you have to be a certain age, especially in China – both of you under thirty-five, and you cannot be gay. That’s very complicated. In fact, very few countries, I don’t know of any, allow gay men to adopt – they allow single men to adopt...and then we would have had to readopt as soon as we got back [home], and there was something about that that didn’t

sit comfortably with me. Most of the countries also require psychiatric evaluations to ensure you are not homosexual. So ethically, I couldn't participate in that.

Jonathan and Ely chose to use a private attorney because they were concerned that adoption agencies would not be supportive of a gay couple:

I had heard that not many agencies were amenable to gay couples. We didn't really want to adopt separately and we ended up doing that legally, but we did not want to put forth an image of a single parent adoption. We had a birth mother letter with the two of us in it, and we wanted to present the whole family. We didn't want to deceive anybody. And most agencies are not okay with that.

Anthony, when questioned by the director of a private adoption agency about information he included about his partner Stan in the materials distributed to birth parents, insisted that he leave it in. Unlike some of the participants mentioned previously, though Anthony was willing to move forward with a single parent adoption, he was not willing to hide his relationship with his partner:

When you do a private adoption, you write a letter and do a picture album and write all kind of things, and the parents look through this information. I clearly mentioned [Stan] through this...I mentioned something about the different children who have been in my life, and the godchildren who have been in my life ...I mentioned how [Stan] helped me through all this and was very supportive and was a very kind and loving person. I remember at the time the woman running through the agency looked at this and said, "Are you sure you want to mention that?" And I said, "Yeah." It was the kind of thing where I understand that if you talk about this and that long-term relationship, that might limit or end some adoption prospects, but I at least wanted to have it there. You'd have to

be stupid not to get what was going on. If somebody needed to deny it themselves, that was their issue. That was their problem; let them deny it. But it was clear for anyone who looked at our profile to see what was going on – that this was a “single” man that had another person who was prominent in his life.

As prospective adoptive parents, the men needed to balance what they would gain and what they would lose by making certain choices in the adoption process. Having to make these kinds of ethical and emotional trade-offs is illustrative of the burdens that heteronormatively constructed institutions like the adoption system place on those who do not fit within their moral and ideological boundaries.

**The point is to play the game.** Some fathers, like Henry, felt that not to disclose was necessary given the realities of the systems they were working with and given their strong desire to find a child to parent:

I think the reality there was a child that needed a better life... it was just a child would be stuck in an orphanage for the rest of its life if we didn't do this. So it was a very easy decision...it was never a case of lying, of openly lying, or misleading in any information. His partner Sheldon described this as “part of a little game” that they needed to play in order to get a child:

It's all part of a little game really...the point is to play that game. Get the kid back here. You have to do what you have to do...what point would be made by trying to get upset about the fact that you have to work within the system? Then what happens if you don't get a family?

Jonathan and Ely had differing reactions to being advised not to reveal their relationship.

Jonathan “tried not to dwell on it” but felt:

It was unfair and costly. [Ely's] adoption had to be a separate financial affair. Morally, it's completely wrong, but financially, it was – five, seven thousand dollars more? He had to prove to the state that he was fit to be an adoptive parent.

Ely, in contrast, felt that “it wasn't an issue” and recognized that some people would accept them as a couple and some would not. For Joey and Thomas deciding not to get married was part of “playing the cards”, because getting married would have been a hindrance to them successfully adopting a child:

We found out that being married can be not beneficial as far as you adopting from certain states. Some states allow you to adopt as a single parent and then come back to your state and do a second parent adoption – but if you are legally married, then you might not be able to adopt from a large percentage of places. So we decided to also just stay domestic partners... We do talk about each other as each other's husbands. At least for the children, we want the same rights [as married couples], of course, but for certain laws that would have hindered us, we were just playing the cards.

Playing the game has its costs. Fathers experienced additional bureaucratic and financial burdens not being able to adopt jointly and having to do a second parent adoption. They also faced emotional costs. Jeremy describes how he felt knowing that his partner Juan was not yet the legal adoptive parent of their son Simon after more than two years:

Louisiana doesn't do same-sex adoptions so only one of us is the adoptive parent in Louisiana so right now we are going through the [second parent adoption] process so that we're both the adoptive parents... So that's completely frustrating. I mean it costs us several thousand more dollars cause we have to do it all over again... We have to do a home study again; we have to get our fingerprints again, and that's like infuriating. And

it also just, you know, makes you feel like crap that to know like for my partner... not to be the legal parent, close to two and half years old, cause Louisiana is also really slow so it's takin' forever. And lot of that slowness wasn't bad things, it's just slow. And so that's just frustrating, and you know, and even though, you know, we feel so much like a family, and you know, we don't have concerns about losing [our son] or anything like that, legally. It's just frustrating, both emotionally and financially. So that's kind of been the aftermath.

Sheldon, whose partner Henry first became the adoptive parent for their son Bernie, spoke about what it was like for him before he became Bernie's legal adoptive parent. On the one hand, having to wait to become his adoptive parent was a "drag" and, at the same time, he "didn't have any worry." Yet, when he took Bernie to the hospital emergency room, his status as Bernie's parent was questioned:

It's like a lot of things of being gay. It's awful that we don't have the same rights as other people. It's awful that you have to pay taxes for health insurance to file on [Henry's] policy. So it's just one of those. I didn't have any worry. I mean there were times we took [Bernie] to the emergency room here [and were told]... [y]ou're not his real parent.

Anthony, who adopted his son Austin 14 years ago, was questioned by the director of the adoption agency about including information that may suggest that he has a male partner. In discussing how he felt about this, he provides an interesting historical perspective on this issue of disclosure:

I was okay with that. I wasn't insulted. I mean, you knew. Now, you kind of go through all of the stuff where you say, "No, I have to go through all of this openly or honestly," but there weren't really options at that time, you know what I mean? I mean, someone

else might say, “I’m not going to do it this way; I’m going to do surrogacy.” But in only fourteen years, it’s a very different world. People who wanted to become parents wanted to become parents. That was very very important. It wasn’t about politics. And I don’t think adoption or parenting should be about politics. It’s about loving. I think you just knew that.

**You have to know the landscape.** The issue of whether single gay men or gay couples can adopt children highlights the kinds of heterocentrist bias and discrimination prospective LGBT parents often face on the state level (Dodd, 2008; Family Equality Council, 2011). Consequently, entering the adoption process as an openly gay man requires that one is knowledgeable and aware of the legal and policy landscape, as explained by Randy, a single father of a teenage boy:

I happen to have the privilege of living in [name of state] right now, but certainly when I was living in [name of previous state], it wouldn't have been as easy for me to adopt as a single gay parent. There was no question here that legally, ethically I could do it. In other places I'm sure there would have been much more discussion about if I could be a parent... And certainly there are probably other states where it would have been more complicated to adopt as a single parent and as a single, gay parent on top of that...All of that makes the possibility of parenting complicated.

At times, the men faced major barriers to adopting a child due to restrictive state laws. Jason and Scott lost the opportunity to adopt a baby from a particular state because of that state’s ban on gay adoption:

The final straw was when we had a mother where everything was going to go great – she wasn’t on drugs, she wasn’t alcoholic, and she was due relatively soon. The problem was

that she was in Florida and she couldn't relocate quickly enough to get her out of Florida. And at that time, gay adoptions were illegal in Florida, so we lost that opportunity. That was it – that was the final straw. We said, “Screw it, we're going to try another route.”

Because the adoption system is uneven and unpredictable in its treatment of same sex parents, the men needed to know where they could advertise themselves in order to increase their chances of successfully adopting a child. This meant working with adoption professionals who, as Donald put it, “knew the landscape” for prospective LGBT parents:

[Our adoption consultant] really has it down...[She] know[s] where to advertise, depending on the type of child you want. What your situation is....two gay men are not advertising in the Bible Belt. We advertised in Washington State, Oregon, and Maryland, strangely enough, wherever she told us to advertise, we advertised. We felt very comfortable with her so we said we would give it a shot.

Knowing the landscape was also important for couples who chose to adopt internationally:

[Our social worker] knew the landscape, and at the time, the countries that were possible for a gay couple or a single male to adopt from were Georgia, the country, Russia, or Guatemala, [they] were the sort of easiest paths.

Martin described navigating the terrain of same sex adoption with a private attorney as a “well-oiled machine”:

Our attorney would guess that her clientele was anywhere from twenty to fifty percent gay. A high percentage of gay [male] couples...She was extremely familiar with all the issues surrounding same sex adoption and she knew which states in the US...had the most favorable laws for same sex adoption. She had a whole system in place to take us from the very beginning, pre-certification stages of the adoption through finding the birth

mother, keeping the birth parents happy, through completely the final paperwork. It was very systematic.

Prospective heterosexual adoptive parents, either couples or single people, likely do not have to think about whether state and national laws will bar them from adopting children, except for states and countries that prohibit unmarried people from adopting, of which there are only a few. Consequently, the prospective fathers and the adoption professionals who helped them needed to be strategic in how they presented information about their family to the courts. Jeremy explained why his caseworker wrote two home studies:

She kind of wrote two home studies. One was talking about us as a couple, as a married couple; I mean we're actually legally married in [name of state]. So one kind of presented us that way, depending on what state we were adopting from. Right? And then she also rewrote a home study that was specifically for me as the adoptive parent and [Juan] as a household member is the technical term; again, depending on what state we went to would then determine which home study was turned in.

Making these decisions about how to present themselves had their benefits as well as emotional consequences. Jeremy described what it felt like to use the home study that presented his husband as a household member:

Because we went to Louisiana we used the one that just presented me as the adoptive parent and [Juan] as the household member. Which again just makes you feel like crap, you know; it's like it just kind of completely, you know, ignores your relationship and the whole reason you're doing this.

States have various ways of denying recognition of two men as the legal parents of a child. Even after completing a second parent adoption in their home state, several couples, like

Alan and Kyle, were denied the right to have both fathers' names on their children's birth certificates:

[Our children's] adoptions were...from Texas which doesn't have a very progressive point of view on adoption by gay men or by gay couples...[Alan and I] are both legal adoptive parents. Although Texas does not permit my name to be on the birth certificate...That's another wrinkle.

At times, two men adopting a child drew a great deal of attention, including from a state governor. In speaking about trying to get both parents' names on their son Nathan's birth certificate after the second parent adoption, Ben said:

We then applied to the state of Texas to have my name added to [Nathan's] birth certificate, and we got back a letter, this was when George W. was Governor of Texas, saying, "By order of the Governor, we may not put your name on [Nathan's] birth certificate unless we remove [Gordon's] name from the birth certificate." Later the State of Texas passed a law, the legislature passed a law to that effect, but before that, ours was done by order of Governor George W. Bush that my name couldn't be on [Nathan's] birth certificate unless [Gordon's] was removed because we were of the same gender.

When asked how he and his partner responded to being denied having both names on their son's birth certificate, Ben replied that they just wanted to keep their family safe:

It wouldn't have mattered who would have challenged it because within months, the Texas legislature passed a law saying that there couldn't be two parents of the same sex on a birth certificate...We just wanted to move on; we wanted to keep our family safe...We didn't do this because we wanted to be political. We did it because we wanted

to be parents, and that's what was important that we be parents and...keep our family as safe as we could.

The ways Ben and Gordon handled this situation begs a broader question about how gay fathers chose to handle bias and discriminatory acts when they arose. Fathers were both strategic and clear with what they were willing to live with in terms of how they handled disclosure, while driven by their end goal of adopting a child and creating the family of their desires.

### **Why would a mother choose us?**

Going through the process of adopting a child, in and of itself, can be unsettling. Being a same sex couple makes one especially vulnerable given an unpredictable and variable social and legal landscape. Mario, who with his partner Conrad adopted two children through a private attorney, described the adoption process as one which required a lot of trust:

For me, it was exactly this feeling that it was a very, very difficult process to adopt. If you don't work with people you can trust, there is no point. You need to be able to trust the people you work with, and we didn't feel we trusted this agency.

A number of the men, while aggressively pursuing their goal of adopting a child, also wondered whether as gay men they would be picked to be a child's adoptive parents. The uncertainty and vulnerability they conveyed made the fact that they all successfully adopted children all the more moving. As the fathers spoke, I wondered how growing up in heterosexist and homophobic environments helped shape their expectations of what they could encounter in the adoption process. I also thought about cultural and societal hierarchies that deem certain people more or less worthy to be parents (Riggs, 2006).

At times, fathers got no response from an agency or caseworker when they expressed interest in adopting a child. Some fathers then wondered whether this had to do with them being two men and/or being gay, as illustrated below by Richard, who adopted two foster children:

You can basically send out your home study to anywhere....[We] sent hundreds of them out...And we never got a response. We don't know if that's because of the system -- was it because of the system and them being overworked or was it them responding to two men in a family?

Marcus and James, who also adopted their child through foster care, had a similar experience:

We kept trying to get connections with a lot of these kids, and things kept going wrong. I started feeling like maybe some of the social workers were maybe uncomfortable making a placement with two gay men. But you have no evidence that you can ever prove that that was happening.

In contrast, Victor and Philip, who adopted their son through a private agency, said that they experienced no particular challenges or uncertainties working with an adoption agency as a gay couple. They described their challenges waiting for a child as what other prospective adoptive parents go through:

You know, it could have been that had we been a straight couple, they could have presented our case to a woman, and she'd have said, "Sure. That's them." You know, we were only presented to cases who knew who we were, and it didn't happen much longer than a normal pregnancy would, and there were cases that we passed on during the whole process. So I never felt that [being a gay couple] was an issue nor was it going to be particularly because of this agency. I mean we've had friends that have used them that had children much quicker than we did, and I think it's simply what the fates bring you.

Theo, a single father who adopted his 3 year-old son Cody from foster care, had requested a child under the age of five and then faced discrimination against not only being gay but being a single man. He later confronted his social worker about this, who acknowledged that there likely was a preference for a two parent family as a “better match” for younger children, but did not acknowledge that there was bias against him for being gay:

I would usually hear nothing back, and when I would try to find more information a few weeks later, I would be told that that child was placed with another family. So it was getting a little frustrating that the state was saying that they don't discriminate based on marital status or sexual orientation, but it seemed like the younger children who had fewer sort of emotional and physical challenges were being placed with two-parent, straight couples more routinely. So I was really concerned about that and had some frank conversations with my social worker that I felt like there was a subtle discrimination going on here about placements and that a single person, particularly a single man, particularly a single gay man that I wasn't being considered for some of the children who I felt were the best match for me.

The child welfare system has historically placed older and “hard to place” children with gay men. This practice may be based on the homophobic assumption that gay men may be harmful to younger children and the sexist assumption that men are incapable of providing sufficient nurturing to infants and younger children in the absence of women.

Many prospective adoptive parents have some degree of anxiety and fear about whether they will be chosen to be a child's parents. Some of the men felt that in competing with other couples birth mothers would likely select heterosexual couples over a gay couple. Martin said

that this concern compounded his already existing concern about whether he would be perceived as capable of providing for a child's material needs:

The concern about competing against other parents was definitely foremost in my mind. Certainly, at that time, and things have changed for us, but we were not as financially well off as we would have liked to be...I had a lot of anxiety around that. I didn't know what some other person who had a more idealized version of a family life was going to be like...if I were a birth mother at the time, I would have imagined that you would see ten couples – eight of them would be heterosexual, two of them would be gay men, and you would choose one of the eight heterosexual couples and work your way down that way. If for some reason you did sort of put aside the eight hetero couples and focus on the two gay couples, you would choose the more well off of the two.

For some couples like Conrad and Mario, the concern about being seen as desirable parents was reinforced by agency personnel:

When [the director] handed us the case, and we had issues with it because the woman had seizures, we said, "uh, I'm not sure..." then she said, "Well, a lot of people aren't going to take a gay family, so you really shouldn't be too picky."

When a situation with a birth mother went awry, the director used the fact that Conrad and Mario were gay as a threat against them:

[She] would also say things like: "You shouldn't complain – it is really hard for gays to adopt, so you shouldn't make trouble"...she was sort of using the gay card to make us feel like "you're lucky you're working with an agency that accepts gay clients.. which is such bullshit"...then she started using it against us. Before that, there was never an issue about being gay when working with professionals.

At times, concerns about not being chosen were borne out through birth mothers' responses. Jason and Scott, who began their adoption process in the late 1990s, had initially tried to adopt a child domestically through an agency and encountered difficulties finding birth mothers who wanted to place their children with gay families:

The major setback was that we still couldn't find any mothers. It was still fairly early on and gay adoption was still pretty new. A lot of the mothers – not that we found very many – some of them just didn't really want to place their kids with gay families. So there was some of that blatant discrimination.

Some men, like Joey and Thomas, feared being “scammed” by birth mothers who just wanted to get their money.

A lot of the things that were said to be hard about a gay parent adopting was that people might take your money but not actually do anything for you. We knew that that was a danger.

Jonathan and Ely “fell prey” to a birth mother who was using them for the money:

We had a connection with one woman in [name of location] who turned out to be faking her pregnancy just for the attention. Then we foolishly fell prey to some woman who said, “I have a situation, send your deposit.” We were all “Okay!” and so excited, and it turned out that that was a sham.

Concerns about not being chosen or being mistreated by birth mothers influenced which route the men ultimately chose to adopt a child. Daniel, in speaking about needing an attorney who would understand the particular anxieties that come up for gay male parents, said the following:

I mean, why would a mother choose us? That was one of the issues. That was also why we went for private adoption because we didn't want to directly compete with heterosexual couples when they go through agencies, where you have all the profiles online. We didn't want that because we thought we had a better chance at private adoption.

Sheldon, who eventually decided to adopt internationally, spoke about the fears of adopting from foster care and having birth families step in and oppose a child going to a gay couple:

We heard a lot of those stories, or a relative finding that it's a gay couple and saying, "No way are we going to let a gay couple take our [child]" ...I heard a number of stories. A friend of mine had a child in foster care and then was adopting and just when all the paperwork, they were going to the judge. A grandmother who he had never seen showed up of the birth mother and said she didn't want her grandson to be raised by gay men, and the child was taken away from them after he had lived with them for a long time. I just thought that was so horrible, and I knew that it would be a lot for me to take emotionally. That once the child was in my house it had to be abandoned.

While having concerns about not being chosen, some fathers came to realize that being two men served as an advantage in the adoption selection process. Donald explains that one reason among others he thinks they were selected by their child's birth mother was that there were no other women in their household involved in parenting:

I would assume [we were chosen] because...we were financially very stable. I think we present well. We're fairly attractive; we're the right age. I think we're pretty easy to talk to, you know, and all those kinds of things. And we have... a huge support network...but

I think a lot of the birth mothers, the sense that I've gotten is in some ways it's comforting to them to not have another woman in the picture... There's no competition.

Daniel describes this advantage as a “trump over heterosexual couples”:

We eventually figured out that there was one thing that we had as a trump over heterosexual couples, which was this: the mother will always be the mother. The birth mother will always be the birth mother. There is no competition – we would be the fathers, but she would always be the mother.

Sharing a similar view as Daniel, Jeremy makes a distinction between a woman choosing them because she wanted her child to go to a gay family or because there would be no other woman involved:

[The birth mother] never said this exactly, but...one of things that interested her was that we were a gay couple, that there wasn't kind of another mom in the picture. You know, she'll always be his only mom...it wasn't so much that she was like a big gay ally, and that she really wanted her son, her baby to go to a gay family, but it was more that there wasn't another woman.

Thus, for some if not many birth mothers, the need to be the child's only mother superceded any reservations they may have had about gay men being her child's parents. Ironically, the importance given in society to biological motherhood and the meanings motherhood may have for women worked in favor of this group of gay men's aspirations to become parents.

### **I kept expecting to get dirty looks**

Some fathers expected negativity as gay men and were then surprised by the neutral and positive reception they received on their journeys through the adoption process. Having these expectations is understandable given the stigmatizing messages gay men have faced in a system

that has historically been heterosexist and unwelcoming of sexual minorities. Jonathan spoke about being “chosen” by his daughter’s birth mother:

That’s right, she did choose us over several other parents...she did choose us after looking at several profiles. She chose the gay couple. Which was nice, in my opinion. Richard, who had a very positive experience with his foster care agency and the court system, said the following:

I didn’t really know what to expect, but I did actually think that we were going to have some challenges. I didn’t think the system was going to be so open, since it’s usually at the mercy of the caseworker. And the reality is that if someone is opposed to two gay people raising a child, they’re just not gonna call you back.

Shane, who also adopted through the foster care system, “wondered” how other prospective foster parents would respond to him and his partner in their foster parenting classes and then felt welcomed and accepted:

Primarily, the experience was very positive...for the most part, were very welcoming. We had to take eleven weeks of classes and we wondered how they would respond – they, meaning people in the class...And people were very welcoming and open and accepting...For the most part, our experience as two guys in a same sex couple was positive. The foster care system in and of itself is very complicated and very challenged and broken at times.

Daniel, in speaking about the nurses in an Oregon hospital where he and his partner Adam picked up their new baby girl, said that he expected “to feel uncomfortable [and] to have to walk on eggshells or talk around the situation.” His partner Martin expected to have “to be tough about it, [and] say, ‘Deal with it, I’m here’.” Contrary to his expectations, Martin felt that

It was such a non issue that it was shocking. It was like the most normal thing..I kept expecting in the hospital to get dirty looks or attitude, but...they couldn't have been nicer. [The nurses at the hospital] were encouraging us to blog...I think they thought it was kind of cool....I mean, of course they looked, like, "How are you handling the child? Are you able to deal with the child?" And then they saw we were able to do it...The nurses kept making comments...like what a great relationship we had and things like that.

Shane said that he and his partner Jordan expected birth families to not accept them as gay men:

Any foster parent has to think about this, but we had to think about it from a different perspective. We had to worry about, "Are the biological parents going to find out we're a gay couple and then say that 'I don't want my kids with homosexuals'?" We were very concerned about that.

Shane subsequently found this not to be the case and saw this as a lesson in not making assumptions:

Actually, it turned out to be the opposite. Once we met the biological family, [for all of our children], the people we interacted with were extremely okay with it. They really didn't care. They had so many other things going on that that wasn't a concern. It really wasn't. Even with the guys, with the dads or uncles – I think gay men are often more worried about heterosexual men as a whole not treating them well or having negative stereotypes than women, as a whole...It was a lesson in not making assumptions about how people are. I think part of us just thought, "Oh, these folks, these rednecks, they're not going to accept two gay men. They're just going to use that as an excuse to say they don't like us."

Daniel, speaking about his initial concerns that birth mothers may not choose a gay couple, had similar expectations based on his assumptions about how class and religion may influence attitudes towards gay people:

For me, it was about what kind of women give up their children. What is their class structure? What are their religious beliefs?...I thought that a lot of the women, if they were lower class, might not be as open to gay parenting, and also for religious reasons might also not be as open to gay parenting. That was one of my concerns – are we investing our time and not just money and energy and hope in something that might not work out?

The following example of surprise is both similar and quite different from the previous examples. It is similar in the sense that the adoption process can be so unpredictable, particularly for gay men. It is different in the starkness and degree of animosity shown towards a gay couple adopting a child. Ben and Gordon, who live in a very rural area, went to court to do a second parent adoption for their son Nathan (only the second time this was done in that county). They did not expect that their adoption would be made into a “public spectacle”:

There was a lesbian couple who did it before us under the radar; we found out about that later, but we did it, and I guess the gossip was all over the small, conservative county minds...As we were just going up to meet the judge and the clerk, we were all by ourselves in this big courtroom and there she was up on the dais; suddenly the fire exit doors, like to the left and right of the judge's bench opened up, and all of the courthouse employees from the county clerk's office...about 25 or 30 people just came and stood against the wall with arms folded, scowling at us as we went through the process.

These stories show that surprise can come in many forms and have many meanings for gay men adopting children. Some fathers received support, acceptance and even celebration that they had not expected. For others, a hope for a joyous occasion was marked with scorn and hostility. Surprise signals or points to a status quo, the expected, and thus our experiences of surprise illuminate the ways we perceive things should, can, and will be. They convey the pain and joy of facing the realities of both the past and the present; the hopes, expectations, and fears we bring to our present lives and the challenges and opportunities we can embrace as we engage with each unfolding moment. An important arena where fathers faced numerous challenges and opportunities is in engaging with their children's schools, which is the subject of the next section.

### **Disclosure, Diversity, (and Integration?): Navigating the School Systems**

A school is a microcosm, a meeting point of family life, societal values and norms, ideas about child development, and socialization into communities. School is an unavoidable and prominent aspect of a parent's life, at least in communities where children have access to schooling. Being a family with gay parents influenced three areas of fathers' experiences with their children's schools: screening schools to determine if they would be a safe place for their child; helping their children speak to others at school about their families; and, addressing overt bias or discrimination against them and/or their children.

#### **Finding the right school for your kid**

Most of the fathers in this study live with their children in small to large metropolitan areas with many kinds of diversity and often sizable LGBT communities. Some fathers lived in towns with university communities that tended to have a progressive minded culture. As a result of living in these kinds of localities, the majority of fathers had choices in schools, whether they

were public, private or charter. They also had the financial means and wherewithal to exercise these choices, as described by Jason, father of Carlos and Joseph, both of whom go to private schools:

A lot of [other] places, you don't have alternatives...here, it's like "I don't like my local school, so I'll spend a lot of money and put my kid in a private school, and I don't have to worry about it." Not only that, but I have leverage in this place to make them deal with me and my family appropriately...In a public school somewhere else, you don't. That's where you run into problems. It's a safety issue, a psychological and physical safety issue for your children and for your family.

The fact that fathers like Jason had access to supportive school environments raises important questions about how same sex parents who live in small metropolitan and rural areas (see Kinkler & Goldberg, 2011), as well as parents with limited financial resources navigate the challenging and ever-present issues related to their children's schooling.

**What's important is that your kids be safe.** Safety was a primary consideration for all of the fathers in choosing a school for their children. For many fathers, concerns about safety influenced their choices about where to raise their children:

What's important is your kids be safe in school; you can't be wedded to a house or whatever. You need to move to the district where your kids will be safe. Your kids will be safe in some districts, and some they won't be safe in others. That was a universal experience for a lot of different parents, that they ended up moving. Lesbians as well as gay men.

Though fathers were willing to accept uncertainty in people's attitudes and behaviors towards them as gay men, many fathers like Jeremy, father of 2 year-old Simon, were not willing to do so when it came to their children's schools:

When it comes to me, there might be situations where I'm willing to give people a second chance...Like, you know, if someone says something that wasn't that accepting, whatever, I'm like okay; maybe we'll push it a little bit more, ask them a different question, or see about this or whatever...when it comes to [Simon], I have no time for that. If I have a bad feeling, I'm moving on. It's a protective thing...I only want to go to the school that I feel 100% about the whole time.

For fathers of children of color, issues of safety are not only about people's attitudes towards gay men, but also about the complicated dynamics of class and race. Jonathan, who is White, spoke about their decision to send their 9 year old daughter Linda, who is African-American, to a private school rather than the local public school:

We also knew that we couldn't send [Linda] to public school in the area – not just because they all suck but... at the school down the block, every child is probably African-American, and can you imagine people finding out that she has two gay White dads? It would be devastating for her. I remember when I was a kid, they would make fun of someone for having freckles, or glasses, or braces. I think it would have been socially destructive.

Jonathan and his family live in a neighborhood with predominantly African-American residents. When asked if he and his partner Ely would have sent Linda to the local school school if it was better educationally, Jonathan elaborated on its socio economic environment and the families who send their children there:

It's harder on families and harder on children. There are more single mothers and more difficult situations that make for a harder existence as children. The children are tougher; they have to be tougher. That would have compounded on her, having two gay White dads. Because there are not that many, if any, up here.

**Screening schools for heteronormativity.** Fathers had different approaches for gauging a school's potential responses to them as a family. Some fathers immediately let the school know that they were a family with two fathers. Mario and Conrad, fathers of three year old Lucy, described what they would say when they searched for a daycare for their daughter:

Mario: ... We would ask, "Have you had experience with families of two dads?"

Conrad: The response we would get when we would ask would be, "Oh, we're welcoming!" They bent over backwards to think that they were the warmest, best possible environment. They wanted us.

Marshall spoke about "constantly outing" himself at open houses when they were deciding on a school for their five year old son Colin:

Those open houses, with the principal and the staff and everything, and they're talking about why their school is so wonderful. I had to say, "What's your school policy on nontraditional families?" And how do you deal with same-sex or same-gender families? So I was constantly outing myself to a room full of strangers because that's important information for us to decide if we wanted [Colin] to go there. I asked the principal at where he is now that question directly.

Some fathers were extremely assertive in making sure their children's schools would be welcoming of their children and in addressing any problems that arose for their children in

school. Daniel insisted that his daughter Lisa's pre-school "deal with" the fact that she has gay parents. When asked what he meant by "deal with", Daniel explained:

I wanted them to talk about that – I wanted them to verbalize it and also verbalize it to the other children, that it's something that's a possibility, so that it's not just the heteronormative family that's established at daycare.

Some fathers did not immediately disclose that they were a family with gay dads but took a wait and see approach when interviewing schools to listen for indications that the school would be a supportive environment for their family. Jeremy, who lives in a large metropolitan city, described what it was like looking for a daycare for his two year old son Simon:

What sealed the deal at the end, why I knew I wasn't interested is, I had said several times, when referring to [my partner Juan and me], I had said "we," but I hadn't named him, and I hadn't come out, not really on purpose, but I had just said "we." So in the end [the school director] said, "Well, talk it over with your wife, blah, blah." I was like alright, I have other options...for her to make that assumption which a lot of people make... I just know there are people out there that aren't going to make that assumption. So if I lived somewhere else, I'd probably have to think, "Ok, I need to teach her this, and we need to have this conversation," but...I didn't feel like I needed to go there so that was the end of that.

There clearly is no one-size fits all approach in terms of how fathers handled issues of disclosure with the school systems. Fathers did things differently depending on their own comfort level and their assessment of the people and institutions with whom they were dealing.

**Everybody had something interesting or different.** In addition to considering issues like the physical environment and the learning and teaching philosophy of a school, many fathers

assessed schools for how they and their children would be treated as a two dad family, an adoptive family, and in some cases a transracial family. The ways in which fathers assessed and selected a school for their children reveals how they live with what Cole (2009) calls “multiple categories of social group membership” (p. 170). Fathers spoke about the importance of diversity when they were choosing their child’s school. For many of them, diversity in schools included not only families with gay and lesbian parents, but also racial and ethnic diversity, families with different socio-economic backgrounds and families with non-normative family structures (e.g. single parents, grandparents as primary caregivers). Jonathan describes his daughter’s school:

[Diversity] is in their charter...there is a social and economic mix in the school...at [school name], they do have a diversity coordinator and they foster blending in a classroom, so that there is a good number of African-Americans, adopted, gay and lesbian families – they try, anyway, I think we’re the smallest corner of diversity.

Alan, who lives in a neighborhood with a relatively large population of same sex families, said the following about the public schools his teenage sons Leon and Ian attend:

To say what it's like living in our milieu; [Leon and Ian] went to public high school, public elementary school...Neither of them ever had a year that there was not, you know, at least one lesbian family in their class. There may not have been...there were not that many gay male headed families, but there were plenty of two mom families and all kinds of other alternativity....Single parents, blended families, mixed race. There was nothing especially remarkable about them. Everybody had something interesting or different.

A diverse school also meant a school that could effectively address the multiple ways a child might be different from his peers, as explained by Jeremy:

We're looking for a place that not only is accepting of us as gay parents and...a child with two dads, but also [Simon]...you know he has two dads; he's adopted; he's biracial like all those are things that I want to one, not be an issue, and also to be addressed in a positive way.

Diversity did not only mean sociocultural markers, but included challenging gender norms through their educational approach. Jonathan spoke about the “progressive model of education” in his daughter’s private school:

I love the school for what they’re doing... I had never been exposed to a progressive model of education, but I really like it. I think it really works. With everything they teach, they teach positive, fun ways to learn it. And not everything is drilling – they are all learning to knit right now! Boys and girls alike. To me, that is educational. That is teaching something to boys that it’s not just off to the football field...So I just find the school to be refreshingly progressive and forward thinking about everything.

For Jeremy, a White father of a biracial boy, assessing how his son’s potential school handles diversity was an entrance into finding out how the school not only viewed families with same sex parents, but diversity in family structure more generally:

So I got talking to the owner afterwards who's a Black woman and who actually was adopted as well, I found out. There was kind of like a diversity poster on the wall so that's how I started the conversation. I said, “You know, so I noticed this so how do you incorporate issues of diversity into your program.?” And she said, “Oh, all the time.” She said, “You know,” and she already knew our situation, and she said, “Whenever we talk about families, we don't talk about moms and dads, we talk about parents. We talk about families.” And she said, “You know, I'm adopted too. So we talk about how

families change. How families sometimes look alike and sometimes don't." She said everything I wanted her to say (laughs)... it was obvious to me that issues of diversity were central to her beliefs and her way of being so that was great for me.

Daniel was proactive in providing books and materials on alternative families to his daughter's daycare:

I immediately established that we are two gay male fathers, and that in certain areas they need to deal with that. I want them to deal with it in child play, and also in books – we gave them books to read on alternative family structures (not just gay male and things), and so we gave them stuff and they were open to it. They were really happy to deal with it.

When his son Austin in third grade asked him to speak to his class about his family, Anthony, who is a teacher, framed having two dads in a broader context of "kids that come from multiple kinds of families":

I sat the kids in a circle ...and I said, "In my classroom, there are kids that come from multiple kinds of families. Sometimes a kid might have a parent in prison, and he might be growing up with his grandmother, or he might have this situation or another. If I went around in this group, I'm sure you all have a lot of different situations. [Austin's] family is one of them." And I just started talking about the different things that were unique. I talked about, "In our house, we have two dads, we have a grandma, we have a dog, we have a cat..." These were young kids. And I said, "Some of you might notice that I'm also White and [Austin] is African-American," but it could be that I'm with a woman who is African-American and we have a biracial child, and many families have that... I

was talking about the diversity of families in general...rather than, “This is different and we’re the only ones who are different.”

For Theo, being a single gay father brought another level of difference into the diversity equation, namely being a single parent:

I did ask every school about the issue of diversity. Do you have a diverse set of kids? How do you handle diversity? As simple as do you have dolls that are different color? Does my kid see himself in your school at all?...How do you accommodate me as a single parent? Are there other families that are like us? Well, what I found out was, marginally, most schools play lip service to, “Yeah, we have a few black- or brown-skinned dolls. We read books with characters of different colors.” But there's very little diversity reflected in the parents and students. So that's been a challenge. In both schools, I was the only single parent family and the only gay parent. (20) (Theo, father of 4 year old Cody)

**Two dads is a good thing.** For some fathers, having two dads conferred an advantage to their kids in getting accepted into schools. Mario explains that schools saw the fact that his 3 year old daughter Lucy had gay dads as contributing to their diversity:

Eventually – [Lucy] got into all three [schools] – I don’t know if the gay dad thing played in there, because apparently in [name of location where they live] it’s in favor... There’s a diversity thing. Schools are all about looking for a diverse community.

This “advantage” spills over into other social settings. In speaking about his son Ryan’s preschool and pediatrician, Donald said:

If anything I find it advantageous. You know, we had.....I don't know that [Ryan] would've gotten into the school that he got into... You know, two dads is a good thing.

His pediatrician had closed the practice; like they were closed to accepting new patients. We knew someone that knew him, but I think part of the reason they took us on was because they like the idea of having a same-sex couple in their practice... You know, it's another box that you can tick off.

Like Donald, other fathers felt that through their presence they and their children had a positive influence on those around them and the environments of which they were a part. Some fathers, like Donald, placed this in a larger context and were conscious of how their presence may contribute to a larger “cause” in society. Speaking further about having gay dads may have contributed to how Ryan being accepted into his school, Donald said:

I'm perfectly happy to be that person because I feel the only way you promote the cause is through one on one contact. Really, I feel that's the only way you do it. I mean there are other ways, but I will get a lot further if someone gets to know me and my family, and I will do a lot more towards pushing the envelope and getting things opened up and getting this whole, you know, gays and equal and all that stuff by interacting.

These accounts show that fathers see their families as different in more complicated ways than solely as a family with gay parents. Being a family with gay dads, while prominent, fits within a larger picture of what fathers value as a diverse social and educational environment that includes family structure, nationality, race and ethnicity, being adopted, and socioeconomic status.

### **Interfacing with schools**

Some fathers who had young children appreciated that people in their children's schools did not even seem to notice that they were a family with two dads. Marshall, speaking about his four year old son Colin's pre-school, found that “nobody batted an eye”:

Time after time and experience after experience, nobody batted an eye, it was just, you know, kind of, “Okay.” Even his pre-K teacher, she was like, “Okay,” you know, it wasn't...didn't even really need to talk about it. It was all kind of, “Okay.” So that's been super helpful...it's been such a non-issue since we started public school which was a little bit of concern.

Similarly, Joey and Thomas said that people at their 9-month old daughter Mary's daycare “didn't blink” at the fact that they were same sex parents:

Depending on the day, there are five to eight other children there in her daycare, from ages three to eighteen months, or three to fifteen months. She seems to be doing well there...and the daycare was awesome with us from the first moment. We even said that we were two fathers, and they were all “Okay... it's obvious, we get it.” They said that they had had same sex parents before and they didn't blink. It was an instant choice for us to pick them.

It should be noted that both of these schools are located in an urban neighborhood with a significant number of same sex families. Donald, who lives in a suburban area that also has a large number of gay and lesbian families, explained that having two dads made his son Ryan the target of what he called “annoying observational behavior”:

There should be a term for sort of annoying observational behavior. That's not harassment or discrimination. There was this little girl in [Ryan's] class literally, for like twenty minutes, she kept saying, [Ryan], that's your dads. [Ryan], that's your dads. and it wasn't harassing or discriminatory, it was observational on her part, but annoying, like shut up about it...I don't want to say they are too young to discriminate or harass because I think that young children can do that. But I don't think that's what he's experienced that

I've noticed. I think it's been more sort of questioning or wondering, bringing it up maybe more than it needs to be.

**Running into homophobia.** A number of fathers said that, while they generally had positive experiences as gay parents in their children's schools, they also encountered instances of homophobia from teachers and students. Homophobia was expressed in different forms. For Marcus, father of then six year old Tyson, living in a city and school district where gay people were visible and influential provided the support to advocate for his child and his family:

So many of the teachers are gay here. It's just outrageous and wonderful. It's very user friendly territory. We have had had instances when we have run into homophobia in the school...I had a teacher that said something very homophobic, and I overheard her...She basically made it clear that she didn't approve of the adoption...She was saying that it was disgraceful that we were being allowed to adopt [Tyson] and that it shouldn't happen. And as she turned around, I was standing there. She didn't realize I was there, and I overheard her. I confronted her and I confronted the principal and I went down to the Unified school district, and we submitted a letter, and we went to the [name of agency] and we got support. I think we got her fired.

Not all fathers, however, got support after they confronted a teacher about a homophobic or heterosexist incident. Miguel poignantly described an incident that happened to his son Paolo in a reading circle when he was five years old:

They were doing reading in circle. And the teacher was saying Paquito kisses Juanita. Juanita kisses Paquito. Mom kiss Daddy. Everybody was saying something similar. And [Paolo], my youngest, he was five years old, in first grade, raises his hand and says, "Papi kisses his boyfriend." And the teacher corrected him, "No, Papi doesn't kiss

boyfriend. That's not okay. Papi kisses wife"... Well, the principal of the school called me. She said, "I need to talk to you about an issue that I would like to discuss with you about your son. I don't know where he's getting all this, but we need to talk." So I went to the school. And there was the psychologist, the social worker, the principal, the teacher, myself. And I brought my partner with me. They never knew that I was gay because I never openly said anything, and they began to tell me, "Well, we were talking..." and they said what happened in the class. Your son said that, "Papi kisses boyfriend." I said, "Well, let me introduce you. This is [Jose]. [He] is my partner, and he is [Paolo's] very important person in his life, and it's absolutely true; I do kiss him"...they weren't expecting this.

After Miguel disclosed to the school that he is gay, the school stopped asking him to volunteer at events. It should be noted that Miguel is in his late fifties and adopted his children in the late 1990s, when attitudes towards gay parenting and homosexuality more generally were less accepting.

Fathers varied in the ways they thought about and responded to difficulties their children encountered in school. Marcus, whose son Tyson is now 15 years old, describes how his son was teased for having gay dads:

[Tyson] was being teased by a couple of kids. They were using the fact that he had gay parents as a weapon against him – "Your dads are gay so you must be gay too." All of this off the wall stuff that he found really painful. Because he's not a fighter – I mean, he'll fight if you back him into a corner, but he's a relatively gentle natured child. And neither one of us felt like he should have to fight that battle on his own.

Marcus responded to this situation with a "take no prisoners attitude":

I would only give the schools a very short window to arrest the problem. There are some things that we don't tolerate. I don't send my child to be abused or bullied, physically or psychologically. There have been a couple instances where I felt like the schools were trying to react but they were reacting too slow to satisfy my needs. And then I've gone to the principal and said, "You either handle this or I want to meet with both you and the child's parents. If I can't meet with you and the child's parents, you're going to be meeting with me, my partner and our lawyer." So I have a take no prisoners attitude when it comes to that.

Many teenagers live in environments and go to schools where words like "fag" and "homo" are commonly used as derogatory terms and are even condoned by teachers. When asked what it was like for his sons Leon and Ian being kids with gay fathers, Kyle said:

[Our sons] had almost no negative feedback of any kind ever; now here are the provisos on that, the caveats. Kids do you use the word "fag" or "homo." They don't mean that. [Leon], himself, has used it. I mean he doesn't connect it at all with us, and when people have used that with him, they're not talking about your dads. They all know who we are. It's generally cool or nothing, cool or neutral.

On the one hand, Leon has "had almost no negative feedback of any kind ever". At the same time, he has used and has heard others use the words "fag" and "homo". It is noteworthy that Kyle says that his son does not connect these words at all with his fathers. Later Kyle described a situation in which his family was the target of an offensive remark on Facebook:

A kid posted something on [Leon's] Facebook page saying something like, "Hey, [Leon]. I'm very interested in butt sex. Can I meet your dads?" And so we went to work on that...we contacted the parents.

The parents of the other child were very apologetic and horrified that their child had done this, and were scared he may be kicked out of the school. Kyle and his partner Alan had different reactions about the significance of this incident:

Kyle: The truth is we knew that the kid...it wasn't even meant as homophobia. That was not my issue with it; it was just inappropriate to be saying things like that on Facebook.

Alan: You don't think that that was homophobia?

Kyle: Well, only in the most general sort of way, and they, the kids, were kind of ...when they were reminded of or told of the situation, they were horrified. It doesn't reflect their political views is what I mean. It's just something to say to get at somebody, and I have learned to separate that out. I don't really respond to that, but I felt the parents should know because it could be damaging to their children to have these statements be found.

Josh, who adopted his now 22 year old son Warren at birth, described how he responded to kids using the word “faggot” at his son’s school. Josh informed the children’s parents, met with school administrators, and insisted that teachers at the school not ignore the problem but rather speak openly with their students about how certain terms are derogatory towards gay people and are unacceptable:

Everyone was calling each other “faggots” or “you’re so gay.” Everyone was doing it. [Warren] came home really upset one day about that...it was one of the harder things I had to do, but I actually called the parents of the kids who were saying this. Because I felt if [my son] was saying a horrible word like “nigger” or something I would want to know immediately. [We then] went to the school and met with the principal and the administrators. We basically demanded that the school have a school presentation about tolerance. We insisted that the teachers and administrators use the words “faggots” and “fag” and “it’s so gay.” And they said no, [they] couldn’t do that; it’s appalling for [them] to even say those words, and I said then what you’re doing is allowing [children]

to still use those words. I said if my son used the word “nigger” he would have been kicked out of school, and he should be. It shouldn’t be tolerated. But if you don’t tell them what’s not acceptable, then you’re giving them carte blanche to use it. It’s the one word that everyone can say in school still and get by and get away with it. I suggested that instead of just focusing on, you know, attacks on gay people with derogatory terms, I said I know there’re kids at this school, and I listed some of the kids, who get teased constantly because they’re overweight, and they’re called “fat” and “fatso.” My suggestion and my hope is that you broaden this up to respecting everyone and what words are really harmful. And they did. They listened, and they responded. We were really pleased. All the teachers in the classroom had the talk with their kids, and kids participated.

Josh placed what his son was going through in a larger context of other children who get teased, like racial minorities and overweight kids. He framed his approach with the school in terms of the language and words that is being allowed or not allowed in a school. Condoning the use of the word “faggot” by not doing anything, in a sense, authorizes stigmatizing and harassment of LGBT people. Taking these actions was “hard to do” for Josh but it was something he felt like he had to do in order to role model for his son:

I felt like we have to role-model for [Warren] appropriate behavior, [an] appropriate response to a situation. So I wouldn’t have wanted to do this, but I felt I had no choice.

As a parent I had to do this as a role-model. (19)

**Opening up a can of worms: Children’s disclosure in the schools.** Previous literature on children of same sex parents highlights the issue of disclosure, that is how children talk about their families with peers and other people in their lives. This issue can be particularly

challenging for children as they approach middle school (Gianino, Goldberg, & Lewis, 2011). Unlike children who are racial minorities or who have physical disabilities, the markers of difference for an adopted child with gay fathers are not immediately apparent. Thus, children must often decide if and how to talk to others about the details of their families. At times, these conversations are initiated by others and at times they are initiated by the children themselves.

By and large, fathers reported that their children wanted to be open with others about being adopted and having two fathers. Shane, a father of three children, said the following when asked how his seven year old son George talks about his family to other people:

At this point anyway, I can see to him that it's his "normal." It's all he's ever known.

He's grown up knowing before he could understand it that he was adopted. His two dads are his parents. He understands that there are different kinds of families, and most have a mom and a dad, just about all have a mom, and some might have just a dad and some might have two dads. But I guess for him, it's just his normal. It's very matter of fact.

When people mention his mom to him, he will be very quick and matter of fact when he says, "I don't have a mom. I have two dads." But there is no emotion attached to that. I think a lot of us hear, "Oh, someone doesn't have a mom" and there's this element of "Oh, this poor kid! It's so sad!" It's really not the case with him.

Marcus spoke about how his son Tyson would brag to his friends about having gay dads when he was younger, but then began to encounter problems as he got older:

When he first came here, he used to brag to his friends, "I've got two dads!" And I kinda wanted to tell him, "You know, honey, you might not want to brag about that... actually, you might not want to brag constantly at all, like 'I've got this toy or that toy.'" So I told him, "You may find as you grow older that not necessarily everybody agrees that it's the

right thing that you have two dads.” But I didn’t tell him not to say it. Because he thought it was a point of pride and he would tell people immediately. “I’ve got two dads!” It was to the point where I actually sometimes found it a little embarrassing. Then it started happening: other kids started picking on him. It was usually kids who were very jealous of him. The kids who picked on him were kids who didn’t have parents or who had one parent that was struggling, who were very poor and socially marginalized, economically marginalized.

Tyson continued to “out” his family each year at school:

Interestingly, every year the kids have to go through these little biographies, where they talk about who they are to the classes. And every year when he writes his biography, he discloses to the class that he’s got two dads....And a lot of times [his teachers will] send me a note saying, “Geez, you know, [Tyson] kind of outed his family in class today and we were very impressed with the ease with which he did it and we were impressed with how well it was accepted by the other students.” So this is an ongoing thing with him every year.

In contrast to the previous two children, Victor and Philip’s nine year old boy Ralph was not as forthcoming about having two dads:

We have some friends, these two women who have two kids...[their son] said, “Well, I’m adopted; I have two moms.” It was like boom...there was no hesitation... “This is who I am. You need to know that.” That’s not who [Ralph] is...he might not say anything, but also there are ...there are not that many instances in a nine year old boy’s life where they’re not surrounded by people who don’t know them.

A number of children, as described by their fathers, showed a great deal of personal agency in letting others know about their families. In some families children asked their fathers to speak to their classmates at school about their families. Robert was taken aback by how openly his then eight year old son Warren, whom he raised from birth and is now a young adult, wanted to speak to his friends at summer camp about having two dads:

I would take him to school or one of us would take him to school every day. And one of us would pick him up. And he told the kids that he had two dads, and they didn't believe him, and so he asked if we could both come together one day to pick him up so he could prove to his classmates that he really had two dads...I was feeling, "Wow, he's not hiding it, and in fact, he's kind of proud of it, and he wants to prove his point so we did do that."

After repeatedly being asked by his classmates in elementary school about having two dads and not having a mom, Austin, now 14 years old, asked his father Anthony to come into his class and talk about the "can of worms" that had been opened about having two dads:

[Austin] was kind of a remarkable kid. I remember that something had happened, I think in the third grade....He said something about this one girl who was Malaysian who was giving out cookies, and another kid, who said, "Ben said you had two dads...you don't have a mom?" And he said, "If she was asking me in sincerity, I would have answered, but she already knew. She's just doing it to be mean." So he said, "Would you come into the classroom and talk? I kind of said, "I'll come in, but...I'm going to walk out of the classroom and you're going to be the one who's left to deal with it." I said something like, "It's opening up a can of worms." And [Austin] was remarkable. He said, "Well, the can of worms is already open so can you come and talk.

Leon similarly asked his father Kyle to speak to his high school health class about homosexuality. Kyle described his experience in his son's class:

I was his "show and tell" for, you know, as a gay parent... as a gay person...I talked about whatever was in the news then. I think I probably talked about gay marriage and what it used to be like for gay people, and you know, what it's like...I don't even remember. I just remember him being so proud that I was there.

The responses from the other students in the class show the power of presence that is a recurring theme in fathers' stories. Kyle's experience suggests that through one's presence and openness, the idea of a kid raised by gay fathers becomes a reality for others:

I did notice a little bit of surprise...not because they'd never heard of gay parents, but because right there, this guy they knew, they may not even have realized had gay dads.

Jason described the importance of their presence as a gay family in his son Carlos' school. He described how well integrated and connected his son was to his class, which provided him with a strong social network to turn to when he was teased:

It wasn't a kid from his class, but a kid from one of the other classes, and that only tells you how important it is to have gay families in the schools, because even in this school, which was very supportive all the way through, in classes before and after, where there were no gay parents, the boys were nowhere near as sophisticated as the boys in his class...they know all about Carlos' situation, his family, and if anyone else came and gave him a hard time about it they would be on his side. They're like brothers, because these kids are together for such a long time. They would attack a kid who would attack [Carlos].

## Summary

Being a same sex couple influenced how the men in this study interacted with formal institutions such as the adoption system and their children's schools. While successful in eventually adopting a child, many of the men were at times directly and indirectly subjected to additional scrutiny being a same sex couple or a single gay man. Consequently, they needed to be strategic in obtaining resources, finding supportive professionals, and making decisions that were consistent with their values and aspirations about if, when, and how much to disclose about being gay men. A number of the couples were not allowed to adopt their children jointly. Fathers experienced additional bureaucratic, financial, and emotional burdens not being able to adopt jointly and having to do a second parent adoption. While fathers had concerns that they may not be chosen by birth mothers to be adoptive parents because they are gay men, being men parenting without a woman proved to be an advantage for some of the men in the selection process. Also, a number of fathers who had expected to be treated negatively were surprised by the support and affirmation they received in the adoption system.

Fathers were highly selective in choosing schools for their children and screened schools using different strategies and criteria to determine if they would be appropriate for their child. Fathers by and large lived in areas where they had good schooling options; many had the financial resources to exercise these options. Safety was a major consideration in choosing schools, as was the degree to which the school valued and reflected diversity in many forms. By and large, fathers reported that their children wanted to be open with others at school about being adopted and having two fathers. Fathers were involved and proactive in helping their children share information about their families with others at school. A number of fathers said that, while they generally had positive experiences as gay parents in their children's schools, they and their

children also encountered instances of homophobia from teachers and students. While responding to these incidents and advocating for their children, fathers recognized the importance of their families' presence in their children's schools.

## CHAPTER VII

### GAY FATHERS IN SOCIAL SPACES: NEGOTIATING THE UNPLANNED

#### (AND UNINVITED)

When asked what it was like for them to parent as gay men, fathers explained that in many respects their day to day experiences were as one father described “seamless.” At the same time, fathers said that they often faced “reminders” that they were not part of a heterosexual order. These encounters happen spontaneously and unexpectedly in public spaces; for example, while taking their child to the playground, walking down the street, sitting in a café, riding in the subway, or traveling through an airport. Reminders can take different forms such as questions, statements, and looks. Some of them pose a threat, while others seem like minor annoyances. What is common about these situations is that they tend to arise quickly and have a “sticky” quality in that the effects seem to linger after the situation. Exploring these types of encounters reveals a complex picture of how gay fathers and their children experience gay parenting in their lives and how people in their environments respond to this difference from “the norm.” Their experiences also show the overt and insidious ways ideologies about sexuality, gender, and family surface in everyday social interactions, some of which may last no more than a few minutes. This chapter and the next describe examples of these social events and explore what they reveal about gay fathers’ day to day lives and the social contexts in which they live.

#### **Your Wife Must Be at Home**

Fathers often faced statements and questions that assumed they were heterosexual, had a wife, and/or that their child had a female mother. The fathers varied in the ways they thought about and handled these assumptions. Shane, a father of three children, felt that people assuming

he is straight is not surprising and even expected; at the same time, he felt uncomfortable and awkward in these situations:

When I talk about my child and my children, on fostering or adopting or even just “I’m taking my kid to Chuck E. Cheese”...what the world thinks is a straight-acting male who wears a ring must have a woman at home. He must have somebody behind the scenes. I understand why people make that leap – it doesn’t offend me...It makes me uncomfortable, because socially, I’m uncomfortable at that point. The social dynamic and the discomfort I don’t like. It puts me in an awkward position and it also puts them in an awkward position. I don’t like that. I don’t like having to live that way, but it is what it is. I don’t get angry with them or angry with the world or angry with society.

For Conrad, being out with his children on his own made him feel like he was back in the closet. Both the feeling he got from people looking at him with his child and also direct questions led him to not want to be mistaken as heterosexual:

There is an element of being in the closet [when] I’m out with the kids – in fact, I remember when [my daughter Lucy] was just three or four months old, and being out with her, feeling like everyone was looking at me, thinking, “Oh... the mom’s at home.” Or, “Oh, here’s a young dad, mom’s probably somewhere.” And people would say, “Where’s mom today?” So I went out and got a rainbow pin for the diaper bag. Because it felt like I was almost back in the closet, in a way. I didn’t want people to assume I was a heterosexual just because I was walking with my daughter...not that I wanted to go around telling everyone – but I didn’t want to be mistaken for somebody that I wasn’t.

Theo, who is a single father to 4 year old Cody, noticed how people reacted to him differently depending on whether he was alone with his son or if another man was present:

As a single man I think people fill in the pieces in their own minds, and probably I would guess the narrative that people have is, “Oh, look at that guy out with his adopted son; his wife must be at home.” I don't think people perceive me as a gay parent when I'm out alone with him, and I often get remarks about, “Oh, how nice it is you're taking your son out.” We were at a restaurant the other day, and the waitress said, “Oh, I guess it's boys' day out”...I do notice that when I'm with another man with [Cody], I get a different reaction from people. It's almost like they're sizing it up, they're figuring it out; then they think, “Oh, two gay men with a kid. I get it,” and mostly the reaction is positive like “Oh, that's cool,” but it's a different reaction than when it's just me and [Cody].

When Theo is alone with his child there is room for others to “fill in the pieces in their own minds” in such a way that makes the man they are seeing a heterosexual dad giving his wife a break. When there are two men with a child, however, there is less room to fill in the pieces; the possibilities of two men being a gay couple comes into the picture. And with this, people may become more apprehensive of saying something. At times, assumptions of heterosexuality, that children must have a mother, and that men are not capable of taking care of a child full-time come together in the form of what on the surface is a compliment:

What I've experienced a lot is, where's the mother or isn't that brave of you to take the children, how sweet you're letting your wife stay home, either on the airplane or sometimes if I have the kids at a restaurant on a Sunday morning. This sort of presumption that men are sort of idiots when it comes to raising children, and that I must have a wife at home. (Donald, father to 5 year old Ryan and 2 year old Olivia)

### **To correct or not to correct**

In many of these situations fathers needed to decide whether or not to correct others' assumptions about them and their family. Jeremy, father of 2 year old Simon, illustrates the thoughts that can come up:

Coming out is a lifelong process. Every time you move, every time you meet someone new, you change jobs, whatever; as a parent, it is as well. At times, it's not comfortable; at times, it's no big deal. You're faced with, I have to come out. I have to correct this person. Maybe I'm going to turn red. Maybe they're going to turn red. Cause I can turn red kind of easily and so, and then I get angry cause, why am I turning red at their ignorance?? There's all these thoughts swimming around in my head.

For Jeremy, correcting others' assumptions was about "making people think":

I like correcting people and making people think [and] hopefully, they walk and think, oh. Oh. I get it. And I like seeing their wheel turns, and hopefully, they won't ask the next person the same question; they probably will, but maybe they'll think about it a little bit more. I like that.

For Peter, father of two boys ages 10 and 4, this decision about how to handle others' assumptions depends on whether he would be interacting with the person in the future:

We'll strike up a conversation and they will say something like, "You're giving your wife the day off."...If I feel like it's someone I'll see again or someone I've seen at [my son's] school...I definitely tell them right away. "Well, actually I have a partner." But if it is someone random, like someone from two towns away that I'll never see again, I usually just let it go.

Being invested in the relationship with the other person can also influence how fathers respond to a statement. Shane, after realizing his long time work colleague had assumed he was heterosexual when he told her that he was planning to adopt a child, decided to tell her that he did not have a wife:

Because I knew her and I like her, and I knew I'd continually see her throughout the years, I pulled her aside. I said, "Hey, [Judy], you know... I just need to let you know that I don't have a wife. It's my partner..." I often feel bad because then I know that people are then embarrassed that they made that faux pas. More often than not, people say it not even thinking. We're educating and raising awareness just by coming out like that. But I didn't say it for that reason. I told her because she needed to know – we have an ongoing relationship. I wanted her to know that and I didn't want to hide continually.

For Shane, there are two components of coming out – educating others and being more open in a close relationship. A number of fathers described situations where they felt they needed to “explain themselves.” On the one hand, fathers wanted to be open and honest about themselves, and on the other hand they did not want to have to always “educate” others. The following interchange between Conrad and Mario captures this dilemma:

Mario: ...I find it difficult to go into the entire explanation. Part of it is just that explaining myself is almost like a little bit of acknowledging that there's some sort of a problem.

Mohan: So there are times you choose not to explain.

Mario: Yeah, sometimes, like at the playground, saying, "He's daddy, I'm papa." That is difficult.

Conrad: Sometimes a part of it is that at the same time I don't want to be mistaken for somebody I'm not, I don't want to have to educate the public. I don't want to explain everything. I don't want to have to explain my relationship with my children. You know, a man and a woman walk down the street and people think they made that baby. They don't have to explain anything.

For Mario, while explaining himself can be difficult, it was important to him for others to “walk away with a clearer picture” of their family situation. Therefore, instead of saying there is no mother, he tells people that he and his partner adopted the children:

Sometimes to say that she’s adopted actually makes it all better. When our friends say “There is no mom,” I am thinking about what’s going on in the brain of this other person...So if I say, “She’s adopted and me and my partner adopted her,” it makes it a little gentler for them...It becomes easier for me to know that the group is walking away with a clearer picture. I have friends who say, “There is no mother” and leave it at that, but if I were to say “there is no mother,” I would be confused. So why wouldn’t the other person be confused? For me to say that she’s adopted, is easier.

Some fathers, like Daniel, see how they choose to respond to others’ statements and questions as partly a political responsibility. Speaking about situations where women looked at him and scrutinized how he was handling his 2 year old daughter Lisa, he explained:

For me, it’s partly a political responsibility. I want them to see that gay people can be good parents, fully functional parents. I can do it as well as they can – I’m not aspiring to do it the same way, but I can raise a child. I want them to see that, and also to be forced to acknowledge that.

In contrast to Daniel, Donald spoke about not wanting to “be on all the time”:

There's a laziness that comes into it. You know, like, it's not the same thing, but the same reason a movie star wears glasses and a hat, like they just don't want to be on all the time. I don't want to be on all time. If I'm sitting in a diner on a Sunday morning, I want to have my breakfast; I don't need to...every moment doesn't need to be a teachable friggable moment so there's laziness, but in general we are full disclosure all the time.

Fathers spoke poignantly about the lingering emotional effects of having to decide if and how to correct an assumption, explain themselves and be open with others. Marshall, parent to 4 year old Colin, said that while it is “easier” to not explain his family’s situation, mixed thoughts and feelings come up for him when he “moves on” without saying anything:

There have been passing [comments] like, “Oh, how nice of you to...oh, you've got him for the day so his mother can have a rest.” And instead of having this whole conversation of going like, “Well, he doesn't have a mother; he has two dads, and da, da, da, da,” It's like okay, and moving on cause it's a stranger you're passing on the street that's making the comment... I mean there's still an internalized homophobia...It's easier to say, “Sure. Have a good day,” and move on, than going, “Well...” and explaining the situation to a total stranger who I'll never see again.

In a small space of time, Marshall is confronted with negotiating the realities of a here and now encounter with a stranger and his own past being enacted in the present. His partner Edward, while acknowledging that it is often “easier” not to explain, said that being “truthful” is important to him. Speaking about an incident on his son’s school bus, he said:

When I'm not being true to myself, it bothers me...it still weighs on my mind that I let it go with the mother [on the school bus], and that doesn't make me feel good cause I felt I wasn't being true to who I was, and I was just taking the easy way out. So, yeah, that doesn't make me feel good, and I still...I think about it.

Shane said that “a little part of him dies” when he decides not to say something :

I think the truth is in life, when we are up against situations and people that somehow we don't feel is right, that we feel is unjust, I think we have an obligation to speak up. For example, if someone comes into my home and speaks ill of someone who's African-

American, rather than just saying, “Nah, I won’t go there,” I feel like I have an obligation to challenge or question it. Gently. If I don’t speak up against that, I think on some level, a little part of us does die, we know, deep down, that we sold out... Part of it is living life, having to decide as an individual when I can do something and when I can’t – I can’t advocate and educate. Not that I have to, most of my life is pretty mundane, but there are times when I just don’t want to do it.

For Shane, dealing with the “it” in situations like this requires emotional and psychological energy:

It’s just not worth it to go into my whole story. It’s not worth it because although I might be educating them, then I have to deal with whatever it is, on a one to one level. The “it” might be, “gee, I wonder what they’re thinking now.” Or the “it” might be, “Oh, gosh, now I feel bad now because they feel uncomfortable.” You can say I didn’t make them feel uncomfortable, but the thing is that there’s still something to contend with, even if it’s subtle. Even if the truth is that you should come out, come out, and tell everybody – I get all those messages. I live a pretty open life. That does not mean I have to be out all the time.

In contrast, Peter handles these types of situations quite matter of factly. When asked what it was like to not say something and “just let it go” when someone assumed he had a wife, he said:

I think it’s a natural reaction...it doesn’t offend me in any way. That’s just the way most of society is. They would just automatically assume I have a wife because I have a child. It doesn’t really phase me one way or the other.

Like other fathers who found themselves in similar situations, Peter placed this incident in a larger societal framework to make sense of it in a way that allowed him to move on from it. In a similar way, Joey, father of 9 month old Lisa, described how others responded when he corrected their assumptions that his daughter has a mother:

It just seems like it's a standard socialization, where you expect to see a father, and "Where's the mother?" or if you expect to see a mother and "Where's the father?" because that's a much more common grouping...So when people ask, "Where's the mother?" it's just because of assumptions. But when the assumption is corrected, I have never experienced any type of negative reaction...I say, "there's a birth mother, but I have a partner. [Lisa] has two daddies..."I never take it as an offense – it's just someone makes an assumption and the assumption's wrong, so I correct it as nicely as possible. I have never received a negative response thereafter from that person. They're almost apologetic sometimes, like, "Sorry I made that assumption." (13)

### **When my child is present...**

A number of fathers said that how they chose to respond to a statement or question depended on whether or not their child was present. Jeremy considered how he reacts differently if his son Simon is with him:

I think in my own life, when it comes to me, there might be situations where I'm willing to give people a second chance...Like, you know, if someone says something that wasn't that accepting, whatever, I'm like okay; maybe we'll push it a little bit more, ask them a different question...But I think when it comes to [being] a parent, when it comes to [Simon], I have no time for that. If I have a bad feeling, I'm moving on. It's a protective thing.

Shane similarly said:

I don't go through the world suspicious of everybody's motives. Sometimes that's a fault, and that's part of who I am, but let me say conversely that if I sense that someone is doing anything derogatory towards me or my children or my partner, I will speak up very quickly.

Donald said that when his children are present he makes it a point to be clear about who he is even when he does not want to:

It depends. If my children are around, I make a point of saying, my partner. If my children aren't, well, they're always around, if they're paying attention, I always say, my partner. But sometimes I just don't feel like dealing with it...there are times, when I'm just, it's Sunday freaking morning. I just want a cup of coffee. ... it's not like it would be a big deal, sometimes it's just easier, but most of the time, I work hard to make sure people know that I have a partner or that they have two dads or whatever, and the main reason I do it is because I want them to see that it's fine, and see that people aren't going to flinch.

In deciding to correct others' assumptions when their children are present, many of the fathers in this study want to protect their family and also convey affirming messages to their child about them and their family and about being open about who they are. The challenges others' questions and statements present change as children grow older and develop their capacities for language. For Mario, not wanting to deal with questions about the mother has a different significance now that his 3 year-old daughter Lucy can understand:

I didn't even want to deal with it...I always find it's difficult to say, "There's no mother." It was easier when she was younger – now that she understands the conversation, I don't want to say that she doesn't have a mother, because she does have a mother.

### **Two Men Cannot Be Part of the Same Family**

#### **Daddy and papa**

Some fathers were reminded that two men creating a family together is something which many people find hard to fathom. One area where this reminder showed up is in the language fathers and their children used to talk to each other. The words "daddy" and "papa" can draw a lot of attention in public situations. For example, Mario described a situation on the playground with his daughter Lucy:

At the playground, she goes to get some food, and people ask her, "Is daddy okay with it?" and she looks confused, because I'm there, and I'm "papa." So she's like 'daddy'? And I say, "That's okay, I'm fine." Sometimes I say, "I'm papa." And if that elicits a conversation about like, why are you 'papa' instead of 'daddy', then I explain the whole thing...Actually, now she's beginning to understand that 'daddy' and 'papa' are the same word, just in a different language.

The question about why Mario is called papa instead of daddy is telling. In the mind of the person asking the question, both daddy and papa cannot be part of the same family. The confusion of this person on the playground stands in contrast to Lucy's clarity: *she* knows who is daddy and who is papa *to her*.

In a similar situation, Jonathan and Ely were walking down the street with their daughter Linda when the presence of two fathers created "confusion" for two women:

[Linda] was in the middle between us. There was a gap, though, and these two ladies from church came and asked her, “Are you alone?” And she said, “No, that’s my pappa.” It was funny... Then they said, “Who’s daddy?” And she said, “That’s my pappa.... But that’s my Abba.” [Hebrew for “papa”] And the ladies were a bit confused there.

Unlike adults, children are quite flexible with their words and are not constrained by rigid meanings. In the words of one father, children are “pretty sophisticated consumers of family lives.” This is revealed in the ways some young children can flow between the names “daddy”, “papa”, and “mommy”, as shown through the following incident when Jonathan and Linda were riding a bus:

I told them that she was my daughter and they asked her, “Is he your daddy?” and she said “No...” And I said, “Tell them who I am.” And she said, “This is my papa.”... Now she sometimes calls me “daddy.” When she’s in the classroom – she knows that with most of her friends, most of them call their fathers “daddy.” So when I’m in the room, she makes the switch like that and says, “Daddy, come here!” Sometimes she calls me “Mommy.”

At times, the belief that two men cannot be part of the same family was formally enforced. Ben and Gordon and their two children were in transit and had to go through the immigration checkpoint in an airport, when:

We had filled out a family card, [Gordon] and I and the two kids. We had all our passports; we had everything. The U. S. Marine pulled us out of the line and was not going to let us go on our flight to San Francisco unless we filled out two separate cards... [he said] that two men could not be part of the same family.

The documentation in this encounter became a vehicle by which to discount the validity of a family with two fathers. Ben and Gordon had differing opinions about how to handle this situation:

I wanted to fight it. I would have gone to Court over it, even, but [Gordon] said, “No, we are not missing our flight and ruining our vacation.”...[he] just went and filled out a separate card and crossed his name off the card with mine, and I went as the family with the two kids.

This example starkly shows how heteronormative beliefs can be perpetuated through the forms and documents used in formal institutions such as airports, social service agencies, and schools (Dodd, 2008). Questions that ask for a mother’s name and a father’s name and provide only two choices for one’s gender, for example, connote heterosexuality and a binary view of gender as mandatory and renders non-heterosexual and non-gender conforming people invisible and not valid enough to be represented.

### **They realized there were two men with a child**

The message that two men cannot be part of the same family also came in the form of surprise. Jeremy spoke about liking to surprise people that he is a parent as a gay man:

I love being a gay parent. I love like surprising people with that... there's people that come in my office, and they see this picture [points to a photo of his son on his desk]...I don't know if they have kids either, but I think it's quite obvious that I'm gay so I think the assumption is usually that I don't have kids. So there have been people that sit down and [ask me], “Is that your son? You have a son?” And I feel like their surprise is different than if they assumed I was straight. You know, then they would just be like,

“Oh, I didn't know you have a son.” Whereas, they're like shocked, you know, in an exciting way, but I love that though.

Mario got an almost alarmed reaction from a woman in a store when he said to her: “I’m a homosexual. I have a male lover and we adopted this child.” He further describes what happened:

Finally, at one point, I explained it to somebody. I was in the store, and this lady started saying, “Oh! I get it! I get it! I’m okay with it!” She said it so many times that clearly she wasn’t okay with it...She was going all the way to the other end. She didn’t get it until she really got everything I was saying.

How does one characterize this woman’s reaction – shock, disbelief, discomfort, disapproval? Unlike the Marine in the airport who stopped Ben and Gordon, this woman’s reaction is not so straightforward, which illustrates how heteronormative messages can derive their power by being camouflaged in a muddle of reactions.

Cultural markers like the slings that some parents use to carry infants become fascinating objects of attention when they are on a man. Daniel spoke about the moment of “recognition” when people saw him and his partner Martin carrying their daughter Lisa in a sling:

People couldn’t even see [Lisa] immediately because she was so tiny and she was in the sling, so it was only after a while that they realized that there were two men with a child.

It was kind of fun, seeing that recognition on people’s faces sometimes.

In another sling incident, Jeremy vividly paints a scene with a group of women who reacted with shock when they realized that he was carrying a baby in his sling and were told that the baby had two fathers:

[Our son Cody] was like 11 days old...He was tiny, so you couldn't really see him that well. This family next to us, it was so funny, it was like a middle-aged woman, and her teenage daughter, and her mother who was elderly, and like a middle-aged friend. They didn't know what the sling was. They were like what's in there. They were so confused by it which I also feel like if a woman had it on, they may have thought, oh, she's carrying a baby, but because I had it on, they like they didn't know what it was...So I showed them. And they were like, oh.? And then [my partner Juan] came over and sat down and then they said, where's his mom?...We said he doesn't have a mom; we're his dads. And they were like, (*makes a shocked gasping sound.*). I mean this was in New Orleans. And so they were like totally freaked out, but not really in a negative way, but just in an uncomfortable, shocked kind of way. First of all, they didn't even know what was in the sling which I thought was just ludicrous. I think that was because I was a man. The picture just didn't look right to them, and then when they realized it was two dads, they were just out of their mind, like, they couldn't figure out what to do, what to make of this situation.

Several aspects of this situation stand out. The first is that the women in the café did not know what was in the sling because they did not associate the sling with a baby when a man was carrying it. Secondly, they were shocked to find out the baby did not have a mother and had instead two fathers. Finally, while the women seemed uncomfortable and shocked, Jeremy did not interpret this as a negative reaction. This incident raises questions about how gay fathers make sense of and emotionally process the types of reactions they encounter in public situations. Also, like immigration cards in airports, slings are powerful cultural symbols of maternity and child rearing that perpetuate norms, values and ideologies about children, parenting, gender, and

family. Two men carrying a baby in a sling can co-opt this symbol in ways that through personal interactions like the one described above can raise awareness and challenge norms.

### **That's weird but cool**

In a pioneering work on lesbian and gay parenting, Hicks and McDermott (1999) describe lesbians and gay men becoming and being parents as both “extraordinary and ordinary.” While living lives that were in many ways ordinary, being spotlighted in certain ways reminded the fathers in this study that gay men adopting and parenting children is somehow extraordinary. Donald, responding to my question about what it is like for him parenting as a gay man, said that sometime he feels like a “novelty act”:

In terms of the world, and my reaction and interaction to and in the world, it's been relatively seamless. We just have not encountered any resistance at all. If anything, it's been, it's a little bit like a novelty act, it's celebrated a little bit.

Josh, who adopted his newborn son Warren in the late 1980s, said that contrary to what he and his partner Robert had expected, his son was like a “celebrity” at school having two gay dads:

[Warren] went to the same school from 1st grade through high school... in general, our biggest concern from day one was that [Warren] would be discriminated against. That's why we were so careful in picking the schools, but I have to say looking back, rather than being discriminated against, he was more of a celebrity; it's a little bit surprising.

By “celebrity”, Josh meant:

He was special. He had two dads. He was different. Different in a good way though.

Kids seem to respond to that, “Oh, how cool, you have two dads.” (19)

Joey, father of 9 month-old Mary, heard statements that being a family with two dads is “weird”:

I think that very often, people say, “Isn’t something weird? Don’t you see that it’s weird, that it’s different?” But there are a lot of things that are weird, and we’re all different...I have friends that are twins and they’re still uniquely different.

Miguel spoke about different kinds of “weird” when describing how his son’s friend reacted when he found out he had two dads. At the time his son Pedro was around twelve years old:

[Pedro] had a very good friend who became more and more buddies, and when he told him about having a gay dad, [having] two dads, the boy said to him, “wow, that’s weird but cool”...he was like you sense the approval, but I understand...usually people ask about father, then you say you have two dads, it’s weird. I mean no matter where you look at it, it’s weird.

Miguel went on to describe another child’s reaction which reveals more about what “weird” might mean, and the ways that young children may not see the world as black and white as do the adults around them:

One day they were talking and she said to [Pedro], “Wow, isn’t that weird to have two daddies?” “No,” [he] said, “I don’t think it’s weird for me. It’s okay.” “Yeah, but, I mean, it’s like I had two moms. For me, it’s weird.” It wasn’t the same weird (?)...the normal questioning but (?)...it was a normal inquiry you might have about something that you don’t understand...Because things are very black and white sometimes. You have one mother, and you have one father. It’s difficult to say you have two mommies or two daddies because it’s not normal...it’s not normal. I mean, you have only one mother. For them it’s funny, but it was kind of a question mark, to try to make sense what he said...rather than rejecting or putting a kind of negative input.

### **Look, they're looking**

For a number of fathers, messages about them being men with children were conveyed not through words but through looks. On a slight twist of the old adage, “a look can be worth a thousand words.” Ely spoke about openly acknowledging to himself and to his daughter Linda that people were “looking” at them:

I see people look in the street. At times, I ignore it, and sometimes I say, “Look, [Linda], they are talking about us.” It’s not like we go on and like we fuss. I go home with [Linda] at night, and people stare, and sometimes I wave, because I know they’re talking about me. I tell [her] at times, “they’re talking about us,” so she knows that they are talking. She will notice too. She will point it out to me sometimes. She says, “look, they’re looking.”

What is noteworthy is how openly and matter of factly Ely addresses these experiences with his nine year old daughter. Some fathers said that though they may be a little annoyed, others’ looks do not make them feel angry. Peter, father of two boys ages 10 and 4, explained that he and his partner Richard were not surprised that people look and that they too look a little more closely at a family if they seem different or do not fit what they know:

We go out for dinner and out of the corner of my eye we’ll see a family over there noticing us, and they’ll look or whatever because of course they’re curious, but they don’t.... I mean, *I’m* curious. We went to a restaurant the other day where there were two older people, a white man and woman, with six children, all different nationalities. So I was very curious, like, “I wonder how that came about.” So I feel like that’s normal – I would do the same thing, so they’re doing that to me. As long as they’re not glaring at me or if I can tell they’re making loud comments.... Most people are just curious. For the

most part people think it's great. I mean, you know they're noticing our children are very well behaved. When we take them out, they're very well behaved. I think they notice that first of all.

Shane likened people looking at him and his family to people looking at those with disabilities:

People are just gonna look because they don't know or they're curious. It's like with people with disabilities – people will sometimes look because it's something that they're not accustomed to. Does it excuse it? Well, they shouldn't gawk or stare, but a look of curiosity is what it is. That's not about me. It's about them. You and I do it in other situations – people forget that we do the same thing, but just in different situations. It might be for something else. I think it's human nature to do that. Again, if you're pointing and belittling and making fun of them, it's different, but just looking...

Edward, father of 4 year old Colin, described how he expected people to look at “two dads with a baby” and then found that “nobody really gives a crap”:

When we first got [Colin] and we would be out, I was always aware or thinking that people would be looking at two dads with a baby. That lasted for a couple of months for me, that I was just like looking to see if anybody else was looking. There was a heightened awareness...Nobody really gives a crap...they're so involved in their own lives that they really don't think about you. And so it took me, though, a couple of months to be really comfortable with the three of us going out together.

### **It Can Be a Hostile World for Two Men with a Kid**

Many of the examples thus far involved intrusive questions, statements and looks, which for the most part were not intended or received in a hostile way. In contrast, some fathers reported situations where they experienced scrutiny and hostility, often from people in authority.

Josh and Robert, who adopted their son Warren in the late 1980s, got the following response from a nurse as they were taking their newly adopted baby out of the hospital:

It's always a nurse who has to carry the baby from the hospital to the car. The car was parked right at the door, and from the time she left the hospital door to the time that she put the baby in the car seat, she proceeded to tell us that she thought we were very selfish, and it was very wrong what we were doing, and it wasn't fair to the child. It wasn't invited; we didn't ask her what she thought, but she felt very strongly. She had a lot of emotion. She was really angry about it. And we just said, well, actually, one we didn't really invite your opinion. Two, we don't really care what you think and it's not your job to provide your opinion. And three, you are just displaying your ignorance of what kind of family we will be providing to our son. So there were situations throughout our life where we did hit hard.

What is it like to face such a reaction as you are taking your first steps on your journey as a parent? While experiencing the joys, relief, and fears of becoming new parents, Josh and Robert faced a stark reminder that their decision to adopt a child as gay men will be condemned by some people. This situation occurred in the late 1980s, when gay men adopting children was virtually unheard of even in locations with large LGBT communities. The message, however, that they are not accepted and that they are doing something wrong by becoming parents is still heard to this day, but perhaps in other ways.

Some fathers reported situations where they had police called to investigate them.

Jonathan, a Caucasian father of an African-American child, described an incident when he was pulled over by the police after someone had seen him with his crying daughter:

[Linda had] had a fabulous day, and she was a great two year old, but this one day, she was on the train just screaming. So I get off the train, and I hit a patch of grass and I was calling you [speaking to his partner] because I was so frustrated. I was like, “She’s crying and wailing...” and within a minute a police car drove up to the side of the road with the sirens going. And I was like “...” They came over to the side of the road because someone had called, seeing a White guy with a screaming Black baby, and they figured something was wrong, like that I had stolen someone’s baby. But they were also fine, like that [snaps fingers]. I always have to remind myself that they’re doing it because someone was concerned for her safety. Ultimately, that’s a good thing.

It is interesting to think whether the police would have been called if Linda was not crying and was just walking down the street with Jonathan. As Jonathan explains, someone assumed that “something was wrong.” The combination of a crying child who was of a different color and gender of the man she was with set off alarm bells. Jonathan considered what might have happened if he were a woman or if his daughter was White:

I think people think this has to do with kidnapping, child porn... a lot of images come to people’s imaginations. Women are seen as nurturing people in our society. If you’d seen a woman with an African-American child, you’d find a reason to be calm. You know, reverse the colors, reverse the sex, no one would question a caregiver of a child. No one would question a woman – they’re not seen as aggressive or dangerous like we are. So I think that you make it a guy, and the fact of course that we’re a different color, together – even if she’d been a White child, they would have assumed she was my daughter. So the color definitely made a difference. None of this stuff would have happened... People can skip over to that social role, just like that, and move on in their heads. But you see this

combination and you worry and suddenly you're calling people you don't know. It's based on ignorance.

Because of potentially facing such situations, several fathers said that they always carry around their children's adoption paperwork. Ben explained:

We always carried [Nathan's adoption decree] because we had heard this story of some other gay men who had been stopped driving through North or South Carolina ... on their way to Florida for a vacation. And they sent out a warning; someone had seen the Black kid in the car and called the police and told them they were abducting the kid.

Shane spoke about his confrontation with a police officer when he took his son George to get fingerprinted as part of a neighborhood watch Safe Kids campaign in their community.

Shane described what happened when he went to fill out the paperwork and came across the line that asked for his child's "mother's maiden name":

I took [George] up to get fingerprinted and one of the fields on the form was "Mother's Maiden Name." I told the police officer that my child was adopted and had two fathers...I didn't even say "two fathers" at first. I told them that the child didn't have a mother. From the officers, I basically got arguments about how every child has a mother – they turned their back and disregarded me. When I tore up the paper and stormed off, one of the two came up to me and was in my face yelling and screaming and telling me I shouldn't disrespect an officer that way, etc. He said that he was going to cuff me on the floor and take me down. [My partner Jordan] later actually went to our car and brought [George's] birth certificate in to show the officers, to prove a point. We always carry those with us just in case we need it around an idiot like that. So in that situation, we

were definitely treated differently and we definitely had to do some advocacy beyond that with the police department.

George, who was four or five years old at the time, witnessed part of this incident, until Jordan took him away after the police officer began to yell. Shane explained that “on the outside, he didn’t really get super upset or hysterical”, however:

Although he was four or five, [George] was very smart and very aware. He didn’t know exactly what was going on, but he knew that something was going on. It wasn’t like he was a non-entity in this process. The only thing I do remember or know is that later, as we were leaving, he asked [Jordan], “How come that police officer was yelling at daddy?” That’s all I know.

Shane said that facing this type of adversity brought them closer together as a family and closer to their communities of support:

We talk about it all the time. We talk about it with our friends and people who were appalled by the situation and folks like that. My father’s an attorney, so he was involved to some extent with us and guided us on what to do. It’s not anything – though it was upsetting, it drew us together. This type of adversity does draw communities together through support networks. It does draw people closer. If anything, it gave us a common purpose. Nothing draws people better than a common enemy.

### **If Somebody Gets Pissed Off and Something Bad Happens**

Some fathers encountered situations where they faced a possible threat to their child’s or family’s safety. Two stories stand out in their chilling quality. They convey a different aspect of what it is like being a gay father and a gay man parenting in a heteronormative world. In the first

situation, Donald and Adam were on a hayride with their children. In the second, Richard and Peter met the father of their son's friend, who just discovered that they were a gay couple. As the fathers spoke about these situations, I sensed their fear that something violent could happen. They knew that things could get ugly, and in both situations their children were present.

Donald described being on a hayride with his partner and two young children, his sister, and several people he did not know. He said that he chose not to be as open as he might be in other situations that he and his partner were his children's parents:

My sister was there...there was an opportunity for her to have been their mother.

Particularly because she's blond and looks like them, but I felt uncomfortable, and I felt uncomfortable doing things that I could have done to make it clear who the parents were...I didn't make a point of being like, you know, "Don't you love Poppy and Daddy."

You know what I mean? It was left ambiguous.

What was Donald uncomfortable about? He described the environment:

It's kind of ...a little rednecky, and we were on this hayride with a bunch of other families, and you went through like the fields, the corn. So the whole thing was a little spooky cause they had like a corn maze...like if someone stabbed me, no one was going to... I wasn't getting to a hospital on time.

One of the reasons Donald felt uncomfortable was that there was a lot that he did not know about the strangers around him:

I just wasn't feeling a comfy vibe...they took us a mile up on this hay ride to go through this corn maze. I was feeling a little like I don't know who these people are...I just didn't know, and I had my two kids there. My primary thought was if somebody gets pissed off,

and something bad happens, I do not want my children to see it...for all I know they were all gay on the hay ride; they weren't, but.... I have no idea what their deal was. I was just a little freaked out by the fact that we were in the middle of nowhere, and it was definitely kind of like a “bubba” environment.

In reflecting on this incident, Donald realized that he was cautious and left things “ambiguous” because his children were present:

I mean if my children weren't there, I probably would have cozied up to [my partner Adam] cause I do feel like, we can laugh with y'all (*said with a twang*), and you can see that we're normal, and it's all good. That's my normal reaction to a situation like that, but I really just did not want anything negative to happen in front of my kids.

“Making it clear who the parents were” posed a possible risk to his family’s physical and emotional safety. Consequently, he made decisions accordingly to protect himself and his family. Donald adds that this incident was not typical of his experiences as a parent:

I think our general approach is full disclosure all the time. That's the only time I can ever think of where we didn't and it was related to fear.

In a similar incident, Peter described interacting with their son Jacob’s friend, who was eight years old, and his father on their front lawn. Jacob’s friend had just realized that Jacob had two gay fathers:

When he came inside, I mean, he knew I was [Jacob’s] dad, because he’d seen me at school, and [my partner Richard] was home that day. So [Jacob] was like, “Okay, dad,” and he came in a minute. And the kid was like, “Wait a minute, that’s your dad? That’s your dad, *and* that’s your dad? Wait a minute... are you guys gay?”...Right there! And it took me aback because I’m like, “How do we handle this one?”...And [Jacob] kind of

looked at him and said, “Yeah, I told you I had two dads.” He was eight and he didn’t grasp it, and that was fine. It was over.

But it wasn’t over. Peter and Richard then met the boy’s father:

As they were leaving, the kid goes, “Hey Dad! Did you know these guys were gay?” So this was really awkward...And the dad is your typical blue collar, rough sort of dad. Blue collar...So I was sitting there going, “Where is this going to go?” And he goes, “... Okay. That’s not how I live my life, but that’s the way they want to live their life. That’s great.” And he shook your hand [said to Richard].

Peter then described their worries about this man’s response:

Right at that moment, the father could have said, “I don’t want you playing here.” Like “get in the truck!” I didn’t know what to expect or how it was going to play out....But the dad actually handled it extremely well. Whether he truly believed it or not. That’s really the only situation that’s ever come up with us.

The decision to disclose or not disclose depends in part on the assumptions fathers made about the people involved and their potential reactions to them being a same sex couple. These assumptions were related, at least in part, to their associations with the class status of the other people involved. Joey, who in most circumstances is open about his family, talked about his own preconceived notions:

You want people to know about your family and there’s no reason to lie, unless the person is aggressive or mean or if I had a preconceived notion about them, which hopefully I wouldn’t...If I saw a bunch of kids on the subway and thought they wouldn’t respond well, like if I termed them a hoodlum or something like that... there are situations where I want to keep my daughter safe, and I can see that there might be

situations where I come to those preconceived notions... instead of standing up and like “Hey, I have a husband, my daughter has two fathers, and I’m very proud of that,” just make sure that we’re also safe. So there may be situations where I would be not as ‘out’ if I felt that there was a safety concern.

Similarly, some fathers spoke about how being around men whom they think are straight puts them face to face with questions about their own masculinity. Jeremy described being around straight dads Saturday mornings when he is on the playground with his son Simon:

If you go to a playground on Saturday mornings, it's almost all dads because that's like their day with the kids...I assume that a lot of guys there assume that everybody there is a straight dad who gets to take their kid to the playground on Saturday. I've become more comfortable in my life around straight men and with my masculinity and stuff so it's not an uncomfortable space for me...you kind of scope people out; do they look cool in terms of issues of diversity and acceptance and all that. I feel like I'm trying to figure out people a little bit more so from that perspective.

Jeremy’s experience on the playground is another example of being “reminded” of living in a predominantly heterosexist culture. Homophobia is not only about gay male sexuality but is also an injunction against transgressing masculinist norms. For some gay men, becoming fathers transforms their sense of masculinity (Armesto & Shapiro, 2011). The above situation, which is different from instances when women come up to a father and assume he has a wife, is about whether a gay man fits within norms of being a man and being masculine (enough). Both types of encounters point to different expressions of heteronormativity.

### **Little Flecks of Heteronormativity**

All of the above situations are reminders of what one father called “little flecks of heteronormativity.” In speaking about how the challenges he and his children face are different from those faced by families with straight parents, Shane spoke about the decision to disclose or not disclose, to come out or not come out, as something that is “always there” for him, his partner and his children:

We have to go in and explain in new situations, like in school and with Cub Scouts, which [our son George] is doing. We have to think about that. They are notoriously homophobic as an organization. But [George] is just like made to be a Cub Scout – he’s just that kind of kid. And we heard that one of the troops in that area is very open and very cool, very supportive -- so we joined. But those are things you have to think about, when you go places with your kids as a couple or even singly, or even without the kids. You have to think about disclosing or not disclosing, coming out or not coming out. You always have to think about it. I’m sure the kids have to think about it on some level, too, as they get older. It’s just always there. Even if you’re totally open and don’t care, still on some level, you have to think, “Gee, how are they going to react?” Even if you say you don’t care how they react, it’s still present.

The phrases “you have to think about”, “it’s just always there”, and “it’s still present” speak to a pervasive ever-present quality to the experiences of fathers like Shane. Kyle, father of two teenage boys, spoke about how “little flecks” of heteronormativity reminds him that there are places in the world where he and his family would not be accepted. One place where he is reminded of this is when he is filling out forms:

Filling out forms which is about 40% of your life when you're a parent is very annoying because the forms do not have any way, often, of reflecting your reality, and you don't know what to do. You're applying for financial aid for something or you're applying for camp or whatever. Do I cross out mother? You know, so you're always being reminded. And even though I'm not the kind of person to look for trouble, little flecks of it are always presented to me that I have to deal with it by saying, "Eh, it's okay. I'll just figure it out." ...And I'm not looking for a lot of accommodation...I don't need everybody to acknowledge our family exactly as it exists, but it does remind you that there are places and people who just for them this would... knock their socks off.

In a related way, Jonathan said that incidents like having the police called on them, while raising their awareness of the degree to which they can and will be accepted, have not changed who they are or what they choose to do in their lives:

We can't not be who we are, the three of us walking down the street. There's no question of who we are. We're not not going out because of those things. We have not changed anything about who we are and what we do. We go to restaurants and we do this and that thing with each other. It's not like so-and-so walks behind. Those were incidents and make interesting stories and they are a barometer of social tolerance that we make note of – when they happened, I went, "Okay, I guess some people aren't ready for us."

According to Edward, feelings that one may be judged and harmed for being gay are insidious, even if one has encountered very little homophobia both before and after becoming parents:

You go years and years and years with nothing, nothing. I can't remember an incident... other than middle school and high school where I was called a fag, but I can't really in my

adult life, I can't...so even if there was an incident, it was so minor that it doesn't even come to my recollection where I've had an issue with being a gay man in [this city] ever, yet I'm still worried about "what if."

Edward's partner Marshall then spoke about knowing that "it's out there", with "it" referring to homophobia and its sometimes tragic consequences:

I guess it's knowing that it's out there. You know, I mean Matthew Shepard...you hear the bullying. The things that recently happened in Jersey with the guy who committed suicide because they posted...he was posted on YouTube, you know. You know, I guess it's just out there, and so it's almost like a defense mechanism, so it's a way to prevent, if you think about the worst case scenario that you're going to be, you know, called a fag or something, that somehow you're preparing yourself for that situation to happen, even though it's never happened.

Given this awareness of a potentially hostile and unaccepting world, fathers in this study made deliberate choices about where to live. Conrad, who lives with his family in a large urban setting, said:

Raising kids affects where we choose to live, but the two dads issue makes it a fact about where to live...the worst we get is "Oh, where's mom?" and we say she's adopted and I'm married to a man and "Oh."...But I can imagine other situations in small towns in America where they would just walk away and they would be angry, or be visibly disturbed. That certainly wouldn't happen here...I wouldn't want to put my kids through that.

Having a strong gay community where they live is also important to fathers like Marcus, father of 15 year old Tyson:

[Our city] has some pretty aggressive laws in place to protect children and families against bullying and homophobia. The gay community here is not really a community that you want to take on. We have that as a kind of safety net in our favor. If we ever feel that we're being treated badly because of our sexual orientation, we have a number of places that we can fall back on to kind of muster the artillery in defense. That's an issue that I wonder about how other gay and lesbian and transgender and bisexual parents fare, in other states, where they don't have a very aggressive and powerful gay community. [Here], to be perfectly blunt, you don't want to fuck with the gay community. You don't. We've got money. (10)

Jason, father of two boys ages 13 and 10 who also lives in a large urban setting, reflected on the importance of finding support and worried about gay families who live in areas where they may have little social support:

I have a lot of respect and worry for gay couples who are in places where they don't get the kind of support that we get here. I wouldn't raise my kids any other place than [here]. I'm sure it's possible to do it and I'm sure that there are a lot of fine couples who are doing it well. Like that kid in Iowa with the two moms who spoke up – I mean, what a great kid. How grounded can you get? But I'm sure those moms had to work harder than we have, at building a safe, protective, positive experience for their kids.

Even in large urban settings, fathers like Martin were reminded of heteronormativity not just in what they saw and heard, but also in not seeing themselves reflected in their surroundings:

I'm conscious of the fact that I don't see very many other gay parents out in the world. I'm conscious of having traveled on the subway for years with [Lisa] now and having never seen another gay male couple with a child on the subway. That, I'm conscious of –

I'm conscious of not seeing myself reflected in my surroundings on a daily basis, that I have to make a special effort to go to an event or some special party for gay parents.

Fathers were not only reminded of heteronormativity when they were out on the street with their children. While experiencing the struggles described in this chapter, being a parent in public settings was also very joyous and liberating for many of the fathers in this study. Conrad describes being with his 3 year-old daughter Lucy as she sings on the street:

When she takes us on the street and has a singing routine that we've never seen before, and does a little dancing routine that she's making up in the moment, unprompted. It's just incredibly funny and joyful. I can't help but feel a little bit of pride that here's a child whose natural exuberance and humor and creativity I helped flourish – I'm bringing this into the world. I'm helping her become a good person, a beautiful person. Looking at the kids and seeing them happy and funny and creative, that's kind of the reward. It makes me feel like I'm doing a good job as a parent.

Marcus similarly describes the delight he felt walking down the street with his son Tyson:

[Tyson is] really quite an extraordinary young man. He's very attractive, very warm, very loving, very affectionate. I remember when he was younger, I would always take him to the movies and he would walk holding onto my little finger. He would very aggressively hold on because he wanted to know where we were going and he didn't want to get lost. I would remember how delightful that was – that I wanted to take in those moments because when he came of age, little boys have a tendency to distance themselves from overt shows of affection. And he'll still grab my hand when we're walking down the street and hold my hand.

## Summary

The gay fathers in this study, both individually and as a group, faced a range of social situations where they were reminded of that they were different within a heterosexual order. These reminders came in the form of questions, statements, and looks, in often unplanned and uninvited encounters with others on the street, in cafes, in the airport, and in other public spaces. Some fathers were reminded that two men creating a family together is something which many people still find hard to fathom. Fathers often had to decide if and how to correct others' assumptions that they were heterosexual, had a wife, and that their children had a mother. How they chose to respond in these situations often depended on several factors: whether or not their children were present, being invested in a relationship with the other person, the degree to which they did or did not want to educate others about their family, and their assessment of the possible risks of coming out. Fathers found that they had to explain and defend their families to those in authority positions including the police. Many of the fathers in this study had to balance their wish to protect their children while conveying affirming messages to their child and others about their family.

**CHAPTER VIII**  
**WHERE'S MOMMY? THE DOMINANCE OF THE MOTHER**  
**IN GAY FATHERING**

As was described in the previous chapter, fathers often encountered reminders in public spaces that they were different from the heterosexual “norm”. One reminder that many fathers and their children frequently faced was the absence of a female mother in their families. These reminders showed up in overt and subtle ways both at home and outside their homes. Ironically, in this *absence* of a female mother, “mommy” or “mother” became extremely *present* in the fathers’ lives. The fathers and their children are living their everyday lives and “where’s mommy” bubbles to the surface in some way and is felt, spoken about, asked about, or realized. Narratives about “mommy” similarly arose spontaneously and often unexpectedly during the interviews as I asked fathers to tell me about their experiences parenting as gay men.

In this chapter I discuss examples of the ways the “absence of a female mother” shows up in fathers’ lives. Fathers often felt that people, particularly women, questioned their capabilities to parent without a woman. These messages are conveyed through compliments and accolades comparing their parenting to women, and through statements of concern about whether their child is safe and well taken care of without a mother. A number of fathers had their own concerns about their child not having a mother, which were reinforced by their children asking questions about their “mommy.” Finally, the absence of a female mother is very present in the ways fathers both reproduce and challenge traditional gender roles in their households.

Before proceeding, I would like to say a few words about the term “female mother.” I came to this term after hearing many fathers describe themselves as mothers and the ways they “mother” their children. My understanding of “mother” changed and expanded as I conducted

the interviews and subsequently read and analyzed the fathers' narratives. I realized how confined I was (and still am) by the ways I have constructed gendered images and meanings of the person called "mother" and of motherhood. All of this led me to begin using the phrase "female mother" rather than just "mother" to refer specifically to a woman being a mother. The notion that children "need" a female mother and a male father is one that is pervasive in the public, political, and social science discourse. The idea that the gender of a parent determines the parenting skills required to meet a child's needs, however, is not supported by social science research (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010; Hicks, 2008).

### **Wait a Second, Where's Mommy?**

Many fathers reported that people in public, primarily women, asked them direct questions and made statements that insinuated that they did not know how to take care of children. Conrad was on a flight with his infant daughter Lucy when:

This flight attendant came up and said, "Where's mom?" because [Lucy] was sitting with us, and she was crying. So the flight attendant came over and we were waiting to take off – [Lucy] was wrapped up, but before even asking us if [she] was hot or to take off some layers, she asked about mom.

The flight attendant seemed to have a quick, almost visceral reaction seeing first and foremost the absence of a mother rather than a crying child with two adult caregivers. Conrad goes on to explain what the flight attendant's "where's mom" question meant to him and his partner Mario:

We started to recognize that when people say, "Where's mommy?" that they just assume there's a mom and they think a man with a child by themselves must need help, or that he couldn't possibly do it... whether he was gay or straight.

The “where’s mommy” question is a two part statement in disguise, namely that all children must have a mother and that men cannot possibly parent a child without a woman also being a primary parent. Miguel, a father of a teenager and a young adult, had a similar interaction with a pediatrician when he took his then infant son Paolo to the emergency room:

When I went to emergency one time, the pediatrician who got me in [asked me] “Where is the mother?” I was so mad. I told her off. I was fuming. What do you mean where's the mother? You can ask me. I'm the mom. You know what, I want a real doctor here. Someone who will ask me what's wrong with the baby.

Once again, the other person, in this case a pediatrician in an emergency room, notices the absence of a woman when she sees a baby. Some fathers, like Joey and Thomas, faced the “where’s mom” question within hours of becoming new parents:

On our first experience with [our daughter Mary], we were upstate and we stopped on the way down at a Wendy’s for a diaper change, and the men’s bathroom didn’t have a baby changing thing – and the women’s bathroom did. So we were changing her in the hallway and this woman walks by and says, “Oh, how cute... where’s her mother?” And I was like, “Argh, really already... She has two fathers now.”... We were like, “Okay, great, we got it out.” That was the first time we’d [gotten that question] and it was the first day away from the hospital...she was four days old, four hours into our care.

Josh and Robert had a similar experience more than twenty years ago with their infant son Warren. Josh indicates that for him the question “where’s the mother” was actually a statement that the baby he was carrying *should be* with its mother.

In those early days...and again I recognize twenty years ago is very different from now; there would be women in the street, total strangers, who would come up to me because

[Warren] would be in a snuggly...they wouldn't say "hi" or "what a cute baby!", [but] "Where's the mother? Where's the mother?"...The baby should be with the mother. We didn't quite expect that, but that came up a lot.

This message questioning the men's parental competence was often conveyed by women through looks and comments that on the surface seemed like they were only trying to be helpful:

Particularly when [Simon] was younger, when we were alone with [him], sometimes I just feel like some women, in particular, will make an assumption that I have no idea what I'm doing; you know, what I'm feeding him, how he's dressed, or whatever, it's just like they know better...sometimes it's just a feeling, right? Like the looks they give you or whatever, but sometimes it is comments...it comes across to me as criticism.

Although, I can tell they're just trying to help, but they're trying to help this guy who doesn't know what he's doing is what I believe. (Jeremy, father of 2 year old Simon)

Conrad and Mario had a similar experience on a plane soon after picking up their newborn daughter:

We picked up [Lucy] when she was three days old. At one point, I had to get up and change her diaper, and I walked down the entire aisle and went down into the bathroom, changed her diaper, and when I came out, there were three women sitting around...one of them said, "Do you need help? There's a lot of moms on this plane." That is the sort of story we tell to each other, and we laugh and we think it's funny...It's not just discrimination against gay men, but also against men. Women don't think that men can take care of children.

At times, officials asked fathers about the whereabouts of their child's mother. Sheldon and Henry, fathers of two children ages 6 and 4, described what it is like to face questions about their children's mother whenever they travel on flights:

It's still asked just about on every flight. Where's the mother for our kids?...someone in a uniform with a gun. Always asks our kids where's the mother?...planes are always a bit of a dread...especially going into and out of foreign countries.

When asked how they responded to officials asking them this question, Sheldon said:

Calmly and with good nature. It's their control. They have control...And then they say there has to be a mother. Sometimes people in this position are jerks. That's all...Sometimes they are not but sometimes.... We're always prepared. There is no mother. There is no mother in this family.

This situation illustrates how the dominant idea that children need a female gets carried out through people in authority. The official's discomfort and disapproval not seeing a woman stands in contrast to young children who tell others matter of factly that they do not have a mother and that they have two dads:

I mean the kids are very open. They say, "We don't have a mother." It's just the way it is...I remember we were at a birthday party with [our son Bernie] and with his class...The kids got to go around and pick out candy and then go back to the party room. And [Bernie] is with some of his friends, and one of the party coordinators says, "Ok, where's your mother? You need your mother." And his buddy said, "[He] doesn't have a mother"...It was very matter of fact, and not a big deal. (Sheldon, father of 6 year old Bernie and 4 year old Maggie)

At times, messages about men's parental competence were conveyed through support and accolades; in the compliments, however, there was an implicit comparison to women and mothers. Shane, a father of three children all younger than 8 years old, said the following:

Work was amazingly supportive, to the point where we got people commenting to us, "You guys are just great dads..." and I had my grandmother's friends, "You're better than some mothers I know!" ...It might be a little [that] the bar was a little lower for guys... There was maybe a little of that... I think it's natural people are going to do that because mothers are the nurturing ones and the primary caretakers in most families. So when you don't have a mother, you think, "Wow, it's different." I think people were – not even surprised, but like, "Hey, you guys are doing a great job" and on some level there is a message and a lesson that two guys can be great parents without a mother. I really think on some level that people get that. Other people might think, "Gosh, that's all true, but we worry about him as he gets older and goes to school"

It was not unexpected for Shane to have people compare him and his partner to mothers given that mothers are the primary caretakers in most families. He also appreciated that people understand and accept that two men can be great parents and at the same time have worries for what their children may experience socially not having a mother. Like situations where they are assumed to be heterosexual, questions and statements about their child's mother put fathers in a situation where they had to make a quick decision about disclosing they were a family headed by gay men. The above experiences highlight environments in the United States in which the norm is to associate children with women. Ben and Gordon had a very different experience as fathers when they were traveling in Costa Rica:

We had a wonderful experience when [Nathan] was almost three, we went to Costa Rica, and we went traveling... men take so much part in parenting and are really into kids there, much more than the United States. We had men come up to us all the time and talk to our kids or talk to [Nathan] rather. And we saw men with little babies all the time on public transit, and these were straight men...It was everywhere. You were just as likely to see men with a two or a three year old in public as you were to see women.

### **Can We Parent Without a Woman?**

While knowing that they are providing their children with care and nurturing, fathers expressed concerns at various points in their children's lives about their child not having a mother. Twelve of the 20 participants in this study adopted newborns. While some fathers had concerns about whether two men could parent a baby without a woman, all of them found that in fact they could. Some men had notions that as men they would not have the "connection" to their baby that a woman would have. Philip said that he and his partner Victor hired a doula to help out with their infant son Ralph but then sent the doula home after a day because they felt they did not need her:

We hired a doula to come in because we didn't have a mother. We didn't know what to do with a baby. How could we possibly know? We're not women, and we weren't going to have that sort of, whatever that connection is, and so...we'll hire a woman, and she'll help us nurture and feed; she'll teach us how to change a diaper; she'll teach us all these things that we don't know about, and it became very clear to us that we didn't need anyone. You know, it doesn't matter whether you're man or a woman or whoever you are, you figure these things out; it's instinctual. You're handed a living creature, and you figure it out. I mean people figure it out all over the world.

Philip considers that, while their concerns and fears about parenting an infant may be common to most new parents, his concerns were particular to two men taking care of an infant. He, like other fathers of newborns in this study, wondered how much is instinctual and how much is learned in caring for a baby, and whether these abilities are gender specific (Miall & March, 2003). While heterosexual fathers too may have these questions, parenting without a woman accentuates these concerns. Philip realized through the actual experience of taking care of an infant that he could “figure out that when a baby cries you hold the baby...and when they’re hungry you feed them.” He suggested that being able to respond to a baby’s needs was not gendered but rather something human. The norms of who can and desires to nurture a baby are not universal but are culturally and historically bound (Rogoff, 2003). The degree to which Victor and Philip felt they could parent a baby may also reflect their perspectives and life experiences as White middle class gay men growing up in environments where it may not be common for men to take care of babies. Contrary to popular beliefs, parenting is and has been much more common among LGBT people of color than among LGBT people who are White (Family Equality Council, 2011).

Alan, a father of two teenage boys adopted from birth, thought that his child’s birth mother needed to be involved with his baby so that he would be breastfed. His worry dissipated, however, when he examined the idea that children need to be breastfed:

I thought children should be breastfed; they shouldn't be bottle-fed, you know. There has to be a mother involved. No matter what your relations are going to be with her, you know; no matter how much difficulty there is, you have to have a mother in there...when I took out that notion and looked at it again, I suddenly thought, “well, why?” Why, I don't have to. People use formula all the time. There's an industry around baby formula.

You don't have to breastfeed. It was a weight of worry taken away from me when I thought I could do that.

In contrast, Anthony, also a father of a teenager adopted from birth, described himself as a “walking breast”:

Being a mother was the easiest thing in the world for me. It felt very natural. Now, did I feel like, “This child needs to have exposure to women”? Yeah. We always had a lot of women in our lives as far that went, so that was a non-issue. But as far as being a nurturer and holding and rocking the child, that felt very natural to me. If I was able to have nursed this baby, I would have nursed the baby!...So I’m kind of a walking breast.

Both Alan and Anthony invoke cultural, symbolic, and concrete meanings of the breast and breastfeeding, the most obvious difference between female mothers and gay fathers, to comment on their ability to provide for the needs of their babies. Alan uses this reference to show how he may be deficient in comparison to a mother while Anthony uses it to show how he can be a mother. In both cases, the standard of being a mother reigns supreme.

While the fathers in this study nurture their children in ordinary ways by providing care, warmth, security, and an environment in which to grow, how they think about their caregiver roles in relation to women prompts us to think about how we come to associate certain people as better or worse caregivers. The presence of two men signals the absence of someone deemed to be essential for all children, i.e. a female mother, and as a result the vital functions of “mothering.” Sheldon, father of two children ages 6 and 4, explains that he thought gay parenting had more to do with “wrapping your head around” the idea that all of the necessary parenting roles would be covered parenting without a woman:

I think that the majority of being a gay parent is a new thing...[some people] won't get it, won't like it and will call you the devil, but the majority of people, it just takes a second to wrap their heads around. How does it work? How does it work with no mother? Because they associate the parenting job that a mother usually does like, that that functioning isn't happening. But here parenting is...when you first talked about gay parenting, I was like, well, there is no such thing as gay parenting. You know, that has nothing to do with being a parent. Just as the traditional parenting roles usually fall under the female parent track versus the male parent track, you know, all those bases are covered so it's not...and I think that is what people have to sort of understand. A child needs someone to love them, take them to the doctor, buy their clothes, comb their hair...And those are sexless jobs.

The role of caregiver is clearly illustrated by Jason, a father of two boys ages 13 and 10. Jason suggests that the caregiver role is both biological (innate) and socially constructed, and reflects the material circumstances in a family:

Women have breasts and they feed their children with their breasts. And there is a relationship there that is close and physical and personal and no man's ever going to replace that...but I think that in a larger part of things, what a woman does with her life, in a traditional household, she's often going to be the one who is there day to day. She does the nurturing and physical care and feeding and all that stuff. For little kids, that's really what their lives are all about – it's not an intellectual world they live in, but a physical world.

In some sense, while women who breastfeed can be physically close to children in particular ways, who becomes the caregiver depends on who is available. Women have

historically been the ones to do the work inside the home, and are thus the parents who end up taking on the day to day care of children. Jason willingly took on the role of “stay at home parent” and “class mom” at his son Carlos’ school:

I think women are trained to defer more and negotiate more and give in more, in our society, in relationships. So maybe it’s easier for a woman to take on a more traditional mother-type role. But I’ve had a traditional mother-type role for the past five years. I was the class mom at my older son’s school. We all laughed about it, but I was.

Jason also acknowledged a mix of feelings about taking on this role:

Personally, I think it’s a really important role to the kids, to have a stay at home parent, to have that on-site completely devoted, completely interested party who is going to manage their little lives. It’s an important job, even though it’s kind of a shitty job and sort of boring and not that fulfilling from an intellectual point of view. I mean, if you’re at all intellectual, it’s going to make you crazy doing that sometimes. But you can’t lose sight of the fact that it’s a really important job. So I learned in those five or six years where I was doing it – I had a huge respect for my mother and for my sisters, and the other women I’ve had in my life who have undertaken this. I have a huge respect for what they’ve done. I really valued how important it was.

Donald, who also took on the role of stay at home parent when his children were young, described the range of feelings he had about taking care of babies and how what he experienced may have been different from what women who are mothers may experience:

This is something I do think is different with genders...I would have my shirt off and I would have [my son Ryan] lying naked on my chest because skin to skin contact is supposed to be so important, and we weren't breast-feeding...they're just time-sucks.

They're these lumps that suck your time and give nothing back...I know that sounds harsh, but they're just like they're wonderful and cuddly, but women can sit, particularly like my mother and my step-mother, they will sit with a child in a rocking chair for hours, and they get something from that. I can get nothing from that. I'm bored... but I do think you have an opportunity to lay some groundwork. But you don't see that during those first months, all you see is this little creature that, of course, you have to protect, but it's a very different thing...but particularly in the last 8 or 9 months, [our daughter is] just incredible; she's like the most amazing child; but up until then, people are like, "there's no such thing as an ugly baby," that's just not true. I'm not a baby guy.

### **An Adopted Kid with No Mother**

When asked what it was like for their children to be raised by gay fathers, some fathers spoke immediately about their children "not having a mother." Many children who are adopted eventually confront and try to come to terms with the loss of not being raised by their birth families, and particularly their birth mother. Reflecting on how "the foundation of an adoption is built on a loss", Victor and Philip considered how this loss might be compounded for their 9 year old son Ralph by being "an adopted kid with no mother." Donald, in thinking about what it may be like for his 5 year old son Ryan to not have a mother, considered what he got from his own mother, and whether that was related to her being a woman. For Donald, not having a mother, which is related to but not the same as having two dads, is the major source of difference for his son:

I just feel bad about it...that he doesn't have a mom; that he's different. I don't know what it would have been like to have two dads. Maybe I would have preferred it. I don't know. I just have no idea. I know it's not traditional, and I know that I did get wonderful

things from my mother. And I don't know if that had to do with the fact that she's a woman or who she is. I don't know. It's different from what I had. It's different from others. It's going to have to be something that he processes, adjusts to, and figures out at some point.

Fathers were reminded that the presence of a female mother does not only have functional and affective significance, but brings up deeply existential questions. Jason spoke about getting such questions from kids in his son's school about his son Carlos not having a mother:

The boys in his class have never been an issue, ever. They have all known he had two dads, right from the beginning. And you know, in kindergarten, the boys were kind of curious about it, and it was like, "How was he born if he didn't have a mommy?" How do you come into the world without a mommy? You get into this sort of physical part of it.

When Carlos was five years old, Jason gave him "scripts" to help him respond to children's questions:

"Where's your mommy?" "I don't have a mommy. I have two daddies and I was adopted." "How did you get born?" "I had a birth mother in [place of birth]. She wasn't able to take care of me and I got adopted. I have two dads." "Well, why would your mommy give you up?" "I don't know why she did it but I'm happy with my family now." But these were always short. Then it got to the point where enough was enough, and we said, you know, you don't have to answer these questions if you don't want to. You are perfectly free to just say "I don't feel like talking about it."

From a young age, children began to express "mommy" and "mother" to their fathers. Some fathers noticed that their children would bring up mommy spontaneously and wondered

whether they were repeating what they are hearing or also responding to an internal need to connect with this person called “mommy.” Conrad poignantly described his first experience of hearing his daughter Lucy yell for “mommy”:

When she was one and a half or something, she would stand at the top of the slide and yell “Mommy!” and all of our friends have had the same experience. She learned this from other kids on the playground, that when you’re scared at the top of the slide, you yell “Mommy!” She had no idea about the semantic meaning of it. She was just repeating something that other kids do. So that was our first experience of “Mommy, Mommy” and having to respond to that.

Soon after this incident, Lucy started asking her fathers questions about her mommy. Gordon, father of two teenagers, described a similar situation in a store when his son Nathan, who was then a young boy, began to get upset which prompted the police to be called:

They had these Christmas displays of pyramids of toys and things in the middle, and [Nathan] was three; he started trying to rip them down; and we had to take him away; and he was yelling and screaming. So somebody called the police and told them that the two white men were dragging away a black boy who was screaming, “Mommy. Mommy. Mommy”...He was not screaming “Mommy.” He'd never had a mommy in his life. (3)

The above examples suggest that children may learn from what they see in their social environments and mimic what they hear. Also, others may project their own expectations onto a situation, like some people thinking they heard this child scream “mommy”. In both of these examples, “mommy” is invoked as the protector of the child. Fathers also encountered mommy in their children’s spontaneous play. Daniel described how his two year old daughter Lisa plays “mamma and child” with him and how he mirrors her need to make him into mama:

Because of course I'm the mother and she's a child and she wants to be the mother and I'm the child and things like that, she's probably doing that with [adults at her school] as well – so we also have to child play that other role and I decided to do it... She says, “You are the mama now, I'm the child,” and then we play something, like that she's sick and I need to give her something to drink or things like that. Or she says that she's the mama and I'm the child. So it used to be that she was the papa or the dada; right now it's just mama and child.

### **Who's the Mommy and Who's the Daddy: Parenting Roles**

Little research exists about the ways same sex male couples divide parenting and other household roles and responsibilities. Fathers in this study both strongly identified with and challenged conventional male-female gendered roles. Couples attributed a number of factors to how roles and responsibilities emerged in their households, many of which may be common to heterosexual couples. These factors included their individual personalities; practical/logistical issues like flexibility in work schedules; their preferences and abilities for doing different tasks; and their thoughts and feelings about childcare.

Many fathers spoke about a mother role when they described their parenting experiences. For a majority of fathers, “mother” had both functional (what a mother does) and affective (how a mother feels and expresses how she feels) components, a depiction that is strikingly similar to conventional views of mothering. Shane makes a distinction between “birth mother” and “mommy” and is careful about the language he uses when he speaks to his son George about his biological family:

“Mother” has an emotional connotation. Mommy or mom or mother – [my son George] never knew her. That brings a whole emotional element in it for him and I don't really

want that there. That was actually a suggestion by an adoption advocate at a conference I went to once, “Be careful about using words like ‘mommy’ and ‘daddy’ when you’re talking about biological family that kids aren’t with.” So that resonated with me. I probably slip and do say “mommy” once or twice because there isn’t one in the house, but I try to focus on “birth mother” if we can. To make that distinction. With the word “father,” I think people think, “Anyone can be a father, but to be a daddy is to do more of the things dads do.” So when you say that, people say, “Oh, I get it.” We say it about mothers again because our view of mothers in society isn’t seen quite as clearly.

### **The maternal and the paternal**

In describing their different roles as parents, fathers made strikingly and at times surprisingly clear demarcations between what they saw as maternal and paternal parenting roles. Most of the fathers used the language of “traditional” and “nontraditional” in speaking about these maternal and paternal roles. Almost all of the fathers used the word “traditional” in phrases such as: “traditional stay at home wife and mom”, “traditional mother-type role”, “traditional gender roles in society”, “traditional family”, “traditional family model”, “traditional heterosexual parenting family”, “traditional maternal and paternal instincts or traits”, and “traditional female activities”.

While fathers use prevailing scripts about what it means to be maternal and paternal, they also challenge these scripts in the ways they parent and talk about their parenting. Some fathers, like Conrad, said that because he and his partner did not have preexisting models or scripts for two male parents, they could create their own models. Conrad spoke about the freedom they feel not having traditional man-woman gender roles to fall back on in their division of responsibilities

in the home. He described the benefits of neither he nor his partner Mario taking on a “wife role” in their household:

To me, “wife” isn’t even gendered. It’s “primary caregiver.” It’s the person who takes care of everybody else. [Not taking on the wife role] sort of makes us feel equal. We really feel that we are equals in this relationship. Having a wife creates a dynamic in which, say, one person is the breadwinner, and the other person is the caregiver, even if it’s not necessarily financial. I feel like I look at [Mario] and I feel equal. That’s one thing that I like about us.

Other fathers, like Thomas, spoke about being influenced by the model established by their own mothers and fathers and could see both of their parents in their own parenting style:

Well, I’m a male, so I’m coming into the relationship taking on the paternal role, like my father did. That’s how I think I would have viewed things when I was younger. But now, at 35, having been in a relationship a couple of years, and being with [Mary], I bring in what my father *and* mother did. Both of them had their roles and both of them influenced me. There were certain things my mother did for me and certain things my father has done for me. That’s what I do for my daughter.

While it was important to share the caregiving and childrearing roles and responsibilities equally with his partner, Jason used the archetype of the “traditional stay at home wife and mom” as the benchmark by which to gauge what kind of roles he wanted to play at home:

The issues were basically about who was going to be the caregiver and how we would both contribute in the upbringing and child rearing. Even though our relationship has been pretty equal professionally, at that time, the prior ten years time, [Scott] was making much more money than I was. His income was really more important to the lifestyle of

the family...I didn't want to be a traditional stay at home wife and mom, where he would only show up occasionally. I wanted to know that he was going to be an equal partner in the way he could in the upbringing of the child.

On the one hand, deciding that one parent would stay at home with the children full time (instead of having a nanny take care of the kids, for example) may be considered traditional. At the same time, a man/father deciding to be a stay at home parent could be considered nontraditional. Josh was this stay at home parent for his son Warren, who is now in his early twenties. When asked if there were ways in which their parental roles and responsibilities were nontraditional, Josh replied:

That's a difficult question, partly just because I was home; I was in graduate school so I was the one at home. So that was nontraditional that there was a dad actually at home care-giving...Actually if there was any parent at home...So that was unusual.

That more and more heterosexual men choose to be the stay at home parent and delay advancement in their career and other life choices may beg the question: what do terms like "traditional" and "nontraditional" mean in the context of gay male headed families? The "tradition" that is being used as the reference point is the family with two heterosexual married parents, where the man works outside the home and the woman stays at home to be the primary caregiver for the children. Embedded in this model is the notion that the man is free to pursue his other goals, particularly related to career, while having children. The woman, on the other hand, must either relinquish or defer pursuing these goals for the sake of her husband, kids and family, and needs to be happy and satisfied with doing so.

Randy, a single father in his early thirties raising an older teenager, describes himself as having both "paternal and maternal leanings." Randy sees himself as being a good parent

because of his ability to express maternal (i.e. nurturing) leanings as a man, an openness and flexibility which he sees as stemming in part from his sexual orientation:

For me I feel like I had both paternal and maternal leanings tied to my own gender identity and expressions which of course is almost inseparable at times from one's sexual orientation...people [are] always seeing me as a nurturing, more maternal type and affirming that I would be a good parent. I think it was easy for me to see myself as someone who could be a good parent or someone who should parent because I would receive those messages a lot along the way from parents, mostly from mothers that I respected who I think probably saw that in me because of who I am, but also I'm not sure I can divorce that from the balance that my sexual orientation gave me in terms of as a man being able to explore what it means to be maternal which is something I care deeply about.

It should be noted that being a single father, Randy does not have anyone in his immediate environment with whom to share the maternal and paternal aspects of parenting. This raises questions about the dynamics of gender roles in families headed by single gay and lesbian individuals, a subject which is beyond the scope of this paper and is a subject in need of further research.

### **Good cop-bad cop/ the feminine and the masculine**

Some fathers made a clear distinction between being the disciplinarian and being the “softer” parent. Jonathan and Ely, fathers to 9 year old Linda, distinguished between “mommy” and “daddy” in terms of their flexibility and styles of nurturing. In their depiction of their parenting styles, one can hear conventional notions of femininity and masculinity - mothers have

the feminine qualities of being warm and accommodating and fathers have the masculine qualities of being more distant and rigid:

Jonathan: From an emotional perspective, [Linda] clearly has lines – you know, I’m the mommy.

Mohan: You’re the mommy.

Jonathan: I am. I’m the good cop. [Ely] is always going, “Why do I have to always be the bad guy?” And I say, “Because you ARE the bad guy.”

Ely: [laugh]

Mohan: How did that come to be?

Jonathan: Because I’m the naturally nice one.

Mohan: Oh, I see. That’s easy. [laugh]

Ely: I’m more demanding and I’m more...

Jonathan: Rigid?

Ely: I’m more to the point. Even in my work, I’m to the point – there’s no bullshit.

Jonathan: I’m more apt to negotiate, and [Ely] lays down the law to say, “What about this?” and just try to counter balance it.

Mohan: You said that [Linda] sees you as “mommy.” Why is that?

Ely: Because he’s more nurturing than I am.

Jonathan: I’m the snuggler and the hugger. I do think I have a way with her that’s more ... er, what’s the right word? I don’t want to use any term that makes [Ely] sound bad. He loves and nurtures her very much.

Ely: But mine is different.

Jonathan: He’s more like daddy comes home from the office and throws his tie on the chair and tries to give his daughter a kiss.

Edward and Marshall similarly associate being maternal and paternal with masculine and feminine qualities in parenting their four year old son Colin. While they see themselves leaning in particular directions, they also see their roles as being fluid:

Edward: Interestingly enough, I'm rougher with [Colin] than [Marshall] is. I allow [Colin] to be more adventurous outside than [Marshall] does which you would think is a more masculine trait.

Marshall: Right. Cause there are things that, yeah, where I'm much more like the "mother hen" with him, overprotective stuff. Yeah, there's an interesting balance and back and forth.

Mohan: So there's a back and forth between maternal and masculine roles?

Edward: Um, I don't know if there's a back and forth. I definitely think that there's a more maternal role that I play and [Marshall] a paternal role, but it's fluid.

It is important to realize that each set of parental attributes needs the other set to derive their meaning and significance. That is, one aspect of parenting (e.g. nurturing, protection) is revealed when placed in contrast to another aspect of parenting (e.g. limit setting, taking risks). Peter similarly invoked a particular model of nurturing, one that is typically associated with women, mothers, and femininity, as he describes his yearning to be the one who nurtures his 4 year old son Steven:

Like a part of me was fulfilled...the nurturing part of me – [Steven's] extremely attached to me. I would be more the "mother" of the family if you needed to put a label on it. I'm definitely more of the nurturer – he falls and gets the booboo and he comes right to me because I have to put the bandaid on him. And I always wanted that.

When asked to give another example of "nurturing", Peter said, "Yeah, definitely when he's sick... he has to sit next to me."

Some fathers were surprised by their parenting roles and styles, and how these roles challenged the gendered scripts they had about the kind of parents they thought they would be.

For Joey, attending to his infant daughter's health needs brought these scripts to the fore:

I at first thought that when [Mary] needed a shot administered or eye infection medicine, where you have to rip down the bottom eyelid, that I'd be the one saying "aww, it's okay sweetheart." But the parent you think you're going to be and the parent that you end up being can sometimes be completely different, no matter how well you plan for one or the other. And I'm gender labeling, but I think that as far as the maternal instincts – the soft, quiet, soothing, maternal side – I ended up being "No, we have to just get this done. Here's your eye. Let's put the medicine in, because you're going to cry no matter what. Let's get this over and done with." I didn't expect that to be how I really would speak to her during something like that. I thought Thomas might be more like that, and he's actually he's the one soothing her in the background!

Joey's partner Thomas described how he notices and challenges views about the maternal and paternal that he learned through his experiences with his own parents:

I had my mother and my father. My father was the breadwinner and the disciplinarian, but my mom was more the soother and the daily caretaker. She was the one I went to with all my questions and concerns. My father was the background moralizer. So that is what I bring to the relationship – in the back of my mind, I think, "What did my mom do?" and that was what I associate with 'maternal' and "What did my father do?" and that's what I associate with 'paternal.'" Then I realized that those were just character traits – like, I associated some traits with my mom, who happened to be a woman. It doesn't mean that a father couldn't or shouldn't do that. It was just a matter of challenging my

own views at the beginning and realizing that two dads can do things that are associated with both ‘maternal’ and ‘paternal.’

Some fathers had the opportunity to see their roles through the eyes of their children. Josh described how his son Warren, who is now a young adult, saw him as more the mother because of both what he did and the ways he expressed his emotions. We can see in this depiction both functional and affective components of mother and father:

Mohan: So [Warren] sees you more as the mother?

Josh: He’s very clear about that and always has been. I was offended at first. I would try to say can’t a dad do these same things. And he got frustrated and just said, Papa, you know what I mean, you did all the mother things...like fix my lunch, arrange my play dates, take me to school, take me to the park, you did everything all the mothers do, and he would always say, you’re more emotional like mothers tend to be...I think he was in elementary school, probably around 6 or 7, when he first said that.

In contrast, Robert, Josh’s partner, was “more the dad” because he “went out to work”:

He went out to work. He was gone for work. He was back on weekends, back during certain nights of the week. So I think it was easier. And [Robert] didn’t cook. He hates to cook. It’s not that I love to cook, but someone had to cook. I did the more traditional female activities.

Marcus, father of 15 year-old Tyson, eloquently sums up the ways many fathers in this study both draw from and resist proscribed gender roles:

I learned to care, watching parents around me. But I also tried to do a lot of very different things. Some of the things I saw with men and women, I didn’t like, where the woman was always subordinate and would manipulate to get her way with the so-called stronger

male. We didn't have that stereotype, so we're redefining what parents can be...It's not necessarily because we haven't had role models – we've had heterosexual role models – but we see a window of opportunity to really recreate the institute of parenthood in our own images. That's what we're trying to do, to take the best of both worlds. There's something advantageous in the way heterosexuals do it and there's something advantageous in the way non-heterosexuals do it. We create something unique – hopefully something better.

### **Summary**

The themes in this chapter reveal the myriad ways narratives about gender, motherhood and children's well-being are present in the lives of gay adoptive fathers. The “absence of a female mother” shows up in the fathers' lives in a number of ways including frequent questions about their child's mother and about their competence to parent without women, their own concerns about their child not having a mother, their children's questions about “mommy”, and the ways gender roles and norms of masculinity and femininity are present in fathers' parenting styles. Fathers frequently encountered a variation of the “where's mommy” question, which for them conveys the dual message that all children must have a mother and that men cannot possibly parent a child without a woman.

Many fathers spoke about a mother role when they described their parenting experiences. For a majority of fathers, “mother” had both functional (what a mother does) and affective (how a mother feels and expresses how she feels) components. While fathers used prevailing scripts about what it means to be maternal and paternal, they also challenge these scripts in the ways they parent and the ways they talk about their parenting.

## CHAPTER IX

### IT'S SO IMPORTANT TO TALK AND TALK: PREPARING CHILDREN FOR A HETERONORMATIVE WORLD

Fathers shared many examples of communicating with their children about issues related to being different from the “norm.” For many fathers establishing open lines of communication with their children was very important. Fathers often talked with their children about difficult issues from a young age— being adopted, not having a mother, having two dads, and being a “different” family. Like a number of the fathers in this study, for Shane, father of three boys, open communication was “normal” and “natural.” Miguel said that his son Pedro, who is now a young adult, encountered many difficulties with his peers “standing out” in a number of ways:

On top of being the adopted child from gay parents, we lived in a very Caucasian affluent neighborhood, and he was African-American...he [stood] out by himself; he already had to deal with that.

Miguel describes the importance of talking as a way to face these difficulties:

[Pedro] had a lot of difficulties growing up. But we talked so much. I mean it's so important to talk and talk. Words are extremely important. If you get the words out and put those words on the table which most of those words are feelings, and you deal with those, you are able to be constructive with whatever you do and be positive because we did; we talked a lot.

Communicating with children about the difficulties they experience in their lives is what most parents do. What stands out in the fathers’ stories are the types of issues fathers discuss with their children, and the meanings and significance communication has for gay fathers parenting in a heteronormative world. Previous studies on gay and lesbian families (Wainwright

& Patterson, 2006) highlight the importance of family process variables (such as parent-child relationships) over family structure variables (sexual orientation of parents) in predicting children's well-being. Patterson (2006) and others have called for further research on the quality of family relationships in families headed by gay and lesbian parents. While researchers have begun to explore relationships in lesbian headed families (Perlesz et al., 2006), little research exists about the qualities of parent-child relationships between gay fathers and their children (exceptions include Lewin, 2009; Stacey, 2006; Mallon, 2004). What fathers in this study shared about their communication practices with their children contributes to this picture of parent-child relationships in families headed by gay adoptive fathers.

### **There Are Many Places We Wouldn't Be Welcomed**

The fathers in this study had children ranging in age from nine months and 22 years. Fathers who had infants and younger children anticipated the difficulties and challenges their children were likely to experience as they entered a wider world. They wanted to begin preparing themselves and their children for these difficulties. Daniel, father of two year old Lisa, poignantly said, "When she's older and goes out with the two of us, she's going to know that we're not every family." His partner Martin added:

We already were different from other people because we were gay. So a lot of the things that heterosexuals have to deal with before they adopt, we don't have to do. But [Lisa] will still have to work through some of that, because we did it prior to her arriving, but she'll have to deal with those issues, like that she's not the "normal" standard. She will eventually have to face that, and we'll equip her to do that, but she'll have to do that on her own. And she will be fine, but it's still something she has to learn to deal with.

Having faced their own struggles and challenges as gay men, Daniel and Martin recognized that their daughter will likely face similar and different challenges being a child of gay parents. They realized that to some extent they can help her through these situations, but that she will also have to learn to face them on her own. This concern is likely shared by most parents, particularly minority parents, but may be heightened in some ways for gay fathers. This concern is expressed vividly by Sheldon, father of two children ages 6 and 4, who shares his hopes and worries about his children's teenage years:

We are prepared for a lot of potential issues with being adopted, being a two-dad family, a multicultural family. There are lots of things to sort through. So we'll see...I hope there's not teasing. I hope that there's not kids in the playground saying, "They're not your real family; your mother didn't want you." Just whole adoption related things. I hope they're not taunted about having gay parents. Just like I hope they're not teased about "Oh, you're fat or you're thin" or any of the meanness that children do. They are just... have some more obvious things that they could be teased about.

Fathers spoke about anticipating what will happen as their child expands into new social groups, participates in new activities, and enters new environments. This issue is particularly significant for gay men because as their child interacts with a wider social environment, they and their children become more visible:

I definitely think that [being a gay parent is] different just because you're constantly in new situations just as he ages. You're on the playground and then you're at school or at music class, different things that he starts participating in. As a parent you just start to have a more social life as your child becomes more social. (Jeremy, father of 2 year old Simon)

Like navigating the social spaces described earlier, these social interactions require decisions about disclosure and uncertainties about how others may respond to a family with gay fathers. Victor described his nine year old son Ralph being “on the cusp” as they prepared for him to go to events like summer camp:

I think that we might be on the cusp...He's somewhat in a bubble now because he knows his classmates...things like summer camp or when he's sort of outside people who know him. I mean those are going to be the moments where kids [get] older and meaner...People don't know his story. Everyone is comfortable now, but he's going to find himself in situations where people don't know him, and people will assume he has a mother. He'll have to deal with that.

The issue of living in a wider possibly gay-unfriendly world is not an abstract idea for gay fathers, as it can play out even in routine domestic situations like their child having a friend over for a sleepover. In preparing for his son Cameron to have friends over to their house, Randy, whose son is now 19, said that he wanted to make sure other parents knew that they were “a different kind of household”, one in which “heteronormative functions ... just don't necessarily fly”:

When [Cameron] started first inviting friends and stuff over to the house which I love, but friends who aren't necessarily from [his school], I always remind[ed] him, “Hey, we have a different kind of household, and I want to talk to their parents, and I want to make sure they understand, you know, just what kind of a household we are, and that they're cool with that... We have never had a problem with that, but it was something I made sure that [Cameron] was aware of. You know, there are going to be some friends who are perfectly fine with it, whose parents are perfectly fine with it, and then there may be

some whose parents who may not be cool with it. We have been blessed not to have that situation, but I was aware that could happen.

Like Randy, other fathers expressed that they wanted their children to know about a wider world where there are places that are not welcoming of their family:

What we haven't had and at some point I feel we need to talk about the fact that there are many places we wouldn't be welcomed. And, you know, not everybody thinks it's great that we're gay, regardless of having a child...[Ralph has] never had to be in an environment where we would not be accepted...he knows we can't get married, but he doesn't understand sort of why. He doesn't understand or know that [in] many parts of the country or the world it's illegal to be gay, and you can't have sex, and you can't do that. And we're going to have to deal with the whole very soon how are babies made discussion. (Victor and Philip, father of 9 year-old Ralph)

Ely frames his discussion with his 9 year-old daughter Linda more broadly in terms of how human beings relate to difference:

It's okay to tell [Linda] that not everyone likes everyone. Not everyone likes people who are gay, who are African American, Muslims. I give her examples of everything. She knows that it's human – not everyone likes everything.

The two other families in this study with children who are 9 or 10 years old had similar stories. As children's emotional and social worlds expand, issues related to sexuality and homosexuality, in particular, come to the foreground. Fathers spoke about how they communicated with their children about being gay and their children's understanding of what it means to be gay. This corresponded to their children's evolving understanding of sexuality, sex, and procreation.

The concerns shared by fathers of younger children are understandable given the prevalence of homophobia and bullying among teenagers. Some fathers of teenagers reported that their children encountered blatantly homophobic and disparaging statements. Josh and Robert described an encounter when their son Warren was told by another boy that his fathers were “cocksuckers.” Robert explained how they supported their son:

I don't know what else he was saying, but I remember “cocksuckers”. So it was clear that they were not accepting of this, and that's the first experience I remember [Warren] having where there was not a good reception or it wasn't a neutral reception. That there was a very clear, distinct discrimination so we talked about that; we talked about how these kids probably have never had an opportunity to meet gay dads with kids. We talked about [what] ignorance or lack of knowledge can produce. We also said we assumed he might have talked to the father, and the father might have had this view of gay people, and it's translated to the son, and the son is just a picture of the environment tone. But had the kid been around you since the beginning he would have a different experience because he would know us for years just like your classmates at school.

When Warren was ten years old, he was told by another child: “You have two gay dads; you are going to burn in hell.” Josh described how they spoke to their son about this situation:

I think we both took the more rational approach and said, “What do you think of us burning in Hell? Why would we burn in Hell? What do you think of a Hell and Heaven?” ...He said, “Well, I don't believe it.” And I said, “Well, I'll be honest, I don't either. Just even if gay people were to burn in hell because you were a child raised by two gay dads doesn't mean that you would burn in hell.”... You did nothing wrong. You

had no choice ...he was open about it which also made me feel good that he was comfortable enough in his own skin that he could talk to us.

What was it like for Warren to hear statements that his parents would be condemned for being gay? What was it like for Josh and Robert to support their child through these experiences.

While fathers like Josh and Robert find ways to compassionately speak with their children, facing homophobic and heterosexist attitudes like this can be painful. When asked how he felt when his son Pedro came home after having been teased at school for being different, Miguel said:

[I felt] very much helpless, helpless because you can't shield them in a bubble. They need to go out in the world and deal with these issues on their own...I have a lot of pain when you see them suffering due to the fact that I was gay because you don't want that to happen. I mean if he was gay, he had the problem; it's different. But due to the fact that I'm gay, and I'm taking care of him, and I'm his father. He wasn't even born as me being his bio parent, then I'm giving him the trouble; I'm the one who is the problem, and they need to deal with society due to the fact that I'm gay. That is painful, very painful.

I should note that the above incidents occurred in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when attitudes towards homosexuality and gay male parenting were perhaps less accepting than they are now even in large progressive urban settings.

### **Is it an Adoption Issue or a Gay Dads Issue?**

Children adopted by gay men experience the pressures of being different from other children on multiple levels, including being adopted, not knowing their biological parents, and being raised by homosexual parents (Mallon, 2004). In addition, many adopted children must cope with the loss of their birth family and their wish to have a mother. As Mallon (2004)

suggests, children must cope with the stigma associated with being raised in a non-traditional family and with their fathers' sexuality. Consequently, counselors must become competent in assessing the relative impacts of a number of issues on the daily lives of gay and lesbian adoptive families, including factors related to the sexual orientation of the parents and the family's adoptive status, and must distinguish the influences of these factors from challenges common to all developing families (Boyer, 2007). The fathers in this study, by and large, wanted to understand and help their children understand how their experiences were related to being adopted, to having two dads, or a mixture of both. A number of fathers spoke openly with their children from an early age about issues related to the circumstances of their adoption. Sheldon described his four year old daughter Maggie asking questions about her birth mother:

[Maggie] will just bring up her birth mother...I think it might be more of a longing, an issue for her to sort out that she has two dads versus where's my birth mother. And just the whole adoption, growing up adopted is tough, not looking like the rest of your family... We have little books showing their days in the orphanage and pictures of the birth mother...So we're very open about it.

Communicating openly with their children about adoption issues is significant given the "veil of secrecy" that often surrounds adoption (Javier et al., 2007, p.12). This veil stems from the stigma often associated with both adoptive children and adoptive parents, where relationships in adoptive families are stigmatized and devalued when compared to biological relationships.

Some fathers, like Conrad and Mario, said that being two men made the issue of adoption more visible in their family:

Mario: The major difference between two men adopting and a man and a woman adopting is that we don't have the option of not telling people that [our daughter] is adopted. I remember my cousin...seriously asking me: "So you're going to tell [Lucy] that she was adopted?" As opposed to what?

Conrad: We had to be open from the beginning. A man and a woman might decide to tell their kid when he was ten or fifteen or something...

Mario: Yeah, you can have a little more control.

Conrad: The very minute that [Lucy] knew the word 'mother' and someone can ask her, "Where's your mother?" she needed an answer. So we had to tell her from the beginning.

For White fathers parenting children of color, like Jonathan and Ely, the fact that their daughter is adopted was even more apparent:

All her friends know she's adopted and all of them know we're White. They all know it. I don't think she has the sense that she can shelter that information – she's not the same color. Certainly now, at this age, kids know that she didn't come from us.

### **Eventually the story is going to be hers**

Fathers showed respect and sensitivity to their children's needs around processing the difficult issues related to being adopted. To a large extent, they wanted their children to take ownership over seeking information about their biological families. They wanted their children to ask questions about their families – both their current family and their biological family - and to know about their histories. To these ends, a number of fathers created adoption books for their children. Joey, father of 9 month old Mary, said:

Eventually the story is going to be hers. We won't share anything that we haven't generally shared with her, until it is age appropriate to tell her. But from the beginning, she'll know everything. She has an adoption book – there are no secrets. But eventually, the story is going to be hers, so when people ask us, instead of us saying anything, she can tell her story at whatever level of comfort she is at.

Conrad, speaking about his 3 year old daughter Lucy, echoed this sentiment:

We made her a book of all of her family, all of our family – her grandparents, her uncles and aunts, her cousins, her friends, and her mother. We put a picture of her mom in there. We want her to know who her mother is, what her name is, and where she is. We have always just given her all that information as she asks for it. We'll do the same thing for her brother.

For Ben and Gordon, fathers of two teenagers, having their children's adoption books out on the shelf was a way of being open about their adoption:

What we did [for our children] was we made them adoption storybooks with pictures of the adoption attorney and the judge... They were like picture books that they read from the time they were three years old. And they're on the shelf here. You know, so we didn't make it a secret.

Donald felt that having an adoption book made things “fluid” for his 5 year-old son Ryan:

The book is only, you know, a children's book, it's not extensive, but that's out on our shelf, and he looks at it. It should be fluid. It's certainly nothing we should make him feel bad about or embarrassed about.

Having the adoption book read to him prompted Ryan to start asking Donald questions:

He's starting to ask the tougher questions. Like there's a line in the book that says, “Daddy and Poppy really wanted a baby, but they couldn't make babies, and [birth parents' names] could make a baby, but they couldn't care for the baby after the baby was born”.

Victor and Philip's son Ralph read his adoption book to his fourth grade class in order to “get his story out there” so as to hopefully stop the stream of questions he would often get about his origins:

There were lots of questions that the kids were asking him sort of as he started... and he was becoming sort of very frustrated with repeatedly having to tell his story. We wanted him to and the school sort of offered him the forum to sort of stand up in front of his class with his adoption book, and just get it [snaps his fingers] out there...he really wanted to just stop the questions with his classmates and just tell everyone the story once and get it over with.

### **And now it gets complicated**

For many fathers being a two dad family made issues related to adoption prominent. Conversely, facing adoption related issues made some of them confront issues related to being a two dad family sooner than they had planned. When asked what he meant when he said he managed to keep “cool” when his then two year old daughter asked him, “Where’s mom?”, Conrad said:

I had more of an emotional reaction about it – I was not prepared for it, because she sort of took the initiative about something that I thought I’d sit her down and explain to her about.

Daniel got “panicked about the whole adoption issue” even before his two year old daughter Lisa brought it up. He then took action by reading books about ways to talk to his daughter about adoption. Interestingly, soon after he started preparing himself for speaking with Lisa about adoption, she started asking him questions:

I don’t know what actually triggered my panic. I was suddenly like, “We need to deal with this” and we started getting all this stuff and I was right. We needed to deal with it. And then the questions came. They really came, funnily enough, right after I got the pamphlets.

Daniel's feelings of panic sprung him into action to create an open space to engage with his daughter around her questions. Daniel's partner Martin, in contrast, expressed that he gets "anxious" when Daniel brings up adoption issues because it reminds him about the various ways his daughter is different from other children, issues she will likely have to confront as she gets older:

I get anxious and I don't want to deal with it...we have this nice family unit that is totally untainted, and now it gets complicated. Now [Lisa's] really verbalizing how she's different from all the other children and pointing out the things that she doesn't have and that she never will have. It's just painful on some level... I'm sad. I'm sad for her. She is really happy, but I know that in the future, she's going to have to work through so much stuff surrounding this. I wish she didn't have to bear all that.

When asked what he anticipated his daughter will have to work through, Martin spoke about the multiple layers of difference and possible stigma he anticipated his child may face. Realizing this brings up difficult feelings for Martin:

It's not like [Lisa] was adopted by a heterosexual family with a woman – when she's older and goes out with the two of us, she's going to know we're not every family. We're not most families. She's not going to have a mother in the same way...So I have anxiety and guilt and just like any parent, I want her to have an easier time rather than a harder time in her life...I didn't think it would happen this early. I thought it was like a four year old or five year old conversation somehow, which is probably not realistic.

Most parents worry about the difficulties their children may face and may mourn the loss of innocence and safety their children enjoy in the protective environments of their homes. Venturing out of this protective bubble, however, has different consequences for children of

same sex parents and particularly gay fathers. Donald echoes the sentiments of many fathers when he described wanting his 5 year old son's experiences to be "seamless" as he encountered the realities of being an adopted child with gay parents:

I'm a big fan of 'seamless'... 'seamless' talks about an event as opposed to 'fluid' talking about years. I want [my son Ryan] to feel like things just happen, and it's easy and it's nice. I don't want him to get smacked in the face with the fact that he was adopted or that he's got gay, same-sex parents. I want all of this to be easy cause it will smack him in the face... Like a bell is going to go off for him. Like, 'Shit, I was given up by birth parents. What does that mean?'

Shane expressed similar wishes and worries, and added that speaking with his seven year old son George about his biological family and being adopted, as difficult as it is, helps him as a parent to face the realities of being different:

I worry and I want [George] to be okay. I don't want him to feel pain or to be upset. I know that's inevitable and things happen. So I guess it takes a toll [on me]. I don't mind bringing things up about his biological mother, biological father, biological family because I think on some level it helps me to make it real for myself... It might be therapeutic on some level for me to do that. But I think that as bigger issues come up, it'll probably be harder and get more challenging. But it's just a part of our lives. It's just one facet, one really small facet of our lives.

### **Summary**

Being different from the norm took different forms as children got older. Fathers of younger children anticipated and prepared their children for challenges they may face in environments that may not be welcoming of their family. Consequently, fathers talked to their

children about being adopted, not having a mother, and having gay fathers in ways that prepared them for living in a heteronormative world. Having open communication with their children from a young age was important for fathers. For many fathers being a two dad family made issues related to adoption more prominent. Conversely, facing adoption related issues made them confront issues related to being a two dad family sooner than they had planned. Through their communication practices, this group of fathers shows how openly addressing these difficult issues with their children can become a source of strength and cohesiveness for a family. The difficulties they encountered in their own lives as gay men helped fathers parent their children as they confronted the complexities of difference.

## CHAPTER X

### PARENTING AND GAY IDENTITIES, COMMUNITIES AND CULTURES

Individuals' communities, affiliations, and social circles often change when they become parents. This chapter discusses how other gay men, heterosexual women, and lesbians responded to the fathers in this study and explores how parenting affected fathers' relationships to being a gay man.

#### **From Surprise to Disapproval to Celebration**

Fathers received a variety of responses from other gay men towards their decision to become parents. Some fathers found that becoming parents prompted other gay men to think about parenting. Shane, who is 44 and adopted his first child in 2006, said:

One of my really good friends that is gay that we're visiting this weekend thought it was great. I think there is an element in his case – and in others, probably – which is “Gee... you're having a kid... maybe I should have a kid. How come I'm not, or can't?” So I think there's an element of that, because it makes a gay person who really never thought about it think, “Maybe I could do that.”

Joey, who is 35 and adopted his daughter in 2011, said that some gay men were surprised by his decision to become a parent. In contrast to what Shane describes, the expression of surprise also conveyed some judgment:

A large percent of gay men specifically had a reaction: “Why would you do that?” I joined a sailing club, and it was, “I have children” “you mean dogs?”... There was some selfishness in almost all of those responses... they just wanted to highlight that they were so surprised.

Jason, who is 56 and adopted his first child in the early 2000s, was surprised by the responses he received from gay friends who were “more traditional gay men”:

That was actually one of the more surprising things. With our gay friends, they kind of fell into two categories. If they were more traditional gay men – meaning lone wolves, not wanting to get married, and going to bars every Saturday night to get picked up – those guys kind of dropped by the wayside. We had a number of friends who fell into that category. They didn’t really get kids and didn’t really want to be around kids, so a lot of those relationships went on hold.

Ben, who is also 56 but adopted his children in the early 1990s, lost contact with gay male friends soon after he and his partner Gordon adopted their son:

For the first few weeks it seemed like people were really supportive. They had a baby shower for us, and all these people came. Some people said things to us that sounded like they were real supportive, but then we never ever saw or heard from them again. I know other gay men who have told me that as soon as they adopted they lost all their gay male friends who weren’t parents.

Some fathers experienced overt disapproval and skepticism from other gay men towards their decision to become parents. Kyle (52) adopted his children in the mid 1990s and said that in addition to his gay male friends being skeptical, he often felt that they treated him as a “class enemy” after he became a parent:

It was my impression, not among my dear friends, but casually that there were a lot of gay men and some lesbians who did not really approve of gay men having kids. Or, in some cases it was direct disapproval; in other cases, it was more that it just made them uncomfortable.

Kyle explained that their disapproval was partly about parenting “going against the political aim of gayness.” This was illustrated by a lesbian woman who expressed to Kyle that gay people having children “violate[d] the terms of what being gay was supposed to mean in terms of liberation.” Kyle put this woman’s response in a historical context:

There is a whole strain in gay life between whether gay liberation is about breaking away from kind of heterosexual rules and the whole way life is organized and family life is determined and those who just want equality. This issue was more alive ten, fifteen years ago, I think, than it is now. I think we are all moving toward the equality side of that; that’s what everyone wants, but gay liberation began with sexual freedom. Around this time, those two drives were pushing at each other and somewhat antagonistic. So I did feel that pretty strongly that there were people who felt that just having children at all [was] going against the political aim of gayness.

For some gay men, this disapproval was about letting go of a certain kind of lifestyle, as explained by Richard (42), who adopted his children in the last several years:

All of my friends were terrific about [us becoming parents] for the most part, but [two of our close gay male friends] were all “Oh my god. We’re happy if you really want to do that, but...why would you want to do that?”...They live a more pretentious lifestyle. They are not giving of themselves...their interest is in nice cars, a nice home, vacations twice a year. They appreciate people who do that.

Like other new parents, many fathers experienced changes in their social lives as a result of becoming parents. For Donald becoming a parent meant letting go of activities he and his partner did as gay men without children. Donald, who is 43 and adopted his first child in 2006, said:

[We] both really like to have a good time, and that's changed since we've had kids...I'm not dancing till 5 or 6 in the morning at a club; I've done it once or twice since [our son] was born. For the most part, it's not happening.

After adopting their now 4-year old son Colin, Edward and Marshall lost contact with some of their gay friendship circles and became part of new social circles:

We had a network and a group of gay men...and we used to just have dinner parties every weekend, and we were all invited to everything...and I was like I can't bring a 2 month old baby to your cocktail party and slowly the invitations just stopped coming... now the people we socialize with are all straight couples with kids that we hang out with.

Such changes are common to most parents, but for some gay fathers these shifts in "lifestyle" also signify changes in the ways they envision and construct their lives as gay men. Kyle described what "gay life" was like for him before having kids:

I spent the formative years of my young adulthood creating a gay life that I loved or that made me comfortable and involved...it's not everybody's gay life...I never went to a gay bar in my life. It wasn't that. It was I loved my apartment; I loved my work; my friends, you know, just the whole way I made my life, like an artwork the way people often do when they don't have kids. And I've really had to struggle with letting go of that for years, and it's not complete.

Becoming parents can shift the affiliations and alliances gay men have with different groups of people. In contrast to gay men who asked fathers skeptically why they would want to become parents, some heterosexual women were extremely enthusiastic and supportive. Alan (61), who adopted his children in the mid to late 1990s, explained:

The most enthusiastic people about it were straight women...they all loved it...They said like what a wonderful idea. What a wonderful thing to do, you know. I guess it matched their values. These were women that had children, and also, I think, women that didn't have children. All agreed that, "Why wouldn't you want to do that? That's perfect."

Ben, who also adopted his children in the 1990s, said that one of his biggest supports was a heterosexual female friend who was also an adoptive parent:

We have some people that are very accepting...One of the classic ones would be my boss...She was unable to have children. She and her husband [adopted] an immigrant child who they raised...she was one of the most supportive people in the world to me being a parent. [She] always asked about my kids.

Not all heterosexual women, however, were so supportive or enthusiastic, as Marshall found out:

I had a good [female] friend who [was] about the same age. I think she just had a really difficult time that I could become a parent before her, and she kind of couldn't deal with the ramifications of, you know, at the age she was, as a woman, and the possibility that she would never become a mother, and I was a father now, that whole like psychodrama...I haven't talked to her in 4 years.

In a similar way, Daniel got "looks" from women in public when he was walking around with his daughter when she was an infant:

In a heteronormative, patriarchal society, women gain a certain access to power when they have children. That is their way. So when some women recognize us having a child, basically men stepped on their territory again. It was one territory that was just theirs. I really felt that sometimes...like, that we're taking the one thing men can't touch that now

we're doing as well...the way they look at you or approach you, you really feel like you're stepping on their territory. It was funny...That is something I didn't expect.

Some fathers experienced strong disapproval from lesbians when they became parents.

Ben said that the lesbian parents in the rural community where he lives

look at us and run the other direction as far as they can, because they can blend in and pretend...There are a lot of lesbian parents up here, and they all raise their kids on the idea that we just stay in the closet about this, our kids will be fine and have no repercussions from having gay parents...they don't associate with any other gay parents...[they] think that if anything being friends with other gay families might be harmful to their kids.

Ben went on to describe attitudes towards gay men in a parenting group he was leading:

I was trying to talk about how it's important for kids to have role models of other kids with same-sex parents...[and one lesbian mother] said to me, "when I want my child to have male models in his life, I'll have my straight relatives do that for him. I don't need a bunch of gay men to do that."

Richard, who lives in a suburban community, faced very different reactions from lesbians:

All our lesbian friends, interestingly enough, have children. We have three sets of lesbian friends, all have kids...[and their response to us has been] very positive.

### **Does Parenting Trump Gayness?**

For Anthony (61), who "came of age" in the 1960s and adopted his child in the late 1990s, becoming a parent was part of an evolving gay culture, a movement out of the "margins of society." Anthony's words alert us that we need to understand the histories of gay communities

in order to better understand the significance of gay men becoming parents both for gay communities and for what he calls the “mainstream”:

After our adopting, the world shifted, as far as who we were friends with...it was not viewed very positively by other gay men...there was so much silliness in the politics of it, like “Breeders do it.”...what happened, especially at that time, was much of life was created in the margins of society. A culture evolved out of that. So I think you should be sympathetic to yourself and you should appreciate that culture, but I don’t think you should be hard on yourself because of that culture. You have to understand where it comes from. In a sense, I don’t think you necessarily always have to celebrate that everything about it was wonderful. Not everything was wonderful. And I get why it was so damn hard for us to turn that stuff around. I understand why that still happens – I understand why all of it happened – and I don’t think we should be down on ourselves for it, but I don’t think that we should necessarily celebrate “this is gay culture and we should just be jumping all over the place and doing people without any protection.” You know? I think the culture evolved. .. I think part of it was that people thought, “this is moving out of the margins – this is moving into the mainstream.” It was falling out, to some degree.

Thus, becoming a parent runs counter to the culture of sexual liberation for some members of the gay community. This parallels what Sheldon (44) described as parenting neutering the sexuality of being gay:

I think that most people’s problem with gay people is the sexuality of it. And somehow when there are children involved, it neuters the sexuality of it, and they just become this childcare unit ...it is normalization for them....and also the fact that [our children are]

adopted, and they are of a different race, also makes people think, “oh, these people are doing something nice in the world.” You know what I mean? They didn’t have to do this, and look at what they’re doing. It’s interesting.

Sheldon then explained how parenting creates a hierarchy between “those gay people” and more acceptable gay people who are parents:

It neuters. It takes the sex out of it. It’s not like those gay people. I think because of what defines us as different is sex... if you say you’re gay, it forces them to think about sex...other than their own. But if you think of us as parents with kids somehow the sex part isn’t in their minds.

Some fathers spoke about the phenomenon Sheldon describes as parenting or family “trumping” gayness. Daniel, father of 2 year old Lisa, reflected on the Italian working class neighborhood where he used to live:

We can still go to some of those businesses, and people come out of the laundromat where I used to go and ask how [Lisa] is. I mean, seriously – we lived there for three weeks!...And they were really really friendly, because for them, family trumps everything else. We were the only gay people on that entire street – there were no fags there.

Sheldon sees the dynamics of such situations as straight people connecting with gay people around the common experience of parenting:

It’s something they get, and they understand. You go from someone who is beyond their understanding to “Oh, I had to deal with that too. This is what you do when this happens. “Oh, I see that you...you don’t hug them right away when they fall”...They see we’re dealing with the same things they have ever dealt with, or they are dealing with.

Shane found that having children brought down “barriers and walls” with other adults:

I find that more often than not, children have a way of bringing down barriers and walls, and they find a way to join with people. We go places – we travel...and people will generally be okay....People warm up to kids. People love children and I think they just naturally are drawn to them. And people have children of their own. I think it's natural for folks to just warm up when there's kids around.

In the bringing down of these walls, what happens to gay fathers' sense of a "gay identity?" Does it get reinforced, silenced, diminished, and/or heightened? Daniel said that becoming a parent "shielded him" from dirty looks and made the "gay thing" the "second thing":

It changes your gay identity, definitely, because they can't give you a dirty look when you are with a cute little girl... It shields you. It's really fascinating. And even as a baby, [Lisa] was cute. So people always looked at her and commented on it. It really changes things – the gay thing becomes like kind of a second thing. It's because you carry that child in front of you in some way and they look at you like the gay thing is suddenly the second thing.

Daniel then spoke about feeling scrutinized by women. In a sense Daniel is trading in dirty looks for being gay to feeling scrutinized as a man with a child:

The flip side is that when there are two men with a child, they always intensely look at how you're dealing with the child, so they really watch you...People look, especially women – they look at how you're dealing with the child. When they realize it's two men, they want to see how you handle it, if you're able to do it. So I always feel scrutinized, even now when we're out. I feel like I have a responsibility to show that we are able to deal with the child.

### **A More Openly Gay Man with A Kid**

Some fathers found that having a child made it easier to be more openly gay. They felt compelled to be more open so that they did not give their child a message that there is something wrong with them or their family. Marshall, father of 4 year old Colin, explained:

I've found it easier to be...a more openly gay man having a kid...There's a feeling of pride of being a father and having this child and not wanting to be false or hide who you are and set some kind of example of shame in front of your child cause... they're aware of everything, they pick up on everything. I don't want him to sense any shame.

Wanting to be more open as a gay man put Marshall's partner Edward in touch with what he called his "internalized homophobia." Edward said that when he was out with his partner and son when his son was a baby, he would find himself "looking to see if anybody else was looking." When asked to elaborate on this, he said:

I think that there's some internalized homophobia that I kind of still carry with me about society's thoughts about being a gay man and then being a gay dad, so I think that that was a part of it. That there was these feelings that, you know, being gay is not a good thing; therefore, being a gay dad is an even a worst thing. And I think that there were some aspects with that; and there's aspects of shame [that I still] carry with me.

Theo, father to 3 year-old Cody, confronted his own internalized homophobia when his son expressed the desire to wear girl's tights. While many parents may struggle with how to respond to their son's request, being a gay man parenting a boy heightened Theo's sensitivity to norms of masculinity in his surrounding community:

[It] surprised me as a parent, this is a direct issue around being a gay man parenting a boy. How my own struggle with homophobia or internalized homophobia or the

homophobic culture that we live in impinges on parenting or complicates parenting.

[Cody] is just a wonderful boy. I told you he's very athletic, but he also got this really interesting thing. He loves tights. He loves wearing tights, like girl's tights. He loves the feel of them. He likes to wear them so he wears them... So I sort of struggle with this issue of how do I let my son express his own gender identity? ... as a gay man, all of a sudden I feel like, part of me feels like of course he should wear tights if he wants to and express himself anyway he can, but part of me oh my gosh, he's going to get teased if he wears them outside. Or, boy, do I want to encourage him to wear those. Right? I've struggled with that a little bit. It's been really interesting for me to really have to face that and think about. What's my relationship to being male and masculinity and being a parent and having a son; it gets very complex around those issues. I largely want him to be able to express himself for who is and what he likes and to be supported in whatever he likes and how he chooses to express himself, but I also know as a gay man that that comes with complications if you do things differently than sort of society expects you to do them.

Robert, who with his partner Josh adopted their son Warren in the late 1980s, said that adopting a child propelled him to come out of the closet at work:

I've never had any thoughts before we adopted, but it was definitely an issue for me after in that I was in the closet; I was working for a major company and not out. I wouldn't lie to people about it, but certainly would avoid the subject if it even began to be raised. But once we had [Warren], and now we were role models. We couldn't lie; it's no longer okay to avoid those topics because that's lying really or showing shame for who you are, and I really didn't feel shame; that wasn't one of my feelings. I found all of a sudden

when [Warren] was around, I had to be honest about it. It was somewhat of a liberating experience I hadn't expected it to be.

In contrast, Jeremy, who adopted his 2 year old son in 2009, felt that being out in public with his son concealed the fact that he was gay:

When I'm with [Simon], people don't read me as gay, and I think I'm so obviously gay in the street... That's just not the assumption people make. Which is funny because I know I act exactly the same. You know, I'm being a parent. I talk the same; I act the same; I think it's very obvious that I'm gay, but people don't make that assumption usually.

The decision to adopt a child with his partner Joey was a catalyst for Thomas, father of 9 month old Mary, to come out to his entire family:

I came out to my mother after I graduated college, and it didn't go over well. It was not a rejection, like she didn't love me, but she just had a lot of issues handling it – from the fear of me getting AIDS, to the idea of there being abuse somewhere, to what does that mean for a relationship? Would I ever settle down? She had all these concerns about me and my well being... So fast forward, many years later, when I decided that [I] and [Joey] were going to adopt, I needed to tell everyone. I needed to come clean – I couldn't honestly raise a child if I'm not even comfortable talking to my family about the process and who I am.

For Thomas, being honest with his entire family was important for Thomas, particularly as he thought about how he wanted to parent his daughter. Wanting an honest and respectful relationship with his child prompted him to shift his relationship with his family of origin:

I felt like all of it came up in my views of how I wanted to parent my child. I wanted a relationship based on honesty and respect and mutual support, and if I was to want that

for my child, then I needed to be honest with my family, at minimum. I can't control their reactions; I can only do what's important to me and what's right to me. That includes being honest. If it turns out that they disown me or don't talk to me about it, then I have to learn to accept it. I'm an adult.

For some men, becoming parents changed how their families of origin responded to them as gay men and as a gay couple. Mario, whose mother did not even speak with his partner Conrad for some time, described how his parents' relationships to him and his partner changed after they became parents:

In a way, [becoming a parent] gave some validation to my relationship with [Conrad].

Once I had kids, though, [my parents] actually started to relate to him differently. Not the best, not warm, and they're still a little distant from him, but they treated him like family.

I think they realized that this was the father of my children.

Shane described his grandmother's reaction when she found out that he and his partner Jordan were planning to adopt a child together. For Shane's grandmother, becoming a parent made it more real that her grandson is gay:

It was funny... [my grandmother] knew about [Jordan] forever and he was just my friend and she was just oblivious. Then when we bought a house she kind of figured it out and got really upset and went on and on to me about it. "Oh gosh, why do you gotta do this? You're gonna make a mistake... nothing against [Jordan], but..." Then when we decided to get a baby, or were talking about it, "Oh my God... why do you gotta do that? It's one thing that you have [Jordan] but now you have to have a baby... you're fine just how you are." Then of course she came to love [our son] and it was a non-issue to her. So I guess you can teach an old dog new tricks. I never would have expected that.

Similarly for Joey, once he introduced the idea of having a child to his family, they became more open towards him and his life:

Before [the adoption process]...there were little jokes here and there, there was not too much talk about it... I always came home with [Thomas] and I don't think they've ever seen me come home with a girl. Then we started talking about a child...Now, everybody is awesome. They are treating [my daughter] as if she were [their] grandchild, almost.

### **Summary**

The fathers in this study received a variety of responses from friends and acquaintances about being parents as gay men. These responses included surprise, celebration, disapproval, and skepticism. Becoming parents brought changes in their lifestyles and social circles as gay men. For some fathers these shifts signified changes in the ways they envisioned and constructed their lives as gay men. Fathers spoke about a number of ways being parents affected their experience of being gay in the world. These included their relationship to the political meanings of being gay, the degree to which parenting made them more “acceptable” in mainstream heterosexual communities, and the degree to which parenting “neutered” their sexuality as gay men. For some fathers being a parent compelled them to be more open and “out” with others so that they could give affirming messages to their child about their families. Some fathers found that their families of origin became more embracing of them as gay couples after they became parents.

## CHAPTER XI

### ANOTHER LAYER OF DIFFERENCE: DOES RACE TRUMP GAYNESS?

The experiences of transracial gay and lesbian adoptive families are a new and important area of research (see Farr & Patterson, 2009). Issues related to racial and ethnic differences were prominent for a number of fathers in this study, including those who did and did not choose to adopt transracially.

#### **One More Thing to Contend With: Adopting a Child of Color**

Race was a factor for more than a few fathers in choosing which child they would adopt. Some White fathers said that they did not want to adopt a child of a different race because they felt this might pose additional difficulties for their child on top of issues related to having same sex parents. Conrad, parent of a toddler and an infant, said:

We wanted a White kid, because we didn't want to deal with a race issue. We're already dealing with same sex—the gay issue – and we didn't want to add another difficult situation for the kid.

Shane, father of three children, had similar sentiments:

We did talk about the fact and feel that as two men, in a gay couple, there aren't too many same sex couples that have kids. It's not commonplace or even close [to that] in our society, certainly not in [name of city where he lives]. And that was a challenge we already faced, so then to take in a child of another race was a concern – that would be one more thing we had to contend with. So I think that did influence some of what we did.

Shane and his partner Jordan had initially said they “wanted children who looked like [them].”

When asked to elaborate what additional difficulties adopting transracially might present, Shane explained:

There are issues and there are challenges being a same sex couple, and trans-racial... We just thought that that would be doubly difficult. I think we were more inclined to think that if we had a child that more resembled us, or even a biracial child, whereas a child who was exclusively African American... that did factor into our thought process, to be honest.

Alan, a father of two Latino teenagers, also spoke about the significance of his children looking like him and his partner:

At the time... I was unnerved at the idea of adopting an African-American child, actually. I did think I would worry too much about his safety. So then I thought, "Okay, Latino is, you know, close enough." I did think that people in the supermarket would [look] more kindly on you if you're the same race as your children. But then I thought, "Okay, this could be close enough to pass muster in the world."... every time your kid gets into a new grade, and you meet a new class full of parents, you look around, and you notice which kids... seem to be racially different from their parents... you feel some kinship.

Daniel and Martin, who adopted a White newborn girl, were concerned about introducing the element of race into their family if they adopted a child of color:

We felt that we wanted to have a White child because we're both White, and we didn't want to introduce another identity element into our already complicated family situation... before we went into it, we discussed what we were open to in regard to race issues, and health issues. These were the two main issues we discussed. We wanted to be clear as to what we wanted because all of the literature said to do only the things that you are really comfortable with. So that is what we decided on.

Marshall and his partner felt that being of a different race from them would be another “obstacle” their child would have to overcome:

We felt that it would be easier as two Caucasian men to have a Caucasian child cause he already had the barrier of, you know, the obstacle of having two dads instead of a traditional family and also to be of a different race would be yet another thing to overcome for him so we thought that would be easier for him. Even though we knew it might be a longer process or more difficult to get a White boy.

Even though they ultimately adopted two White children, for Donald and Adam, having a child who was ethnically similar became less important when they adopted their second child:

[Adam] and I both felt strongly that we wanted a child that was ethnically similar to us, light-skinned Hispanic or White...I mean I think we just felt like the first time we had some concerns about how are we going to feel; how are we going to bond; what kind of stress is this going to be on the child; what kind of stress is going to be us...but I mean like he was so clearly our child, so clear, and so quickly that it just became like whatever little being we get the second time around, we don't care anything about it.

The concerns the above fathers expressed are illustrated by Miguel, a Latino father whose older son is African-American. Miguel described the difficulties his son faced being adopted, having two dads and being African-American:

On top of being the adopted child from gay parents...we lived in a very Caucasian affluent neighborhood, and he was African-American...he [stood] out by himself; he already had to deal with that.

Some Caucasian fathers were open to adopting a child of color. Theo, a single father with a 3 year-old Latino boy, felt that he could provide a child of color with the support he needed:

I was open to having a child of any race or ethnicity...personally I feel very comfortable sort of being open to multi-ethnic or racial environments, comfortable with friends who are different race[s] or ethnicities, comfortable that I could provide him with the support to sort of form a healthy identity around his own race by providing him sort of access to other people and communities. Just my general awareness about issues of race made me feel comfortable about adopting a Black or Latino child.

Anthony, parent of an African-American teenager, also felt that he could take on the issues parenting a child of a different race may bring:

I had a very strong sense from the beginning that love was not going to make the difference. When we started the adoption, if you had a checklist, like “Who would you adopt? Who wouldn’t you adopt?” I said that we were open to a child of any race and ethnicity. I didn’t check that off because it would be a non-issue – I checked it off because I thought we would have the energy into making it work. I think it is an issue and it’s a big issue... You have to realize you are taking on these issues and will work through them as best as you can.

Richard and Peter, who adopted two children from foster care, had assumed they would adopt a child of color given the large number of African-American and Latino children in foster care.

When asked if they had any preferences regarding the racial and ethnic background of their child, Richard explained:

We knew that there was a very particular percentage in foster care of African-American children – Black children -- and Hispanic. We went into this with our eyes open. There's just a disproportionate number of children that are Black. I assumed that was going to happen. Our assumption was that we would adopt a Black child or a Hispanic one.

### **White Guy with a Black Baby**

Being White and having an African-American child drew quite a bit of attention for some fathers. Jonathan and Ely, whose 9 year-old daughter Linda is African-American, described a number of incidents when they were approached by the police because someone had suspected that their child was in danger. Jonathan explained:

In the very beginning, especially when [Linda] was a baby and it was not obvious to see her relationship with us – you know, when she's with us now, she's holding our hand, she's talking to us, no one thinks we're putting our girl in danger – but White guy with a little African-American baby.

Jonathan then described one such incident when the police were called when he and his daughter were on their way home from daycare:

[Linda had] had a fabulous day, and she was a great two year old, but this one day, she was on the train just screaming. So I get off the train, and I hit a patch of grass and I was calling you [speaking to Ely] because I was so frustrated. I was like, "She's crying and wailing..." and within a minute a police car drove up to the side of the road with the sirens going. And I was like... They came over to the side of the road because someone had called, seeing a White guy with a screaming Black baby, and they figured something was wrong, like that I had stolen someone's baby. But they were also fine, like that

[snaps fingers]. I always have to remind myself that they're doing it because someone was concerned for her safety. Ultimately, that's a good thing.

Ely emphasized that racial difference, not sexuality, was at play in this situation:

I don't think that's because we were gay...sometimes we're not traveling together and in the past, when she was younger, there were issues at airports and stuff like that. We were not together, so it was not necessarily because of queerdom, but because of the race difference.

Some fathers were told that they could not raise Black children and that being adopted by them was not in the best interests of the child. Ben, both of whose teenagers are Black, described an encounter with a White woman in his church when his daughter Abigail was a young child:

When [Abigail] was three and I was sitting with her one Sunday, [Gordon] was at work, and they didn't have childcare so she sat with me all through this church service. Of course, a three year old is going to crawl around and stuff. Well, there was this elderly, wealthy woman, one of the upper class people from [our town]...started to apologize cause [Abigail] had crawled over the back of the pew at one point and almost gone in her lap. And her response was to me was to say, "Don't you regret adopting those children.? And I said to her, "No, I thought it was one of the best things I ever did in my life.? And she said to me, "Well, don't you think you ruined their lives?? And she turned on her heel and walked away.

Jonathan and Ely had a similar encounter with an African-American woman at the end of their block. They consider whether issues of race, sexuality, or a combination of both were behind the woman's reactions:

Ely: But I think it's racial. I don't think it's the issue of being gay.

Mohan: So that kind of thing – people calling attention to you in a certain way – you don't think it's in terms of being a gay couple?

Jonathan: I don't think we can say we know what is going on in people's heads. I know that the woman on the corner has since become friendlier, but she was a problem. The first time she had caused a ruckus was when [Ely] and [Linda] were together. And then it was racial, because she said, "You don't know how to raise an African-American child."

Ely: She said, "You don't know what it is to be Black. I found out a few weeks later that she reads the Bible in Hebrew so I talked to her about what it is to be a Caucasian Jew. You know, we have a lot in common. She took pictures and stuff like that... So I called the police and I told her, "You know they're going to listen to me, not to you.?"

In contrast, Ben found that having a Black child broke down social barriers with African-American parents. He describes an interaction he had in a shopping mall with another father:

One of the interesting things too that happened when we adopted transracially, [Nathan] was only like three weeks old... was like holding [him] on a bench in the mall, and suddenly this great, big, Black man who could have been a football player just came up to me and started chatting to me about his babies... there was this social thing that broke down and so we suddenly were able to just casually talk with people of color in public; other than we had Black friends, but this was like strangers would just start talking to you... now when I go to [city name], I'm always talking to Black grandmothers on the subway and stuff (*slight laugh*)... I noticed that change.

Jonathan explained that the combination of being a man and being White drew scrutiny while traveling through an airport:

I took [our daughter] into the bathroom stall at the airport and this guy – a janitor – was like, "What are you doing in there with her?!?" And I was like, "I'm taking my daughter to the bathroom." So it's this social conception of people and what they think when they

look at the combination...[it's about race] and gender. If I were a White woman, it would not have been an issue.

### **Being Gay Helps: Knowing what it's Like To Be an Outsider**

Being a sexual minority may make lesbian and gay parents well equipped to help their children with issues of difference, including racial and ethnic differences. When asked if being a transracial family helped him to handle challenges related to being gay parents, Ben replied:

I think being gay parents has helped us handle the challenges of being a transracial family...Because we understand about discrimination and are aware to look out for it...I think because one of the criticisms Black people have about White people raising Black kids is that they won't be able to help kids develop the savvy-ness to be aware, to protect themselves.

Ben explained how he thought being gay and being Black were both similar and different:

I think the things we've experienced as a gay family also mirror the things that our kids will and have experienced in the world being Black...the one thing that gay people can do is you can go off and be incognito in a lot of ways, you don't have a sign to you saying, "I'm a minority; oppress me," all the time or most gay people don't, but Black people are always Black. Your skin color doesn't go away in the United States. And there are always people that treat you differently because of that...that's something that I've realized about racism and stuff, you know, being a transracial family; it's really important. It doesn't go away; it's always part of you.

For Theo, being a gay man sensitizes him to how his son Daniel may experience being different as an adopted child of color. What is prominent for Theo, however, is being a single parent:

Being gay is certainly part of who I am and part of what I bring to my parenting; I sort of as a gay man know what it means to be marginalized, know what it means to feel like you're different than other people. Certainly, a child who is brown-skinned and a child who's grown up as foster care and adopted. [Daniel] may feel those ways, that way sometimes so I think about how my experience sort of fits in with this. But honestly, what I feel more that's been driving my parenting experience, is doing this as a single person and a single man rather than as a single, gay man...the way I see myself as different than most of the families we're around is that I'm doing this alone...doing it alone has been more of a challenge.

Anthony, father of 14 year old Austin, described how being gay and also being adopted helps him to understand what it may be like for his son to feel like an “outsider” as an African-American:

When I've had conversations in the past [with Austin], though, I've definitely brought in issues, like, “Okay, we're on the outside, and I've felt like I've been on the outside... We make those kinds of connections. Also, curiously, within my work, I've always done a lot of work in multiculturalism, in terms of diversity and stuff like that. I've always had a strong appreciation of – not an understanding of – of what it means to be African-American in America...when you say this thing about the gay issue, I guess in my own life, I wonder if some of my appreciation for some of these issues had more to do with early on finding out that I was adopted. That immediately made me the outsider to some degree and gave me an understanding of being the outsider.

Richard, who adopted two biracial boys from foster care, similarly spoke about being minorities:

We're all minorities... You can just better relate to it in terms of challenges... we really teach our children to be very confident and proud of who they are, but I can see how that helps us prepare and position both of them. [My older son Jacob] in particular, I find, because he's Black and he's a minority in this neighborhood, definitely in this neighborhood – he's one of a very few [Black] children in [his] school.

When asked how his experiences as a gay father have been similar and different from other parents he knows, Jeremy, who is White and adopted a biracial boy, described how he felt similar to friends who were a heterosexual biracial couple:

Good friends of ours are a very White, pale, pale, very short woman and her husband is like, I don't know, 6'8? very dark-skinned African-American, I mean, he's an enormous man, and she's so tiny, and they have a child who is much lighter; she's pretty light-skinned. We have had really fascinating conversations about how we've experienced the world as parents, as biracial couples, as gay couples, straight couples, kids whose skin tones don't match either one of ours; it's really, really interesting. There's a lot of similarities... [with families] who just are different than people's expectations in terms of what a family looks like. So whether it's gay or interracial or whatever I think a lot of those experiences are actually really similar, the different experiences that you have cause people just say weird things, and people make weird assumptions.

When asked what he was referring to when he said “different” in this context, Jeremy explained:

Different...in this context, different from a male and female couple who are the same color as each other with a baby who looks like them and is biologically theirs. Like that is the expected norm...if you are anything different than that you have a lot of different experiences.

### **It Had More to Do with Race than Having Two Dads**

Some fathers reported that their children experienced difficulties with their peers more for reasons related to race than for having gay dads. In speaking about “inappropriate” things other children said to his Latino son, Jason said:

Personally, I think it had more to do with race than the fact that he has two dads. It might have been a combination. The kid was just kind of a mean kid and he was just kind of reaching out to find all the ways he could try to hurt [Carlos] because he was mad at him. So I think there was some racial stuff and some gay stuff all mixed in.

Ben and Gordon, who live in a rural area, decided to move their son Nathan from the local public school to a private school after he experienced racism in his school and the principal refused to intervene:

Originally, we sent [Nathan] to the local rural school district where we live. And he in Kindergarten had some horrible, racist things happen to him, and the school counselor called us in tears. We tried to get the school to intervene...in the end after three months and giving them all kinds of curriculum materials, the principal of the school who ironically was a straight man who had adopted transracially and his kids were being race-baited in the same school...He said that the faculty has decided to do nothing because if they talked about racial issues, it would only make it worse. And that's when we took our son out of the school, and we started sending him to the [name of private school].

Anthony described his primary concerns when his son Austin was in elementary school as being related to race and ethnicity, and how this affected his parenting decisions:

All of your questions have to do with LGBT issues – that was not really the dominant issue I was concerned about in [Austin's] early years. More of my concern had to do with

race and ethnicity. A lot of the efforts we put forward were more to do with making sure that [Austin] was moving forward in all kinds of communities – that he was seeing himself as being African-American with lots of examples. Of all the decisions that we made, that was very strong in our decision-making process – I mean, we moved back into the city because of that. The school that he went to, the church we ultimately went to was mixed-race, the dance that he did...everything he was involved in...was even more intentional about focusing on diversity, and not just diversity, but a strong African-American presence in our lives.

Theo is similarly proactive with his 3 year old son Cody about racial issues:

We talk about the color of his skin and my skin. So I try to have a really healthy dialogue between the two of us around what that means...I feel like it's that sort of awareness around issues of race that makes me more comfortable of raising him. I'm realistic that there will be issues. You know the first time he comes home and someone has hurt him, teased him, called him a name because of his race, it's going to hurt. I'm not sure how I'll handle that, but hopefully he and I are establishing enough of a strong relationship, an open relationship about talking about race that will handle it.

Theo described how he responded when Cody asked him for the first time why he did not have the same skin color as his father. Theo explained how he “normalized” skin color difference within the context of different kinds of families, including families with same sex parents:

The first time your child asks you that you're like, “Oh my goodness, what am I going to say?? Yeah, you and I have different colored skin. Yours is brown. Mine is white. [In] some families everybody has the same color skin. And in some families, people have different color skin. And in our family, you have brown skin, and I have white skin.

What makes a family isn't that we have the same color skin or not, it's the love that we share; the things that we do together so that's why I'm your daddy even though we have different colored skin. So trying to normalize for him that there is diversity in race and in family structures. We do the same thing around single parenting and gay issues... There are all kinds of families, and again what makes a family is more the love you share than whether you have a mommy and a daddy or two daddies.

Jonathan and Ely described a situation their then 5 year old daughter Linda had with a classmate who had two mothers. The situation illustrates how skin color can become a dominant issue for families with same sex parents:

Jonathan: In fact, I remember when [Linda] was in the 4/5s, which is pre-K – and you think, at a school like this, everybody who goes there is also going to be socially exemplary, but it just goes to show that no matter who are you on the outside, that you bring things with you that are not necessarily compatible. Somebody told her...

Ely: And that somebody has two moms!

Jonathan: That person told her that--

Ely: --“Your skin is dirty.” So [Linda] never said anything like, “I wish I had a mom and a dad,” or at least she never said it to us. But she does say, “I wish I was Caucasian.”

Victor and Philip, father of a 9 year old boy who is biracial, described a situation at a swimming pool that shows how the combination of being a same sex couple and having differences in skin color can draw attention, and how their son responded to the situation:

We have a son who is not Caucasian, but not easily definable that he is other than not-white. I have a niece who is gay and her partner is African-American, and I think maybe my sister and her husband who are Caucasian were at the pool. And there was this little girl who was there with her mother swimming around the pool and you can see her trying to go, “Whaaaaat's going on here?” I wasn't there, but at some point, she sort of said,

“What's up?” I don't [know] what it was, and I think [Ralph] answered the questions himself...he pointed us out as his dads. “These are my dads.” That was it. The little girl was like, “Oh.” She swam away. I mean if anyone it was probably her parents who had an issue.

In a similar situation, Anthony described how his son Austin was teased in elementary school about various aspects of his family:

In high school, and before that in middle school, it was virtually a non-issue...When he was younger in school, he did hit some bumps. There were kids who would not only tease him about that, but I think because of the issues of adoption and...if there were two moms, I don't know if it would be the same thing, but issues of a mom not being present. And issues of ethnicity – his dads being European-American. So there were a couple of issues that the kids who wanted to be cool could use as tools. I certainly don't want to say it was everyone, but there were a couple of kids that could be kind of brutal.

Upon his son's request, Anthony then spoke to his son's third grade class about how their family was unique. Anthony explained the fact that they were a transracial family with two dads in the context of the diversity among all families:

[Austin] was kind of a remarkable kid. I remember that something had happened, I think in the third grade...So he said, “Would you come into the classroom and talk?...so I sat the kids in a circle and...just started talking about the different things that were unique. I talked about, “In our house, we have two dads, we have a grandma, we have a dog, we have a cat...” These were young kids. And I said, “Some of you might notice that I'm also White and [Austin] is African-American,” but it could be that I'm with a woman who is African-American and we have a biracial child, and many families have that. We

know that, though that's not our situation...I was talking about the diversity of families in general...rather than, "This is different and we're the only ones who are different.?"

For Richard and Peter, the fact that their children would have to deal with the combination of having parents who are both gay and White was one reason they wanted to have more than one child. In this way their children would have each other as supports when they faced issues of being different:

Richard: I grew up in a home with a lot of kids and we're very very close – it's made such a difference in my life, a positive difference. My siblings have made our life more fulfilling. So from my perspective, particularly because of their unique situation, I thought they needed to have that.

Peter: They would have each other to balance it off of. Gay parents, White parents, I mean, it's nice that they have something just the two of them.

As the previous excerpts show, adopting a child of a different racial or ethnic background brings a number of questions and issues to the fore for gay fathers. Marcus, an African American father who adopted an African American child with his White partner described same sex parents adopting children of color as a significant "social phenomenon":

It's no longer a surprise to see a gay White couple with their Black child with them. In fact, I know one gay White couple who are French. One is from Belgium and the other is from France. They adopted two Black boys when they were infants. And those boys grew up speaking French and learned English as a second language. And we became friends and I thought it was hysterical – they have French names and they speak the most beautiful Parisian French and they are as black as tar. They are beautiful black boys and I think it's really going to shake up the social status of this country when those kids come of age. As our son gets comfortable being around sexual minorities, I think these other

kids are going to be the same way and hopefully that will have a positive impact on how kids are seen in America.

### **Summary**

Race, ethnicity, and skin color were factors for more than a few fathers in choosing which child they would adopt. Many of the White fathers who did not want to adopt a child of a different race were concerned that a tranracially adopted child would experience additional difficulties on top of challenges related to having gay fathers. For some of these fathers it was important for them that their child look similar to them. In contrast, some White fathers were open to adopting a child of color and facing any issues related to race that may arise. For some fathers being White and having an African-American child often drew scrutiny in social settings. Both White and non-White fathers with children of color reported that their children at times experienced difficulties with their peers more for racial reasons than for having gay dads. A number of these fathers said that being gay men helped them to be more sensitive to their child's needs, questions, and struggles being a racial minority.

## CHAPTER XII

### DISCUSSION

#### Introduction

The twenty poignant and diverse stories presented in this dissertation provide a glimpse of how gay adoptive fathers experience parenthood. The fathers in this study illuminate social landscapes dotted with evolving attitudes towards gay parenting, structural inequities against LGBT people, and deep-seated ideologies about gender, sexuality and family. To a large extent the fathers live their lives in ways that on the surface are not constrained by heteronormative standards. At the same time, they and their children face unique issues as families headed by gay men. Shane, father of three boys, echoes the sentiments of many of the fathers in this study:

Our lives are full, busy, and they can be hectic having kids, but we don't feel overly challenged or that we have a tremendous amount that we need to overcome as a same sex couple. There are things that are unique and there are things that we have to contend with that others do not, but we're doing it and living our lives and I feel like in some ways we're pioneers because there aren't too many dad-dad couples out there. I think the numbers will increase with time, but in some ways, we're the first. It can be exciting and it can be unnerving and it's just a reality.

Much of the research on families headed by same sex parents has focused on the "impacts" same sex parents have on children's social, emotional, and psychological adjustment and the degree to which being raised by same sex parents is similar to being raised by heterosexual parents. The findings of this dissertation move beyond questions about whether gay fathers are similar or different to heterosexual parents and dive into the heart of being with difference and the meanings difference has for gay fathers, their children, and those around them.

This dissertation contributes to several emerging areas of research on families headed by same sex parents. The fathers in this study give us a picture of the social fabric of heteronormativity and how living in heteronormative environments affects them socially and emotionally. At the same time, they give us an intimate look inwards at their relationships with their children, their partners, and others in their lives. Fathers describe both their strengths and struggles as they interact with social institutions, policies and laws, members of their communities, and their identities as parents and as gay men. Like gay fathers in previous qualitative studies (Lewin, 2009; Stacey, 2006; Mallon, 2004), the fathers in this study contribute rich information about how social contexts impact everyday life. Their stories illustrate how dominant social structures become enacted, embodied, reinforced, and challenged in a parent's hopes and fears raising his child in a heteronormative world.

### **The Possibilities of Parenting as Gay Men**

Notwithstanding the social pressures to have children, previous research suggests that one of the most important qualities gay and lesbian parents bring to parenting is the fact that they made a deliberate choice to become parents, a choice that was fueled by a strong desire to raise children (Boyer, 2007; Matthews & Cramer, 2005). Many of the fathers in this study knew for much of their lives that they wanted to parent, while some seriously considered parenting only after meeting their partner. Their journeys contribute to a growing area of research on the paths and decision making processes for gay men choosing to parent through adoption and surrogacy (Gianino, 2008; Goldberg, Downing, & Moyer, 2012). Recent work has examined gay men's desire to parent and factors that support and inhibit gay men from pursuing this wish (Riskind & Patterson, 2010). The men in this study followed and actualized their parenting desires, knowing that they live in a world where many people may not accept them and their children.

The findings of this study contribute to an important area of research on how expectations and aspirations about parenting are socially constructed (Chabot & Ames, 2004; Stacey, 2006). Heterosexuality brings opportunities and rights that are often taken for granted. This heterosexual privilege comes in many forms: being allowed to get married; showing affection in public without fear of repercussion; and not having your sexuality become a point of scrutiny or curiosity. This privilege also comes in the form of having one's desires mirrored by others (Kiersky, 2001) and being encouraged to imagine possibilities for one's life. The environments and communities in which the men in this study recognized their wish to parent were influential in their parenting journeys. The men created their families in a society dominated by the beliefs that all children need a mother, that gay men cannot and should not be parents, and that homosexuality is morally wrong. Like fathers in previous studies (Goldberg et al., 2012; Rabun & Oswald, 2009), the fathers saw their journeys towards parenthood as part of their normative life course trajectories. At the same time, they lived in environments where being gay and being a parent were deemed incongruent. Some of the men believed for much of their lives that it would not be possible to parent as an openly gay man and that being gay and being a parent were somehow antithetical; others had no doubts about the possibility of parenting as gay men. Their ideas about parenting as gay men were largely shaped by their coming out experiences, messages they told themselves and were told by others about what it means to be gay, the images they saw or did not see in their immediate environments, and laws and policies concerning same sex parenting in their places of residence. While most of the fathers in this study live in large metropolitan areas with sizable LGBT populations and community resources, state laws and adoption practices both provided and restricted opportunities to parent and influenced how the men related to their desires and aspirations.

### **Interacting with Formal Systems: The Visibility and Invisibility of Gay Parents**

Building on what previous authors have highlighted (Dodd, 2008; Riggs, 2006), the fathers in this study bring to life the pressures LGBT people experience interacting with institutions and systems dominated by heteronormative ideologies. Interacting with formal institutions requires becoming more visible in the world as a family with gay parents. With this visibility come risks, challenges, opportunities, and benefits. Disclosure breaks silence which can then lead to feeling more integrated as a person and within one's environment. At the same time, disclosure in homophobic and heterosexist environments requires taking emotional, psychological, and even physical risks. Though very few fathers spoke about situations in the adoption system and in schools where they or their children faced physical risks, they were vigilant about the emotional and social consequences of disclosing information about their families. How fathers and their children navigated these kinds of decisions varied across families and situations. Situations ranged from deciding what to say about their households in an adoption home study; whether or not to be open as a gay couple in the adoption process; assessing whether a school would be an accepting environment; and helping their child deal with questions at school about his family.

#### **Navigating the adoption process**

Consistent with findings from previous research (Downing et al., 2009; Gianino, 2008; Mallon, 2004), many of the fathers experienced challenges and unpredictability in the adoption process as gay men. While some fathers worked with adoption professionals who advocated for same sex parenting, many regularly encountered heteronormative biases and practices in the adoption system. These include lack of response to their queries about becoming a parent, heterosexist language on paperwork, blatantly homophobic and heterosexist judges in courts, and

discriminatory state and local laws. Many fathers maintained some degree of control over the adoption process by finding and partnering with supportive people in the system. Like gay fathers in earlier studies (Gianino, 2008; Mallon, 2004), this group of fathers were resourceful and assertive in finding adoption professionals who were supportive, knowledgeable and strategic in helping them successfully adopt children as openly gay men. At the same time, a system as large, complicated and unwieldy as the adoption system brought both expected and unexpected encounters with heteronormative attitudes and practices. A number of the men, while aggressively pursuing their goal of adopting a child, also wondered whether as gay men they would be picked to be a child's adoptive parents. It should be noted that living in large urban environments provided the men with a number of adoption options. Recent studies have documented the challenges of lesbian and gay parents in small metropolitan areas (Kinkler & Goldberg, 2011).

While all parents raise their children in a constantly changing society, being at the center of moral and political debates about same sex parenting brings this shifting social, political, and ideological landscape front and center for the families in this study. As I write this, some states are legalizing same sex marriage while others are passing referendums restricting and even eliminating rights for LGBT people. Debates are raging among political candidates about the morality of LGBT people and their ability to parent children. Attitudes towards sexual minorities are becoming more accepting in some areas and more discriminatory and hateful in others. While experiencing challenges as gay men in the adoption process, all of the men in this study chose adoption routes that were consistent with their values and supported their parenting aspirations.

### **Allowing two men to adopt jointly**

Many of the couples in this study were not permitted to adopt their children jointly. While some felt the need to conceal their same sex relationship during the adoption process, other couples were not willing to hide the fact that they were a gay couple and insisted on being open throughout the adoption process. As prospective adoptive parents, at every juncture the men needed to balance what they could gain and what they could lose by making certain choices concerning disclosure. Having to make these kinds of ethical and emotional trade-offs is illustrative of the burdens that heteronormatively constructed institutions like the adoption system places on those who do not fit within their moral and ideological boundaries. Being open as a gay couple is not merely about disclosing a piece of information, but is about being oneself and expressing one's desire to enter a parenting journey as a gay man. The fact that some of the men had to consider not being open is a penalty imposed on them for being gay by a system shaped by heteronormative ideologies. Harking back to Jeremy's story, there is a glaring contrast between the event of two men choosing to adopt a child and having one's partner, the person whom you love and with whom you are creating a family, try to look like a non-intimate household member in a photograph. The love Jeremy feels for his partner and son was coupled with fearing the repercussions of showing this love too openly. There is an irony here being in the closet while performing the public act of adopting a child from the state.

What is threatening about permitting same sex couples to adopt jointly? Becoming a parent for some members of society is part of what Fivush (2009) calls a life script, a "'canonical cultural biography' of what a typical life looks like" (p. 93). Life scripts are both normative and prescriptive. Thus, if one is heterosexual it is normal and expected that one becomes a parent. Heterosexuals need not consider whether to reveal their sexual orientation to an adoption social

worker or a family court judge. Non-heterosexuals however do not have this “freedom not to speak, to be silent, the freedom to assume shared knowledge that comes from a position of power” (Fivush, 2009, p.94). Gay men must decide if and when to “come out” against a backdrop where becoming a parent is not seen as part of their life script. When Ben and Gordon were denied by then Governor of Texas George W. Bush the right to have both their names on their son’s birth certificate, they decided not to challenge the state because they feared that the adoption could be reversed. The visibility and attention that challenging the state would bring was a threat to their family’s safety and stability. The silence imposed by heteronormative biases was a double whammy for Ben and Gordon and their family. On the one hand, heightened attention on them was motivated by a desire to render them invisible. Challenging this bias, however, required a level of visibility that could undermine their family’s existence.

Even though the end results of joint adoption and second parent adoption are the same (both men are the legal adoptive parents of the child with the same rights and responsibilities), joint adoption breaks the silence on a number of levels. First, allowing Ben and Gordon to adopt a child together sanctions their intimate relationship, which may be seen as endorsing gay male sexuality. Second, joint adoption recognizes and honors Ben and Gordon’s desire to create a family within the context of an openly gay relationship, which decenters the heterosexual nuclear family as the gold standard. Finally, joint adoption makes public the fact that a child will be raised by one or two men, thus upending conventional notions that a child needs both a female mother and a male father. I use the word public because LGBT people have been raising children for centuries, as parents who had children biologically while in a heterosexual relationship and then later came out as LGBT and also as parental figures who may not be legally recognized.

### **The power of presence**

Dunne (2000), in an early qualitative study on lesbian mothers, examined how the visibility of lesbian parents in mainstream society prompted others to examine their beliefs about parenting and family. This dissertation is one of the first studies to actively explore how gay fathers influence the environments of which they are a part. Nowhere was this more apparent than in their children's schools. Contrary to the belief that gay men adopting children are putting children at risk, the fathers in this study exhibited strength and sensitivity in being with their children as they confronted the difficulties of living within heteronormative environments. Like same sex families in previous studies (Crowl, Ahn, & Baker; 2008; Lindsay et al., 2006; Mercier & Harold, 2003; Ray & Gregory, 2001; Vivien, 2001), all of the fathers were actively involved in finding schools where their children would feel safe and in addressing any problems they or their children encountered related to being an adoptive family with gay fathers.

While most parents are protective of their children, the fathers in this study, like other same sex parents, had a heightened awareness of their children's safety and security as a child of gay parents. Though fathers were willing to accept a certain amount of uncertainty in people's attitudes and behaviors towards them as gay men, they were not willing to do so when it came to their children. Fathers were assertive with school personnel in advocating for the ways they wanted their families to be treated. Many of the children wanted their peers to know about their families and asked their fathers to speak to their peers. Children of all ages faced challenges dealing with questions about their family, challenges they were able to effectively handle with the constant support of their parents. A number of fathers said that, while they generally had positive experiences as gay parents in their children's schools, they also encountered instances of

homophobia from teachers and students. While many got support after they confronted a teacher about a homophobic or heterosexist incident, some did not. Developing lasting relationships in the schools was a priority for the fathers. These relationships did not eliminate homophobic or heterosexist incidents, but they provided a foundation and environment from which to grow.

The fathers in this study illuminate the power of one's presence in shifting attitudes and practices in one's community. Through their examples, they show how presence means being visible and being heard. The fathers felt that through their presence they and their children had a positive influence on those around them and the environments of which they were a part. They saw themselves and their families as part of a larger picture of diverse students and diverse families. While many fathers did not see their decision to parent as a political statement, they placed their experiences as parents and as a family within a societal context and were conscious of how their presence contributed to a larger "cause" in society.

### **Parent-Child Relationships: Communication, Connection, and Cohesion**

There has been little research on intimacy, relationships, and attachments in gay father families (Patterson, 2008). This dissertation builds on recent work that spotlights the influences of family processes rather than family structure in same sex families (Erich, Leung, & Kindle, 2005; Matthews & Cramer, 2005; Perlesz et al., 2006; Ryan, 2007). Focusing on whether gay fathers "produce" gay children has distracted both proponents and opponents of gay parents from more pressing questions about the needs children of gay fathers have at various developmental stages and the ways fathers address these needs (Armesto, 2002). By explicitly using a relational framework, this dissertation moves away from narrow questions about if and how a gay man's sexual orientation may affect his children's well-being to a broader focus on parent-child relationships and family dynamics in gay father families. This dissertation is one of few studies

that combine a relational framework with a social constructionist perspective, thus providing a useful theoretical approach for further studies on same sex families.

The findings of this study begin to address questions about gay and lesbian families posed by previous researchers (Meezan & Rauch, 2005; Tasker & Patterson, 2007) about quality of parental relationships, communication processes among family members, and the strengths and resiliencies parents and children develop to cope with stressors. Kyle vividly describes how what he feels in his relationships with his children is similar to what other parents feel:

In terms of relationships, the big picture disappears, as you are immersed in the little picture, and the little picture has a million pixels every day, and it's really hard to see beyond that. Mostly I think what we both feel is tired, worried, hopeful, excited, and just exactly what any parents who are deeply involved with their kids feel.

At the same time, the fathers in this study paint a rich picture of how they as gay fathers nurture communication processes and emotional bonds with their children as they cope with living in heteronormative environments. Like previous researchers (Goldberg, 2007; Lindsay et al., 2006; Mallon, 2004), in this dissertation I have been steadfast on maintaining a dual focus on families' strengths and struggles. The fathers reveal how their strengths as parents and as families often arise from their struggles.

### **Anticipating a wider world**

Prior to this study there has been no research on how gay fathers think about their children's futures and how their hopes and concerns are influenced by their experiences as gay men. One of the strengths of this study is that the sample contains fathers with children from a wide range of ages, from infancy through young adulthood. Fathers were frequently reminded in their day to day experiences that there are places in the world where they and their family would

not be accepted. Like many parents, gay fathers with infants and younger children anticipate the challenges their children may face as they grow and expand into new social groups, participate in new activities, and enter broader environments. This issue is particularly significant for gay men, however, because as their child interacts with a wider social world, they and their children become more visible as a family that is different from the norm.

Being different from the norm took different forms as children got older. Consequently, fathers needed to adjust the ways they interacted with their children around difference. By and large, the fathers in this study were able and willing to engage with their children around complex issues related to adoption, sexuality, and family at different developmental stages of their children's lives. Fathers of transracially adopted children additionally had to navigate the complicated terrain of being racial minorities. For toddlers and early elementary school age children, being different was mostly about not having a mother. In the late elementary school years, having two dads and being adopted became more prominent. As children approached their middle school years, they and others became more cognizant of having gay dads. Having gay parents begins to take center stage as the youth and their peers become more aware of sexuality. As sexuality becomes a topic in youth's social interactions, they must begin to negotiate a world of compulsory heterosexuality. These results suggest that it is important to explore the experiences of children of gay fathers who are transitioning from late elementary school into middle school. Longitudinal studies on children of gay adoptive fathers, similar to longitudinal studies on children of lesbian mothers (Gartrell & Bos, 2010) are also needed.

### **It's about communication**

The fathers in this study add to what we know about how experiences as sexual minorities help same sex adoptive parents support their children with issues related to being

adopted (Mallon, 2004; Matthews & Cramer, 2005). Leung, Erich, and Kanenberg (2005) found that gay and lesbian adoptive parents not only provide viable and healthy adoptive family environments, but also may offer unique strengths to adopted children with special needs. Professional wisdom in the adoption field claims that it is not the experiences of adoption that can be damaging, but rather the “veil of secrecy” surrounding adoption and the “paucity of information” given to adoption triad members about their potential challenges as a family (Javier et al., 2007, p. 12). The fathers in this study by and large work to remove this veil of secrecy about their child’s adoption by taking incremental steps to dialogue with their children around these issues and anticipating and planning for future challenges their children may face. The challenges an adoptive family faces are likely compounded when the adoptive parents are gay or lesbian (Gianino, 2008). Like fathers in previous studies (Gianino, Goldberg, & Lewis, 2009; Mallon, 2004), for this group of fathers issues related to adoption and having same sex parents were “overlapping and intertwined” (Gianino, Goldberg, & Lewis, 2009, p. 219).

Previous research shows that by and large gay and lesbian adoptive parents ensure the security of their family members and function effectively as part of society (Erich, Leung, Kindle, & Carter, 2005). The fathers in this study give us a window into how they provide this security. Fathers could not predict the many types of situations they and their children would face nor how their children would handle speaking to others about their families. Through their communication practices, the fathers show how facing the challenges of being different in heteronormative environments can become a source of strength and cohesiveness for their families. Open communication about difficult matters was “normal and natural” for a number of the families. Speaking about conversations he has with his three children about the challenges they face as an adoptive family with two fathers, Shane said:

We weave it into the fabric of our daily lives. It's just a part of living. Kids bring up things that are challenging for any parent and things that they question. We've been through so many challenges as foster parents, as a couple – there are so many things...I guess it's just part of who we are – it's normal and natural for us.

The words “normal” and “natural” are often used disparagingly to claim that families with same sex parents are inferior to families with heterosexual parents because they deviate from the heterosexual nuclear family model. It is noteworthy that gay fathers like Shane are reclaiming these words to describe what they do and who they are as parents and as families.

Findings from numerous studies (see Chapter 3) confirm that children raised by gay and lesbian parents are well adjusted socially and psychologically, have strong self-esteem, develop healthy relationships with family and peers, and function well in school. While the goal of this dissertation was not to investigate or evaluate the well-being of children of gay fathers, what fathers shared about their children expands our understanding and appreciation for young people who feel and are perceived to be different. The fathers remind us that the young people they are raising need to be seen not as passive victims, but as active agents in shaping their social worlds (Hines & Merdinger, 2005; Pinkerton & Dolan, 2007). Similar to parents in a previous study on gay and lesbian adoptive families (Ryan, 2007), the fathers in this study identified many of the strengths their children exhibit in managing heteronormative environments. The findings of this study contribute to research on disclosure practices of adopted kids raised by gay and lesbian parents (Gianino, Goldberg, and Lewis, 2009) and the many ways children and adolescents raised by same sex parents develop peer relationships and build their social networks (Gershon et al., 1999; Ray & Gregory, 2001; Rivers et al., 2008).

The interactions their children had in school drew fathers into deeper relationships with their children and further out into their communities. Fathers were open to learning from their children as they modeled and guided them in relating to others. The ways their children involved their fathers in building their community in their schools shows their strong emotional connections with their parents and the ways they create a complex web of relationships between themselves, their parents, other family members, peers, and other adults in their communities (Perlesz et al., 2006). At times, the fathers, like many parents, projected their anxieties and fears about difference onto their children. Many of the fathers, like many gay men, have faced stigma and discrimination in their lives, which elevated their concerns about what their children may experience in the world as they come out as a child with two dads. Fathers, however, soon realized that they and their children handled difference differently. For example, for Shane's son having two dads is "his normal" and thus being open with others is necessary and perhaps not that monumental for him. This raises important questions about the meanings disclosure has for children who have grown up with same sex parents for most of their lives (Gianino, Goldberg, & Lewis, 2009).

As I reflect on the fathers' stories about their relationships with their children, I am reminded of the importance of voice and breaking the silence. Having gone through their own challenges, growth and realizations as gay men, it was very important for fathers to communicate openly with their children, as painful as this may have been at times. What grounds this group of fathers parenting in what can be tumultuous waters are the deep connections they create with their children, relationships that they grow through self-reflection, mindfulness, and constant communication. For lasting relationships are built not through a wish or a feeling, but through the doing of everyday interactions with another human being. As Miguel said, "it's so important

to talk and talk.” For in the talking and naming of one’s experiences comes the possibility of change and transformation. This was vividly illustrated by Josh as he tearfully described his fears that his son Warren would go into the closet about his family when he went to college:

I created a small photo album with pictures from his birth all the way to graduation...I didn’t want him to forget about us. I didn’t want him to sweep us under the table with his friends and roommates. And I also was thinking this might help ground him if he’s struggling at some point. Maybe picking it up would help ground him...When we left that last day I hid it so that he would discover it. [Warren] told me that friends would pick it up. He never announced that he had two gay dads. It wasn’t like he announced to the world that he had two gay dads, but people did pick the photo album up and were touched and moved by it, and they asked questions so, I think it served the purpose that I was hoping it would.

Like Josh’s story, the findings of this dissertation lay groundwork for further research on the ways gay fathers through their parenting practices foster connections, resiliencies, and security in their families.

### **Relationships in the Community: Everyday Reminders of Heteronormativity**

Little research exists about the day to day experiences of gay fathers in public settings. One of the powers of qualitative research is that it uncovers the depth, richness, and complexities of human experience (Patton, 2002). The stories in this dissertation extend beyond questions about whether the fathers in this study are the same or different from heterosexual parents (Hicks, 2005; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001;) and reveal an intricate picture of their day to day experiences at home and on the street as they parent their children. In this way, the findings of this study offer what Weston (1995) calls “street theorizing”:

Most of us theorize a fair amount of the time as we go about the business of living our lives, whether that living involves writing books or painting houses or changing bedpans. We ask how and why the world works as it works, why it does or doesn't change...The question then becomes: What *kind* of theory do "we" want to do?...Straight theorizing is the one most folks recognize and name as theory. It comes complete with references to European philosophers, fancy footnotes, and words that haven't yet made it into my students' college dictionaries...Street theorizing is the activity that engages people as they go about their business...scholars in queer studies need to do more work that bridges the two. (p. 348)

The many situations fathers described were on the surface ordinary social encounters—walking down the street, sitting in a café, waiting in line at an airport, going to the doctor, and visiting their child's school. The fabric of these social spaces is made up of statements, questions, looks, messages, decisions, expectations, and surprises. The reactions and responses fathers encountered, however, were complex, animated, and often unpredictable. From sidewalk to airport, hospital to playground, classroom to café, gay fathers and their children drew attention. This attention came in different forms - curiosity, affirmation, scrutiny, surprise, disapproval - and with a variety of messages about gender, sexuality, and family. Fathers were reminded of heteronormativity not just in what they saw and heard, but also in not seeing themselves and their families reflected in their surroundings. In the spirit of Berger and Luckmann (1966), the numerous examples they provide show that the textures of these social spaces are not pre-existing, but are rather co-constructed by each of them with different people in various situations and time periods. Unlike encounters that occur within the confines of social institutions like courts, adoption agencies, and schools, many of these unplanned spontaneous

encounters were quick and often slippery. Just when I thought that I had a “neat” way to frame talking about these situations, I heard another detail, another wrinkle that made the social space “messy” again. I came to realize that gay fathers and their families face a mess of norms, attitudes, and ideologies on an almost daily basis.

The findings of this dissertation contribute to previous work on the burdens same sex parents often feel having to justify themselves and their families (Bos, Van Balen, & Van den Boom, 2004). The fathers in this study often encountered people who assumed they were heterosexual, had a wife, and/or that their child had a female mother. In these situations they had to decide whether or not to correct others’ assumptions about them and their family. Fathers frequently encountered situations in which other people, not seeing a woman, expressed concern or even alarm for their children’s well-being. The meanings of woman and man are constructed here in relation to what children need to be safe in the world, a heteronormative discourse that is often perpetuated in child welfare through the narrative of the “best interests of the child” (Riggs, 2006). Deciding how to handle these unplanned and often uninvited encounters was at times a minor annoyance and at other times very unsettling. Because these social encounters were pervasive, many fathers faced the challenge of modeling honesty and pride, while trying to normalize their experiences as a family for themselves and for their children. Consequently, the ordinariness of raising their children was often punctuated by reminders of a dominant heterosexual order. Their stories point to that emotional space where a person does not feel different, deviant, or special and then through a routine yet unexpected social interaction becomes acutely aware that he may not “fit in.” In that moment he becomes visible and this visibility then dominates the situation. The fathers went into these social encounters experiencing themselves as parents but were responded, reacted, and spoken to as someone else

other than their children's parents. People often did not see a parent, but rather a (gay) man with a child and/or a child without a woman. The combination of how fathers experience themselves in the world and how their worlds see them at times reinforced and other times negated their own felt sense of being a parent.

Marginalized groups whose lives are considered "other" and deviating from the norm are frequently told by mainstream dominant groups not to talk about themselves (Roy-Chowdhury, 2010). Silence, or the act of silencing, constitutes a loss of power. Gay men currently and historically have had to hide their sexuality, relationships and lives (Seidman et al., 1999). Choosing to be silent in a social interaction, however, can also be an act of exerting power (Roy-Chowdhury, 2010). A person who is considered deviant or different often feels the pressure to explain himself, whereas someone who conforms to social expectations has the freedom to remain silent because he represents and enacts what is socially, culturally, and morally valued. A gay father choosing not to explain his relationship with his partner and child thus can be an act of resistance (Roy-Chowdhury, 2010) against a societal or ideological imperative that asks those who do not fit in a heterosexual order to justify themselves. Being silent thus can short circuit an interaction that reproduces dominant social norms. Nonetheless, as the stories in this dissertation reveal, having to make these kinds of decisions places emotional burdens on gay fathers as they shoulder the weight of homophobia and heterosexism to protect their child.

### **Relationships to Gender: The Dominance of Motherhood**

Recent empirical studies on gay fathers (Schacher, Auerbach, & Silverstein, 2005; Stacey, 2006) and lesbian mothers (Ben-Ari & Livni, 2006; Brown & Perlesz, 2007; Dalton & Bielby, 2000) and theoretical work (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010; Hicks, 2008) show how gender ideologies and parenting intersect in the lives of same sex families. The findings in this study

build on this body of work by revealing how gay fathers both reproduce and transform notions of fatherhood and motherhood. It is ironic (or perhaps not) that much of this paper about gay fathers is focused on mothers, mothering, and motherhood. Is it that fatherhood can only be defined in reference to motherhood? The ways in which fathers encountered the absence of a female mother in their daily lives shows what Miall and March (2003) call an “intensive mothering ideology [that] exists within the larger community, despite significant changes in women’s other roles, and the nature and diversity of family forms” (p. 30).

### **Challenging ideologies of mothering**

Many of the men in this study live in environments where people tolerate, accept, and even celebrate being gay, but find it difficult to digest the idea of parenting without a woman. The fathers’ experiences illustrate how norms of sexuality and gender intertwine and that heteronormativity is at times more about maintaining gender norms than about preserving heterosexuality. The assumption that heterosexuality is the only normal sexuality brings with it gender roles and scripts. A man choosing to parent without a woman violates the terms of these scripts. Previous researchers have suggested that studies are needed that do not view gender and sexuality as variables to be isolated and tested, but rather can uncover how they are socially constructed (Gabb, 2004; Hicks, 2008; Biblarz & Stacey, 2010). The findings of this study reveal how meanings of gender get enacted on multiple levels for gay fathers.

While a number of the fathers discounted or rejected the need to have a child biologically, many of them chose to raise a child from birth. Some studies suggest that men have an innate desire to become fathers in order to pass on one’s genes, while women have an innate desire to become mothers in order to rear children and parent (Miall & March, 2003). This helps explain why gay men choosing to adopt children may be surprising and unsettling to some; for

here are men choosing to become fathers to children with whom they are not biologically related. Thus, their desire to be fathers is about child rearing and developing an emotional bond with a child and not about passing on a genetic heritage. In this way, the fathers in this study, particularly those who chose to adopt newborns, veer into a territory traditionally reserved for women.

Mothering also appeared in the ways fathers thought and spoke about their parenting. While knowing that they provide their children with care and nurturing, fathers also had concerns at various points in their children's lives about their child not having a mother. While some fathers of newborns questioned whether two men could parent a baby without a woman, all of them found that in fact they could. Just as some people in the fathers' lives came to realize their strengths as parents once they saw them in action, fathers also began to question their assumptions about their capabilities when they saw themselves in action. The actual experience of parenting gave fathers and those around them opportunities to investigate and challenge notions about gender and parenting they had constructed.

The fathers gave numerous examples of how "mommy" spontaneously appeared in their children's language, play, and social interactions, and the ways fathers made sense of and responded to their children's statements and questions. Fathers sometimes used biological parenting and pregnancy as anchor points from which to describe and make sense of their own experiences as gay adoptive parents. This raises questions about what it is like to parent and be a family in social contexts and communities where biological relationships are often a gold standard by which to evaluate the depth, legitimacy, and value of relationships, what Riggs (2006) has called a developmentalist discourse. Mothering ideologies also worked in the men's

favor. Some fathers came to realize that birth mothers chose them to be their child's adoptive parents because they were men and thus would not usurp her role as the mother of the child.

### **Transforming (queering?) social roles**

What is it about gender that gets “shaken up” by the existence of gay fathers – gender identity? gender roles? norms of masculinity and femininity? The fathers' experiences as men raising children without a female primary parent raise questions about the extent to which mothers and fathers are different in “nature”. What is nurturing and what purportedly makes women “better nurturers than men? While the heteronormative gaze highlights who the fathers *are (or are not)*, what stands out loud and clear from their stories is what they *do* as parents. Perhaps this is what Brad, a father of two young teenagers, meant when he explained that he and his partner are both “the mother” for their children by virtue of what they do for them. Fathers like Brad contribute important information about how parenting by gay men and lesbians transforms social roles. While reproducing ideologies of mothering the fathers reconfigure mothering as an institution. Oswald et al. (2005) explain that heteronormativity maintains three pairs of binary opposites: “real” males and “real” females versus gender deviants, “natural” sexuality versus “unnatural” sexuality, and “genuine” families versus “pseudo” families. Brad and the other fathers in this study expand our understanding of heteronormative beliefs about “real” mothers and “real” fathers.

There has been little in depth research on how gay fathers establish parenting roles and the meanings these roles have for them. The findings of this study begin to shed light on this important and intriguing area. The couples in this study attributed a number of factors to how roles and responsibilities emerged in their households, many of which may be common to heterosexual couples. These factors included their individual personalities; practical/logistical

issues like flexibility in work schedules; their preferences and abilities for doing different tasks; and their thoughts and feelings about childcare. In describing their different roles as parents, fathers made strikingly clear demarcations between what they saw as maternal and paternal parenting roles. Most of the fathers used the language of “traditional” and “nontraditional” in speaking about these roles. Like some lesbian mothers (Perlesz et al., 2006), the fathers in this study challenge institutionalized “scripts” of mother/father and male/female configurations in the family while incorporating dominant gender-based scripts about provider and caregiving roles.

Like previous qualitative studies (Dalton & Bielby, 2000; Goldberg, 2007), the findings of this dissertation show how expanding our view of gender can help us better understand how heteronormativity shapes and influences the experiences of gay and lesbian parents and their children. In so doing, the social, cultural, and institutional forces that shape the meanings of gender can be surfaced. Gender and sexuality become liberated from being merely defining characteristics to being shifting signposts pointing to how human experience is socially organized. According to Plummer (2005), “‘queer’ brings with it a radical deconstruction of all conventional categories of sexuality and gender. It questions all of the work of gender and sexuality in the modern world (and all worlds)” (p. 359). Do the fathers in this study actively queer gender through their parenting practices and the meanings they attribute to these practices? Or does their very existence as parents queer gender? In contrast, Lewin (2009), in her study on gay adoptive fathers, argues that gay identity need not always be experienced and formulated in opposition or in contrast to dominant norms and that doing so limits and misrepresents the real lives of LGBT people. These questions are subjects for continued research.

### **Relationships to Identities: What's Being Gay (Not) Got to Do with Being a Parent?**

The findings of this study add to an emerging area of research on relationships between gay identity and parenting for gay fathers (Armesto & Shapiro, 2011; Berkowitz & Marsiglio, 2007; Tornello, Farr, & Patterson, 2011). Throughout this study I was curious about whether being a parent affects fathers' feelings of authenticity as gay men in the world. While the findings do not directly answer this question, they suggest new ways of thinking about the construction of identities for gay parents.

#### **Decentering gayness**

Asked what it was like for them to parent as gay men, many fathers replied that they were first and foremost a parent and that what they experienced was no different from what other (i.e. heterosexual) parents experienced. For example, Victor, who adopted his son in 2002, said: "I don't think it has any difference...being a gay man than being a straight man when you're a parent." His partner Philip added: "I'm never sort of aware of parenting as a gay man. I'm just being a parent." While Victor and Philip and many of the other fathers were clear that they did not want to be pegged by me or society as "gay parents", the examples in the previous chapters reveal how being gay can at times be very present in their day to day lives. In the interviews, fathers at times kept gayness in the foreground, and at times they let it move into the background. This ebb and flow parallels what they experience in everyday life. At certain times being gay becomes prominent; other times being gay recedes. In some situations, fathers actively bring the fact that they are gay men to the fore; in other instances, they actively downplay their identities as gay men.

This flow between figure and ground happens on multiple levels in this study: fathers' everyday lives, how fathers talk about their experiences (text), and the text analysis process

(Ben-Ari & Enosh, 2011). Being in this ebb and flow presented many challenges in interviewing these fathers. One of the benefits of research, and qualitative research more specifically, is that it can challenge the researcher's preconceived notions and sensitizing concepts (Charmaz, 2008b). Choosing to use the label "gay adoptive father" in my recruitment flyer and consent form reflected my preconceived notion that "gayness" would be in the foreground of the participants' lives. My decision to center homosexuality or gayness gave fathers an opportunity to paint a more complex picture of what was central to their lives. Despite prevailing messages that paint being a gay man and being a parent as mutually exclusive, the fathers in this study by and large do not live any kind of double life as parent and as gay man; in contrast, they have integrated these identities. They illustrate what Seidman, Meeks, and Traschen (1999) call life "beyond the closet" for some individuals in America who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. Fathers describe the ways they both "'normalized' (subjectively accepted) and 'routinized' (socially integrated) their homosexuality" (Seidman et al., 1999, p. 11):

Normalization and routinization prompt individuals to 'decenter' or marginalize homosexuality as a basis of personal identity...if the conditions of the closet often compel individuals to make their homosexuality into a primary self-identity, normalization gives individuals the latitude to define its relation to identity, and many individuals seem to be choosing to decenter it. (Seidman et al., 1999, p. 28-29)

While I both deliberately and inadvertently made being gay central in the interview process, fathers at various points de-centered their homosexuality. Different aspects of their experiences as parents intertwined with and were at times more prominent than being gay: man, father, parent, White person raising a Black child, not being a woman, adoptive parent. Issues related to race, ethnicity, and skin color were prominent for many of the fathers who transracially

adopted. Cole (2009), writing about the concept of intersectionality in social sciences, states that social scientists, and I would argue practitioners, “tend to see certain identities as totalizing and determinative, as trumping all others” (p. 175). For this group of parents, different identities co-exist and trump each other at different times revealing how the ways identity categories are animated by one’s in the moment interpersonal and emotional experiences. The fact that many of the fathers in this study so fluidly move between these markers of their identities may reflect their own comfort levels with being gay. They spent many years prior to parenthood grappling with the issues and complexities of being a gay man in a heteronormative world. Also, many of the fathers live in dynamic and diverse communities which support being with the complexities of multiple differences and that promote a pluralistic outlook on community life.

### **Parenting and social status**

The findings of this study contribute to previous ethnographic work on the communities and affiliations of gay fathers (Stacey, 2006). Like other new parents, many of the fathers experienced changes in their social lives as a result of becoming parents. Such changes are common to most parents, but for some fathers these shifts in “lifestyle” also signified changes in the ways they envisioned and constructed their lives as gay men. Little research exists on how becoming parents affects gay men’s relationships with their own families of origin. In becoming parents, the fathers in this study faced a wide array of reactions from celebration to skepticism to strong disapproval from family members. The stories fathers shared reveal the depth of their connection with their own parents and how becoming parents shifted a number of fathers’ relationships with their families. This is particularly meaningful for the fathers that had contentious and unsupportive relationships with their parents and siblings when they came out as gay men. The decision to adopt a child encouraged some fathers to become more open about

themselves with their families. Wanting an honest and respectful relationship with their children prompted them to make difficult decisions when it came to relating to their families of origin. Some drew closer to their families while others created more distance from them. For some fathers, becoming parents changed how their families of origin responded to them as gay men and as gay couples.

Becoming parents shifted the men's relationship with and identification to both gay and heterosexual communities. Many of them saw themselves as now part of a parenting community, which raises further questions: How does becoming parents influence the social status of gay men in society? Does becoming a parent lead to a greater acceptance of homosexuality, particularly gay male sexuality? Does it conceal ongoing homophobia and a lack of acceptance of homosexuality? A number of fathers gave instances where they felt being a parent "trumped" being gay. A few fathers spoke about parenting "neutering" the sexuality of being gay, and delineating which gay people are acceptable to mainstream society. Do what the fathers share in common with other parents supercede and override any differences they may have from heterosexual parents as gay men? Parenting silences and makes invisible what makes many people uncomfortable about gayness, namely same sex sexual desire and behaviors. This silencing of sexuality, then, renders gay men who become parents as "'good gays' and not 'bad queers'" (Hicks, 2008, p.134). While many parents may feel like their sexual beings become marginalized in society once they become parents, this phenomenon is particularly salient for members of society for whom sexual identity is socially, psychologically and politically important.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This dissertation study has several limitations. The sample, while large for a phenomenological study, is still small. The sample of parents is quite homogenous, comprised primarily of White men with high socioeconomic status who by and large live in small to large urban environments. The experiences of fathers who are racial minorities, are lower income, and live in rural communities are likely different from those of the fathers in this study. The results of this study are based on interviews conducted only with the fathers. While fathers provided extensive information about their children, I did not speak directly with the children and thus do not have their perspectives. The data in this study were obtained entirely through self-reports. While fathers were quite forthcoming about their struggles and difficulties, there is likely some degree of social desirability bias in their accounts because of a desire to portray themselves and their families in a positive light. Due to time and financial constraints, only one person (the researcher) collected and analyzed the data. Given this it was not possible to cross-check the ways interviews were conducted and the results of the data analyses. Since the sample included only gay fathers, it was not possible to compare and contrast the parenting experiences of gay fathers with those of lesbian mothers and heterosexual parents. Also, the sample was predominantly comprised of couples, which limited the amount of information gained about single gay fathers.

### **Implications for Social Work**

The results of this study have a number of implications for social work practice, education, and research. The men in this study were greeted with a staggering array of reactions to their decision to become parents. Hearing the fathers' joy and relief in becoming parents against this backdrop of mixed reactions highlights the importance of community and the fact

that not all gay men may be supported in their endeavors to parent. Social workers working with LGBT clients can use the results to become attuned to these social realities and to provide affirmation, support, and resources to those aspiring to become parents.

Doing so means becoming more comfortable with the discomfort of being with difference. This study expands the discourse on difference and diversity in social work. Practitioners and researchers, in an effort to understand the diversity of human experience, can invariably essentialize groups of people through their questions. One of my original research questions was “What conflicts do gay adoptive fathers encounter parenting in a family constellation that does not conform to dominant norms?” As I interviewed fathers and then analyzed their narratives, I became more and more aware of how inadequate and limiting the word “conflict” was. In conducting this study, I found that there is nothing like a person’s story to shake up this tendency to want to reduce the complexity of human experience and in so doing inadvertently categorize people. The findings of this study thus raise a central question for social work practitioners: How can social workers be with difference in ways that does not diminish or silence difference and at the same time does not accentuate differences to the point of further marginalizing individuals and groups of people? The fathers’ parenting stories suggest that competent practice with diverse populations includes the willingness to be with differences in ways that invite the discomfort of not knowing and from this stance build relationships of genuine curiosity and compassion.

Heteronormative biases abound in social work practice, policy, and education. The methodology and findings of this study can help social work practitioners, educators, and researchers challenge these biases. The findings of this study add to knowledge about the diversity of family life. Social workers can lead the charge in challenging notions in child

welfare and other fields about “who counts” as a family (Hicks, 2005). Denying caring adults the right to have a legal standing with their children is both unjust and detrimental to children’s well-being. Greater awareness of the fathers’ experiences provides social workers with fodder to advocate for removing legal barriers on the state and federal level that prevent same sex couples from jointly adopting, as well as laws that restrict or deny LGBT people from adopting children.

By largely avoiding sexuality and desire in its professional discourse, social work has been complicit in maintaining a heteronormative status quo (Hicks, 2008). Following the model of this dissertation, social workers have the opportunity to move beyond questions about whether a parent’s sexual orientation affects children's well-being and interrogate why such questions are even posed in the social work profession. It is important for social work educators to integrate material in curricula that reflects the day to day experiences of families headed by same sex parents. Educators can use the results to engage students in identifying heteronormative biases in social work theories and practice models and provide them with tools for challenging these biases in their practice.

In my experience, it is easier to ask questions that preserve and continue to sanctify dominant ideas about gender, sexuality, and family than to challenge them. The findings of this study prompt us to ask more difficult and possibly risky questions: Why do we think the gender and sexual orientation of a parent matter so much (see Stacey & Biblarz, 2001)? What leads us to consider family structure (i.e. the number of parents, the relationship status of the parents) to be so central? Who benefits and who loses by investing large amounts of emotional, intellectual, and political energy in these questions? These concerns draw us away from more crucial questions: What does every child, every parent, and every family need to thrive in society? How can we advocate for the fundamental human rights of all families and the eradication of

inequities that undermine the conditions necessary for families to not only survive, but to flourish? What conditions are necessary for everyone, regardless of relationship or family status, to remain connected, be nurtured, and feel whole? As I consider these questions, I begin to see more vividly the possibilities and complexities of social work practice and research, not just with gay and lesbian families, but with all families. These include holding multiple perspectives on people and social problems, alleviating immediate suffering while promoting structural change, and effectively integrating theory, research and practice.

### **Future Research Agenda**

Research on gay fathers is growing but is still in its infancy stages. The results of this dissertation point to a number of areas of future research in which I am interested. I plan to conduct further qualitative research on gay adoptive fathers using a variety of methodological approaches (e.g. phenomenological, grounded theory, narrative analysis). This dissertation illustrates the power and influence of using a social constructionist lens to understand the social context of parenting. Further research that uses social constructionist frameworks that shed light on the workings of heteronormativity is needed. Building on the work in this dissertation, I plan to conduct further studies that incorporate relational and family systems frameworks to explore the intricacies of parent-child relationships and communication processes in families headed by same sex parents.

Studies that explore the experiences of children and adolescents raised by gay adoptive fathers are greatly needed. In addition to parents and their children, I would like to interview members of each family's social network (e.g. grandparents, other caregivers, and teachers). Given that the population of children raised by gay adoptive fathers is aging and growing, I envision conducting a longitudinal study on children adopted by gay men. The findings of this

study suggest that the challenges and opportunities children of gay fathers face change as they age and as societal norms and attitudes evolve. One of my research priorities is to explore the experiences of late elementary and middle school age children of same sex parents as they transition into adolescence.

Much of the research on LGBT parents, like this dissertation, has been limited to samples of predominantly Caucasian parents with high socioeconomic status. As a result, I plan to explore the experiences of gay fathers of different races, ethnicities, and class backgrounds. In addition, the stories of the two single fathers in this study indicate important differences between parenting as a single man versus as a couple, thus signaling the need for research on single gay fathers. The findings of this study show the complex ways norms of gender and sexuality overlap in the lives of gay fathers. While recognizing the importance of this knowledge, I would like to understand how gender and sexuality may uniquely contribute to parenting experiences. In this spirit, I plan to conduct both qualitative and quantitative comparative studies between adoptive families headed by gay men, lesbians and heterosexual parents. Also, I am interested in developing a line of research on the ways parenting influences gay fathers' identities and subjectivities as gay men and their relationships to gay communities.

### **Conclusion**

I deeply appreciate the opportunity to speak with each father in this study. I have lived with their stories for many months and have come to realize more and more the power of words. In writing this dissertation, each time I got lost in my thoughts, when my own words seemed to mean little, returning to the fathers' words rejuvenated me. Every time I read their stories, their hopes, fears, and joys resounded even more poignantly. Theo, a single father of 3 year-old Cody, captures the joy and struggle shared among this group of fathers:

If you want to do this, you've got to really want it. This is something you have to really, really struggle for and fight for in your life... I waited for so long to be a parent, and I am so glad to be a parent right now, there's a real joy when I'm spending time with [Cody].

We have hard moments like every parent, but I think people really react to that, the strength of our relationship and the joy that each of us feels in our parent/son relationship.

The fathers in this study adopted children over an almost 25 year time span. As gay fathers become more visible in American society and as attitudes towards LGBT people change, entrenched ideas about parenting, family, gender, and sexuality are exposed and challenged. As Shane said earlier, in many ways gay fathers are pioneers. At the same time, the joys, struggles and fulfillment the men in this study experience as fathers can resonate across communities and are reminders of our needs and wishes as human beings.

APPENDIX A  
RECRUITMENT FLYER

**Participants Needed for Study on  
Gay Adoptive Fathers**

Are you a gay man or a gay couple who legally adopted one or more children? If so, I am interested in speaking with you about your experiences as a gay parent in your family and in your community. You will be asked to participate in a 1 ½ to 2 hour interview. Participants will receive \$50 for each completed interview. I am conducting this study for my doctoral dissertation in Social Welfare at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York.

Increasingly more gay men are choosing to become parents by adopting children. Parenting as an openly gay man in a mostly heterosexist society may bring unique challenges, opportunities and rewards. There has been little research about adoptive families headed by gay men. Your story can provide social workers with valuable information to improve social work practices and policies for families headed by gay parents.

**If you are interested in participating in this study or if you would like more information, please contact me, Mohan Krishna, at [mkrishna@hunter.cuny.edu](mailto:mkrishna@hunter.cuny.edu) or (347) 249-1059. Please leave a phone number where I may contact you to tell you more about the study and answer any questions you might have.**

This study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at Hunter College of the City University of New York (Protocol # HC 090913631).

Thank you for your consideration.

Mohan Krishna

## APPENDIX B

## INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Mohan Krishna (hereon referred to as the researcher) is a doctoral student in Social Welfare at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. You are being asked to participate in a study on the parenting experiences of gay adoptive fathers. The researcher is conducting this study for the purposes of his doctoral dissertation.

Increasingly more gay men are choosing to adopt children. There has been little research, however, on families headed by openly gay men. The purpose of this dissertation study is to explore how gay men who have legally adopted children experience daily life within their families and in their communities. In particular, the researcher is interested in exploring what conflicts these fathers may encounter parenting in a family constellation that does not conform to dominant norms and how these conflicts may influence their feelings, behaviors, and relationships. The researcher plans to interview 15 to 25 single gay men or gay couples who have legally adopted one or more children. The researcher is recruiting participants for this study with the assistance of organizations that have contact with families headed by gay male parents. You will be asked about your experiences in your family and in school, work, and other social and community settings.

You are being asked to participate in a 1 ½ to 2 hour in-depth interview about your experiences as a gay adoptive father. You do not have to answer any question you prefer to skip, without prejudice. You may discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits or services to which you are entitled.

To ensure privacy and confidentiality, face to face interviews will be conducted at a private office rented by the researcher, at your home, or at a mutually agreed upon public location near your home. Interviews may also be conducted by phone or by an Internet video communication system, such as Skype. Skype uses security controls such as digital certificates and encryption to ensure the privacy of the identity and conversations of its users. Detailed information about these security controls can be provided to you by the researcher and can be obtained at <http://www.skype.com/security/detailed-security/>.

There is no direct benefit to you for participating in this study. Some people, however, may benefit from the opportunity to discuss their life experiences. There may be some risks associated with participating in this study. Some questions may evoke negative memories and experiences from your past, which may cause stress. In the event that this happens, the researcher has a list of resources that can provide assistance should you need it. The researcher will also offer to assist you in contacting these resources.

The researcher will not disclose who has participated in the study. The researcher will tape record and/or video record the interview with your consent. If you prefer, the researcher will take notes during the interview. Only the researcher, his faculty advisor, and the interview transcriber will hear the recorded interview tape. All identifying information will be disguised on the transcripts and on any reports produced by using pretend names which will be assigned to

each participant. After being transcribed, the tapes will be destroyed. The transcripts will be analyzed for thematic content. Transcripts and other research materials will be stored in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's office. These materials will be destroyed after three years.

The results of this study will be used to produce a doctoral dissertation in partial fulfillment of a PhD in Social Welfare from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. The researcher may seek to use the results of this study for the purposes of a conference presentation, publication in a professional journal, and/or trainings for human service professionals conducted by the researcher. After the interviews are analyzed, the results of the study will be made available to you if you wish to receive a summary of the final report. You may receive a copy by calling the researcher at his office.

In recognition of the time spent participating in this interview, you will receive \$50. If there is more than one parent, the \$50 will be given to the parental unit, not to each parent.

If you have any questions about this study, you may contact the researcher at (347) 249-1059 or the researcher's faculty advisor, Professor Mimi Abramovitz - Hunter College School of Social Work, at (212) 452-7106. You may also contact the Hunter College Office of the Institutional Review Board at (212) 650-3053, should you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a subject and research-related injuries.

I have read the contents of this consent form and have been encouraged to ask questions. I have received answers to my questions. I give my consent to participate in this study. I have received a copy of this form for my records and for future reference.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Research Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Mohan Krishna

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

APPENDIX C

AUDIO CONSENT FORM

HUNTER COLLEGE, CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK  
AUDIOTAPE RECORDING RELEASE CONSENT FORM

Protocol #: HC-090913631

Researcher(s): Mohan Krishna

Title: Turning Friction into Traction: Gay Adoptive Families in a Heteronormative Society”

As part of this research project, an audiotape recording will be made of you during your participation in this project. Please indicate below the uses of these audiotapes to which you are willing to consent. This is completely voluntary. In any use of the audiotapes, your name will not be identified.

1. The audiotapes can be studied by the researcher for use in the research project.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Initials

2. The audiotapes can be studied by the researcher and used for future presentations of findings.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Initials

I have read the above description and give my consent for the use of audiotapes as indicated above.

Printed Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX D

### INTERVIEW GUIDE

**Introductory script: “Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study on gay adoptive fathers. I will be asking you questions about your experiences in your family and in your community parenting as a gay man. You do not have to answer any question you prefer to skip.”**

- Question 1: How did you come to adopt your child(ren)?  
 Question 2: What was it like becoming a parent?  
 Question 3: What has it been like for you parenting as a gay man?  
 Question 4: What does “family” mean to you?  
 Question 5: In what ways has what you have experienced as a gay father been similar and/or different from the experiences of other parents whom you know?

**Based on the participants’ responses to the above questions, some of the following areas may be explored, as relevant:**

**Question 1: How did you come to adopt your child(ren)?**

- Route to adoption (private domestic, public domestic, or international; open or closed adoption)
- Age of child(ren) when adopted
- Age of parents when they adopted child(ren)
- Rationale for choosing adoption over other routes to parenting (e.g. surrogacy)

**Question 2: What was it like becoming a parent?**

- Decision making around becoming a parent
- Barriers faced pre-adoption and during adoption process
- Hopes and expectations
- Doubts and fears
- Changes they experienced in their relationship as a result of becoming parents
- Responses from gay community? Families of origin? Other friends?
- Experiences of the adoption process (e.g. experiences with adoption agencies, legal issues, financial issues, etc)

**Question 3: What has it been like for you parenting as a gay man?**

Explore challenges and rewards in following areas:

- Relationship with child
- Relationship with partner
- Experiences with other gay men, LGBT community, other parents, other fathers
- Experiences with family of origin, friends, and peers
- Experiences at child’s school and in other community settings (e.g. work, recreational settings, religious institutions, health care settings, etc.)
- Helping children describe their family
- Personal experiences of discrimination, harassment, and/or stigma
- Helping children deal with experiences of discrimination, harassment, and/or stigma
- Decisions about disclosure
- Legal and financial issues
- Challenges and rewards unrelated to being gay

**Question 4: What does “family” mean to you?**

**Question 5: In what ways has what you have experienced as a gay father been similar and/or different from the experiences of other parents whom you know?**

- Parents' roles in the household (e.g. child-rearing, other household tasks)
- Did they follow any particular models/scripts for family and parenting? Did they create new models/ scripts for family and parenting?
- Experiences in community settings

## APPENDIX E

## DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

**Interview #**

**Please complete the following questions. You may skip any question you prefer not to answer. Please return your completed questionnaire to [mkrishna@hunter.cuny.edu](mailto:mkrishna@hunter.cuny.edu) as an attachment.**

**Parent 1**

What best describes your race? [.Click here to enter text.](#)

What best describes your ethnicity? [Click here to enter text.](#)

What is the highest educational level you have completed?

- Less than High School
- High School/GED
- Some College
- 2-Year College Degree (Associates)
- 4-Year College Degree (BA, BS)
- Master's Degree
- Doctoral Degree
- Professional Degree (e.g. MD, JD)
- Other  (please describe) [Click here to enter text.](#)

**Parent 2 (if applicable)**

What best describes your race? [.Click here to enter text.](#)

What best describes your ethnicity? [Click here to enter text.](#)

What is the highest educational level you have completed?

- Less than High School
- High School/GED
- Some College
- 2-Year College Degree (Associates)
- 4-Year College Degree (BA, BS)

- Master's Degree
- Doctoral Degree
- Professional Degree (e.g. MD, JD)
- Other  (please describe) [Click here to enter text.](#)

**What best describes your child(ren)'s race and ethnicity?**

- Child 1**
- First name [Click here to enter text.](#)
- Race [Click here to enter text.](#)
- Ethnicity [Click here to enter text.](#)

- Child 2**
- First name [Click here to enter text.](#)
- Race [Click here to enter text.](#)
- Ethnicity [Click here to enter text.](#)

- Child 3**
- First name [Click here to enter text.](#)
- Race [Click here to enter text.](#)
- Ethnicity [Click here to enter text.](#)

**What is your relationship status? (check all that apply)**

- Single  [Click here to enter text.](#) Legally married in New York state
- Partnered (not legally recognized)  Legally married in another US state
- Domestic partners  Legally married in another country
- Civil union
- Other  (please describe) [Click here to enter text.](#)

**What best describes the locality where you live?**

- Large urban area
- Small urban area
- Suburban area
- Rural area
- Other  (please describe) [Click here to enter text.](#)

**Which of the following best describes your annual household income?**

- |                   |                          |                     |                          |                      |                          |
|-------------------|--------------------------|---------------------|--------------------------|----------------------|--------------------------|
| \$0 - 24,999      | <input type="checkbox"/> | \$100,000 - 124,999 | <input type="checkbox"/> | \$200,000 or greater | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| \$25,000 - 49,999 | <input type="checkbox"/> | \$125,000 - 149,999 | <input type="checkbox"/> |                      |                          |
| \$50,000 - 74,999 | <input type="checkbox"/> | \$150,000 - 174,999 | <input type="checkbox"/> |                      |                          |
| \$75,000 - 99,999 | <input type="checkbox"/> | \$175,000 - 199,999 | <input type="checkbox"/> |                      |                          |

APPENDIX F  
SAMPLE DEMOGRAPHICS

**TABLE 1. Descriptive Characteristics of Adoptive Fathers**

<u>Pseudonyms of Fathers</u>	<u>Age (yrs) At Time of Study/ At Time of First Adoption</u>	<u>Race/Ethnicity</u>	<u>Type of Residential Locality</u>	<u>Relationship Status</u>	<u>Relationship Length (yrs) At Time of Study/ At Time of First Adoption</u>	<u>Adoption Pathway</u>	<u>Joint or Second Parent Adoption</u>
Jeremy Juan	38/36 42/40	White/Caucasian Hispanic/Latino	Large urban	Legally married in NYS	9/7	Domestic/private agency	Second parent
Donald Adam	43/38 44/39	White/Caucasian White/Caucasian	Suburban	Domestic partners	10/5	Domestic/private attorney	Joint
Victor Philip	53/44 45/36	White/Caucasian White/Caucasian	Large urban	Legally married in another country	16/7	Domestic/private agency	Joint
Conrad Mario	43/40 41/37	White/Caucasian White/Caucasian	Large urban	Legally married in NYS & another country	7/4	Domestic/private attorney	Joint
Joey Thomas	35/35 35/35	Hispanic/Latino White/Caucasian	Large urban	Domestic partners	6/5	Domestic/private agency	Joint
Alan Kyle	61/34 52/37	White/Caucasian White/Caucasian	Large urban	Domestic partners	16/*	Domestic/private agency	Second parent
Edward Marshall	49/45 54/50	White/Caucasian White/Caucasian	Large urban	Domestic partners	19/15	Domestic/private agency	Joint
Jonathan Ely	50/41 41/32	White/Caucasian White/Caucasian	Large urban	Domestic partners	16/7	Domestic/private attorney	Second parent
Jason Scott	56/46 57/47	White/Caucasian White/Caucasian	Large urban	Civil union in VT	33/23	International/ orphanage	Joint
Shane Jordan	44/38 40/34	White/Caucasian White/Caucasian	Small urban	Partnered (not legally recognized)	14/9	Domestic/foster care	Joint
Ben Gordon	56/38 54/36	White/Caucasian White/Caucasian	Rural	Legally married in Canada	26/8	Domestic/private attorney	Second parent
Richard Peter	42/41 39/38	White/Caucasian White/Caucasian	Suburban	Partnered (not legally recognized)	10/9	Domestic/foster care	Joint
Daniel Martin	47/45 42/40	White/Caucasian White/Caucasian	Large urban	Domestic partners	10/8	Domestic/private attorney	Joint
Randy	30/29	Black/African-American	Small urban	Single	N/A	Domestic/private agency	N/A
Marcus James	59/51 64/56	Black/African-American White/Caucasian	Large urban	Domestic partners	30/22	Domestic/foster care & private agency	Joint

**TABLE 1. Descriptive Characteristics of Adoptive Fathers**

<u>Pseudonyms of Fathers</u>	<u>Age (yrs) At Time of Study/ At Time of First Adoption</u>	<u>Race/Ethnicity</u>	<u>Type of Residential Locality</u>	<u>Relationship Status</u>	<u>Relationship Length (yrs) At Time of Study/ At Time of First Adoption</u>	<u>Adoption Pathway</u>	<u>Joint or Second Parent Adoption</u>
Anthony Stan	61/47 Not identified	White/Caucasian White/Caucasian	Small urban	Partnered (not legally recognized)	35/21	Domestic/private agency	Second parent
Sheldon Henry	44/38 52/46	White/Caucasian White/Caucasian	Large urban	Domestic partners	10/4	International/orphanage	Second parent
Miguel	57/48	Hispanic/Latino	Suburban	Domestic partners**	Not identified	Domestic/foster care	Not identified
Josh Robert	54/32 59/37	White/Caucasian White/Caucasian	Large urban	Legally married in another US state	31/9	Domestic/private adoption from friend	Second parent
Theo	46/46	White/Caucasian	Rural	Single	N/A	Domestic/foster care	N/A

\* First child was adopted by Alan several months before Alan and Kyle met.

\*\* Miguel's domestic partner is not the legal adoptive parent of his children. Miguel adopted his children with a previous partner from whom he separated.

**TABLE 2. Descriptive Characteristics of Adopted Children**

<u>Pseudonyms of Fathers</u>	<u>Pseudonyms of Children</u>	<u>Age At Time of Study/ At Time of Adoption</u>	<u>Gender</u>	<u>Race/Ethnicity</u>
Jeremy Juan	Simon	2 yrs / 2 wks	Male	Biracial
Donald Adam	Ryan Olivia	5 yrs / newborn 2 yrs / newborn	Male Female	White/Caucasian White/Caucasian
Victor Philip	Ralph	9 yrs / 2 days	Male	Biracial
Conrad Mario	Lucy Alberto	3 yrs / newborn 9 mths / newborn	Female Male	White/Caucasian White/Caucasian
Joey Thomas	Mary	9 mths / newborn	Female	White/Caucasian
Alan Kyle	Leon Ian	17 yrs / 2 wks 15 yrs / 3 wks	Male Male	Biracial Biracial
Edward Marshall	Colin	4 yrs / 2 days	Male	White/Caucasian
Jonathan Ely	Linda	9 yrs / 5 days	Female	Black/African-American
Jason Scott	Carlos Joseph	13 yrs / 3 yrs 10 yrs / 16 mths	Male Male	Biracial Biracial
Shane Jordan	George Seth Patrick	7 yrs / 19 mths 3 yrs / 20 mths 2 yrs / 2 yrs	Male Male Male	White/Caucasian Biracial White/Caucasian
Ben Gordon	Nathan Abigail	18 yrs / 10 days 14 yrs / 2 days	Male Female	Black/African-American Black/African-American
Richard Peter	Steven Jacob	4 yrs / 3 yrs 10 yrs / 9 yrs	Male Male	Hispanic/Latino Biracial
Daniel Martin	Lisa	2 yrs / 10 days	Female	Hispanic/Latina
Randy	Cameron	19 yrs / 18 yrs	Male	Biracial
Marcus James	Tyson	15 yrs / 7 yrs	Male	Black/African-American
Anthony Stan	Austin	14 yrs / 10 days	Transgender	Black/African-American
Sheldon Henry	Bernie Maggie	6 yrs / 8 mths 4 yrs / 8 mths	Male Female	Hispanic/Latino Hispanic/Latino
Miguel	Pedro Paolo	20 yrs / 11 yrs 16 yrs / 4 yrs	Male Male	Hispanic/Latino Biracial
Josh Robert	Warren	22 yrs / newborn	Male	White/Caucasian
Theo	Cody	3 yrs / 3 yrs	Male	Hispanic/Latino

**TABLE 3. DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF SAMPLE**

<i>DEMOGRAPHICS</i>	#	%
<i>Age of Fathers (at time of study) N=37</i>		
30-35:	3	8.1
36-40:	3	8.1
41-45:	11	29.7
46-50:	4	10.8
51-55:	6	16.2
56-60:	6	16.2
61-65:	3	8.1
Did not identify:	1	2.7
Mean of identified: 48.0		
<i>Age of Fathers (at time of first adoption) N=37</i>		
25-29:	1	2.7
30-35:	6	16.2
36-40:	15	40.5
41-45:	5	13.5
46-50:	7	18.9
51-55:	1	2.7
56-60:	1	2.7
Did not identify:	1	2.7
Mean of identified: 40.3		
<i>Age of Children (at time of study) N=30</i>		
3 and under:	9	30.0
4-7:	6	20.0
8-12:	4	13.3
13-18:	8	26.7
over 18:	3	10.0
Mean: 9.0		
<i>Age of Children (at time of adoption) N=30</i>		
At birth-1 month:	16	53.3
2 months-12 months:	2	6.7
13 months-2 yrs:	4	13.3
3-5:	4	13.3
6-10:	2	6.7
11-15:	1	3.3
16-20:	1	3.3
Mean: 2.2		
<i>Family Size (# of children) N=20</i>		
1 child:	11	55.0
2 children:	8	40.0
3 children:	1	5.0

*Gender of Children N=30*

Girls:	7	23.3
Boys:	22	73.3
Transgender:	1	3.3

*Race/Ethnicity of Fathers N=37*

White/Caucasian:	32	86.5
Black/African-American:	2	5.4
Hispanic/Latino:	3	8.1

*Race/Ethnicity of Children N=30*

White/Caucasian:	9	30.0
Black/African-American:	5	16.7
Hispanic/Latino:	6	20.0
Biracial:	10	33.3

*Fathers' Educational Level N=37*

High School/GED:	1	2.7
2-Year College Degree (Associates):	2	5.4
4-Year College Degree (BA, BS):	9	24.3
Master's Degree (MA, MS, MBA):	10	27.0
Doctoral/Professional Degree (PhD, MD, JD):	11	29.7
Did not identify:	4	10.8

*Annual Household Income N=20*

\$50,000-99,999:	4	20.0
\$100,000-149,999:	2	10.0
\$150,000-199,999:	4	20.0
\$200,000 or greater:	8	40.0
Did not identify:	2	10.0

*Partnership Status N=20 (some respondents identified more than 1 status)*

Single:	2	10.0
Partnered (not legally recognized):	2	10.0
Domestic partners:	9	45.0
Civil union:	1	5.0
Legally married in New York state:	2	10.0
Legally married in another US state:	1	5.0
Legally married in another country:	3	15.0
Did not identify:	1	5.0

*Adoption Pathway N=20*

Domestic/private agency:	6	30.0
Domestic/private attorney:	6	30.0
Domestic/foster care:	4	20.0
Domestic/foster care & private agency:	1	5.0
Domestic/adopted from friend:	1	5.0
International/orphanages:	2	10.0

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