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## Reminders of Heteronormativity: Gay Adoptive Fathers Navigating Uninvited Social Interactions

*Gay adoptive fathers and their children are becoming more visible in American society. Consequently, a deeper understanding is needed of the challenges and opportunities gay fathers experience in social interactions. Using a phenomenological approach, gay adoptive fathers from 20 families were interviewed about their experiences parenting as gay men. Although fathers led fulfilling lives as parents, many of them faced uninvited social interactions that reminded them of their place in a heterosexual order. These reminders of heteronormativity included scrutiny about their parenting, concerns about the well-being of their children, and decisions regarding disclosing information about their families. This article illustrates the use of a social constructionist lens to understand the emotional burdens gay adoptive fathers carry navigating these interactions in public settings. By narrowing the focus on such encounters, this article attunes practitioners and educators to gay fathers' emotional worlds while deepening their understanding of the social fabric of heteronormativity.*

Adoptive families headed by gay men are part of an ongoing evolution and expansion of family forms (Tasker & Patterson, 2007). Adoption

is becoming a more common route to parenting, particularly for younger gay men (Goldberg, Downing, & Moyer, 2012). Approximately 65,500 children in the United States have been adopted by lesbian and gay parents (Gates, 2010). According to estimates based on national survey data, the proportion of gay male couples raising children increased from 1 out of 20 in 1990 to 1 out of 5 in 2000 (Gates, Lee Badgett, Macomber, & Chambers, 2007). More than two million gay and lesbian individuals report that they are interested in adopting children (Gates et. al., 2007). Despite pronounced shifts in family compositions in the United States, the picture of the standard North American family of two heterosexually married persons parenting their biologically produced children dominates social and political life (Ryan & Berkowitz, 2009). Gay men in the United States who choose to adopt may face unique pressures stemming from the beliefs that all children need a mother, that gay men cannot and should not be parents, and that homosexuality is morally wrong (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).

Previous studies have highlighted challenges gay adoptive fathers encounter in the adoption process (Goldberg, 2012; Mallon, 2004), in school settings (Brown, Smalling, Groza, & Ryan, 2009), and in everyday social encounters (Goldberg, 2012; Lewin, 2009; Mallon, 2004; Tornello, Farr, & Patterson, 2011). Using the

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results of phenomenological interviews conducted with fathers from 20 families, this article adds to this body of research by analyzing the emotional impact experiences of heteronormativity have on gay adoptive fathers. While in many ways living fulfilling lives as parents, a number of fathers faced uninvited social interactions in their communities that reminded them of their place in a heterosexual order. Gay fathers have reported that such social interactions can be challenging because of others' curiosity, scrutiny, and hostility (Gianino, 2008; Mallon, 2004). This article illustrates the use of a social constructionist lens to understand the emotional burdens gay adoptive fathers carry navigating these interactions in public settings. This article shows how narrowing the focus on such encounters can broaden our perspective on the social fabric of heteronormativity while deepening our understanding of the emotional lives of gay fathers. This study elicited the voices of gay adoptive fathers to answer the following research questions:

1. How do gay adoptive fathers experience daily life in their families and in their communities?
2. What challenges, opportunities, and rewards do gay adoptive fathers experience as parents in a family constellation that does not conform to dominant norms?

### *Literature Review*

Research about adoptive families headed by gay and lesbian parents has been growing considerably in recent years (Erich, Leung, & Kindle, 2005; Farr, Forssell, & Patterson, 2010; Goldberg, 2012; Goldberg, Downing, & Sauck, 2007; Mallon, 2004; Tornello et al., 2011). Gay adoptive fathers lie at the nexus of social identities that deviate from the heterosexual nuclear family norm (Goldberg, 2012; Heiden Rootes, 2013). They are gay men who have chosen to parent children outside the context of biological relationships without a primary female parent. Because of this, they are likely to face unique pressures that may be different from lesbian mothers and heterosexual fathers. As a result, this review will focus primarily on studies conducted with gay fathers.

*Challenges Faced by Gay Fathers.* Many gay men have reported numerous challenges

throughout the adoption process as a result of negative attitudes toward gay male parenting (Downing, Richardson, Kinkler, & Goldberg, 2009; Gianino, 2008; Goldberg, 2012; Kaye & Kavalanka, 2006; Mallon, 2004). These attitudes are based on stereotypes that depict gay men as emotionally unstable, incapable and undesirous of long-term relationships, and unfit for assuming parental roles (Lobaugh, Clements, Averill, & Olguin, 2006; Ryan, 2007). There is still a deeply held belief in American society that all children need one male and one female parent (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010). While gay men and lesbians encounter barriers in adopting children, the number of children and adolescents who need 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 in the United States, approximately 115,000 of whom are waiting for adoptive homes (Movement Advancement Project, Family Equality Council, and Center for American Progress, 2011).

Gay fathers must contend with helping 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 (Mallon, 2004). Tornello et al. (2011) found that parenting stress for gay adoptive fathers was associated with issues related to their identities as gay men, including decisions around disclosing information about their sexual orientation and their own sensitivity to stigma as gay men. Gianino (2008) similarly found that gay male couples, living outside of traditional family structures, faced negative stereotypes based on their sexual orientation and disparaging beliefs about their parenting capabilities as men. Bos (2010), in a comparative study between father-child relationships in gay father and heterosexual father families, found that, though gay fathers did not differ from heterosexual fathers in the strength and quality of their relationships, feelings of rejection and having to justify themselves as parents affected their feelings of competence as parents. Brown et al. (2009), in a cross-sectional study of 182 adoptive families (45% of whom were headed by gay fathers), also found that lesbian and gay adoptive parents faced questions about the legitimacy of their family relationships and family structure, struggles to find schools who would accept their families and treat them equally, and

discriminatory laws and policies. Parents also said that though they experienced some amount of acceptance, they still lived in fear of homophobic encounters.

*Moving Beyond Either/Or Thinking.* Researchers have found that, like other marginalized groups, the challenges gay and lesbian parents and their children face also bring opportunities (Fulcher, Sutfin, & Patterson, 2008; Perlesz et al., 2006; Ryan, 2007). Goldberg (2012), in conducting qualitative interviews with 70 gay adoptive fathers (35 couples) across the United States using social constructionist and queer theoretical perspectives, found that gay fathers cannot be classified as either conforming to or resisting heteronormativity, but rather they defy these simplistic classifications. Additionally, Goldberg found that being a parent both hides and makes more visible gay fathers' sexuality. On the one hand, being gay becomes less visible and becomes "trumped" by being a parent. On the other hand, because gay fathers and their families stand out as different from the norm, being a parent makes more visible and more prominent their identity as gay men (Goldberg, 2012; Lewin, 2009). Similarly, Schacher, Auerbach, and Silverstein (2005) found that gay fathers transform norms of fatherhood, family, and masculinity, and provide models for "conscious parenting" (p. 48) and in so doing can prompt other parents to challenge dominant parenting narratives (Riggs, 2006). Perlesz et al. (2006), in exploring the experiences of multiple family members in 20 lesbian families, similarly found that family members' conceptions and feelings about their families were traditional and transformative, and were strongly influenced by heteronormative beliefs about what makes a family.

To challenge opposition to same sex parenting on an ideological level, practitioners can become more aware of their own taken for granted beliefs about parenting and family and how these beliefs affect their work (Mallon, 2004). Understanding how these beliefs and social norms manifest in everyday social interactions is an important step in building this awareness. As the discussed studies show, heteronormativity, like other ideologies, is a complex apparatus that can manifest in different arenas of social life. The subtle and not-so-subtle ways these ideologies affect families with same-sex parents in their daily lives is an area in need of further investigation and

analysis. As gay fathers and other families with same-sex parents become more visible in American society, a deeper theoretical understanding is needed of how they manage their visibility on a daily basis in a constantly shifting sociopolitical landscape (Goldberg, 2012). To this end, this study offers a detailed account of the ways gay adoptive fathers navigate heteronormativity in spontaneous and often uninvited social encounters and the emotional impact these encounters have on them as parents and as gay men.

### *Theoretical Perspective*

*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 performed and enacted, rather than as an innate quality of human beings. To explore how heteronormativity unfolds in the lives of gay adoptive fathers, I employed a social constructionist framework proposed by Jackson (2001). Although numerous descriptions and explanations of social constructionism exist (e.g., Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Lupton & Barclay, 1997), Jackson's framework was particularly relevant and useful for exploring and analyzing the experiences described by this group of fathers.

Jackson (2001) explained that the process of social construction involves four intersecting levels of human experience: social structures, cultural meanings, routine social interactions, and individual subjectivities. Through laws, policies, and social institutions like the family, dominant cultural definitions of masculinity/femininity and mothering/fathering are used to proclaim whose relationships are meaningful, real, and "normal." These ideas are then reinforced and also challenged through what Jackson described as routine social interactions. These interactions occur within the day-to-day dynamics of a family; in schools and other community settings; and in social situations with family members, friends, and strangers. Such interactions, some of which may last no more than a few seconds, can include seemingly simple acts such as walking down the street or going to the corner store to buy groceries. Jackson explains that routine social interactions are deeply meaningful in that they influence people's subjectivities – their identities, desires, expectations, hopes, and

fears – and the ways they see their own lives and the world around them.

Using Jackson's perspective, we can better understand the meanings everyday social interactions have for gay fathers and the sociocultural forces that may give rise to and underpin these interactions. Our social environment can validate and negate that which is within us. It is this juncture where individual intention and desire and the reflection of the social environment meet for gay adoptive fathers that I wished to enter in this phenomenological study. Applying a social constructionist lens can at once expand our understanding of the emotional lives of gay fathers while illuminating the social contexts in which they parent.

## METHOD

### *Participants*

The participants in this study were single gay men or gay male couples who legally adopted one or more children as openly gay men. To maintain the focus on adoptive relationships, fathers who had a biological relationship with their children were excluded from this study. The reason for this is that it was assumed that being an adoptive parent would bring unique challenges and opportunities in environments that hold biological relationships as the "gold standard" (Riggs, 2006). Participants were recruited in two ways. First, more than 30 local and national organizations serving lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) families; adoption and child welfare agencies; and practitioners working with LGBT parents and their children were asked to distribute the recruitment call. A number of these sources were located in the Northeast, whereas others were located on the West Coast or were national organizations. Examples of national organizations are Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere (COLAGE) and the Family Equality Council. In addition, participants were recruited through snowball sampling, where participants referred friends who were gay fathers to participate in the study.

Fathers from 20 families (18 couples and 2 single fathers) were interviewed for this study. A total of 20 interviews were conducted. Thirty-one fathers participated in the interviews. Of the 18 two-parent households, the interview was conducted with both parents in 11

households and with only one parent in seven households. In the latter case only one parent was willing to be interviewed or scheduling constraints made it difficult to interview both parents. Participants also completed a brief demographic questionnaire.

The fathers ranged in age from 30 to 64 years ( $M = 48$ ,  $SD = 8.5$ ) and were raising a total of 30 children (7 girls, 22 boys, 1 transgender child) ranging in age from 9 months to 22 years ( $M = 9$  years,  $SD = 6.6$ ). The children represented all developmental phases from infancy through young adulthood. Sixteen of the children were adopted within the first month of life. Fathers were by and large well educated, with 21 fathers having a postbaccalaureate degree. The families were economically well off, with 12 families having an annual household income of \$150,000 or greater. Fourteen of the 18 two-parent households have two White fathers; one household has two fathers who are Hispanic/Latino. The remaining couples are interracial, with one father being White and the other father being Hispanic/Latino or African American. One of the single fathers is African American and the other is White. Five children are Black/African American, six are Hispanic/Latino, nine are White, and ten are Biracial. The fathers were asked to classify the location where they lived as "large urban," "small urban," "suburban," or "rural." Twelve families live in large urban areas, whereas three live in small urban areas. Three families live in a suburban community, whereas two live in a rural area. All but two of the families live in the northeastern United States. The other two families live in a large urban center on the West Coast. It should be noted that all of the families (except for one) live in regions of the United States with relatively progressive attitudes toward LGBT people and where they have access to community supports for LGBT families. One family, however, lives in a rural area of a northeastern state with conservative attitudes toward LGBT people. These geographical distinctions are important, given research that suggests that LGBT families living outside of large metropolitan areas face unique challenges (Kinkler & Goldberg, 2011). The families used a variety of routes to adopt their children, including domestic private agencies that place newborns (five), private attorneys (eight), the domestic foster care system (five), and international orphanages (two). In 10 families, both parents adopted

the child jointly. In seven families, one parent adopted the child first as a single parent and then the second parent adopted the child through a second parent adoption. In one family, only one of the parents was the legal adoptive parent.

### *Procedures*

Using a semistructured interview guide, phenomenological interviews lasting 1½ to 2½ hours were conducted. The interview questions were open ended and concerned the men's paths to adoption, their parenting experiences at home and in community settings, and the effects of their experiences in the community on their family relationships. Probes and follow-up questions were used, when needed. In general, the same question order was used. As the interviews progressed, I added several questions based on issues raised by previous interviewees.

Interviewing more than one family member at a time is a technique that has been used strategically by family researchers (e.g., Gianino, 2008; Goldberg, 2012; Lewin, 2009; Perlesz et al., 2006). Nevertheless, doing so has advantages and disadvantages. One advantage of interviewing both fathers simultaneously is that I could understand what being gay fathers meant to the couple as well as to each individual. Also, fathers provided multiple perspectives on a situation, which often stimulated their reflection and description of the event. Finally, I could hear directly from each father about his views rather than having his partner speak for him. One disadvantage is that some fathers may have felt inhibited from sharing certain thoughts and feelings in the presence of his partner. To address this issue, I was watchful of each parent's reactions and when a parent was silent, I asked him about his thoughts and feelings regarding the topic at hand. To interview participants from different parts of the country and to accommodate participants' scheduling needs, interviews were conducted in participants' homes and workplaces, by phone, and by Skype. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with 13 participants (nine in their home and four at their workplace). Five participants were interviewed by phone and two by video conferencing on Skype. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim by a transcriber. This study was approved by the institutional review board at a major university.

### *Data Analysis*

Adoptive families headed by gay men are an emergent population in the United States. Qualitative methods are appropriate for eliciting, describing, and analyzing individuals' subjective experiences and for studying emergent social phenomena (Charmaz, 2008). As a phenomenological researcher, I was curious about what it was like to "be in the world" as a gay father (Van Manen, 1990). Phenomenological research is particularly well suited for excavating the meanings people attribute to their lived experiences and the essence of being in these experiences. Using descriptive phenomenological analysis (Giorgi, 2012) and with the aid of NVivo (version 9) software, I identified themes within each interview and across interviews. I was the sole data analyst for this study. Descriptive phenomenological analysis involves an iterative process of reading, analyzing, and rereading each participant's account numerous times. As described by Giorgi (2012), I began by reading each transcript to get a sense of the whole. Following this, I read each account and noted each time I experienced a transition in the meaning. In the next step, I transformed the raw data in these meaning units into phrases and sentences that reflect the meanings I was attributing to the participants' account. Using a process called "free imaginative variation" (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003), I then returned to the transcripts numerous times with my constructed meanings in mind and considered alternate meanings. 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). Through this iterative process, I arrived at interpretations that were more likely to mirror the meanings being lived by the participant.

Free imaginative variation allows the researcher to surface new insights, while identifying and filtering out biases. Throughout this study I interrogated how my research lens was informed by my experiences as a gay man who plans to adopt children and as a social worker and teacher committed to social justice. I saw my subjectivity not as a hindrance, but rather a crucial part of understanding gay fathers' lived experiences (Ben-Ari & Enosh, 2011). To facilitate this self-reflective process, I continually bracketed

my beliefs, assumptions, and feelings by writing and analyzing hundreds of pages of memos throughout the interviewing, data analysis, and writing process. These memos included critical reflections on how the participants' words related to my own life, to the empirical literature, and to the theoretical framework of the study. Memos provided a space to acknowledge and analyze my feelings and assumptions, so that I could then better understand the motivation behind my particular interpretations. Being armed with this knowledge I was able to "check" each interpretation against the data and then reformulate and/or discard interpretations that did not accurately reflect the data. Additionally, I continually triangulated my evolving interpretations with findings from the literature to identify areas of congruence and divergence. Given that I was the only analyst in this study, these steps were particularly important for enhancing the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings (Padgett, 1998).

### RESULTS

When asked what it was like to parent as gay men, a number of 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 they knew. To a large extent they were able to live fulfilling lives as parents and as a family. At the same time, all of the fathers in this study, at some point in their parenting journey, faced some degree of scrutiny and/or disapproval for becoming and being parents. Many fathers were frequently reminded through uninvited social encounters of their place in a heterosexual order as gay fathers. Four themes relating to these types of encounters are discussed. The first theme concerns the absence of a female mother in their families. The second relates to reactions of surprise and confusion the fathers encountered as two men creating a family together. The third theme concerns the fathers' decisions about if and how to explain their families to others. The final theme highlights situations in which gay fathers and their families faced hostility and scrutiny from people in authority positions. Although the depth to which these encounters with heteronormativity emotionally affected the fathers varied, being a parent under these circumstances presented unique challenges and pressures for each of them. Using the social constructionist

lens described earlier (Jackson, 2001), I discuss the ways fathers navigate these reminders of heteronormativity and the emotional impact these encounters have on them as parents and as gay men. Before proceeding, it is important to note that all of the fathers I interviewed, even those who experienced discrimination and negative responses, also experienced support, understanding, and encouragement from people and institutions in their lives. Such affirming social encounters, though also prominent in the lives of these fathers, are not the focus of this particular article. Being a gay father, I have learned, involves a constant process of facing a wide range of reactions from others and integrating these experiences into one's life.

#### *The Absence of a Female Mother*

Many of the fathers frequently encountered people who assumed they were heterosexual, had a wife, and/or that their child had a female mother. I came to the term *female mother* after hearing a number of fathers describe the ways they mother their children as men. Behind these assumptions was the insinuation that the fathers did not know how to take care of children in the absence of a woman. Conrad and Mario (all names used are pseudonyms) were on a flight with their infant daughter Lucy who was crying when a flight attendant asked about their child's mother:

Before even asking us if [she] was hot or to take off some layers, she asked about mom. ... 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 flight attendant seemed to have a quick, visceral reaction seeing first and foremost the absence of a woman rather than a crying child with two adult caregivers. For Conrad, the "where's mommy" question is a two-part statement in disguise; namely, that all children must have a mother to be safe and that men cannot possibly parent a child without a woman also being a primary parent. Such interactions put Conrad face-to-face with his need and wish to be authentic with others: "I wanted people to know that I was parenting as a gay man – not that I wanted to go around telling everyone – but that I didn't want to be mistaken for somebody that I wasn't."

One can view this situation using the four levels of social construction described earlier. The visibility of a crying child is the stimulus for a social interaction between the flight attendant and the fathers that enacted a dominant cultural belief that children need a female caregiver to be nurtured and safe. Faced with deciding how to respond in this interaction, Conrad then was reminded of his wish to be seen for who he is as a gay man and as a gay father in the world. Thus, in a matter of seconds, a prevailing ideology translates into a deeply felt emotional experience through what on the surface may seem like an innocuous social interaction.

Miguel, father of a teenager and a young adult, had a similar interaction with an emergency room pediatrician when she asked him about his then infant son's mother. Unlike Conrad, however, Miguel responded angrily, "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." Like the flight attendant, the pediatrician in an emergency room notices the absence of a woman when she sees a baby in need. Conrad's partner Mario expressed the frustration and dilemma of having to respond to questions about their child's mother:

There is a level of not wanting 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 ... I don't think that I have figured out what to say yet.

In both of these examples, the fathers enter situations, whether it is on an airplane or in the hospital, immersed in the practice of nurturing their children. They encounter another person who wields some amount of power and control in the situation. Dominant controlling images about the proper caregiver for a child lead to questions about the child's mother. Fathers engaged in parenting and who want to be seen for who they are are faced with these questions, which are vehicles by which to validate or discount their experiences as parents.

#### *Encounters with Surprise and Confusion*

In the previous examples, the primary message conveyed through the social interaction centered

on who the fathers were not; namely, mothers. In a related but different way, some fathers were reminded that many people find the idea of two men creating a family together hard to fathom. These reminders came in varied forms and resonated with fathers in different ways. Jeremy, father of 2-year-old Simon, appreciated the surprised reactions he received from coworkers when they saw a picture of his son on his desk:

[They 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.

Donald said that sometime he feels "a little bit like a novelty act" and that he sees being a gay parent as "celebrated a little bit." Similarly Joey, father of 9-month-old Mary, heard statements in his community that being a family with two dads is "weird." In this regard, Miguel described his experience of being thought of as "weird but cool" by his son's friend, "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." Mario got an alarmed reaction from a woman in a store when he explained to her that he was gay and had adopted a child with a male partner, "[She] 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." In contrast, Daniel and Martin had expected "to have to walk on eggshells" and "to get dirty looks or attitude" from the nurses in the hospital where they picked up their baby girl but then found that "it was like the most normal thing ... [and that] they thought it was kind of cool."

At times, fathers engaged in their everyday acts of parenting drew undue and often unwanted attention. Cultural markers like infant slings can perpetuate and challenge dominant scripts about parenting when they are on a man. Jeremy vividly paints a scene with a group of women in a shopping mall who were "shocked" when they realized that he was carrying his baby boy Cody in his sling and that the baby had two fathers:

If a woman had it on, they may have thought she's carrying a baby, but because I had it on, they like they didn't know what it was. ... We said he

doesn't have a mom; we're his dads. ... And so they were like totally freaked out, but not really in a negative way, but just in an uncomfortable, shocked kind of way

Although the women seemed uncomfortable and shocked, Jeremy did not seem to interpret their reactions as negative. For Jeremy, personal interactions such as this can co-opt cultural symbols like slings to raise awareness and challenge norms about mothering and fathering.

Like slings, baby carriages also carry deep cultural meanings. Alan, father of two boys ages 18 and 16 who were adopted from birth, faced strong reactions from his own mother about him walking with his son in public with a baby carriage:

She said, "Are you going to walk [in a dress] with the baby in a carriage on the Promenade?" ... it's a place where people congregate ... 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 messages may lie underneath his mother's concern? The reference to a dress and walking with a baby carriage may indicate that she was embarrassed that her son would be too feminine and would be violating norms of masculinity. It is significant that Alan did not know what his mother was referring to and wished he had asked her what she was thinking about. I sensed yearning and sadness as he spoke about how his mother eventually "came around" shortly before she died: "She got to know [our son]. She got to like him. She got to put him in her will ... she did come around, but unfortunately she was old and feeble ... I didn't know her."

For a number of fathers, attitudes 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 9-year-old daughter Linda that people were "looking" at them:

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."

It is noteworthy that Ely openly and matter-of-factly addresses these experiences with his 9-year-old daughter so that she is knowledgeable and aware of her social environment. Peter, father of two boys ages 10 and 4, explained that he and his partner Richard were not surprised that people look at them and that they too look a little more closely at families who do not fit what they know. Shane, father of three boys, likened people looking at him and his family to people looking at those with disabilities "because it's something that they're not accustomed to ... it's human nature to do that."

From a social constructionist perspective, these social situations reveal the subtle mechanisms by which dominant beliefs become imbued with power. Whether it is through a conversation, seeing a photograph, or being seen on the street, people in these fathers' communities expressed some form of confusion, disapproval, or surprise. The fathers and their families were seen as different or unusual because they countered cultural and societal expectations about what a family looks like. Although the reactions the fathers encountered were not intended or received as harmful, they placed an emotional burden on fathers as they had to consider how they and their family would handle being seen as different. One of the challenges fathers often faced was deciding if and how to disclose information about their families.

### *Decisions about Disclosure*

For many of the fathers, responding to others' questions, assumptions, and reactions required disclosing information about their sexual orientation and the structure of their families and then dealing with the ramifications of this disclosure. In these decisions around disclosure, fathers were directly reminded that they and their children live in a social environment where they may face attitudes that discount or invalidate them. Living with this awareness can create emotional pressures on the fathers as gay men and as parents. A number of fathers described occurrences where they felt they needed to "explain themselves." On the one hand, fathers wanted to be open and honest about their families, and on the other hand, they did not want to have to always "educate" others, a dilemma described by Conrad:

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.

Some fathers spoke poignantly about the lingering emotional effects of deciding if and how to explain themselves. Marshall, father to 4-year-old Colin, said that though it is "easier" to not explain his family's situation, mixed thoughts and feelings including his own internalized homophobia come up for him when he "moves on" without saying anything. In a similar way, Shane said that "a little part of us does die" when he decides not to say something. In contrast, Peter, when asked what it was like to not say something and "just let it go" when someone assumed he had a wife, explained that he saw it as a "natural reaction ... [because] that's just the way most of society is."

Many LGBT people face issues of disclosure about their sexual orientation and gender identity on a regular basis. Being a parent, however, adds another layer of factors to consider. A number of fathers said that how they chose to respond to a statement or question depended on whether their child was present. Although 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. Kyle, father of two teenage boys, spoke about how "little flecks of heteronormativity" remind him that there are places in the world where he and his family would not be accepted. These "flecks" appeared in seemingly mundane, yet deeply meaningful practices like filling out a form for financial aid or his children's summer camp:

The forms do not have any way, often, of reflecting your reality, and you don't know what to do. ... Do I cross out mother? You know, so you're always being reminded ... , 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" ... it does remind you that there are places and people who just for them [our family] would ... knock their socks off.

Acutely aware of this social reality, all of the fathers were willing to accept uncertainty in people's attitudes and behaviors toward them as gay men, but were not willing to do so when it

came to their children. As explained by Jeremy, "If I have a bad feeling, I'm moving on. It's a protective thing." Some fathers encountered situations where they faced a possible threat to their child's or family's safety. Donald described being on a hayride with his partner and two young children, his sister, and several people he did not know. He explained why he chose not to reveal that he and his partner were his children's parents and to instead leave it "ambiguous":

I didn't make a point of being like, "Don't you love Poppy and Daddy" ... they took us a mile up on this hay ride to go through this corn maze. ... My primary thought was if somebody gets pissed off, and something bad happens, I do not want my children to see.

"Making it clear who the parents were" posed a possible risk to his family's physical and emotional safety. Consequently, Donald made decisions accordingly to protect himself and his family. Shane spoke about the decision to disclose as something that is "always there":

We have to go in and explain in new situations, like in school and with Cub Scouts. ... You have to think about disclosing or not disclosing, coming out or not coming out. You always have to think about it ... it's just always there.

The various levels of social construction are evident in these situations. Having to face decisions about disclosure in social interactions heighten gay fathers' awareness of their relationship to a society in which they and their families are largely not reflected. With this heightened awareness come concerns and even fears, which at times can seem ever present, about the possible ramifications of being open and authentic in what can be an unwelcoming environment. Gay fathers contend with heteronormativity on many levels, including social norms which may be unspoken but they know are present, the complexities of negotiating difference in social interactions, and concerns that add to the already challenging tasks of parenting.

#### *Facing Hostility from Authority Figures*

Berger and Luckmann (1966), in their classic text on the social construction of reality, described *ideologies* as ideas individuals and institutions use as weapons to further social interests. The situations described thus far

involved intrusive statements, questions, and looks bolstered by the implicit authority of heteronormativity. Despite the stresses created by these encounters, the fathers by and large did not experience overt hostility from the other people involved. In contrast, some fathers faced direct scrutiny and hostility from people who were authority figures, such as airport officials, medical professionals, and the police. Ben and Gordon had filled out an immigration document as a family in an airport when:

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.

Like other couples I interviewed, Ben and Gordon had differing opinions about how to handle situations like this:

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.

Heteronormative beliefs can be enforced through forms and documents used in formal institutions such as airports, social service agencies, and schools (Dodd, 2008). In this encounter, the documentation was a vehicle by which someone in authority could discount the validity of a family with two fathers and thereby limit their freedom. Challenging the authority of officials and the norms they are supporting poses possible risks and losses. Despite these risks, some fathers challenged authority in even their most vulnerable moments. Josh and Robert were greeted with the following response from a nurse as they were taking their newly adopted baby out of the hospital:

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 ... 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.

While experiencing the joy, relief, and fear of becoming new parents, Josh and Robert were reminded that their desire and decision to adopt 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.

More recently, some fathers reported situations in which the police were called to investigate them. Jonathan, a White 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:

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 ... I always have to remind myself that they're doing it because someone was concerned for her safety. Ultimately, that's a good thing.

The combination of a crying child who was of a different color and gender of the man accompanying her set off alarm bells. Like Peter who explained his experience of being singled out as a "natural reaction" because of "the way society is," Jonathan makes sense of his experience as a response to concerns about his child's safety. In considering what might have happened if he were a woman or if his daughter was White, Jonathan explained:

No one would question a woman [because] they're not seen as aggressive or dangerous like we are ... even if she'd been a White child, they would have assumed she was my daughter. ... 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.

This situation illustrates how the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality leads to associations and assumptions that put a father in a difficult and potentially disempowering situation. Of importance here is Jonathan's experience of this situation as a gay man who at the moment he is nurturing his daughter is met with scrutiny. Like Josh and Robert, Jonathan's desire, intentions, and ability to be a nurturing parent are rendered invisible and questionable. Because of potentially facing such situations, several fathers like Ben, also a White father of two African American children, always carry around their children's adoption paperwork. (A discussion of the unique challenges and opportunities of gay

fathers who adopted transracially are beyond the scope of this article).

For some fathers, facing such scrutiny from the police became opportunities for advocacy and bonding as a family. Shane spoke about his confrontation with a police officer when he took his 5-year-old son George to get fingerprinted and was told that he had to provide his child's mother's maiden name on a form:

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. He said that he was going to cuff me on the floor and take me down.

Following this incident, Shane and other members of his community advocated for changes in policy in the police department. Shane said that facing this type of adversity brought them closer together as a family and closer to their communities of support because "nothing draws people [together] better than a common enemy." While facing hostility and scrutiny and being aware of a potentially unwelcoming environment, many fathers did not change who they are or what they chose to do in their lives. According to Jonathan, "We can't not be who we are, the three of us walking down the street. There's no question of who we are."

### DISCUSSION

Qualitative research like this study uncovers the richness and subtleties of human experience (Patton, 2002). This article illuminates how the social fabric of heteronormativity is woven on multiple levels into spontaneous and often uninvited social interactions for a sample of gay adoptive fathers who adopted over a nearly 25-year time span and who are parenting children ranging in age from infancy to young adulthood. In particular, the article illustrates how a social constructionist perspective can provide insight into the emotional impact of these situations. On the surface, many of the situations fathers described were ordinary social encounters in public settings. The questions, statements, and looks they faced, however, were complex and unpredictable. From sidewalk to airport and hospital to playground, gay fathers and their children drew attention in various forms – curiosity, scrutiny, celebration, surprise, disapproval – and with a variety

of messages about gender, parenting, and family. The fathers frequently encountered situations in which other people, not seeing a woman and seeing two men, expressed concern or even alarm for their children's well-being. Like gay fathers in previous studies (Berkowitz & Margiglio, 2007; Goldberg, 2012; Hicks, 2008; Mallon, 2004), many of the situations described illustrate how norms of sexuality and gender intertwine. A man choosing to parent without a woman violates the belief that women are children's natural (and therefore necessary) primary caregivers. The fathers' experiences reveal a cultural milieu in which mothering reigns as the marker of ideal parenting, what Miall and March (2003) called 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).

This article spotlights the ways gay adoptive fathers decide if and how to disclose information about themselves and their families in social settings and the emotional complexities of these decisions. Similar to previous findings (Mallon, 2004; Rivers, Poteat, & Noret, 2008), how they chose to respond depended on whether their children were present, whether they wanted to educate others about their family, and their assessment of the possible gains and risks of coming out. Fathers often had to balance their need to be honest and authentic with their need for safety. The act of disclosing can break the silence that can lead to feeling more integrated within oneself and within one's environment. At the same time, disclosure in potentially homophobic and heterosexist environments requires taking emotional, psychological, and even physical risks. Regardless of how fathers chose to respond in a given situation, having to make these kinds of ethical and emotional trade-offs illustrates the burdens faced by those who do not fit within the moral and ideological boundaries of heteronormativity.

By focusing on adoptive fathers, this study sheds further light on the experience of parenting outside the realm of biological kinship. Like gay and lesbian families, adoptive families and adopted children are often stigmatized and viewed as a second tier of families (Javier, Baden, Biafora, Camacho-Gingerich, & Henderson, 2007). Questions posed to adopted children like "Who is your real mother?" suggest that an adoptive family is somehow not legitimate and that relationships between adoptive parents

and their children are inferior. Dominant narratives about parenting equate biological kinship with idealized forms of attachment, security, and authenticity as a family (Riggs, 2006). In other words, relationships derived from blood relations must necessarily be more attached, secure, and authentic than those that are not. This narrative is woven into the fabric of heteronormativity. As a result, gay adoptive fathers have to justify their relationships with their children without relying on the assumed closeness that comes from being biologically related. It was beyond the scope of this study to explore if gay adoptive fathers in fact experience heteronormativity differently from gay fathers who became parents through biological routes such as surrogacy. This is a question for future comparative studies.

Heterosexual privilege comes in many forms that are often taken for granted: being allowed to get married; showing affection in public without fear of repercussion; and not having one's sexuality and relationships become objects of scrutiny or curiosity. In many of the social interactions described in this article, gay fathers felt misunderstood, questioned, and scrutinized. The fathers' stories point to that emotional space where a person is engaged in his practice of everyday living and then through an unexpected social interaction becomes acutely aware that he may not fit in or may not be welcomed. The fathers entered these everyday social encounters experiencing and doing things as parents but were then treated as someone not connected to or even harmful to their children. These experiences at times reinforced and other times negated their own felt sense of being a parent. Like other LGBT people who live in what Kiersky (2001) called the "shadowlands" (p. 28), gay fathers must at times contend with being shadowed by the specter of heteronormativity. Consequently, reminders of a dominant heterosexual order often punctuated the ordinary joys and struggles of raising their children.

The findings of this study build on previous research showing the burdens same-sex parents often feel having to justify themselves and their families as they manage their visibility in their communities (Bos, van Balen, van den Boom, & Sandfort, 2004; Goldberg, 2012; Mallon, 2004; Tornello et al., 2011). Becoming a parent for some members of society is part of what Fivush (2010) calls a life script, a "canonical cultural biography" of what a typical life looks like"

(p. 93). For many heterosexuals 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, teacher, or random person on the street. 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). A person who is considered deviant may feel the pressure to explain himself, whereas someone who conforms to social expectations often has the freedom to remain silent because he represents what is socially, culturally, and morally valued. Gay men often are faced with the decision to "come out" against a backdrop where becoming a parent is not seen as part of their life script. The fact that some of the men had to consider not being open is a penalty imposed on them for being gay by social environments shaped by heteronormative ideologies. At the same time, a gay father choosing not to explain his relationship with his partner and child can be an act of resistance against a societal imperative that asks those who do not fit in a heterosexual order to justify themselves. Choosing to be silent in a social interaction can thus be an act of exerting power (Roy-Chowdhury, 2010).

### *Limitations of the Study*

The sample of fathers in this study is quite homogenous, comprising primarily White men of high socioeconomic status who live in small to large urban environments. Gay fathers from racial minorities, who have lower income, and/or live in rural communities, may have significantly different experiences from those of the fathers in this study. Regarding data collection, the results of this study are based on interviews conducted only with the parents. Although 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. Although 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. Finally, though I made every effort to probe quiet partners in the interviews, due to existing dynamics within the couple they still may not have been as open in front of their partners as

they would have been if interviewed individually. Regarding data analysis, a limitation is that only one person (the researcher) analyzed the data; therefore, it was not possible to cross-check the results of the analyses with another analyst. Despite the steps taken to heighten the rigor and trustworthiness of the analysis that were described earlier, this remains a limitation in the study. Because 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 couples, which limited the amount of information gained about single gay fathers.

#### *Implications for Practice, Education, and Research*

Becoming culturally competent in working with LGBT populations requires identifying and challenging heteronormative attitudes and beliefs about LGBT people (Mallon, 2004). This article illustrates how a social constructionist lens can be used to deconstruct the workings of heteronormativity in everyday life. Ideas about motherhood, fatherhood, and the "best interests of a child" become embedded in practice and social policy and then derive their power by becoming taken for granted and "natural" (Riggs, 2006). Practitioners in child welfare settings and other agencies serving families can challenge and expand these notions about "who counts" as a family (Hicks, 2005). Asking for the names of the mother and father and providing only two choices for one's gender render nonheterosexual and non-gender-conforming people invisible and not valid enough to be represented. Thus, practitioners in all settings can develop language on agency forms that does not presume that everyone is heterosexual and that a family has a female and male parent. Practitioners in school settings can raise awareness about families with same sex parents and create environments that do not merely tolerate but celebrate all kinds of family diversity.

LGBT clients come to practitioners having experienced stigma, discrimination, harassment, and even violence as a result of homophobia and heterosexism in their communities. Many students in human services have been exposed to these same homophobic and heterosexist attitudes (Foreman & Quinlan, 2008). It is

important for educators in social work and family therapy programs to integrate material about the day-to-day experiences of families headed by same sex parents into curricula. The various types of experiences described in this article expand our understanding of how gay fathers resist heteronormativity while being deeply immersed within it. Educators can use the results and social constructionist approach of this study to help their students identify their own beliefs about family, parenting, sexuality, and gender and provide them with tools for deconstructing these personal biases. The examples provided in this article can help students identify seemingly mundane social situations in their personal and professional lives where they have the opportunity to reinforce or challenge heteronormativity. Like the fathers in this study, students have the opportunity to resist dominant narratives while witnessing how they manifest in their everyday lives. Finally, students can be encouraged to question the notion that one's gender and sexual orientation influence the ability to effectively parent (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010; Hicks, 2008) and ask the more crucial question: What conditions are necessary for everyone, regardless of relationship or family status, to remain connected, be nurtured, and feel whole?

Further studies on gay adoptive fathers using a variety of methodological approaches (e.g. phenomenological, grounded theory, narrative analysis) are warranted. In particular, exploring the experiences of children raised by gay adoptive fathers, particularly middle school-age children transitioning into adolescence, is needed. Given that the population of children raised by gay adoptive fathers is aging, a longitudinal study on children adopted by gay men is warranted. The experiences of gay fathers of different races, ethnicities, and class backgrounds need to be explored. Finally, research is needed on how students who are being trained to work with families become aware of and challenge their attitudes about LGBT issues, including families with LGBT parents. As gay fathers become more visible in American society and as attitudes toward LGBT people change, entrenched ideas about parenting, family, gender, and sexuality are exposed and challenged. As one father told me, gay fathers are in many ways pioneers. At the same time, their joys and struggles as parents will undoubtedly resonate across families and communities.

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