

Gay Fathers Expanding the Possibilities for Us All

Stephanie Jill Schacher
Carl F. Auerbach
Louise Bordeaux Silverstein

ABSTRACT. This article describes a qualitative research study of 21 men who became fathers as openly gay men. The fathers were interviewed using a semi-structured questionnaire in a focus group format. The data were analyzed using grounded theory methodology. The narrative data depict the men's paths toward fatherhood. The themes elicited from their narratives suggested how gay men are changing traditional cultural norms for fathers, families, and masculinity. The authors propose that by degendering parenting, reconceptualizing family, and reworking masculine gender roles, gay fathers are expanding role norms in novel ways that may serve as alternative models for all families. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail*

Stephanie Jill Schacher, PsyD, is affiliated with Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center, New York, New York. Carl F. Auerbach, PhD, and Louise Bordeaux Silverstein, PhD, are affiliated with Ferkauf Graduate School of Psychology, Yeshiva University, New York, New York.

Address correspondence to: Stephanie Jill Schacher (E-mail: s.schacher@att.net).

The research presented in this article was part of the Yeshiva Fatherhood Project, a large-scale qualitative study of the fathering experiences of men in many subcultures in the United States. The data were originally collected, organized, coded, and submitted by Stephanie Jill Schacher as a PsyD research project in partial fulfillment of her doctoral degree. The data were re-analyzed for this article.

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Fatherhood is a powerful social construct defined by the various roles that fathers have assumed such as breadwinner and disciplinarian, or more recently, nurturer and caretaker. The changing definition of fatherhood, and even of who can be a father, is evident in the gay community. While gay men have always fathered children through heterosexual marriages (Bozett, 1989), it is only recently that openly gay men have chosen to become fathers through means other than a traditional heterosexual union. The increasing number of gay men starting families has been aided by expanding opportunities to have children through foster parenting, adoption, surrogacy, and co-parenting arrangements with lesbian mothers (Martin, 1993).

This subgroup of gay fathers has been referred to as the *new* gay fathers to differentiate them from the group of gay fathers who had children in the context of a heterosexual marriage and only later established a gay identity. While it has been estimated that there are 1-3 million gay men who are fathers through heterosexual relationships (Falk, 1989; Gottman, 1990), there are no estimates on the number of new gay fathers. Thus, despite these men's increasing visibility, little is known about them.

The data presented in this article add to prior research in three specific areas: (1) information is provided about gay men's motivations to parent and their paths toward fatherhood; (2) the way in which gay fathers have redefined the meaning of family are depicted; and (3) demonstrating how gay fathers have made transformations to parental roles and how these transformations have encouraged the reworking of traditional masculine gender ideology.

Research on gay fathers is essential to understanding the diversity of fatherhood identities that exist in the United States today. However, we are also interested in studying gay fathers as representatives of people on the margins for whom conventional social roles and corresponding norms do not work. People living on the margins must develop a new set of rules and role norms that may then serve as models for non-marginalized people-in essence creating new opportunities for all of us. The question we pose then is: What can all families learn from these

new gay fathers? This article will describe a sample of gay fathers and suggest some answers to that question.

Previous Studies on Married Gay Fathers

In the past decade, several articles reviewing research on gay fathers have emerged (Barrett & Robinson, 1990, 1994; Bozett, 1989; Patterson & Chan, 1997). In a comprehensive review, Patterson (2004) described the prevalence of and diversity among gay fathers, reviewed the research on gay fathers as individuals and as parents, and presented the outcome data on children of gay fathers. She concluded that, overall, the research has contradicted stereotypes of gay fathers suggesting that the men and their children would be more likely to have difficulties than heterosexual families. The difficulties gay families encounter emerge from external prejudice and discrimination.

In our research in the Yeshiva Fatherhood Project, we found that issues of identity consolidation had been challenging for most of the men. In a sample of 25 gay men who had fathered children through heterosexual marriage, successful integration of their fathering identity and their gay identity often required coming out to their wives and children (Benson, Silverstein, & Auerbach, 2003).

Two Studies on the New Gay Fathers

There have been two published studies on gay men who had children outside of conventional heterosexual relationships referred to as new gay fathers. Sbordone (1993) sampled 78 gay men who became parents via adoption or arrangements with surrogate mothers and compared them with 83 gay non-fathers on measures of internalized homophobia, self-esteem, and recollections of family relationships. The gay fathers in this study displayed significantly higher levels of self-esteem and significantly lower levels of internalized homophobia than did the gay non-fathers. Sbordone postulated that the higher levels of self-esteem and lower levels of homophobia were a result of fatherhood.

McPherson (1993) compared 28 gay parenting couples to 27 heterosexual couples on measures of division of labor and relationship satisfaction. Gay couples demonstrated significantly more equitable arrangements of parenting tasks and roles, significantly greater satisfaction with those arrangements, and greater overall relationship satisfaction than did heterosexual parenting couples. McPherson speculated that the higher degree of satisfaction was a product of gay fathers being able to choose

parenting roles that suited them, rather than having roles assigned to them according to traditional gender role expectations.

METHOD

We have not included a detailed discussion of the assumptions underlying qualitative research because we have discussed these issues at length in both Benson, Silverstein, and Auerbach (2005) and Auerbach and Silverstein (2003). In general, it is important to bear in mind that qualitative research is hypothesis-generating rather than hypothesis-testing research. As a result, qualitative studies are conducted and evaluated differently than quantitative ones.

Focus Group Procedure

The current study was part of a larger project that examined the fathering experiences of men from a variety of subcultures in the U.S. Four focus groups, or semi-structured group interviews, were conducted in which the moderator took the group members through a narrative account of their fathering experiences. The men were asked a series of eight standard questions (see Table 1), with follow-up questions specifically tailored to their answers. A demographic questionnaire was given to each group. The first author, a White, heterosexual, female

TABLE 1. Standardized Focus Group Questions

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1. When was the first time you thought about being a father and what did you think it would be like? How did coming out affect your thoughts about being a father?
 2. Who were your role models, and how did they affect your parenting?
 3. How did you/you and your partner go through the process of deciding to have a child?
 4. What is being a father like? How did it change your sense of who you are and what your life is about?
 5. How has being a father affected your relationship with your partner?
 6. How has being a father affected your relationship with your parents and siblings?
 7. What do you tell your children about their family, and what are your concerns about raising your child?
 8. How do you divide up childcare and work responsibilities?
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graduate student, acted as moderator and was supervised by the secondary authors. The focus groups were run in private homes. Each focus group lasted from 2 to 2.5 hours.

Recruitment Procedures

The moderator recruited participants through personal contacts and word of mouth using a snowball sampling procedure. A contact at the Gay and Lesbian Parenting Coalition International (GLPCI) provided several leads to other gay and lesbian parenting groups across the United States. These organizations were contacted, and advertisements calling for participants were placed in their newsletters or sent to recipients through their email distribution list. GLPCI also placed an advertisement in their online newsletter. A similar advertisement was placed at Congregation Beth Simchat Torah, a gay and lesbian synagogue in Manhattan. Researchers and clinicians working with gay parents were also contacted, and a posting was made through the email distribution list of Division 44 of the APA.

These procedures resulted in a wide array of responses from several cities and states. The first author contacted potential participants by email and/or telephone explaining the purpose of the study, the structure of the focus groups, the process of informed consent, and how video and audiotapes were to be used. When enough potential participants began to cluster in certain locations, these locations became the sites at which focus groups were ultimately held.

Research Participants

Four focus groups were run in the following locations: Manhattan, a suburb of Philadelphia, a suburb of Seattle, and San Francisco. The number of men in each group varied between three and seven. In total, 21 men participated. Demographic information is summarized in Table 2. The ages of the men ranged from 29 to 49. All but two were employed. The majority (81%) of household incomes were over \$100,000 per year. With the exception of two men, all lived and parented with a partner. The men had either one or two children with a total of 14 children for the sample ranging in age from 17 months to 12 years of age. All of the groups were made up of a combination of men who knew each other and men who were strangers.

TABLE 2. Demographic Information

<i>Demographics (N = 21)</i>	#	%
<i>Age of Fathers</i>		
29-35:	6	28.6
36-42:	9	42.9
43-49:	6	28.6
Mean: 39.4		
<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>		
White:	17	81.0
Asian/Asian-American:	3	14.3
Hispanic-American:	1	5.0
<i>Religion</i>		
Jewish:	6	28.6
Catholic:	6	28.6
Protestant:	3	14.3
Methodist:	2	9.5
None:	4	19.0
<i>Education</i>		
Some College:	5	23.8
College Degree:	2	9.5
Some Graduate:	2	9.5
Graduate Degree:	12	57.0
<i>Household Income</i>		
\$30,000-\$64,999:	2	9.5
\$65,000-\$99,999:	2	9.5
\$100,000 and above:	17	81.0
<i>Employment Status</i>		
Employed:	19	90.5
Unemployed:	2	9.5
<i>Partnership Status</i>		
Single:	2	9.5
Partnered:	19	90.5
Mean Years: 12.9		
<i>Ages of Children (N = 14)</i>		
3 and under:	8	57.0
4-7:	5	35.7
8-12:	1	7.0
Mean Age: 4.3		

<i>Demographics (N = 21)</i>	#	%
<i>Race/Ethnicity of Children</i>		
White:	7	50.0
Black:	2	14.3
Hispanic:	2	14.3
Mixed:	3	21.4
<i>Means of Having Children</i>		
Adoption	15	71.4
Bio co-parent w/Lesbian	3	14.3
Surrogacy	2	9.5
Non-bio co-parent	1	5.0
<i>Legal Guardianship</i>		
Guardianship	17	81.0
No Guardianship	4	19.0

Data Analysis

The focus groups were audiotaped and videotaped, and the transcribed taped transcripts constituted the data of the study. The data were analyzed using a grounded theory technique which generated three levels of analysis (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). The first level, *Repeating Ideas*, reflected words and phrases used regularly by the participants. After identifying the Repeating Ideas, a second, more abstract level called *Cultural Themes* were recognized. Cultural Themes represented more general ideas implicit in the Repeating Ideas. The third and most abstract level of data analysis is *Theoretical Constructs*. The Theoretical Constructs reflected our organization of the Cultural Themes into theoretical categories that link our findings to psychological theory in general. Each level of organization subsumed the level below it. That is, each Repeating Idea was a cluster of relevant text; each Cultural Theme was a cluster of Repeating Ideas; and each Theoretical Construct was a cluster of Cultural Themes (see Table 3).

Our procedure incorporated concerns about the issues of reliability and validity although not in the form they take in quantitative research. As suggested by Rubin and Rubin (1995), we have tried to achieve a procedure that is: (1) transparent (i.e., another investigator can check what we have done); (2) communicable (i.e., the categories make sense to other investigators who want to use them); and (3) coherent (i.e., the categories are internally consistent while reflecting both individual dif-

TABLE 3. Theoretical Constructs, Cultural Themes, and Repeating Ideas

I. Heterosexist gender role strain.		
A. We wanted children, but it wasn't supposed to be in the picture for us.		100%
1. I always knew I wanted children.		71.4%
"For me it was just very innate. There was no question." (Grp 2:HL)		
2. I thought I'd never be a father because I was gay.		28.6%
"I bought the line 100% when I came out that there was no chance for me to have a family of my own." (Grp 2:HH)		
3. Getting ready to be a parent took some time.		100%
"You really have to put a lot of thought into it. We did a lot of discussing and exploring about why." (Grp 3:GJ)		
"I read everything there was on parenting, gay parenting, and adoption." (Grp 4:RW)		
B. Where's Mom? You're looking at him.		100%
4. What's the story here? Giving Mom a break?		76.2%
"You're not wearing a sign that you are gay, this is your child, and they're like, 'Well, what's the story here?'" (Grp 1:PV)		
"I hear the 'giving Mom a break' and I'm so sick of that." (Grp 1:JL)		
5. Feeling you need to be a "super parent" to prove yourself.		66.7%
"There's this perception that you have to be a super parent because . . . some people think you can't do it." (Grp 3:BM)		
6. Discrimination in adoption because you're a man and because you're gay.		61.9%
"It's disgusting, but there's a hierarchy of parents and there's a hierarchy of children . . . and gay men are at the bottom." (Grp 3:DF)		
C. Who stays home and who goes to work—bucking the paradigm can be hard.		100%
7. I felt really conflicted.		33.3%
"It was a really hard decision . . . I wanted to create a really special bond with our son . . . but then there was the issue of career suicide, of taking off two years . . . how many companies will find that . . . valuable." (Grp 1:PV)		
"It's about being a man and not working." (Grp 1:HV)		
"I tend to think less about what people think of me." (Grp 1:PV)		
"There was a lot of evolution . . . my own personal evolution, emotionally, mentally." (Grp 1:PV)		
8. I wouldn't want to stay at home full-time.		76%
"I enjoy being with her but I also need the stimulation of working too." (Grp 4:JV)		
"It's probably the biggest problem in our relationship . . . who gets to go to work." (Grp 1:JL)		
II. Facilitating ideology—degendered parenting.		
D. Deconstructing "Mommy" and "Daddy."		100%
9. Gay parents are a new phenomenon—there isn't a path.		71%
"We were the first gay couple to go through this agency so they didn't really know what to expect." (Grp 1:JL)		
"For us, there isn't a path. We had to invent the path." (Grp 2:HL)		

10. We define our roles—there are no rules. 90.5%
- "I wouldn't call it a 'mommy' or 'daddy' role . . . just primary caregiver." (Grp 3:BM)
- "Greg tends to do . . . the outside chores . . . but he also does the fancy-type cooking." (Grp 3:DF)
- "It's really a pretty even division of who makes breakfast and who, you know, cleans up the table." (Grp 4:MC)
- "We each took a day off." (Grp 3:DF)
- "Two men is a big advantage . . . you don't have stereotypes to fall back on." (Grp 4:JV)
- "It's not about gender . . . males and females can be equally mothers and fathers." (Grp 3:BM)
- "I don't know [if] we're men or not men." (Grp 3:FC)
11. Nomenclature, and changing and creating terminology. 95.2%
- "You're having to cross everything out . . . I went to this pediatrician, it's a pre-adoption visit, I'm not a mother, I felt just like a teacher with a red pen." (Grp 3:DF)
- "I'm the bio-dad." (Grp 1:PF)
- "Am I a mother or a father? So what does that make me when I nurture him? What's a father and what's a mother? I don't really know." (Grp 4:DO)
- E. Love makes a family. 100%
12. Bonding transcends biology. 66.7%
- "The first time I held Hilary, it's the tactile that made the absolute bond." (Grp 3:MD)
- "It was an immediate bonding to this person . . . and it transcends biology." (Grp 2:DL)
- "From the day we brought him home, I felt a connection . . . it's like, whose else's are they? They're yours." (Grp 4:RW)
13. Redefining family. 81%
- "He has this whole extended family . . . eight or nine grandparents of multiple ethnic backgrounds, and he knows it's his family." (Grp 1:PV)
- "Gloria's lucky, she has two mommies and a dad, and Uncle Riley." (Grp 2:HH)
- "We found out who the birth father is and we're in touch." (Grp 1:HV)
14. We don't see in Black and White. 42.9%
- "Our main goal was having a healthy child, regardless of race. We didn't have to have our child look like us." (Grp 1:HV)
- "We told the agency . . . the child could be biracial, it didn't matter to us." (Grp 4:BD)
- "You walk into the supermarket . . . it's like the whole shopping center just like, stopped what they were doing . . . I think they immediately see the color difference, and everything else kind of shuts down in their brain." (Grp 3:MD)
- III. Social Supports.
- F. Keeping connections. 100%
15. Providing kids with a variety of influences. 76.2%
- "We try to surround her with many different kinds of families." (Grp 1:JL)
- "I'm trying to provide an environment in which Danny has lots of people that can be role models . . . whether it's his . . . race, sexuality, all these issues." (Grp 1:MK)

TABLE 3 (continued)

16. We want our kids to know their roots. "Julian's mom is active in his life. She lives a couple of blocks away." (Grp 1:HV) "We're in touch with the grandparents, we have traditional clothes for the holidays of the African-American heritage, and we'd like him to learn Spanish." (Grp 1:HV)	61.9%
17. Religion ties us together. "It's one thing we're tied together with, we're Jewish, we're all Jewish." (Grp 4:RW) Religion is very important in both of our lives . . . and we want her to have some sense of unity." (Grp 4:MC)	28.6%
18. Our families are supports. "They've been amazingly proud of how we're parenting and how the girls are turning out . . . they've been wonderfully supportive." (Grp 2:HL) "The extended family has been really wonderful on both sides." (Grp 3:GJ)	57.1%
G. Creating buffers by teaching tolerance & giving kids tools to handle difference.	100%
19. It's important to educate others. "In some ways I view it as part of my community service. The more we educate, the easier it is for everybody." (Grp 2:HL)	71.4%
20. What we tell our kids about our family. "We're real matter of fact about it . . . we don't try to make it different or wrong, just 'this is our situation'." (Grp 1:KW) "The truth. Day one." (Grp 2:DL) "I made a book for him . . . about how Daddy went to Guatemala and Papa was making our home here." (Grp 3:DF)	85.7%
21. Modeling openness and pride. "We don't want to ever give Danny the sense that we have to hide who we are, what his origins are, what our family is like." (Grp 1:PF) "Being proud of who we are and we want Lily to feel the same." (Grp 1:JL)	33.3%
IV. Rewards for transformation.	
H. Satisfaction in helping make change and paving the way for others.	100%
22. Beating the system. "It really involved having to beat the system . . . having the embassy in Guatemala say, 'Thank you, you're the first person to ever challenge the system'." (Grp 3:DF) "We won on appeal . . . and every piece of legislation since the coparent adoption went through . . . has had some sort of tag on it." (Grp 3:MD)	23.8%
23. Enjoying being spokespersons. "It's a great feeling . . . to be part of change, helping change." (Grp 4:DO) "We've had a number of people, gay people, sitting in this room . . . who now have children . . . and I think that's fantastic." (Grp 4:JV)	57.1%

i. Being a father is the thing I am most proud of.	100%
24. Personal growth and sense of pride.	100%
"Of all the things I've done in my life, it's probably the most important, and grounded me the most, given me the most sense of worth." (Grp 1:JL)	
"Being a dad has been better than any therapy I've ever been in." (Grp 1:KW)	
"It's as though I can talk back to all those who said, 'Coming out is gonna destroy your life, you'll never have a family', and say, 'Yes I can.'" (Grp 2:HH)	
25. Being a parent brings you closer.	76%
"I had not spoken with my parents in over seven years. My parents are fundamentalist Christian ... and I told them they were going to be grandparents and they were just ecstatic ... just the magic of a grandchild is just unbelievable." (Grp 1:PP)	
"Emma cements us. We may be arguing, but as soon as we see her, we just say wait a minute, that's all not important, this is important, we're a family now." (Grp 4:JV)	
26. It's not a straight versus gay world anymore.	66.7%
"We have straight friends with kids and gay friends with kids. That's more important than straight or gay is being parents." (Grp 1:HV)	
"There are people without kids and there are people with kids, and that's how I'm looking at the world now, instead of I'm gay and 90% are straight. The cutting line has moved. Suddenly I'm in with this other group." (Grp 2:HH)	

N = 21. The percentages in the Repeating Ideas reflect the proportion of the total sample that expressed a comment endorsing a Repeating Idea. The percentages in the Cultural Themes, however, reflect the proportion of the sample that expressed a comment in any of the Repeating Ideas that support a particular Theme.

ferences and genuine inconsistencies in the culture). We try to achieve these aims by incorporating multiple participants at each stage of the data analysis process. For a detailed discussion of the coding technique, see Auerbach and Silverstein (2003).

RESULTS

Table 3 demonstrates how we have used quotes from the transcripts to construct our Repeating Ideas, and how, in turn, these Repeating Ideas are clustered into Cultural Themes, and Cultural Themes into Theoretical Constructs. The Cultural Themes are presented below as subsection headings, and the Repeating Ideas as paragraph headings. Because of space considerations, we have not presented the full array of

data. Rather, we have selected enough of the total data set to provide the reader with a sense of the evolution of the men's fathering identities. However, the complete data set is available from the first author.

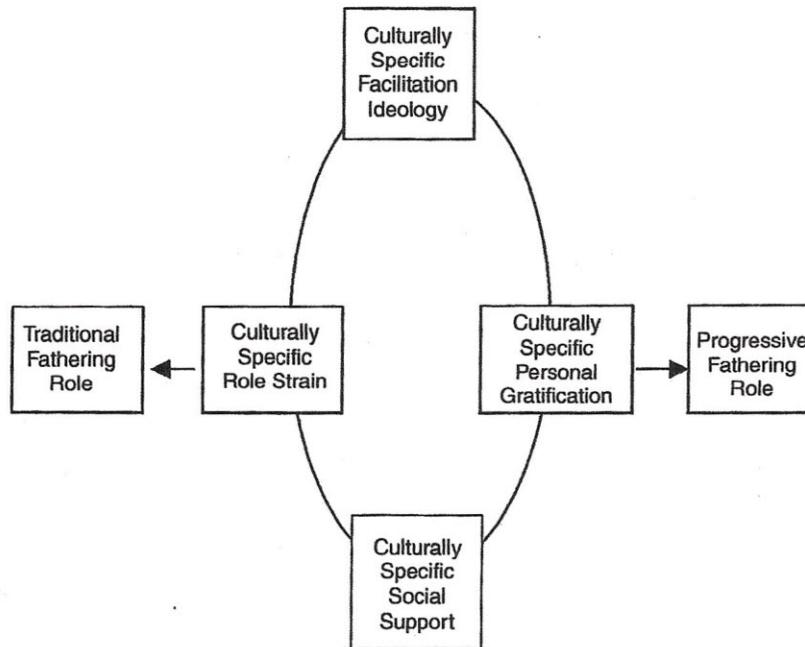
The final stage in the development of grounded theory organizes the Cultural Themes into Theoretical Constructs that link the data to existing theory. Our theoretical framework is embedded in profeminist men's studies (see for example Levant & Pollock, 1994). This perspective proposes that masculinity in the United States is evolving from a more traditional stance that emphasized achievement, aggression, and restricted emotionality to a more progressive stance that advocates a balance between work and family roles, collaboration and power-sharing, and emotional responsiveness. The evolution of fathering from a sole provider/disciplinarian to a co-provider/caretaker parallels the contemporary reconstruction of masculinity.

We developed four Theoretical Constructs which we believe reflect how this evolution in fathering is taking place (see Figure 1). These four constructs interact in a non-linear, circular fashion. Our research has suggested that there are many subcultures of fatherhood each with its specific version of gender role strain. Each evolving version of fatherhood requires culturally specific ideologies and social supports to facilitate change toward a more active and responsible fatherhood; and each contains its own rewards for change. We call this theoretical framework the *Next Step Theory of Change* because it suggests the requirements necessary for men to take the next step on the fathering journey from a traditional father toward a more progressive version of fatherhood.

The current study continues our process of building theory about how men are reconstructing the fathering role. Below, we present a theoretical narrative that shows how the data from this sample of gay dads (see Table 3) support our theoretical framework.

1. *Heterosexist Gender Role Strain*. The men in this study described a particular type of gender role strain that we have labeled *heterosexist* role strain because gay men violate masculine gender role norms as defined by heterosexuals. Their story begins as they contemplated becoming fathers. They could not imagine how to integrate the conflicting identities of gay and father ("We wanted children, but it wasn't supposed to be in the picture for us"). They realized that their internalized homophobia was interfering with their ability to take on the fathering role ("I thought I'd never be a father because I was gay"). In order to become fathers, they needed to reconcile these conflicting identities, which took time and exploration ("Getting ready to be a parent took some time").

FIGURE 1



The men reported that they felt awkward because, in most cases, they were parenting without female partners. They were often questioned about where their children's mother was ("Where's Mom? You're looking at him"). Not only do gay men feel that they are battling against homosexual stereotypes but also against our culture's bias to see women rather than men in caretaking roles.

The men spoke about the attention and comments they received just by walking down the street with their families ("What's the story here? Giving Mom a break?"), which reinforced the idea that it is unusual to be a man and a primary caregiver. In response, some felt that to pass the scrutiny of others they needed to be a *super parent*. Finally, the men were reminded of their unorthodox roles through the discriminatory experiences many had during the adoption process ("Discrimination in adoption because you're a man and because you're gay"). Many adop-

tion agencies told them that there was a low probability that they would be offered a healthy, non-disabled infant. Others suggested that they list themselves as a single male rather than as gay couple.

A final area of gender role strain involved the emphasis traditional masculine gender ideology places on the provider role as a core part of male identity ("Who stays home and who goes to work—bucking the paradigm can be hard"). Despite their desire to be very involved in caregiving, many expressed feeling conflicted about giving up their primary role as breadwinner. They spoke of the strong ethic ingrained in them to be providers ("It's about being a man and not working"). A few spoke about feeling a decline in social status after switching from a provider to a caretaking role. Some of the men resolved this feeling by actively redefining their own sense of personal value ("There was a lot of evolution . . . my own personal evolution, emotionally, mentally").

Still, most of the men did not want to be full-time caregivers even if it were economically feasible for them. Many felt that they did not want to compromise career goals (i.e., commit "career suicide") or miss the intellectual stimulation and challenges of work. Some even stated that deciding which parent went back to paid employment had been a source of friction in the couple ("It's probably the biggest problem in our relationship . . . who gets to go to work"). This last aspect of role strain remained an ongoing issue for many of the men in our sample. Many felt that they should be out earning a living or climbing the corporate ladder. They found it difficult to modify this vision of what it meant to be a man, despite their sense that parenthood should be the priority.

All of the men reported significant areas of strain. As gay men, they did not conform to traditional definitions of masculinity. As primary caregivers, they did not conform to traditional fatherhood norms. As single-parent, two-father, or multi-parent families, they did not conform to traditional definitions of family.

2. Facilitating Ideology-Degendered Parenting. In our larger research project, we have found that as men begin to change their fathering practices from more traditional to more progressive ones, they need to generate a new masculinity ideology. This new ideology provides a rationale for their new behaviors, and, thus, facilitates change by defining a belief system that prescribes, rather than prohibits change.

All of the men articulated a belief system that we have called *degendered parenting* where parental roles and duties are not ascribed by gender. Gay parenting, by necessity, makes the gender role distinctions between "mommy" and "daddy" obsolete ("Deconstructing 'Mommy' and 'Daddy'"). One man highlighted the artificiality of these

distinctions when he questioned, "What's a father and what's a mother? I don't really know."

In their blending of mother and father roles, the men had a sense of doing something new that had never been done before ("Gay parents are a new phenomenon—there isn't a path"). They felt free to write their own rules, define their own parenting roles, and create new norms. They created a hybrid, degendered parent role that encouraged both partners to be adept at most childcare duties rather than creating a "mommy role" in which one partner over-functioned in caretaking, and a "daddy role" in which the other partner over-functioned in the public world of work. One man commented on the violation of traditional gender role norms by joking, "I don't know [if] we're men or not men."

Most spoke of how both partners made personal sacrifices so that neither partner had more responsibility at home or less infringement on work life than the other ("We each took a day off"). Parental responsibilities and personal sacrifices tended to be determined through a democratic, mutual decision-making process rather than through an "anatomocracy" based on predetermined gendered roles ("It's really a pretty even division of who makes breakfast and who, you know, cleans up the table").

These men rejected the common wisdom that women are naturally suited to parenting believing instead that men can be as nurturing and capable of raising children as women ("It's not about gender . . . males and females can be equally mothers and fathers"). To support these changes in their roles, they revised common heterocentric terms and labels to accommodate their families (nomenclature, and changing and creating terminology).

A second aspect of their facilitating ideology was their re-conceptualization of family. The ideology, "love makes a family," emphasized the primacy of an emotional attachment between parent and child that need not be based on a biological tie (bonding transcends biology). This belief redefined the concept of family as a group of individuals who love and are committed to one another. It also redefined the structure of family, going well beyond the traditional nuclear paradigm. Family may be comprised of one parent or multiple parents, people who live together or live in different households, and persons who are biologically related such as the "birth father," members of the "birth family," and others who have no biological ties (redefining family).

Another aspect of the redefinition of family was the interracial and interethnic nature of these families ("We don't see in Black and White"). Most men who adopted felt that it did not matter what racial

background their child came from ("The child could be biracial, it didn't matter to us"). One partner from a White couple with a Black child described feeling as if an entire shopping center of people had stopped to look at the color difference between him and his child. Adopting children from different racial or ethnic backgrounds is still another way in which these families violate traditional cultural norms.

3. *Social Supports.* Going against cultural and subcultural norms (i.e., becoming a father as an openly gay man) is anxiety producing. Changes in role behavior such as the ones seen in this sample of gay fathers required a social support system that helped to manage the anxiety that accompanies a change of this magnitude.

The men drew upon various avenues of support both for themselves and for their children. Many belonged to gay parenting groups and had friendship networks that included other non-traditional family structures thereby exposing their children to a variety of cultures, family forms, and role models (providing kids with a variety of influences). Many developed a connection to their children's culture or family of origin ("We want our kids to know their roots") while others looked to religion to help reinforce family connections and a sense of belonging to a community ("Religion ties us together"). Finally, most of the men talked about the emotional support and approval they received from their own families of origin ("Our families are supports").

These gay fathers have worked to create supportive environments, teach their kids coping skills, and shield their families from intolerance ("Creating buffers by teaching tolerance and giving kids tools to handle difference"). They worked to make their social environments more tolerant and supportive of gay families by becoming informal educators, spokespersons, and activists ("It's important to educate others"). They also believed in being very open with their kids about their families as a means of handling the challenges that come along with their non-traditional families ("What we tell our kids about our family").

4. *Rewards for Transformation.* In keeping with our theory, when role strain is coupled with a facilitating ideology and adequate social supports to help manage the anxiety that accompanies change, new behaviors may emerge. When this change occurs, we believe that individuals experience intrapsychic and interpersonal rewards for their transformation.

All of the men in this sample expressed a sense of receiving various intrinsic rewards since becoming parents. Most spoke of a strong sense

of satisfaction in helping make social change and paving the way for others. Many felt that they had "beat the system" simply by successfully navigating all the obstacles to having a family. In contrast to their own experience of having few role models for gay fatherhood, they now felt pleased to be role models for other gay men who wanted families ("Enjoying being spokespersons").

The majority spoke of a sense of personal growth and fulfillment in being fathers, stating that having a child was the thing that they were most proud of; the biggest achievement in their lives. Being a father also allowed them to receive positive reinforcement from others. Most of the men reported a deeper connection with their partner and with their families of origin since becoming a father ("Being a parent brings you closer"). Finally, many stated that they felt a new sense of commonality with straight people because they shared the experience of being a parent ("It's not a straight versus gay world anymore"). This new sense of being part of a majority was comforting.

DISCUSSION

Transforming Fathering, Family, and Masculinity

Data from this study supported the idea that gay fathers are making modifications to socially constructed roles in the United States. Gay fathers have made changes to the traditional fatherhood role by degendering it. They have also stretched the bounds of what is accepted as family to include, not only persons without biological connections but also people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Gay fathers are also helping to transform our cultural definition of masculinity. Because they are parenting without female partners, there is no ability to "avoid all things feminine," one of the major prescriptions of traditional masculinity (Levant & Pollack, 1995). They are broadening cultural images of what it means to be a gay man at the same time as they are expanding cultural images of what it means to be a father. Their emphasis on equitable division of home labor is consistent with previous research on gay couples (Bigner, 1996; Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Dunne, 1999; McPherson, 1993), and contrasts with findings on heterosexual couples showing an unequal division of duties along gender lines (Blair & Lichter, 1991; Brines, 1994; Coltrane, 2000; Greenstein, 2000).

From our perspective, the changes that gay fathers have made to parenting roles may serve as important lessons for the rest of us. For instance, gay men provide a model of conscious parenting. Because they cannot have children in the context of the usual heterosexual couple, gay men must actively plan for parenthood, exploring their motives, their readiness, and negotiating with their partners. This process contrasts sharply with a more traditional process that might treat parenthood as a given, a pre-determined stage in life, or at worse, an unplanned and perhaps unwanted event.

By changing their fathering roles, the men also modified the traditional masculine gender role. These gay fathers incorporated nurturing traits that included a wide range of emotional expression with partners and children. Gone was the stereotypical absent, uninvolved, emotionally distant father who provided financially for the family but contributed little to the emotional needs of others. Instead, we see parents with a high degree of emotional commitment to undertake their parenting roles.

The gay fathers in this sample emphasized emotional bonds rather than biological ones and minimized the importance of differences based on color, race, religion, and sexual orientation. The fathers were committed to presenting a model to their children of valuing differences.

The gay fathering couples also showed a trend toward egalitarianism and toward parents as generalists rather than specialists. We see parental roles where one is not subordinated to the other and where there is an equitable division of home labor. This equitable division of labor has been linked to increased relationship satisfaction in some studies (Cowan & Cowan, 1988; Patterson, 1995). Interestingly, although the gay dads exhibited a wide range of nurturing behaviors and were emotionally expressive, they acknowledged their unwillingness to make a permanent commitment to the loss of power and status that full-time parenting, what we usually think of as mothering, entailed.

The model of the emotionally connected, nurturing father that these men presented is relevant to all families because it illustrates how fathers can become a significant emotional resource in family life. In this sample of gay dads, both partners reported having a primary attachment relationship and a strong emotional bond to their child. In addition to enriching the emotional life of men, this model of fathering has the added advantage of presenting children with multiple attachment figures.

This family structure in which couples share power and primary attachment status contrasts with the power dynamics in heterosexual cou-

ples with traditional gender roles that too often keep women in an inferior position and men more peripherally involved with or emotionally distant from their children. This model has benefits for both men and women. It would shift the unfair burden of the second shift (Hochschild, 1989) and decrease the high levels of stress and depression in working mothers. It would also create the opportunity for deeper emotional bonds between men and their children leading to the rewards that emotionally intimate relationships offer. In addition, the openness to difference could serve as a positive model for our multiracial, multicultural society.

If men became more integral contributors to a child's emotional growth and well being, the fathering role would be elevated in American culture. This elevation of fatherhood status might, in turn, help to protect the integrity of the father-child bond in cases when the original parental couple has dissolved. It might also pave the way for other social changes such as equity in paid paternity leave and in guardianship and custody rights. Data from this study, and others of its kind, may be used to encourage new ways of thinking about current legislation and social policies so that they reflect the changing nature and structure of families.

LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

There are several limitations inherent in the design of this study. First, the participants were all volunteers, and as such, they represent a group of men who were willing to talk openly about their fathering experiences and their sexual orientation. These characteristics might distinguish them from other gay fathers. Generalizations to the total population of gay fathers, therefore, should be avoided. It is also possible that the use of volunteers allowed us to hear only the stories of men who have successfully navigated the complexities of forming their families and renegotiating roles and responsibilities. Men who were less successful might tell significantly different stories.

The homogeneity of the current sample is another limitation. The majority of the men in this sample were White, educated, and from middle to upper middle class backgrounds. Gay fathers of color, ethnic minority, and immigrant status would also have different subjective experiences.

The focus group format, itself, has built-in limitations. For example, group dynamics can increase pressure to conform to majority views. Group interviews also preclude more in-depth exploration of each indi-

vidual's perspective. However, group interviews have the advantage of encouraging discussion beyond interviewer questions. Thus, some information that the interviewers did not think to ask emerged spontaneously as the men talked with each other. In some groups, some participants knew each other, and it is impossible to know whether the familiarity among the men promoted more conformity or generated a sense of trust that allowed more differences of opinion to emerge.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

There is much that remains to be explored about gay fathers, their families, and the ways in which they are modifying social roles. A follow-up study using individual interviews of the same sample could explore in more detail some of the cultural themes uncovered here. Similarly, focus groups or individual interviews with children could explore the unique issues of growing up in gay families from the children's perspectives. Research efforts including men from diverse racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic status are needed to understand how race and class interact with the experience of gay fathering.

An unexpected finding of this research was the continued experience of gender role strain between the father-as-provider and father-as-care-taker roles. A final area of importance not only to lesbian families but to all technologically enhanced parents is the meaning of guardianship and bio-parent status in a couple relationship and the potential impact of these issues on the power dynamics of the couple. These findings bear further research as they have wide social implications.

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