

Gay Men: Negotiating Procreative, Father, and Family Identities

Our qualitative study examines the social psychology of gay men's experiences with their procreative, father, and family identities. In-depth interviews were conducted with 19 childless gay men and 20 gay men in the United States who have fathered using diverse means excluding heterosexual intercourse. By focusing on men aged 19–55 residing primarily in Florida and New York, our novel analysis illuminates how emerging structural opportunities and shifting constraints shape gay men's procreative consciousness. Findings reveal that gay men's procreative consciousness evolves throughout men's life course, and is profoundly shaped by institutions and ruling relations, such as adoption and fertility agencies, assumptions about gay men, and negotiations with birth mothers, partners, and others.

Understanding gay men's motivation and approach to creating family bonds through fatherhood draws attention to gay men's experiences with the procreative realm. We examine how gay men develop and express a procreative consciousness over time in the context of a socially constructed world that privileges heterosexual parenting.

Our study builds on Marsiglio and Hutchinson's (2002) qualitative study exploring how young heterosexual men perceive and express as-

pects of their procreative consciousness—their awareness of their ability to create human life. Their analysis highlights how heterosexual men experience the procreative arena through their sexual and romantic relations while anticipating and experiencing incidents of miscarriage, abortion, pregnancy, contraception, and birth. Heterosexual men's procreative consciousness is heightened, at least temporarily, by encountering various objects, people, and situations that are a part of the heterosexually defined procreative realm. Yet what happens in the absence of heterosexual intercourse and intimate experience with fertility-related events such as miscarriage, abortion, and pregnancy? Absent an imaginary or real partner capable of giving birth, does a gay man's procreative consciousness emerge and develop? If it does, what are its distinguishing features and relationship to a gay man's desire to become a father?

Issues of gay marriage and gay parenting continue to evoke controversy in our society. Significant segments of society devalue same-gender relationships, waging battles in the popular press, legislative forums, and courts in order to prevent gay men and lesbians from having the legal right to marry. Despite these obstacles, gay men and lesbians have created families through adoption and other artificial means, and the definition of "the family" has changed dramatically over the past few decades to include such family forms (Dunne, 2000; Mallon, 2000). Yet there is little understanding of how gay men experience the procreative realm in terms of fatherhood motivations and decision making. In fact, no research to date has examined how gay men experience the transition to fatherhood (Mallon, 2004). Our

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Key Words: father identity, gay fathers, procreative consciousness, reproductive decision making.

analysis fosters a deeper understanding of how gay men conceptualize and negotiate their sense of self as procreative beings or fathers, or both.

This research strives to answer two important and related questions:

1. How do gay men become aware of and express their procreative consciousness and father/family identities over time?
2. Within a socially constructed world privileging heterosexual parenting, how do gay men negotiate, with themselves and others, their dual experience of being gay and having desires to become a father?

Our study advances the literature on the sociology of gender, sexualities, and reproduction. Informed by symbolic interactionism, the procreative identity framework, and feminist sociology, we present a novel lens through which to view gay men's perceptions and decision making about having children. Using in-depth interviews with childless gay men and gay fathers who constructed their families through nonheterosexual intercourse, we generate new insights about how gay men perceive themselves as both potential and active fathers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gay Fathers

The notion of gay fathers, and even gay men who want to be fathers, challenges traditional assumptions about gender, sexualities, and families in two principle ways. First, because heterosexuality and parenthood are so inextricably intertwined in the United States, the mere suggestion of gay fatherhood appears strange, abnormal, and even impossible (Lewin, 2006; Mallon, 2004). Second, for many living in the United States and elsewhere, parenting remains the natural domain of women. In contemporary America, fathers are often viewed as secondary, rather than primary parents (Lev, 2006; Mallon, 2004). Accordingly, gay men who choose to parent, either as a couple or alone, must cope with the fact that they will be challenging societal notions regarding the absence of a woman as the primary caregiver (Mallon, 2000). Under this assumption, many men, both gay and nongay, will struggle with questions concerning their ability to parent based solely on their exposure to traditional gender scripts. Even more, the very existence of gay

fathers and gay men who want to be fathers challenges traditional assumptions about gender, sexualities, and families.

Although the social construction of the homosexual-heterosexual binary is a fairly recent phenomenon, it is likely that men who would now define themselves as gay have fathered children since ancient times (Bozett, 1989). Furthermore, although recent gay fathers' experiences are well documented (Barret & Robinson, 2000; Bigner & Jacobsen, 1989; Bozett, 1987), much of the scholarly work examining gay fathers in America centers on the experiences of gay men who parented through the course of heterosexual marriages and other heterosexual relationships (see Lewin, 2006; Mallon, 2004; Stacey, 2006; for exceptions). Since the mid-1980s, however, gay men have been extending their imaginations to embrace the idea of attaining fatherhood through pathways other than heterosexual intercourse and in turn are challenging traditional gender prescriptions associated with gender, sexualities, and families (Dunne, 1999; Lemon, 1997). As gay men struggle for access to the means of procreation, they face an array of emotionally and financially taxing options, foster care, variations of domestic and international adoption, diverse forms of surrogacy (whether "traditional" or gestational), and kinship arrangements, wherein they might coparent with a woman or women with whom they are intimately but not sexually involved (Stacey).

Although recent academic discourse in Western Europe, specifically the U.K., maintains that scholars should move beyond asking whether gay and lesbian parenting is possible to a more critical analysis of queer parenting (Clarke, 2006; Hicks, 2006a), we assert that this is not the case in "the more religious and politically polarized climate" of the United States (Clarke & Kitzinger, 2005, p. 149). Many gay men in America still automatically assume that fatherhood is not an option. In fact, many men view being gay as equivalent to being childless. An openly gay man and father, Don, elaborates, "the coming-out process for me was not so much about people knowing I was gay as it was more about losing the idea of having children" (Mallon, 2004). Yet, some recent studies have highlighted that many gay-identified men who live in America would like to raise a child and those who said they wanted children were younger than those who did not (Bryant & Demian, 1994; Sbordone, 1993).

So how is it that gay men transition from regarding themselves as forever childless to wanting children some day? Recent American studies and personal memoirs underscore the significance of service agencies, organizations, and child welfare agencies in breaking through organizational biases to promote gay adoption and heighten gay men's awareness of fatherhood opportunities (Mallon, 2004; Savage, 1999; Strah, 2003). A more refined understanding of how gay men become aware of fatherhood opportunities needs to address how this transition is influenced by meeting lesbian mothers, meeting other gay men who choose to father, taking care of a friend or relative's child, the experience of death, and exposure to changing organizational and institutional policies and practices. Thus, our study fills an important gap in American scholarship on gay parenting, notably how gay men become aware of their reproductive options and how these options are mediated by technical, practical, and financial constraints and opportunities.

THEORETICAL INFLUENCES

Themes from symbolic interactionism, the procreative identity framework (Marsiglio & Hutchinson, 2002), and feminist sociology inform and guide our research. We use these theoretical perspectives as sensitizing lenses to develop a conceptual framework that accounts for how gay men construct and negotiate their procreative identities over time, in different situations, and through interactions with others in a society that blatantly privileges heterosexual parenting.

Symbolic interaction assumes that human beings' unique capacity for thought is shaped and refined by social interaction, which in turn is influenced by individuals' ability to learn and manipulate symbols (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934; Stryker, 1980). In our study, symbolic interaction illuminates how the meanings gay men associate with aspects of the procreative arena are assumed not to be inherent or essential; rather they are viewed as emerging out of a social and interpretive process. We attend to the social processes by which the men assign meaning to situations, events, others, and themselves as they encounter facets of everyday life and the procreative realm. Of particular note is how gay men conceptualize their lack of traditional reproductive ability. The meanings they construct are critical in understanding how they conceptualize their sense of self as a person capable of creating

or nurturing human life, or both. Furthermore, it is crucial to identify how these meanings emerge through gay men's interactions with others, specifically romantic partners and known birth mothers. We view gay men as active agents constructing their identities while defining their relationships.

The procreative identity framework, grounded in the symbolic interactionist tradition, informs our analysis because procreative consciousness is viewed as the cognitive and emotional awareness and expression of self as a person capable of creating and caring for life. Moreover, the framework treats this self-expression as a process-oriented phenomenon tied to situational contingencies, global sentiments, and romantic relationships. Although gay men's experiences are distinct in some ways, the basic conceptual lens is relevant to gay men because it accentuates how men's procreative consciousness is activated and evolves. The model's emphasis on both individual-based and relationship-based modes for expressing procreative consciousness draws attention to how gay men, on their own and in conjunction with partners, learn to frame their view about becoming fathers. Also, the *fatherhood readiness* concept captures features of how well-prepared gay men believe they are to assume responsibilities associated with being a father. Here, we are attentive to the degree to which and how gay men collaborate with a partner or assess their state of readiness independently. A temporal focus comes into play because we are sensitive to how gay men draw on previous concrete experiences to frame their thinking. We also are aware that gay men can vary in how certain they feel they are to have a child at this point in their life, in general or with a particular partner.

Finally, we use Dorothy Smith's (1987, 1990) feminist sociology to expand our approach to studying gay men's decision-making processes related to fatherhood. This theoretical paradigm highlights how certain institutions and ruling relations, such as adoption and fertility agencies, and the institutionalization of both fatherhood, and the gay subculture shape the processes by which gay men contemplate fatherhood. For example, even though gay men's desire for parenthood may be similar in some situations to heterosexuals' feelings, gay men's access to adoption and assisted reproductive technologies is mediated by a bureaucratic apparatus that affects the conditions under which they can father

(Lewin, 2006). This mediation is especially important for this study because the majority of data were collected in Florida and New York. The former is currently the only state with explicit statutes prohibiting adoption by gay men and lesbians, and in the latter state, all use of surrogate mothers is illegal (Horowitz & Maruyama, 1995; Mallon, 2004; Weltman, 2004).

METHOD

As a qualitative method, in-depth interviewing accentuates the subjective quality of different life experiences, the contextual nature of knowledge, the production of social meanings, and the interactive character of human action. We use this interviewing technique to study the process by which gay men become aware of and express their procreative consciousness and father identities.

Recruitment

Our analysis draws on audiotaped, in-depth interviews conducted with a sample of 19 childless gay men and 20 gay fathers who have created families through nonheterosexual means. Our purposeful inclusion of both fathers and childless men of varying ages should not be viewed as a strategy to compare these two groups of men. Rather, it is a methodological tactic we employ to better understand how emerging social structural opportunities, shifting constraints, and historical developments shape the process of gay men's reproductive decision making throughout their life course.

The participants were recruited through a variety of methods in diverse locales from 2004 – 2006. In South and North Central Florida, the first author used both snowball sampling and posted fliers in areas frequented by members of the gay community such as gay community centers, shopping malls, eating and drinking establishments, hair salons, and gay activist organizations. The fliers for the recruitment of childless gay men were a broad call for participants who might be interested in discussing their thoughts about fatherhood, without screening them for whether they intended to have children. The fliers for gay fathers specified that we were searching for men who had become fathers through any means other than heterosexual intercourse.

Fifteen childless gay men and three fathers were recruited in Florida. Because gay adoption

is not legal in Florida, the first author traveled to New York City from June – August 2005 to recruit and interview gay men who have chosen fatherhood. She volunteered at various Gay Lesbian Bisexual Transgender (GLBT) organizations, including the GLBT center and a GLBT synagogue where she recruited four participants. Furthermore, while in Manhattan, she befriended a man employed by an up-and-coming gay and lesbian media group who sent out a mass e-mail to members of this community. Fortunately, this e-mail generated an unexpected response and she was able to recruit nine more fathers and four childless men. The final five participants were recruited through prior respondents and other acquaintances. These men lived in a variety of states, including New York, New Jersey, and Massachusetts. Because of financial constraints, these interviews were conducted over the telephone after the first author returned to Florida.

Participants

The group of childless gay men differed substantially from those who chose to become fathers through nonheterosexual means (see Table 1 for detailed subsample description). These differences should not be regarded as a substantive finding of our research but an artifact of the first author's recruitment strategies. The childless gay participants were more racially, ethnically, and economically diverse than the fathers. Three of the childless men were African American, 1 was Chinese American, 2 were Latino, and 13 were White. Three participants had not completed college, five were enrolled in college with the intentions of graduating, seven had graduated from a 4-year university, and four had an advanced graduate degree. Two participants were Jewish, one was Presbyterian, three were Christian, four were Catholic, one was Buddhist and Catholic, and eight reported to have no religious affiliation. Six participants were students and the remaining participants were employed in either the service sector or the professional sector. Annual income for these men ranged from under \$15,000 to over \$75,000 annually. Ages of the childless men ranged from 19 to 53 and the mean age was 31.

Consistent with other research on gay fathers (Johnson & Connor, 2002; Mallon, 2004), the gay fathers participating in our research were White and predominantly upper middle class. All but two of these men earned over \$75,000

Table 1.

	Age	Religion	Education	Occupation	Current Relationship	Fatherhood Pathway
Gay childless men						
Participants from Florida						
Evan	38	Jewish	College	Nonprofit	Partnered	na
Luke ^B	28	Christian	College	Waiter	Single	na
Todd	28	Christian	High school	Waiter	Single	na
Nick	29	Presbyterian	College	Waiter	Partnered	na
Zack ^A	34	Christian/Buddhist	College	Restaurant manager	Single	na
Frank	30	Catholic	College	Student	Single	na
Clark	20	Atheist	High school	Student	Single	na
Aiden	20	Christian	High school	Student	Single	na
Taylor	23	Roman Catholic	High school	Student	Single	na
Anthony ^L	19	None	High school	Student	Single	na
Ross ^B	35	None	College	Realtor	Single	na
Blaine	45	Catholic	JD	Attorney, business	Partnered	na
Larry	34	Jewish	JD	Attorney	Partnered	na
Jake	33	None	Masters	Information technician	Partnered	na
Carlos ^L	22	Catholic	High school	Cosmetologist	Partnered	na
Participants from New York						
Segal	38	Atheist	PhD	Professor	Partnered	na
CJ	39	None	College	Nonprofit	Single	na
Noah	22	Agnostic	High school	Student	Single	na
Participant from New Jersey						
Walter ^B	53	Spiritual	College	Public health	Single	na
Gay fathers						
Participants from Florida						
Brian	47	Catholic	Some college	Politician, realtor	Partnered	Adopt
Parker	37	Jewish	College	Information technician	Partnered	Adopt
Mark	45	Jewish	MD	MD	Single	Surrogacy
Participants from New York						
Andrew	37	None	College	Graphic artist	Partnered	Adopt (foster)
Craig	34	None	College	Full-time homemaker dad	Partnered	Adopt (foster)
Laurence	51	None; ethical humanist	Masters	Statistician	Partnered	Adopt
Tommy	36	Catholic	PhD	Psychologist	Partnered	Adopt
Randy	47	Unitarian	Some college	Realtor	Single	Adopt
Drew ^A	35	Jewish	College	Television production	Partnered	Surrogacy and sperm donor

Table 1. Continued

	Age	Religion	Education	Occupation	Current Relationship	Fatherhood Pathway
Nico ^a	33	Catholic	College	Full-time homemaker dad	Partnered	Surrogacy
Ethan	55	Jewish	Masters	Teacher	Partnered	Adopt
Eliot ^b	37	Jewish	MD	MD	Partnered	Surrogacy (gestational)
Billy ^b	47	Catholic	College	Event coordinator	Partnered	Surrogacy (gestational)
Art ^c	48	Jewish	JD	Party decorator	Partnered	Adopt
Rick ^c	53	Jewish	Masters	Hospital administrator	Partnered	Adopt
Participants from New Jersey						
Gus ^d	48	Episcopalian	Masters	Consultant	Partnered	Coparent
Robin ^d	45	Christian	College	Information technician	Partnered	Coparent
Aaron	45	Catholic	College	Realtor	Single	Coparent
Participants from Massachusetts						
Leonard	43	Jewish	College	Information technician	Single	Coparent
Spencer	47	Unitarian universalist	College	Headhunter	Single	Coparent and foster

Note: We employ pseudonyms and have altered identifying details to protect the privacy of our participants. All participants are White unless noted by the following subscripts: A = Asian, B = Black, L = Latino, na = not applicable. Participants with the same lowercase subscripts are members of the same couple.

annually, the remaining two earned between \$30,000 and \$60,000, and the majority of participants were employed in the professional sector. Similarly, all participants except two had completed college and eight had an advanced graduate degree. Fathers' ages ranged from 33 to 55 with a mean age of 43.5. Eight participants were Jewish, five were Catholic, three were Christian, two were Unitarian, and three claimed to have no religious affiliation. Because the GLBT synagogue in New York City was part of the recruitment strategy, an unusually large proportion of Jewish men is in our sample. Our participants created their families in diverse ways, including various forms of adoption, traditional and gestational surrogacy arrangements, and coparenting with a lesbian woman or women.

Interviews

Semistructured interviews were conducted that lasted from 45 to 120 minutes. They took place in a variety of settings (e.g., participant's households or work offices, coffee shops, eating and drinking establishments, the researcher's office, and over the telephone). Although it was our intention to conduct all interviews individually, six men who were coupled and had young children opted to be interviewed together (coupled participants are linked in Table 1). The qualitative interviews were preceded by a brief sociodemographic background survey.

Interviews were open-ended and designed to generate rich, detailed information. Participants were encouraged to discuss their thoughts, feelings, experiences, and personal narratives regarding their images and decisions about fatherhood. They shared their private daydreams, fantasizes, and reflective moments as well as the conversations they had with others. Interviews were designed to explore the men's emerging identity as a prospective or real father, including how their father identity emerged out of interactions with other children, friends, family members, birth mothers, agency coordinators, and romantic partners.

Analysis

The initial textual material was analyzed with grounded theory methodology for qualitative data analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). As ideas, terms, moods, and so on surfaced in multiple interviews, they were

coded and given tentative labels by the first author during the open phase of coding. Open coding is a process of comparing concepts found in the text for classification as examples of some phenomenon. As similarities in experience, patterns, and emergent themes appeared, categories of phenomena were labeled and entered into a code list. This process of open coding enabled the first author to create an analytic process for identifying key categories and their properties (Strauss & Corbin). Core or central categories were the roots that anchored their properties. For example, a central category in our research is *nonprocreative turning points in activating fathering desires*, and concepts that are associated with this category include *coping with death of a loved one*, *moving to suburbia*, *seeing another gay couple with a child*, and *ultimatum by a partner*. This coding scheme allowed us to label categories and properties that represent distinct happenings and to describe other instances of the phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin). Next, both authors embarked together on axial coding, wherein we explored the relationship between and among concepts and began to construct a theoretical explanation of how gay men navigate their way through a heterosexually privileged reproductive arena (LaRossa, 2005).

Admittedly, despite the urge to offer readers a step-by-step guide of how we analyzed the data, coding did not occur in distinct phases. Instead, "the picture slowly emerged as a patchwork mosaic" (Dey, 2003, p. 86). We used headings or categories as interpretive aids to formulate a holistic account of the entire process. Our final stage of selective coding also allowed us to compare themes identified in this study to existing literature exploring fathering among both gay and heterosexual men. The themes derived from this work unveil the dynamic and complex social-psychological process of how gay men become fathers through nonheterosexual intercourse in a world that, for the most part, makes it quite difficult for them to fulfill their fathering fantasies.

FINDINGS

Consistent with the literature (Mallon, 2004; Savage, 1999), many of the participants, especially those older than 35 years, viewed the coming-out process as synonymous with the realization that they will never be fathers. For many, their

identity as a gay man was seen as incompatible with their identity as a prospective father. Marc, a single gay man who became a father with the assistance of a surrogate mother, explains, "When I knew I was gay, I just assumed that I would never have children . . . I just thought I would be childless for life." For Marc, one of the "big disappointments" of his life would have been never to fulfill his fantasy of becoming a father. He continues, explaining a "pleasant surprise was when I realized I could change the situation," he ultimately succeeded in creating his new family with the birth of his now 4-year-old daughter.

Clark, a childless college student, very politically active in GLBT affairs, echoes Marc's sentiments, "I'm never going to be a father. My parents are never going to be grandparents . . . You know, my mom really wants grandkids. This is horrible for her." Yet, later in the interview, Clark divulges his plans to father, when he remarks:

I always had plans, before I came to the realization that I was gay, I planned to have a wife and kids just like my parents had and their parents before them. And then, after I kind of made that realization that I was gay, I tried to keep my plans as intact as possible. Um, you know maybe have a husband and 2.5 kids.

Although the experience of coming out for these and other men was initially synonymous with realizing they would be childless forever, as time passed, the men discovered opportunities available to them and fatherhood became a viable option. After coming out to themselves and to the world as gay men, many men underwent life changes that heightened and activated their respective procreative consciousness and fathering desires. Yet, as this social-psychological process evolved, many men became aware that their desires to father were mediated and even constrained by structural and institutional barriers.

Here, we address these considerations. First, we touch upon the various turning points the gay men experienced in procreative and nonprocreative arenas with regard to activating their fathering desires. Next, we discuss how discriminatory beliefs about gay men's gender and sexuality interact to create barriers for how these men think about fatherhood. We then examine how institutional and financial barriers shape gay men's procreative consciousness. Relatedly, we consider how the process of becoming a father

for gay men requires the assistance of a third and sometimes a fourth party. In doing so, we foster a more nuanced understanding of how gay men negotiate the shared identity of the birth mother and father. Finally, because of the privileging of biogenetics in Western society, we aim to understand how gay men negotiate the presence or absence of biological relatedness in their newly formed families.

Turning Points in Activating Fathering Desires

For many of the men, their procreative consciousness was triggered by specific moments, experiences, or social processes. Consistent with other studies and personal memoirs (Mallon, 2000, 2004; Savage, 1999; Strah, 2003), men noted that their procreative consciousness was heightened through taking care of a child or children, interacting with lesbian mothers, encountering another gay man or men who chose to father, the death of a partner or family member, and being exposed to adoption or surrogacy organizations, or both.

Experiences with children. Many of the men discussed both prior and current experiences with children as critical episodes in activating their awareness of their procreative identity. For the majority, experiences with children were formative events in constructing their identity as a prospective father. Many, fathers and childless alike, discussed experiences with nieces, nephews, and cousins. Others spoke about working at a camp, working or volunteering at daycare, and partaking in various mentoring programs. For example, Luke, a Black childless man from New Zealand, talked about his yearlong experience raising and mentoring his nephew. In a conversation about experiences with children, he cites this particular year as a highly significant time in his life: “he [my brother] was a slack-ass and it was important for me to be a good role-model for him [my nephew] . . . he became like my side-kick . . . for some reason he listened to me.” The year he cared for his nephew was one of the most influential periods in shaping Luke’s prospective father identity. Recognizing the importance of becoming a decent role model for his nephew when his brother failed heightened Luke’s awareness of his fathering ability. Yet experiencing a heightened procreative consciousness on the basis of interactions with children does not nec-

essarily mean participants will desire to become a father someday. Anthony’s experiences with children actually confirmed his original decision not to have children of his own. A career-driven theater major and a childless gay man, Anthony was adamant about not ever having kids. He explains some of his previous encounters with children:

I guess when I approach kids, I’m kind of like a little too grown up because I can’t be like, “Hi kids!” Like, I can’t be all happy and smiley and, like, childlike, like, I just can’t do that. I worked at a daycare center for a few weeks, and, like, there were these three little kids that would just, like, climb up my leg, which was cute. But, for the most part, like, kids just kind of like keep their distance from me.

Anthony cites his prior experiences with children as *confirmation* that he did not want children. Nevertheless, for many of these men, experiences with children were influential in heightening their procreative consciousness and shaping their identities as future gay fathers.

Experiences in the nonprocreative arena. Other turning points that were critical in shaping men’s prospective father identities included witnessing the tragedies of September 11, the realization that one could actively participate in his religious organization, a partner’s influence or ultimatum, and the gradual process of settling down and purchasing a home in a suburban area outside of Manhattan. Drew and Nico, a committed couple who became fathers 2 years ago to a set of twins, explain that they “contracted with the surrogacy agent a month after he [Drew’s father] passed away. It was kind of a kick in the ass, you know, like life is short, let’s go do it.” Although this couple had fantasized about becoming fathers sometime in the future, they wavered about the decision for some time. Losing Drew’s father after a lengthy battle with cancer prompted their desire to create a family and in essence sped up the reproductive process.

Art and Rick, a couple who created their family 4 years ago by adopting a son, explained how they almost abandoned their fantasies of becoming fathers because of the continuous difficulties they experienced with agencies and attorneys. A chance encounter at a grocery store in Fire Island changed everything. Art explains how he saw two men and “the most beautiful baby you wanted to see” exiting the store. He approached them with

a mouthful of questions, and later that afternoon, the four men spoke for 8 hours detailing the adoption process. For Art and Rick, this chance encounter was a turning point in their forming father identities. Like Drew and Nico, they were actively contemplating fatherhood, but their enthusiasm required the direction that this couple provided.

Ethan, a 55-year-old father of a young teenage girl, explains that once he came out in college, the two aspects of his life he felt he had abandoned were his Jewish heritage and his desire to have a family. For Ethan, the choice to follow his same-gender attractions and lead a gay lifestyle was always darkened by the feeling that he would never have these two essential aspects in his life. He describes his experience of finding a gay synagogue when he was in his early 30s as a critical event that activated his procreative consciousness. With the discovery of this organization, Ethan realized that if he could participate as an openly gay man in the synagogue and retain his Jewish identity, then what was to stop him from having the family he had always fantasized about.

Nico had always wanted children and was ecstatic when he met Drew, a gay man who had served as a known sperm donor to a lesbian couple in another state. Although they lived a three-and-a-half hour drive away from the couple, the friends saw each other somewhat regularly. For Drew, the experience of "having kids without having kids" was enough to satiate his familial desires. But Nico yearned for children of his own and periodically broached the subject of fathering with his long-time partner. After much deliberation, Nico gave Drew an ultimatum: "if you don't want to do this, then maybe this relationship isn't going to work out because this is something I really want." Drew claims he "had to go back to the mental drawing board" and seriously consider if he could live his life without Nico's companionship and intimacy. Although Drew was already a biological father, he did not see himself as a prospective social father who would be engaged in the day-to-day activities of his children. It was this conversation and Nico's ultimatum that finally prompted Drew to begin to integrate a physically and intimately involved father identity into his sense of self.

Other men shared stories that depicted a somewhat different type of process in the formation of their fathering desires. Unlike the sudden turning points discussed above, Rick's experience highlights a gradual, natural shift that represents a different quality of change. Rick, a 53-year-old

Jewish man with a 4-year-old boy discusses how thinking about fatherhood simply progressed as the "next logical step in his life." He elaborates, "Well, settling down, buying a home, having the space to do it, knowing that you have a school system here to work with . . . being part of suburbia." For Rick, the defining realization that he was becoming an adult heightened his awareness that he was also ready to embark on a new stage in his life. Relocating to a suburban area that included families with children helped to shape his identity as a prospective gay father. Interestingly, Rick's narrative reveals much about the place of family, fatherhood, and children in American culture. Although gay families are marginalized from mainstream definitions of American families, Rick's procreative consciousness is still very much influenced by heterosexual assumptions and prescriptions of what defines a family and where such families should reside.

The stories of Drew, Nico, Ethan, Art, and Rick underscore the importance of turning points, whether sudden or gradual, in activating their awareness of having fathering visions. These men all experienced some sort of change in their life that triggered their awareness of their desire to become social fathers. Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier, gay men's fathering desires are mediated by myriad social and institutional factors. These men did not simply become fathers immediately following this realization. Rather, there were various twists and turns in the months and sometimes years to follow.

Aware of Fathering Desires But . . .

Being a gay man. For some of these men, being socialized into a world that stereotypes gay men as pedophiles constrained their ability to envision themselves as future fathers. Luke, a childless man explains, "when people see a single gay man with a kid, they think, you need to watch him . . . what is he doing with that child in there? [Thinking] are you a pedophile?" Similarly, Aiden, the politically active college student, discusses how he was genuinely worried that society would look at him as someone who would want to father simply to raise a gay child:

What if I do raise my kid to be gay? I just think that there's a lot of fears that society, you know, puts on, you know, um, like, the gay community having kids . . . They might actually want to replicate this kind of lifestyle because they think, you know, that's the gay way to be.

Many laypersons and even child welfare professionals cling to a belief system grounded in negative myths and stereotypes about gay men (Mallon, 2004). The myths and stereotypes have emerged because there is a dearth of research on gay fathers, they persist largely unchallenged because few gay fathers have a significant political voice (Barret & Robinson, 2000). Even worse, as both Luke and Aiden express, it is not uncommon for gay men to incorporate these heterosexist myths and irrational stereotypes into their own self-concept. Consistent with ideas on the looking-glass self, individuals adapt to their perceptions of how others see them (Cooley, 1902). Like Luke and Aiden, many young childless gay men are apprehensive about becoming fathers because they are overly concerned with how outsiders would perceive them. Even though empirical evidence confirms that one's sexual orientation does not determine one's ability to love and care for a child, the unsubstantiated myths persist, affecting laypersons, social service professionals, and even gay men themselves (Barret & Robinson; Mallon, 2004).

Many childless men talked about their potential children's futures in dealing with hardships, discrimination, teasing, and the issue of a mother. Clark is certain he wants children in his future but voices concern about his future child's possible experiences in school. "They'll be picked on at school. What will the children tell the neighbors and their teachers? What will they tell their friends? The truth is, kids and teachers can be really cruel." Clark recognizes the ignorance and discrimination that would possibly plague their prospective children's lives and consciously mulls over these impending hardships. Interestingly, the fathers in this study seldom report actual discrimination from schools, neighbors, and other parents. Nevertheless, prior to becoming fathers, they too were fearful that their children's futures would be overwhelmed with adversity, primarily on the basis of others' criticism and discouragement. Art and Rick, the Jewish couple residing in suburban New York, explain that when they told Rick's mother about their plans to have a child, she retorted "what is all this bullshit . . . nobody is going to give you guys a baby." Despite harsh censure from others, men such as Art and Rick had lives similar to those of many other parents, and rather than their days being filled with the discrimination and hardship that many anti-

pated, they were filled with the mundane tasks of childrearing.

Other participants wondered how their gender and sexuality would interact to negatively affect their child's future socialization. Marc, the proud single father of a 4-year-old girl explains, "if I have a boy, will I be as good as a role model? You know, dads take their sons to ball games and things like that, which I am just not into . . . if I had a boy, it might be somewhat difficult to do that 'macho' role model." Because Marc was never the stereotypical masculine athlete, he questioned whether he could participate with his imagined son in "normal" male-bonding activities. In contrast, Rick spoke about how he and Art fantasized about the challenges of having a little girl because "we knew boy issues; we knew what to expect . . . we also thought girls were more difficult in terms of later on, with puberty and all that." Both Rick and Art questioned if two dads could adequately deal with the harsh realities of a 13-year-old girl's pubescent phase, as they envisioned images of a menstruating, bra shopping teenager. Hence, the men's perceptions of their future children's gender socialization helped forge the men's child and fathering visions as well as their procreative and father identities.

Thus, consistent with the literature, gay men experience distinct thought processes when deciding whether to become fathers (Bigner & Jacobsen, 1989; Mallon, 2000, 2004). Even though gay men might be conscious of their procreative abilities and opportunities to become fathers, they are simultaneously aware that much of society devalues them as human beings, especially as parents. The men negatively influenced by the prevailing heterosexist ideology were genuinely concerned about reproducing societal myths about gay parenting (Barret & Robinson, 2000). Furthermore, many of the men contemplated how having two fathers might negatively affect their prospective children's future life experiences as they imagined possible instances of discrimination. Finally, some men's thoughts about reproduction as well as their child and fathering visions were affected by worries over their abilities to construct their future child's gender identity according to mainstream norms.

Being aware of barriers. The processes that gay men undergo to become fathers are quite different from those experienced by their heterosexual counterparts (Barret & Robinson, 2000; Bigner

& Jacobsen, 1989; Mallon, 2004). Many of the men were well aware of emerging legal and reproductive opportunities that made their once outlandish daydreams of becoming a father now a viable reality. Yet, they also were well aware of how structural and institutional constraints shaped their experiences in the procreative realm. Taylor, a shy and soft-spoken college student, explains how a gay man's journey to fatherhood is much more purposeful than the often spontaneous and even accidental process of fatherhood for heterosexual men.

It's business like . . . you gotta find who. You gotta pick a date. You know, it's so, it's so organized. It's not, like, it's not romantic. It's not anything. It's not accidental. It's, you gotta sit down, discuss, plan, pick everything out. Like, it's kind of structured. It's overly structured that it kind of makes it more difficult, like, to actually make every decision.

Taylor's narrative underscores the absence of spontaneity in many gay men's passage to fatherhood. Admittedly, Taylor's comments may only be applicable to the experience of White middle class relatively privileged gay men who are not closeted. Nonetheless, his narrative further emphasizes the idea that, unlike heterosexual men who may get a woman pregnant accidentally, a gay man who desires a child by means other than heterosexual reproduction must undertake a substantial amount of research and preparation.

Such research and preparation sometimes may be followed by overt or covert discrimination by the respective agency with whom the gay man or men decide to work. Laurence was one of the pioneering gay men who chose fatherhood in New York in the mid-1980s. He remembers his experience with agencies and attorneys over 17 years ago when he and his former partner adopted their first son. He explains that

This is what you get, you know when you're gay, it was like the last bastion of a place where people could be prejudiced and biased and not be reprimanded, not be punished for it . . . they were allowed to kind of push you aside . . . if you wanted a child, you had to put up with this.

Although we would like to report that much has changed since Laurence became a father, changes are slight and gradual at best in the United States. On a positive note, in 1999–2000, nearly, 60% of all adoption agencies in the United States reported that they had accepted applications from

self-identified gay men and lesbian women (Brodzinsky & Staff of the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2003; Lev, 2006). But only 39% of these agencies had actually placed a child with gay or lesbian adopters (Brodzinsky & Staff of the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute; Hicks, 2006a). Contemporary adoption agencies still serve as a ruling relation, wherein underlying homophobic practices regularly surface and shape how gay men approach the transition to fatherhood and even manipulate their self-presentations to those persons in power (Hicks, 2006b). Fortunately, Laurence is a man in the upper echelon of society and was able to afford the luxury of an attorney to help him navigate his way through these legal barriers. Because it takes substantial financial resources to overcome these bureaucratic obstacles, Laurence's story illuminates how opportunities associated with middle-class status and privilege mediate family formation for gay men seeking fatherhood.

The men's (childless and fathers alike) narratives underscore how a gay man's journey to fatherhood is shaped by a variety of mediating factors, including interactions with the agency, attorneys, and even the state. In addition to the men acknowledging the planning, structure, and possible homophobic prejudice and discrimination involved in becoming a father, they discussed the various legal obstacles involved. Participants in Florida recognized that their place of residence was the only state in the entire country with statutes explicitly prohibiting adoption by gay men and lesbians (Mallon, 2004). Clark, a childless man was the most knowledgeable participant on the legal status of Florida. He explains that

I'm in Florida. So, um, reading this stuff about what I can and can't do in the country was just, uh, I really thought to myself this was never going to happen unless I get out of the country . . . but, I mean, more and more, the country is becoming a little more accepting. There's, you know, Massachusetts, New York, and California.

Clark is quick to comment that he currently resides in the only state in the entire country that overtly forbids adoption by gays and lesbians. Yet, as an active member of a university GLBT student group, Clark increasingly realizes the options available to him in this country.

Similarly, men in New York had to cope with the issue that surrogacy is illegal in their state. Billy and Elliot are a unique couple who had the

financial means to hire both an egg donor and a gestational surrogate mother in order to create their 3-week-old twins. Because of various legal barriers, they hired “an egg donor from one state, a surrogate mother from another state, a surrogate agency in another state, the paternity clinic in a fourth state, and [we] were in a fifth state.” Although Billy and Elliot were the only men who employed the assistance of both an egg donor and a gestational surrogate, the substantial amount of effort and monetary resources these men invested in creating their family was not atypical.

Gay men’s desires and pathways to parenthood are inextricably tied to legalities mandated by both local and national government. So even though gay men’s struggles are similar in some respects to heterosexuals’ stressful, time-consuming efforts to achieve parenthood through adoption or by using assisted reproductive technologies, gays are further burdened by heterosexist norms about family building. Nevertheless, Drew, a 35-year-old recent father concludes that the rigorous planning and ability to negotiate the logistical and discriminatory challenges might benefit families created by gay men:

I think the biggest difference between us and straight dads is that there aren’t any mistakes or unwanted children . . . it is really a conscious decision that you have to jump through hoops to accomplish, either financially or legally . . . we might not be able to trace exactly when we thought about it, but once you do decide, it is like a mission to get it done.

A critical analysis of Drew’s narrative indicates a somewhat hierarchal pattern to how families are perceived (Hicks, 2006a). Drew’s comparison of his family with that of heterosexuals and closeted or married gays and lesbians emerges as a simplistic and rather categorical statement about gay parents who have undergone such extensive planning (Hicks, 2006a). With such comments as “there aren’t any mistakes or unwanted children” and “it is really a conscious decision,” Drew distances himself and gay-planned families from other familial arrangements and practices that are generally formed through less privileged and structured means. Such glowing discourses tend to raise certain gay families to a romanticized pedestal of responsibility and choice. Although some gay families, such as the ones discussed in this article, are formed through such conscious planning, many others are not. The kinship arrangements dis-

cussed here can be respected without treating them as privileged.

Becoming a Father

Negotiating the shared identity of the birth mother. When gay men become fathers, they do so not as an individual entity. Rather, they construct their procreative and fathering identities through negotiations with others. Whether it is through conversations with their intimate partners, as in the case of Drew and Nico, or through the struggles with agencies, lawyers, and other legal bodies discussed above, gay men’s procreative and fathering identities are part of a dynamic process. Similarly, in the case of gay parenting when heterosexual intercourse is absent, it takes “more than two to tango” and “getting pregnant” requires the assistance of a woman. Accordingly, a fascinating feature of gay men’s procreative identity is how it becomes intertwined with the real or imagined identity of the child’s birth mother.

Many men spoke of evaluating the birth mother (or, for Billy and Elliot, the egg donor) in terms of such biographical characteristics as age, race, physical attractiveness, medical history, intelligence, athleticism, and artistic ability. In their evaluation of surrogate birth mothers, men also questioned why this woman would want to conceive a child and then give the child away. They questioned whether prospective birth mothers were entering into this agreement solely for financial purposes or because they genuinely wanted to help people in general or a gay man or men in particular. Some men considered whether the birth mother had been employed as a surrogate mother prior to working with them because this would confirm that she was stable and that she could easily relinquish another child. Presumably, gay men who create families through adoption would value the characteristics of the birth mother and the biological father, but few mentioned the existence of the biological father. Although, we do not know for sure, we speculate that adoptive fathers may avoid discussing the biological father to somehow legitimize the authenticity of their own father identities.

After choosing the birth mother, men discussed living vicariously through the actual pregnancy. Drew and Nico decided to document their pregnancy and gave their surrogate mother a video camera that was used often. Similarly, some participants made creative booklets and

scrapbooks as evidence of their journey, whereas others took advantage of modern technology to stay in touch continuously with their birth mothers who lived out of state. Some men used e-mail to keep up to date with the most recent ultrasound pictures, and Billy and Elliot spoke of scheduling webcam dates with their birth mother, "so that we could see her belly grow. She would sit at her desk chair with her top rolled up so that we could see her belly." For the most part, men explained how they were intimately involved in the lives of the birth mothers, and Drew described his involvement in the 9 months of pregnancy: "If anything happened we got a call. If she got a cramp and she went to the doctor, we knew about it." Many men were in the birthing room and were able to witness their child being brought into this world. Tommy, a professor in Manhattan who adopted his son using open adoption, said when he and his partner witnessed the birth of his son, "the doctor held him and when I got to cut the umbilical cord it was like that defining moment [of my life] had finally arrived." For many gay fathers, especially those who used surrogacy and open adoption, the birth mother of their child was not simply a womb or shell. She was an integral part of their lives, and her identity was woven into their elaborate web of procreative, father, and family identities.

Negotiating the meaning of biological fatherhood. The formation of a father identity for some of the men is mediated by the anticipated or actual presence of biological ties. Childless participants diverged in whether they desired a child who was biologically related to them. Some men explained that they preferred a child who would have blood ties to them, whereas others talked about wanting to adopt their future child. Zach, a childless 33-year-old Chinese American restaurant manager, confessed that the only way he would have a child was if that child was biologically related to him. He elaborates that

I would love more than anything to have a child. My own as well . . . If I am going to have a child, I want it to be a part of me . . . I want it to have some of my characteristics . . . I want to have a little piece of me . . . I think that if anything, that is really what drives all of it. I do want to have someone, a little piece of me out there doing a little something to contribute to the world.

Zach was the only childless person who was so explicit in his desire for a biological child. A

handful of other childless men claimed that although a biological tie was preferred, adoption would be a second option. Taylor, also childless, explains, "adoption would just be the second option, like a fall back . . . I'd rather conceive a child with someone I know and trust . . . I guess I would rather have my own . . . but if that's not an option, adoption wouldn't change anything." Although Taylor and a few other men ideally preferred a biological relation between themselves and their child, as gay men and as prospective fathers, they realized their options were quite limited. Many other men, both childless and fathers, questioned their ability to feel the same level of affection for a child not biologically related to them as compared to a genetically related child.

An unusual story illustrates how gay men sometimes negotiate their biological relatedness. Billy and Elliot, romantic partners and fathers of 3-week-old twins, decided to mix their sperm before inseminating their chosen egg donor. At present, it is unknown which of them is actually the biological father of the 3-week-old twins. They maintain that because there are two children and two "fathers," each man is the biological father of a twin. Although these men are uncertain about their biological paternity status for each twin, their story illustrates how meanings associated with aspects of the procreative arena emerge out of a social and interpretive process. Billy and Elliot's negotiations of their procreative identities show how some gay men assign meanings to situations, events, others, and themselves as they construct their father identities in nontraditional scenarios.

The meanings that gay and lesbian parents assign to interpersonal ties not rooted in shared biology are often embedded in a rather loosely defined web developed through social rather than biological means. The narratives discussed above, however, illuminate how the men we spoke with still greatly value biogenetic ties. Although we found a great deal of creative negotiation within these families, it is significant to recognize that such negotiations were regulated with the conventional privileging of biological relatedness at the forefront of these men's consciousness.

DISCUSSION

Relying on theoretical perspectives accentuating the meaning-making aspects of social life, and

extending a conceptual framework of procreative identity designed for heterosexuals (Marsiglio & Hutchinson, 2002), we stress how the gay men in our study construct and act on their self-awareness of being both gay and capable of creating or fathering human life, or both. Our qualitative analysis, which is based on a combined purposive sample of childless gay men and gay fathers who became fathers through nonheterosexual means, explores timely issues related to the ways gay men develop and orient toward their procreative consciousness. Moreover, it reveals how a select group of relatively privileged men navigate the complicated procreative realm to become fathers either through adoption, surrogacy, or sperm donation to a lesbian couple. Despite standing outside the traditional family building path, gay men appear to develop a procreative consciousness somewhat similar to their heterosexual counterparts. But because gay men cannot biologically reproduce with one another, their procreative consciousness and father identities are constructed, negotiated, and expressed in unique ways.

The insights we generate about gay men navigating the procreative realm should be viewed in context and their limitations noted. It is challenging to recruit a diverse sample suitable for answering questions about gay men's orientation toward the procreative realm spanning decades of the life course. Given the realities of reproductive physiology, gay men, unlike their heterosexual male counterparts, are not confronted with the immediate prospects of paternity during their romantic and sexual relationships. Thus, gay men's procreative consciousness is not activated as often or in as many ways. We therefore decided to recruit both childless gay men and gay fathers to capture as fully as possible the wide spectrum of gay men's experiences over the life course. As a result, we rely on two relatively distinct subsamples: The childless men are on average about 9 years younger than the fathers, more diverse racially/ethnically, and less well-off economically. Interestingly, although the childless subsample was relatively less privileged, none of them spoke of how financial considerations or concealing their gay identity from friends and family might ultimately shape their future experiences in the procreative sphere.

Including younger men enabled us to interview those more apt to recall their early experiences with coming out as gay and how their procreative consciousness was expressed during this period.

Meanwhile, because the process of becoming a gay father through nonheterosexual means is often financially costly, and because of the recruitment strategies of the first author, the fathers who participated in our study were primarily of the professional class and White. Regrettably, we were unable to speak to how minority men and gay men of more limited financial means may experience the process of becoming fathers.

Pursuing a few obvious avenues of research with gays (and lesbians) will help broaden and deepen the literature on how individuals express themselves in the procreative realm and construct parental and family identities. First, comparisons should explore how gay men and lesbians construct their procreative identities and the gendered ways they negotiate parenting desires as part of their romantic relationships. Second, analyses should directly compare similarly aged gay and heterosexual men from similar communities/states. Third, attention should be devoted to understanding how facets of gay men's race/ethnicity, social class, and family/friendship networks affect their perceptions and strategies for incorporating fathering visions into their personal and relationship trajectories.

Now that we have a more nuanced understanding of how gay men become aware of their procreative options and how they traverse pathways to parenthood, we can move to a more critical analysis of queer parenting as our academic colleagues abroad have (Clarke, 2006; Hicks, 2006a; Nelson, 2006). Aside from a deeper understanding of how class and race privilege interact to form certain types of familial arrangements and discourses, there is a need to grapple with the question of why queer families sometimes draw upon and use traditional ideas about gender, biogenetics, respectability, sexuality, and kinship (Hicks, 2006a). Moreover a critical analysis of gay family formation needs to move beyond the social and structural constraints in attaining fatherhood to distinguish what type of father identities and families are produced in these distinct settings.

The emergence of planned gay fatherhood (and lesbian motherhood) is part of a broader process of social change that involves myriad forms of inventive family constellations (Nelson, 2006). Currently, increasing numbers of individuals, regardless of their sexual preference, are questioning and rejecting conventional forms of

family life. Thus, examining nonheterosexual experiences provides an important opportunity “to consider alternative models of parenting, gender, and relations across and within gender categories” (Dunne, 1999, p. 4). Although gay men and lesbians may never be viewed as part of the procreative and parenting mainstream, the paths they pursue will likely represent reflexive and innovative models for the diversity of family arrangements and practices in America and abroad.

NOTE

We are indebted to the men who participated in this research. We also would like to thank Ellen Lewin and the three anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments.

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